

CURRENT AFFAIRS for UPSC

13TH TO 19TH JUNE, 2021
DREAMIAS



INTERNATIONAL

TRUMP PRESSED OFFICIAL TO WIELD JUSTICE TO BACK ELECTION CLAIMS

An hour before Donald Trump announced in December that William Barr would step down as attorney general, the president began pressuring Barr's eventual replacement to have the Justice Department take up his false claims of election fraud. Trump sent an email via his assistant to Jeffrey Rosen, the incoming acting attorney general, that contained documents purporting to show evidence of election fraud in northern Michigan — the same claims that a federal judge had thrown out a week earlier in a lawsuit filed by one of Trump's personal lawyers. Another email from Trump to Rosen followed two weeks later, again via the president's assistant, that included a draft of a brief that Trump wanted the Justice Department to file to the Supreme Court. It argued, among other things, that state officials had used the pandemic to weaken election security and pave the way for widespread election fraud. The draft echoed claims in a lawsuit in Texas by the Trump-allied state attorney general that the justices had thrown out, and a lawyer who had helped on that effort later tried with increasing urgency to track down Rosen at the Justice Department, saying he had been dispatched by Trump to speak with him. *The emails, turned over by the Justice Department to investigators on the House Oversight Committee and obtained by The New York Times, show how Trump pressured Rosen to put the power of the Justice Department behind lawsuits that had already failed to try to prove his false claims that extensive voter fraud had affected the election results.* They are also the latest example *of Trump's frenzied drive to subvert the election results in the final weeks of his presidency, including ratcheting up pressure on the Justice Department. And they show that Trump flouted an established anticorruption norm that the Justice Department acts independently of the White House on criminal investigations or law enforcement actions, a gap that steadily eroded during Trump's term.* The documents dovetail with emails around the same time from Mark Meadows, Trump's chief of staff, asking Rosen to examine unfounded conspiracy theories about the election, including one that claimed people associated with an Italian defense contractor were able to use satellite technology to tamper with U.S. voting equipment from Europe. Rosen declined to comment. A spokesman for Trump did not respond to a request for comment.

WHAT LED TO THE BIDEN-PUTIN SUMMIT?

In 2011, Joe Biden, then Vice President in the Obama administration, visited Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin. Inside Mr. Putin's office, *Mr. Biden "held his hand a few inches from his nose," he recalled later in a conversation with journalist Evan Osnos. "I said, 'Mr. Prime Minister, I am looking into your eyes, and I don't think you have a soul.'"* When Mr. Osnos, who has described this conversation in his book *Joe Biden American Dreamer*, asked if he said that to Mr. Putin, *Mr. Biden replied, 'Absolutely, positively'.* In March 2021, after assuming the White House, *Mr. Biden described Mr. Putin as a "killer". He also said the Russian leader was "going to pay" for the "interference" in the 2020 U.S. presidential election.* Three months later, the same Mr. Biden met Mr. Putin in the Swiss city of Geneva and sought a more predictable relationship between the "two great powers".



Western alliance

In the past, *when American Presidents visited Europe and met NATO allies, Russia had been their main focus. But this time, when Mr. Biden went to Europe, his first foreign trip after becoming the President, the focus was on China — a sign of the emerging shifts in the global power balance.* Mr. Biden held a host of talks with separate blocs in Europe — the Group of Seven (G7), NATO and the EU — with a focus on strengthening the western alliance. The G7 industrialised nations — the U.S., the U.K., Germany, France, Italy, Canada and Japan — issued a communiqué slamming China's human rights records. Issues such as the detention of Uighurs in Xinjiang, the crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong, growing tensions with Taiwan and the alleged lack of transparency on COVID-19 were all mentioned in the G7 statement. The 30-member NATO, whose traditional focus has been on Russia, has also issued a statement in which China has been mentioned multiple times. NATO members warned against the “systemic challenges to the rules-based international order” emanating from China's rise. The U.S. and the 27-member EU have decided to cooperate more on technology, regulation, industrial development and trade in an attempt to help the West compete better with China. They have also decided to set up a high-level trade and technology council, which would boost innovation and investment.

The China focus

This approach is in line with the Biden administration's overall focus on reorienting American foreign policy to deal with the China challenge more effectively. In the past six months since he assumed office, Mr. Biden has taken a host of decisions in this regard. *He ended America's support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, and is pulling back all American troops from Afghanistan by September 11. In March, he called the first summit of Quad countries — the U.S., India, Japan and Australia — which decided to boost vaccine production to help other countries.* At home, the U.S. Congress passed the \$250 billion tech and manufacturing Bill, which would ensure funds for the semiconductor research, design, and manufacturing initiatives. The aim is undoubtedly to counter China. And then, Mr. Biden travelled to Europe to rally reluctant allies around the U.S. in the emerging geopolitical contest. When Mr. Biden moves forward, focusing on China, Russia remains a distraction. Ties between the two countries, as both leaders have admitted, are at the lowest point since the end of the Cold War. There were allegations of Russian cyberattacks and election interference in the U.S., while Moscow is reeling under Western sanctions and seems determined to resist any move by NATO to expand into its backyard. *Ukraine remains an unresolved crisis. Earlier this year, Mr. Putin had assembled Russian troops on the Ukraine border in a direct challenge to Mr. Biden. After he recalled Russian Ambassador from Washington and asked the American Ambassador to return for consultations, bilateral relations between the two countries practically collapsed. On the other side, Russia was steadily deepening its partnership with China.* Mr. Biden appears to have wanted to arrest this free fall of ties and bring in some order.

Detente with Russia

In the Geneva summit, Mr. Biden stopped short of characterising Mr. Putin, which he had done in the past, and held talks on critical issues. One summit doesn't resolve the serious foreign policy differences between the two former Cold War rivals, but both leaders have sought a détente. Mr. *Putin said it's “primarily a pragmatic relationship”, while Mr. Biden said it's not about trust but about “self interest”. And they decided to return their Ambassadors and follow up bilateral engagements*



with “a strategic stability dialogue” on arms reduction. The message from Geneva is that the leaders wanted to establish rules of engagement so that the countries can better address their differences and seek common ground on issues of mutual interest. *With some predictability in ties with Russia, Mr. Biden can strengthen his China-focused foreign policy. And with a less hostile America, Mr. Putin can retain Russian influence in the country’s backyard. In the past, President Donald Trump had sought to isolate China and reach out to Russia. But, amid allegations that a Russian cyber campaign helped him win the 2016 elections, Mr. Trump’s attempts to build a bond with Mr. Putin met with strong resistance in Washington. But Mr. Biden, an establishment Democrat himself, seems to be having more leeway in the Russia policy. It’s too early to see any meaningful change in Russia-U.S. relations. But the Geneva summit suggests that policymakers in Washington have at least started thinking of Russia as a secondary challenge that needs to be tackled diplomatically, not only through coercion, if the U.S. wants to take on a rising China.*

Shaking hands

The two leaders did shake hands — Mr. Biden extended his hand first and smiled at the stoic Russian leader — moments earlier when they posed with Swiss President Guy Parmelin, who welcomed them to Switzerland for the summit. Mr. Biden and Mr. Putin first held a relatively intimate meeting joined by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Each side had a translator for the session, which lasted about an hour and a half. The meeting, after about a 40-minute break, then expanded to include senior aides on each side.

THE REIGN OF ‘BIBI’ IS OVER, FOR NOW

Supporters call him ‘King Bibi of Israel’. Detractors deride his right-wing politics, polarising leadership and bellicose foreign policy. But *Benjamin Netanyahu has been a domineering presence in Israel’s politics for more than three decades.* On Sunday, his illustrious political career suffered a major setback when a coalition formed by his former protégés proved majority in the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, bringing an end to Mr. Netanyahu’s 12 years of consecutive rule. Arguably, no politician has managed to influence Israel’s domestic and foreign policies as much as Mr. Netanyahu has done in the new century. He ruled from the right, made alliances with a host of Jewish orthodox parties, took a harder line towards the Palestinians, expanded the Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories, repeatedly bombed Gaza, clashed with the Obama administration over the Iran deal, took Israel’s covert and overt operations to Iran and Syria, made peace with four Arab countries and clung on to power despite repeated failures to form a stable government since 2019. Even after the ‘change’ coalition was formed under the leadership of centrist politician Yair Lapid and right-wing leader Naftali Bennett, Mr. Netanyahu tried till the last moment to subvert government formation. And after it became certain that Mr. Bennett would be elected Prime Minister on Sunday, in the Knesset, he threatened to “topple the dangerous left-wing government”. The message is clear — Mr. Netanyahu is already plotting a comeback.

Opposition to Oslo talks

Born in Israel and brought up partly in the U.S., Mr. Netanyahu, like most Israelis, served in the military in the 1970s, along with his brother Yonatan Netanyahu. Yonatan was killed in 1976, at age 30, during an operation to rescue hostages held at Uganda’s Entebbe Airport. Mr. Netanyahu rose to fame in the 1980s when he was posted as Israel’s Ambassador to the UN. A fluent speaker



in English with an East Coast accent, he was a regular presence in American TV shows during that time. After returning to Israel, he plunged into politics, in 1988, in the midst of the *First Intifada* by the Palestinians. Mr. Netanyahu built a political career by *opposing the Oslo peace process* in the early 1990s. In 1993, when he was 43, Mr. Netanyahu became the leader of Likud. *He lambasted the Oslo Accords*, attended right-wing rallies held to *oppose the peace policies of Labour Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and continued to call Yasser Arafat a terrorist. When Rabin was assassinated in November 1995 by a Jewish extremist, many critics said Mr. Netanyahu's hyperbole speeches at rallies where crowds chanted "death to Rabin" fuelled extremism and incitement.* But it did not deter Mr. Netanyahu. *In 1996, he became Israel's youngest Prime Minister.* Under his watch, the Oslo process slowed down. After losing power in 1999, he was in the wilderness briefly when Labour leader Ehud Barak revived the peace process. *But the 2000 Camp David summit failed. Palestinian territories erupted into the Second Intifada.* When Likud came back to power, Mr. Netanyahu played second fiddle to Ariel Sharon. But the party came into his hands when Sharon left Likud in 2005 to form Kadima. As Likud chief, he sat in the Opposition. It was during this period that Mr. Bennett joined the Netanyahu team. A U.S.-based entrepreneur, Mr. Bennett became Mr. Netanyahu's Chief of Staff. Mr. Netanyahu came to power again in 2009. Twelve years later, the same Bennett would dislodge his former boss from power and take his job. In the past, Mr. Netanyahu had mastered the art of survival. But his repeated failure to form a stable government after four elections since 2019 appeared to have weakened the brand of Netanyahu. He is also facing corruption charges. Even the Gaza bombing, which many predicted would help him politically, appears to have backfired as his right-wing allies criticised the ceasefire with Hamas, calling it "a surrender".

Fragile coalition

When his grip on Israeli politics finally started loosening up, his political rivals found an opportunity. *Mr. Lapid stitched together a coalition of eight parties, from the right-wing Yamina of Mr. Bennett to the Arab Ra'am. This is the first time an Arab party is joining a ruling coalition in the history of Israel.* In the Knesset, Mr. Netanyahu has made it clear that he will not give up. He has called the coming together of the diverse parties an "election fraud". On the other side, the Lapid-Bennett coalition is visibly weak. When Mr. Lapid announced the coalition earlier this month, he had the support of 61 Members of the Knesset (MKs) out of 120. *During the vote on June 13, the government got the backing of 60 MKs as against the Opposition's 59 — one MK from Ra'am abstained.* It would be an uphill task for Mr. Bennett to keep his bloc together, especially when sensitive issues such as Jerusalem and Jewish settlements come up. But to begin with, they did what seemed impossible till a few months ago — ousting Mr. Netanyahu from power. For Messrs. Lapid and Bennett, that itself is an achievement.

BIDEN'S MANICHEAN VISION (SREERAM CHAULIA - PROFESSOR AND DEAN AT THE JINDAL SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS)

The G7 summit in Cornwall, U.K., was noteworthy for the cohesive vibe among member states, buttressed by their shared identity of being democracies. After four years of irrelevance wrought by the illiberal former U.S. President, Donald Trump, this club of rich, industrialised countries has got a new lease of life under his liberal successor, Joe Biden, who believes that democracies should unite against authoritarian rivals. In Mr. Biden's Manichean vision, the world is at an "inflection



point between those who argue that autocracy is the best way forward and those who understand that democracy is essential". Disproving the "false narrative" that dictatorships are faster and more efficient, and refuting autocrats who claim that the age of democracy is over, are the driving forces of Mr. Biden's foreign policy. *At the Cornwall summit, his non-confrontational approach to his G7 counterparts signaled democracies can manage their differences, team up multilaterally and push back the influence and muscle-flexing of China and Russia.*

An expanded coalition

To make sure that the messaging about team-building by democracies went across, the host of the Cornwall summit, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, invited four other democracies as guest participants – Australia, India, South Korea and South Africa. The combination of the G7 and the first three of these invitees has drawn attention to an expanded 'D10' coalition of democracies. *Mr. Biden's Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, Kurt Campbell, promotes D10 as a necessary instrument to "bridge European and regional (Asian) approaches to Chinese challenges."* Since Japan is the only democracy from Asia within the G7, forging a D10 with Australia, India and South Korea could corral the U.S.'s European and Indo-Pacific allies to present a transcontinental counterweight to China. A 78-year-old who built his career in American politics during the Cold War, Mr. Biden carries the liberal memories of that period when the U.S. mobilised allies across continents to beat back the Soviet Union.

Interdependent links

But what is different with today's 'new Cold War' is that power is more diffused around the world and economic interdependence transcends a neat division of the world into black (dictatorships) and white (democracies). For example, despite being a U.S. ally and a democracy, South Korea is wary of joining a formal D10 or Quad-plus alliance because its economy is interwoven with that of China. India, which has been wooing the Europeans to bring their economic and military heft to the Indo-Pacific, would be happy to see a combined trans-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific formation like D10 that could counterbalance Chinese hegemony. But it cannot afford to alienate friendly undemocratic powers like Vietnam, Iran or Russia, all of which are vectors for India's ambitions of becoming a 'leading power' in the world. And for that matter, the Americans and Europeans are themselves not undiluted upholders of democracy. *The U.S.'s allies in West Asia remain notoriously authoritarian, and European countries still cultivate client dictatorships in Africa.* As every democratic power has some authoritarian partners, should the Biden-led pitch for a "summit of democracies" and "contest with autocracies worldwide" be treated as hypocritical rhetoric? Politics is the art of the possible and so is geopolitics. *The G7 and D10 are not idealistic alliances to spread democracy everywhere. They have to be selective in targeting adversaries and strike a balance among moral values, geo-strategic needs, and the complexities of the present multipolar world order.* To the extent that cementing relationships with the principle of democracy helps corner specific undemocratic foes, there is a practical utility to D10. But these concepts cannot metastasise into rigid structures waging holy war between good and evil. Navigating ambiguities with nuanced policies is the key.



G7 ACCOMMODATES INDIAN STAND ON NEED FOR INTERNET CURBS

Internet freedoms are subject to national security, said government sources, claiming that India's tough negotiations on the joint communique issued by G7 and Guest Countries at the session on Open Societies had ensured that the original language criticising "Internet shutdowns" was amended to include New Delhi's concerns. The explanation came after the '*G7 and Guest Countries: 2021 Open Societies Statement*' referred to "politically motivated Internet shutdowns", which indirectly addresses Internet blackouts in various parts of the world including India. Kashmir has experienced Internet and mobile telephony shutdown since Article 370 was amended on August 5, 2019. Similar communication shutdowns were witnessed in Delhi and Assam during the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act during 2019-2020 and the farmer's protest last January. Communication shutdowns were also witnessed in other parts of the world, including Hong Kong where a protest against Chinese security laws intensified during 2019. The G7 statement also took note of the developments in military-ruled Myanmar as well as in larger economies. "We are at a critical juncture, facing threats to freedom and democracy from rising authoritarianism, electoral interference, corruption, economic coercion, manipulation of information, including disinformation, online harms and cyber attacks, politically motivated Internet shutdowns, human rights violations and abuses, terrorism and violent extremism," declared the statement, referring to the problems facing the democratic world. The assertion in the statement appears to touch upon several issues that are sensitive in nature as they are often subjected to public debate in India. Sources indicated that the mention of the topics in the statement took place in the backdrop of a sustained exchange of opinions between G7 and Indian teams.

Public safety

The statement went on to say that the G7 and guest countries would "promote respect for internationally accepted norms that drive inclusivity and protect digital civic-space, including through capacity building, and ensure that the design and application of new technologies reflect our shared values, respect human rights and international law, promote diversity and embed principles of public safety". Government sources said that "*politically motivated Internet shutdowns clarified that national security and public order concerns are an exception to the need for Internet freedoms*". According to the sources, during his visit to London in early May, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar fielded questions about the government's actions against protesters and the clampdown in Jammu and Kashmir after August 5, 2019. The sources said Mr. Jaishankar "made it clear" that law and order concerns were important and public safety had to be prioritised when regulating the flow of information. He also fielded questions about the Internet shutdown for months in Jammu and Kashmir, as well as during the Republic Day protests by farmers in Delhi this year. Mr. Jaishankar attended the meetings virtually as he was under quarantine in London. The G7 Foreign Ministers-level statement issued earlier in May, however, also referred to "Internet shutdowns" as a subject that the organisation would counter.

G7 AGREES TO BOOST CLIMATE FINANCE, CALLS ON OTHERS TO JOIN

G7 leaders agreed on Sunday to raise their contributions to meet an overdue spending pledge of \$100 billion a year to help poorer countries cut carbon emissions and cope with global warming, calling



on other developed countries to join the effort. But campaigners said firm cash promises were missing. Alongside plans billed as helping speed infrastructure funding in developing countries and a shift to renewable and sustainable technology, the world's seven largest advanced economies again pledged to meet the climate finance target. But climate groups said the promise made in the summit's final communique lacked detail, most importantly a figure for the increases. *A spokesman for British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said nations would set out their increases "in due course". Germany said it would boost its contribution by 2 billion to 6 billion euros (\$7.26 billion) a year by 2025 at the latest. In the communique, the seven nations — the U.S., Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan — reaffirmed their commitment to "jointly mobilise \$100 billion per year from public and private sources, through to 2025".*

There was a clear push by leaders at the G7 summit in southwestern England to try to counter China's increasing influence in the world, particularly among developing nations. The leaders signalled their desire to build a rival to Beijing's multi-trillion-dollar Belt and Road initiative but the details were few and far between.

Mr. Johnson, host of the gathering in Carbis Bay, told a news conference that developed nations had to move further, faster. "G7 countries account for 20% of global carbon emissions, and we were clear this weekend that action has to start with us," he said. "And while it's fantastic that every one of the G7 countries has pledged to wipe out our contributions to climate change, we need to make sure we're achieving that as fast as we can and helping developing countries at the same time."

Pledge overdue

Some green groups were unimpressed with the climate pledges.

Developed countries agreed at the UN in 2009 to together contribute \$100 billion each year by 2020 in climate finance to poorer countries, many of whom are grappling with rising seas, storms and droughts made worse by climate change. That target was not met, derailed in part by the pandemic that also forced Britain to postpone the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) until later this year. The G7 also said 2021 should be a "turning point for our planet" and to accelerate efforts to cut greenhouse gas emissions and keep the 1.5 Celsius global warming threshold within reach.

REVIVING THE SPIRIT OF MULTILATERALISM

Despite its collectively large economies and a commitment to liberal democratic values, the G7 is no longer the behemoth that it was. Formed in 1975 in the aftermath of the 1973 Oil Crisis, the G7 then collectively produced 70% of the world's GDP, a number that has dropped to 40%, as the Economist points out. The larger G20 has become a more relevant multilateral body due to the inclusion of economies such as Brazil, China, India and South Africa but the ability of the G7 summit to set the tone for cooperation on global issues has not diminished.

Economic differences

When the G7 summits begun in the mid-1970s, the heads of states sought to resolve economic differences related to exchange rate policy, growth, inflation, energy policy among others and this set the stage for multilateral trade arrangements and negotiations with the European Union and Japan assuming greater responsibilities on multilateral issues along with the U.S. *Interestingly, the*



consensus among these nations, especially in the 1990s, to promote policies for the ease of flow of multinational capital and a concomitant reduction in expansive welfarism by the states, set the tone for the "tax competition" among states which went on to benefit MNCs. As the summits progressed, the emphasis on economic issues remained salient and endured, but the heads of States began to prioritise other matters as well, especially after the end of the Cold War — the environment, debt relief for developing countries, and the strains on globalisation. *Terrorism also became a key agenda for discussion and action. The G7 also became the G8 with Russia's admission into the group in 1998, despite its limited national wealth compared to the other countries. The G8 reverted to the G7 again in 2014, following Russia's expulsion after its annexation of Crimea.* The Cornwall summit includes invitees in heads of state from outside the G7 as well — Australia, South Korea and India with Prime Minister Narendra Modi set to attend it remotely. *The presence of these three countries is seen as a nod to the recognition of their discontent with the influence of China, which persists with what the West believes is an anachronistic single party regime but is also an economic superpower.* In the summit, G7 leaders unveiled the *Build Back Better World project*, which pledges hundreds of billions of infrastructure investment in low- and middle-income countries based on "values-driven, high-standard and transparent" partnerships. *It is seen as a counterweight against China's multi-billion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative.* While U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has sought to hail the traditional trans-Atlantic ties with the U.S. and a revival of their mutual role in setting the multilateral tone for G7 and beyond, the Brexit issue has cast a shadow over their ties. Mr. Biden, unlike Mr. Trump, had steadfastly opposed Brexit and his advisers have raised concerns over the Britain's dispute with the EU over Northern Ireland Mr. Johnson might be pressed to make concessions to address such concerns.

Global health

More significantly though, the G7's declaration on global health in which they commit to resources to quickly develop and license vaccines, medicines and diagnostics for future diseases is an important step that recognises the havoc that COVID-19 has wrought across the world and the need to prepare for future epidemics. *Mr. Johnson has said he wishes for the entire world to be vaccinated by 2022, but has not specified details as to how this can be achieved.* If the summit manages to agree to substantially extend vaccine availability for low-income countries, that would be a great achievement. After all, the disparity in vaccine availability with the U.S. and EU cornering vaccines far more than what their populations need while other countries, India and those in Africa, are hampered by shortages, is a consequence of the autarkic turn during the Trump period. If the G7 seeks to revive its multilateral emphasis in the spirit of globalisation, addressing the vaccine disparity will truly take it forward from the dregs of Trumpism.

RARE EARTH METALS AT THE HEART OF CHINA-U.S. RIVALRY

What if China were to cut off the U.S. and Europe from access to rare minerals that are essential to electric vehicles, wind turbines and drones? At a time of frequent geopolitical friction among those three powers, Washington and Brussels want to avoid this scenario by investing in the market for 17 minerals with unique properties that today are largely extracted and refined in China. "The expected exponential growth in demand for minerals that are linked to clean energy is putting more pressure on U.S. and Europe to take a closer look at where the vulnerabilities are and the concrete



steps these governments can take,” said Jane Nakano, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

Heavy dependence

In 2019, *the U.S. imported 80% of its rare earth minerals from China, the U.S. Geological Survey says. The EU gets 98% of its supply from China, the European Commission said last year. Amid the transition to green energy, in which rare earth minerals are sure to play a role, China’s market dominance is enough to sound an alarm in western capitals.* Rare earth minerals, with names like *neodymium, praseodymium and dysprosium, are crucial to the manufacture of magnets used in industries of the future, such as wind turbines and electric cars.* And they are already being used in *consumer goods such as smartphones, computer screens and telescopic lenses.* This week the U.S. Senate passed a law aimed at improving American competitiveness that includes provisions to improve critical minerals supply chains. *U.S. aims to boost production and processing of rare earths and lithium, another key mineral component, while “working with allies to increase sustainable global supply and reduce reliance on competitors,”* Deputy Director of the National Economic Council Sameera Fazili said on Tuesday. The best hope for boosting American production can be found at the Mountain Pass mine in California. *Once one of the major players in the sector, the mine suffered as China rose and ate up its market share, aided by Beijing’s subsidies. China is expected to remain dominant for some time to come, but experts say that if recycling is scaled up, “20 to 30% of Europe’s rare earth magnet needs by 2030 could be sourced domestically in the EU from literally zero today.”*

CHINA OFFERS GLIMPSE OF TIBETAN LIFE WITHOUT THE DALAI LAMA

A brisk wind ruffles yellow prayer flags as dozens of Tibetans, some on crutches, circle a shrine in a time-honored Buddhist ritual. Across the street, a red banner spells out a new belief system, one being enforced with increasing fervor, of China’s ruling Communist Party. “Xi Jinping’s new socialist ideology with Chinese characteristics is the guide for the whole party and all nationalities to fight for the great rejuvenation of China,” the sign proclaims in Tibetan and Chinese script, referring to China’s leader, who has sought to put his imprint on virtually every aspect of life across the vast county. Lately, that has increasingly encompassed religion, both in central China and on its fringes, such as Tibet. The party is pressing a program to Sinicize Tibetan life through programs to separate Tibetans from their language, culture, and especially, their devotion to the Dalai Lama, Tibet’s traditional spiritual leader who has lived in exile since 1959. In the sun-drenched courtyard of the Jokhang Temple, one of the holiest sites in Tibetan Buddhism, the head monk Lhakpa said the Dalai Lama is not its spiritual leader. Asked who is, he said: “Xi Jinping.” The Associated Press joined a rare and strictly controlled media tour to Tibet highlighting what the government describes as the social stability and economic development of the region after 70 years of Communist Party rule. Stops included monasteries, temples, schools, poverty alleviation projects, and tourist sites. That appears to reflect the party’s confidence that it is prevailing in the global battle of public opinion over Tibet. As a counterweight, Tibet rights groups continue to report frequent detentions, economic marginalization, a suffocating security presence and heavy pressure to assimilate with China’s Han majority while pledging loyalty to the Communist Party. Tibetans in exile say they were effectively independent for centuries and accuse China of trying to wipe out Tibet’s Buddhist culture and language while exploiting its natural resources and



encouraging Chinese to move there from other parts of the country. Beijing says Tibet has long been a part of China and that the communists liberated hundreds of thousands of illiterate serfs when they overthrew the ruling theocracy in 1951. Security has been tightened significantly since widespread anti-government protests in 2008, shortly before the Beijing Summer Olympics, accompanied by redoubled efforts at economic development and the declining influence of Buddhism. In the model village of Baji east of Lhasa, the capital, residents dressed in traditional garments told foreign journalists how poverty alleviation campaigns had changed their lives. "Time has changed, so people's demands have changed. People needed religious beliefs as their spiritual sustenance in old times, but now we don't," said Tsering Yudron, 25, an accountant. The impact on traditional culture has been stark. Like Christians and Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists have increasingly been pressured to "Sinicize" their religions under a program put forth by Xi, China's most authoritarian leader since Mao Zedong. While repression has been less harsh than in nearby Xinjiang, which has seen mass incarcerations of Turkic Muslims, residents are under extreme pressure to monitor each other and infractions can bring long prison sentences, rights groups say. The party has evolved a system to try to control Tibetans through their faith, said Robert Barnett, a Tibet scholar at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Especially since the 2008 protests, the government has sought to "get the love of the Communist Party into those Tibetan minds when they're children," he said. From campuses to homes, portraits of Xi now hang from the walls of homes and temples as once did images of the Dalai Lama. While the Dalai Lama says he seeks only meaningful autonomy under Chinese rule, Beijing accuses him of supporting terrorism and seeking to split Tibet from China, and has cut off all contacts with his representatives. With the Dalai Lama soon to turn 86, attention has increasingly turned to the question of his succession, or reincarnation as traditional belief holds. The successor is traditionally identified by senior monastic disciples, based on spiritual signs and visions. But China says that only Beijing can appoint the next Dalai Lama in a ceremony using a golden urn to pick from among candidates approved by the central government.

NO ABNORMAL ENVIRONMENTAL RADIOACTIVE LEVEL IN SURROUNDING AREAS, SAYS CHINA ON REPORTS OF LEAK AT ITS NUCLEAR PLANT

China on Tuesday played down the reports of a leak at one of its nuclear power plants, asserting that there is no abnormal environmental radioactive level in the surrounding areas and the public safety is guaranteed. China's response came after CNN reported on Monday that the US government was assessing a report of a leak at a Chinese nuclear power plant, after a French company that partly owns and helps to operate it warned of an "imminent radiological threat. *The warning included an accusation that the Chinese safety authority was raising the acceptable limits for radiation detection outside the Taishan Nuclear Power Plant in Guangdong province in order to avoid having to shut it down.* I want stress that based on the information we got from competent authorities to date, the Taishan Nuclear Power Plant meets the requirements of the technical specifications and there is no abnormal environmental radioactive level in areas surrounding the power plant, so safety is guaranteed, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told a media briefing here. *He parried questions on whether the Chinese authorities have raised the acceptable limits of radiation around the plant. Zhao said China attaches high importance to nuclear safety. We put our nuclear safety regulatory system consistent with our national conditions and up to international standards.* Also, the nuclear safety administration working in close cooperation with relevant nuclear safety



regulatory institutions and engaged in communication with IAEA and the convention on nuclear safety and other multilateral mechanisms, he said.

TAIWAN REPORTS 'LARGEST' INCURSION BY CHINESE FORCES

As many as 28 Chinese air force aircraft, including fighters and nuclear-capable bombers, entered *Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ) on Tuesday, the island's government said*. It is the largest reported incursion to date. While there was no immediate comment from Beijing, the news comes after the *Group of Seven leaders issued a joint statement on Sunday scolding China and underscored the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait*. Taiwan has complained over the last few months of repeated missions by China's air force near the self-ruled island, concentrated in the southwestern part of its air defence zone near the Taiwan-controlled Pratas Islands. The latest Chinese mission involved 14 J-16 and six J-11 fighters, as well as four H-6 bombers, which can carry nuclear weapons, and anti-submarine, electronic warfare and early warning aircraft, said Taiwan's Defence Ministry. It was the largest daily incursion since the Ministry began regularly reporting Chinese Air Force activities in Taiwan's ADIZ last year. The Ministry said Taiwanese combat aircraft were dispatched to intercept the Chinese aircraft and missile systems were also deployed to monitor them.

TIGRAY CRISIS: A NEW 'FAMINE' IN ETHIOPIA

The conflict that began between Ethiopia's federal government and the ruling party in the Tigray region in the country's north last September has since blown up into a full scale crisis in the Horn of Africa. Now, hundreds of thousands in Tigray are facing famine, and millions more are at risk, UN agencies have said.

Crisis in Tigray

In November, local government officials in Tigray had told Reuters that some 2.2 million people had been displaced by the fighting and many forced to flee to neighbouring countries. Although *Ethiopia's federal National Disaster Risk Management Commission disputed the number of displaced people, independent observers had agreed that it was exceptionally high*. *Reports have emerged of sexual violence against girls and women in the region*. In April, the UN said investigations by news organisations and independent observers had revealed that sexual violence was being used as a "weapon of war". This week, UN emergency relief coordinator Mark Lowcock said Tigray was now also witnessing widespread famine. *The term 'famine' was used after the release on Thursday of an Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis update, which uses a standardised scale originally developed by the UN, integrating "food security, nutrition, and livelihood information into a statement about the nature and severity of a crisis"*.

Famine conditions

According to the IPC analysis, famine conditions in Tigray are in phase 5, which, according to a Reuters report, "starts with a catastrophe warning and rises to a declaration of famine in a region". *According to the IPC analysis, approximately 350,000 people out of Tigray's 6 million population are experiencing famine. This was the result of several factors rooted in the ongoing military conflict. Eritrean forces who joined the conflict in support of Ethiopia's PM Abiy Ahmed, have been accused of*



destroying property and burning crops. In an interview to Reuters, Lowcock said Eritrean forces were “*trying to deal with the Tigrayan population by starving them*”, *blocking supplies to over a million people. “Food is definitely being used as a weapon of war.”* The Ethiopian government has rejected the accusations, and claimed that the food shortages were not severe. *Reuters quoted a government spokesperson as saying the comparisons with the terrible Ethiopian famines of 1984 and 1985 were incorrect, and “that (a repeat) is not going to happen”.* The government has insisted that food is being supplied to Tigray; a BBC report, however, said that even where rations have been provided, the quantities are insufficient. There have been reports of food aid being stolen by soldiers, including Eritrean troops.

Beyond Tigray

Alex de Waal of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy wrote in a BBC analysis that “*Food security is fast deteriorating in the neighbouring regions of Amhara and Afar, as the ripples of the war and a deepening nationwide macro-economic crisis are disrupting livelihoods and deepening poverty. There are also warnings of escalating food needs in Sudan*”. *De Waal pointed out that UNSC Resolution 2417 on armed conflict and hunger was passed three years ago to tackle crises like the ones being witnessed in the Horn of Africa. However, the UNSC is yet to hold a public session on the ongoing crisis, de Waal wrote.*

A RARE SOLIDARITY FOR ROHINGYA

Anti-junta protesters flooded Myanmar’s social media with pictures of themselves wearing black Sunday in a show of solidarity for the Rohingya, a minority group that is among the most persecuted in the country. Since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi from power in a February 1 coup, an anti-junta movement demanding a return to democracy has grown to include fighting for ethnic minority rights. *The mostly Muslim Rohingya — long viewed as interlopers from Bangladesh by many in Myanmar — have for decades been denied citizenship, rights, access to services and freedom of movement.* Activists and civilians took to social media on Sunday to post pictures of themselves wearing black and flashing a three-finger salute of resistance, in posts tagged “#Black4Rohingya”. *“Justice must (be) served for each of you and each of us in Myanmar,” said prominent rights activist Thinzar Shunlei Yi on Twitter. Local media also showed a small protest in Myanmar’s commercial hub Yangon, with black-clad demonstrators holding signs in Burmese that said they were “protesting for the oppressed Rohingya”.* By afternoon, the #Black4Rohingya hashtag was trending on Twitter in Myanmar, with more than 180,000 mentions. *Sunday’s show of support from the mostly Buddhist, ethnic Bamar-majority population is a far cry from previous years, when even using the term “Rohingya” was a lightning rod for controversy.*

Military crackdown

In 2017, a bloody military campaign in Myanmar’s west sent some 7,40,000 Rohingya fleeing across the border into Bangladesh carrying accounts of rape, mass killings and arson. The military has long claimed the crackdown was justified to root out insurgents, and *Ms. Suu Kyi also defended the army’s conduct by travelling to the Hague to rebut charges of genocide at the UN’s top court.* The Myanmar public was largely unsympathetic to the Rohingya’s plight, while activists and journalists reporting on the issues faced vitriolic abuse online. Prominent Europe-based Rohingya



activist Ro Nay San Lwin said the online campaign is a yearly effort to raise awareness — but Sunday was “the first time” he had seen it go viral in Myanmar. “I am so happy to see those inside Myanmar joined this campaign. I am more hopeful to have a stronger solidarity from them,” he said.

AMERICA’S MISTAKES IN THE ‘FOREVER WAR’

President Joe Biden has set the September 11 deadline for all American troops to leave Afghanistan, winding up 20 years of the invasion by the United States. Military officials say the withdrawal would be complete about two months ahead of the schedule. The peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban that started in Doha last year have been frozen for months. The bid by the U.S. to hold a summit in Istanbul between the warring parties has been a non-starter. *On the ground, the Taliban are making steady advances. Since May 1, the Taliban have seized eight districts in four different regions. At least six provisional capitals, including Kabul, Lashkar Gah (Helmand) and Kandahar, have the insurgents at their gates.* As of now, about 22% of Afghanistan’s 398 districts are in the Taliban’s control and 24% with the government, while more than half of the country’s territories are contested.

A neocon war

The longest war in America’s history is also turning out to be one of its most disastrous. After 20 years of war, when the world’s mightiest military is exiting Afghanistan, the Taliban, which it sought to perish, are at the height of their influence since they were driven out of power. Terrorist networks, which the U.S. vowed to destroy when it launched its global war on terror in Afghanistan, are now scattered across Asia and Africa, from eastern Afghanistan to the Sahel region. What went wrong for the U.S.? The U.S. made three fundamental mistakes, which led to the superpower’s humiliating exit from this clichéd ‘graveyard of empires’. First, the U.S. went into Afghanistan without learning anything from the country’s history, or was blindsided by the unipolar hubris. Afghanistan was invaded by great powers in the 19th and 20th centuries as well. The British empire, which feared a Russian invasion to India via Afghanistan, sent troops to the country in 1839, ousted its ruler Dost Muhammad and established a client regime of its ally, Shah Shujah. But the British had to withdraw in the face of Afghan resistance, mostly by Pashtun warriors; while retreating in 1842, all of the British and Indian troops, except one doctor, were massacred by Afghans. In 1979, the Soviet Union sent troops to Afghanistan to salvage the country’s nascent communist regime, orchestrated a coup and established a friendly regime. The Soviets, faced with a bloody Mujahideen resistance (which was bankrolled and trained by the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Pakistan), had to pull back in 1989 in ignominy. The U.S. might have thought that history would have been kinder to them when they launched the Afghan invasion in October 2001. It wasn’t. Once they invaded Afghanistan, the U.S., given the mistakes the British and the Soviets committed, could have had a strategically focused campaign, targeting its enemy, al-Qaeda, which was behind the September 11 attacks. It should have gone after the terrorists, destroyed their networks and then withdrawn. That is what a realist power would do. But the U.S., driven by the neoconservative globalism of the Bush administration, had set more ambitious goals for itself. It wanted to topple the Taliban and rebuild a centralised “democratic” state in Afghanistan. How did building democratic institutions in Afghanistan from top-down serve America’s foreign policy interests? The neoconservatives in Washington might have found it fascinating, but the move made little strategic sense. And now, the U.S. is retreating,



practically leaving Afghanistan to the mercy of the Taliban, in return for assurances from them that they would not assist the terrorists such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Strategic failure

After the Taliban regime was toppled and al-Qaeda driven back into the caves and mountains, the U.S. still had a chance to stabilise the country with help from its different factions and leave. In December 2001, Taliban spokesperson Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef had offered to surrender. The Taliban sought modest terms — Mullah Omar, their leader, should be allowed to return home. But the Americans rejected the offer and promised to destroy the Taliban in every corner of the country. The Taliban are an indigenous militancy with deep roots in Afghanistan's Pashtun majority. Toppling them from power was easy, but defeating them in their country was not. And after vowing to defeat them, the U.S. launched the Iraq invasion to topple Saddam Hussein and export democracy there. This was the second mistake. The U.S. took Pakistan's tactical support for its war on terror for granted, overlooking the fact that Pakistan had deep strategic ties with the Taliban. Pakistan played a double game by supporting the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan while at the same time offering refuge and support to the Taliban. For Pakistan, the Taliban have been their wild card to check India's influence in Afghanistan. When the U.S. declared victory in Afghanistan prematurely and went on to invade Iraq in 2003, it became easier for Pakistan to assist the Taliban's regrouping, at a time when the Afghan government was grappling with corruption and infighting on ethnic lines. For the ordinary Afghans living outside the provincial capitals, life did not change much under the new government. When the U.S. got stuck in the morass of the Iraq war, the Taliban were steadily making a comeback in Afghanistan's hinterlands. By the time the U.S. shifted its focus back to Afghanistan, after defeating the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and amid growing calls at home to end the "endless wars", the Afghan war had already been lost.

Surrender to the Taliban

Granted, there is a realist case for the U.S. to leave Afghanistan. It seems to have reached the conclusion long ago that the war was one that could not be turned around. The war was also becoming increasingly unpopular at home, prompting Presidents, from Barack Obama to Donald Trump and Joe Biden, to promise to wind it up. *The U.S. has also been shifting its focus to East Asia where China is rising. And given the foreign policy challenges the U.S. is facing now elsewhere, continuing troops and commitments in Afghanistan makes little sense. But the U.S. could have opted for a more orderly withdrawal. Instead, it surrendered to the Taliban's terms to pull back its troops. This was the third mistake. The Taliban have not defeated the Afghan troops yet. The Afghan government has about 200,000 battle-hardened soldiers, including the U.S.-trained elite special forces. The government still controls most of the country's population centres. The Taliban's efforts to take over provincial capitals were successfully thwarted in the recent past, with air power help from the U.S. With the U.S. being present in Afghanistan, the conflict has been in a stalemate — the government not being able to defeat the insurgents and the Taliban unable to overrun the cities. The U.S. should have used this stalemate, coupled with mounting pressure on Pakistan, to extract concessions from the Taliban. Instead, the Trump administration went for talks with the Taliban on their terms. The Afghan government was kept out of the whole process because the Taliban do not recognise them as being legitimate. And the U.S. struck a direct deal with the Taliban, without addressing any of the Afghan concerns. The American exit would now decisively shift the balance of power in favour of the Taliban. The insurgents have always known this. They have stepped up*



attacks and carried out targeted killings aimed at weakening the Afghan government and terrorising society immediately after signing the agreement with the U.S. in February 2020. And ever since the remaining U.S. troops started pulling back from Afghanistan on May 1, the Taliban have started capturing more territories. The war may be winding down for the Americans. But for Afghans, it will continue in one form or another.

EU RESOLUTION PUTS SPOTLIGHT ON SRI LANKA'S RIGHTS SITUATION

A recent resolution adopted by the European Parliament, urging the *EU Commission to consider temporary withdrawal of the GSP+ status given to Sri Lanka, has put the spotlight back on Sri Lanka's human rights situation, prompting Colombo to defend its "multifaceted progress" in its response. Sri Lanka regained the GSP +, or the EU's 'Generalised Scheme of Preferences' in 2017, on Colombo's commitment to implement 27 international conventions on human rights, labour conditions, protection of the environment and good governance.* The status effectively removes import duties on goods from Sri Lanka entering the EU. The June 10 resolution, expressing "deep concern over Sri Lanka's alarming path towards the recurrence of grave human rights violations", makes specific reference to the use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, pointing to arrests of lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah and poet Ahnaf Jazeem, among others, who are in "arbitrary" detention for over a year. The resolution notes the "continuing discrimination" against and violence towards religious and ethnic minorities, while voicing "serious concern" about the *20th Amendment passed in 2020, and the "resulting decline in judiciary independence, the reduction of parliamentary control, and the excessive accumulation of power with the presidency"*. Responding, Sri Lanka's Foreign Ministry on Friday said it regrets the adoption of the resolution that, it observed, "contains factual inaccuracies, and does not take cognisance of the multifaceted progress made by Sri Lanka in reconciliation and development." Rejecting claims that the PTA is used for arbitrary detentions, the Ministry said it was "revisiting provisions" of the Act to propose "necessary amendments", drawing upon international best practices.

INDIA EXTENDS \$100 MN LOAN TO SRI LANKA

India and Sri Lanka on Wednesday signed an agreement for a \$100-million loan from the Export Import Bank of India to support the island nation's efforts to expand solar power coverage. Issuing a press statement on the bilateral initiative, the Presidential Media Division said one of the "key plans" of the government was to generate solar power, with the contribution of state-owned buildings, places of worship and houses of the low-income families. "Steps will also be taken to provide facilities to store solar energy in batteries for the low-income families that are unable to access the national power grid," the statement said. *Sri Lanka has an installed capacity of 4,213 MW of power. While 1,400 MW of that is hydropower, some 900 MW is produced from coal. Over the last five years, Sri Lanka has sought to tap more renewable sources of power, particularly solar power. The country's electricity demand is expected to grow at an average 5.3% from 2015-2034, according to the Public Utilities Commission.* A press release from the Indian High Commission in Sri Lanka said the \$100 million line of credit will help finance various projects Sri Lanka's solar energy sector, including those announced at the founding conference of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) held in March 2018, in New Delhi, such as rooftop solar photo-voltaic systems for households and government buildings. *As many as 89 countries, including Sri Lanka, signed the framework agreement of the ISA, jointly launched by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi and former*



French President Francois Hollande in 2015, with the aim of bringing together countries to promote large-scale deployment of solar energy. The line of credit extended by India, according to officials, is for a period of 20 years, with an interest of 1.75 %. Sri Lanka owes about \$960 million in debt repayment.



DreamIAS



NATION

A YEAR AFTER GALWAN CLASH, CHINA STRENGTHENING BASE ALONG THE LAC

A year since the clash between the Armies of India and China in the Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has built additional accommodation in the depth areas along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on its side and is preparing for the long haul, according to official sources. "PLA has built additional accommodations, both permanent and temporary, in Rudok, Kangxiwar, Gyantse and Golmud areas. Construction of field hospitals and procurement of additional snow mobility vehicles by the PLA also indicate that they are preparing for the long haul and permanent winter occupation of these posts," a source said.

Regiments replaced

According to intelligence inputs, the Chinese troops in the Pangong Tso (lake) area have all been rotated. China's 4th and 6th Divisions were withdrawn from both the banks of Pangong Lake to Rutog County for repairs in February, and returned to Xinjiang for repairs in the past three weeks. They were replaced by the 8th and 11th Divisions. Each division has two mobile infantry regiments, an armoured regiment, an artillery regiment and an air defence regiment. "China is also intensifying construction work behind the main confrontation points in Aksai Chin," the source said, citing intelligence inputs. The PLA has also conducted exercises in Tibet and opposite Arunachal Pradesh. For instance, in the first week of this month, the PLA conducted a small arms training at Shigatse in Tibet. The PLA soldiers were trained in anti-tank rocket launchers, grenade launchers, anti-aircraft machine guns and other weapons, according to inputs. In early May, Chinese state media Global Times reported that a unit of the PLA in the Xinjiang Military District under the Western Theatre Command had deployed new long-range heavy rocket artillery in the border region at an altitude of 5,200 metres. Training was also recently conducted at a location opposite Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh at an altitude of 5,130 metres by a regiment from the Shannan Army Division, the official stated. Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat recently said all Armies carried out training activities during peacetime, and the conduct of exercises was one such event to maintain operational preparedness. He added that China as well as India had carried out turnover of troops, and the best way to familiarise new troops was to carry out exercises. On the disengagement situation in the Pangong Tso area, two officials said both sides had agreed to and have actually disengaged from the Finger areas on the north bank, but added that it was only disengaged and not de-induction. Most Chinese deployment had just shifted back to the rear areas, one of the officials said. Both sides have also emptied the heights of the Kailash ranges on the south bank where the Indian Army was in an advantageous position after decades due to the operation by the Special Frontier Force (SFF) in the end of August pre-empting Chinese moves to occupy them.

No progress

However, there has been no progress in the talks for disengagement at Gogra and Hotsprings as well as in Demchok and the strategic Depsang Valley. There was no change in the ground situation since the disengagement at Pangong Tso and the situation is quiet, the second official said. In the first combat fatalities in 45 years, 20 Indian soldiers were killed in the violent clash after they



were attacked by Chinese troops in the Galwan Valley on the night of June 15, 2020, during a “de-escalation” process after a month-long stand-off between the troops at several points in eastern Ladakh and Sikkim. China, which initially did not reveal its casualty numbers, later said four of its soldiers had been killed.

11 rounds of talks

India and China have so far held 11 rounds of military talks for disengagement and de-escalation in eastern Ladakh since the stand-off began early May last year. Defence officials said there was no clarity yet on when the next round of talks would be held. Army chief General M.M. Naravane recently said India was dealing with China in a “firm and non-escalatory” manner and the coming rounds of talks would focus on restoration of status quo ante of April 2020. The Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson recently said the process of disengagement along the LAC “remains unfinished” and an early completion of disengagement could lead to de-escalation of forces which would “hopefully” lead to full restoration of peace and tranquillity in the border areas and enable overall progress in the bilateral relationship.

UNLOCKING WAR HISTORIES WITH A PURPOSE (AIR VICE-MARSHAL (DR.) ARJUN SUBRAMANIAM (RETD.) - A MILITARY HISTORIAN AND THE AUTHOR OF ‘INDIA’S WARS: A MILITARY HISTORY, 1947-1971’ AND ‘FULL SPECTRUM: INDIA’S WARS, 1972-2020’)

Saturday’s announcement by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on archiving, declassifying and compiling of war histories (<https://bit.ly/3zro0qL>) is a long overdue initiative that signals that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) is at last willing to shed its shroud of confidentiality over happenings long gone by. Largely conforming to global practices, the policy has the potential to kick-start multiple initiatives within the MoD and the three services that will offer researchers, analysts and historians an easy lens into studying military operations in the post-Independence period.

Interlinked challenges

Drawing on my own experiences of nine years as a practitioner-historian who has struggled to put together two definitive historical and joint narratives of war and conflict in contemporary India, conversion of this policy into deliverables will be a tough and unglamorous grind. The four biggest challenges facing this initiative will be the fusion of political directives and strategic decision making with the operational and tactical happenings on ground; compilation and reconciling and analysis of events at multiple levels (headquarters, commands and field formations); putting together a team of dedicated researchers and historians with a mix of academics and practitioners with access to records and files; and lastly, putting together a concurrent oral history and digitisation of all archival compilations associated with this initiative. Decisions to go to war and wage conflict in democracies are largely political decisions and it is important that such decisions are fused into compilations of war histories. For example, one of the reasons why the Indian Army is reluctant to declassify the *Henderson Brooks Report* that considered operational failures during the 1962 war with China is because it is largely a scathing indictment of the Indian Army’s leadership without any accountability assigned to the political establishment led by Jawaharlal Nehru and Krishna Menon. On the other hand, several histories of the Vietnam War can now be considered credible and well-rounded because researchers have had access not only to operational accounts but also to archived discussions between the political architects of the

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



conflict such as Presidents J.F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson and Defence Secretary Robert S. McNamara. Similarly, General K. Sundarji and Ambassador J.N. Dixit have borne the brunt of much criticism by researchers examining India's intervention in Sri Lanka from 1987-1990 because they expressed themselves in the open domain without fear. But it is only when researchers get access to records of discussions involving other generals, admirals and air marshals and even Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, Minister of State for Defence Arun Singh and even political heavyweights in Tamil Nadu such as M.G. Ramachandran and M. Karunanidhi, that the cobwebs around *Operation Pawan* will be cleared.

On 'Brasstacks'

'Most military historians of contemporary India agree that Exercise Brasstacks (1986-87) heralded the transformation of Indian war fighting doctrine, tactics, techniques and procedures in conventional war fighting, particularly in the plains and the desert. However, all of them, including this writer, have relied on oral recollections to put together a mosaic of what may have transpired in the confines of the Military Operations (MO) Directorate of the Army HQ and thereafter. Writing the official history of Exercise Brasstacks must be high on the list of the initial projects in this initiative as it will highlight the fusion of decisions taken at multiple headquarters right down to the regiment and squadron level.

Digitisation and creation of oral histories will form a critical component of this transformation. Both are either unfolding at a snail's pace or are absent in our existing official repositories of history at the service headquarters or war colleges. A software major must be roped-in for this and an outreach must be made to individual historians, think tanks and global repositories to share their oral history collections on contemporary Indian military history.

The first chapter

Considering the timeline of 25 years, a suggested list of declassifications to trigger this transformative initiative are the Nathu La skirmish of 1967, 'The Lightning Campaign' in the Eastern Theatre during the 1971 War, Operation Meghdoot (Siachen), Exercise Brasstacks and its subsidiary operations, and Operation Falcon (Sumdorong Chu). Lest the initiative be accused of only showcasing successes, Operation Pawan (Indian Peace Keeping Force; picture) too needs to be officially written about, albeit with due sensitivity. One of the hallmarks of a leading power/emerging power/power of consequence and a leading military is the ability to take criticism, tackle institutional reluctance to expose faultlines and push forward with reform with the big picture in mind. History does not offer a blueprint for the future, but it is certainly instructive in building on successes and not repeating the follies of the past. That proposition must be the bedrock on which this initiative takes off.

TERRORISING DISSENT

Caught between a statutory bar on grant of regular bail and a judicial embargo on any close examination of available evidence at the bail stage, those arrested under the country's main anti-terror law have been languishing in jails without trial for extended periods. *The Delhi High Court orders granting bail to three student activists jailed for over a year for their alleged role in the February 2020 riots in Delhi represent a clear-headed effort to get around such impediments. Sound*



in legal reasoning and interpretation, the judgments of Justice Siddharth Mridul and Justice Anup Jairam Bhambhani have made a salient distinction between those accused of offences against the country's integrity and security on the one hand, and protesters or dissenters roped in unjustifiably under the rubric of 'terrorism' on the other. The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act has been invoked by the Delhi Police against activists and others who were among those organising the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, on the claim that they had also fomented the riots. *Under Section 43D(5), there is a legal bar on granting bail if the court is of the opinion that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the accusation against those held is prima facie true. Adding to this onerous burden on the accused to demonstrate to the court that the accusation is untrue is a 2019 Supreme Court judgment that bars a detailed analysis of the evidence at the bail stage and rules that bail can be denied on "the broad probabilities" of the case. The High Court has ruled that the bail court can look at the available evidence to satisfy itself about the prima facie truth of the case.* In other words, there is no statutory invincibility to the prosecution case merely because the UAPA has been invoked. It has found that none of the three — Asif Iqbal Tanha, Natasha Narwal and Devangana Kalita — was specifically or particularly accused of any 'terrorist act', 'funding of a terrorist act' or an act amounting to a conspiracy to commit a terrorist act or something preparatory to it. Once the UAPA charges were not seen to be true, it was open to the court to admit them to regular bail until conclusion of the trial. Further, with 740 witnesses cited, there is no scope for early conclusion of the trial. Riots are matters concerning public order, and not the security of the state. *The court's observation that the state, in its anxiety to suppress dissent, has blurred the line between the constitutionally guaranteed right to protest and "terrorist activity", is a stern indictment of the establishment.* The Delhi Police has gone to the Supreme Court on appeal against the verdict, possibly in the fear that the ruling may foil its design to paint protesters as 'terrorists'. *If the High Court's approach to grant of bail is upheld, it would help secure the liberty of other dissenters held under the UAPA elsewhere without sufficient basis.*

SC REFUSES TO INTERVENE IN HC RULING ON STUDENT ACTIVISTS' BAIL

The Supreme Court on Friday did not intervene in the Delhi High Court decision granting bail to student activists Devangana Kalita, Natasha Narwal and Asif Iqbal Tanha, but said the High Court's order of June 15 would neither be treated as a precedent in any proceedings nor be relied on by the parties.

The three students were granted bail by the High Court after a year's incarceration in Tihar Jail. They were accused of offences under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in connection with the northeast Delhi riots, which broke out after the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) turned violent last year. The High Court accused the police of blurring the line between "terrorist act" under the UAPA and the students' right to protest against a law. "The entire UAPA was turned on its head along with the Constitution..." Solicitor General Tushar Mehta objected in the Supreme Court on Friday during the appeal hearing. "The issue is important. It has pan-India ramifications. There are many questions involved here... We want to decide it for the good of the entire country," Justice Gupta observed orally, issuing formal notice to the three students on the appeal. Mr. Mehta argued that 53 people died and 700 were injured in the riots. "The right to protest does not mean the right to kill and hurl bombs," he submitted. If the protests were held on the "perceived belief" that the CAA was against a particular community, then "the lady who assassinated a former Prime Minister" also did it on the belief that injustice



was done to a particular community, he stated. Pushing for a stay of the judgment, he said the three students “may remain out” but the judgment may be used by others booked under the UAPA to get bail. A hearing on the limited question of bail for the students was used by the High Court to discuss an entire law.

The law officer was questioning the High Court’s remarks that the provisions of the UAPA are being casually used by the government when charges under conventional penal laws such as the IPC would very well do. Senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for the students, said “I think the Solicitor General has a lot to say, we too have a lot to say.... In the meantime, let us not treat it [High Court judgment] as a precedent”.

The court posted the government appeal for detailed hearing on the week commencing from July 19.

A JUDICIAL PUSHBACK TO A DRACONIAN LEGAL REGIME (GAUTAM BHATIA - A DELHI-BASED LAWYER)

The root of the problem lies in Section 43(D)(5) of this Act, which prevents the release of any accused person on bail if, on a perusal of the case diary, or the report made under Section 173 of the Code Of Criminal Procedure, the court is of the opinion that “there are reasonable grounds for believing that the accusation against such person is prima facie true”. It is important to break this down. *Broadly speaking, India follows the adversarial system of criminal justice, where two sides to a dispute attempt to persuade the court that their version of events is true.* At the heart of the adversarial system of justice is the testing of evidence through cross-examination. Each side is afforded the opportunity to scrutinise, challenge, and question the evidence produced by its opponent; and the best way for a judge to unearth the truth — or the closest approximation of it — is to consider which side’s evidence is left standing, and appears more persuasive, after the rigours of cross-examination. Production of evidence, and cross-examination, involves witnesses, recoveries of incriminating objects, tests of handwriting or voice samples, and many other elements. It constitutes the bulk of a criminal trial. *In India, with our overburdened courts and creaking justice system, criminal trials take years. In high-profile cases such as the Delhi riots case, where the record is bulky, and the witnesses number in their hundreds, trials can take many years — even a decade or more.*

Importance of bail

For this reason, bail becomes of utmost importance. If an individual is not able to secure bail from the courts, they will languish as under-trials in prison, for the duration of the case, no matter how many years it takes (in recent memory, there are cases of people being found innocent in terrorism cases after 14 and even 23 years in prison). Bail, thus, becomes the only safeguard and guarantee of the constitutional right to liberty. In ordinary circumstances, when considering the question of bail, a court is meant to take into account a range of factors. These include whether the accused is a flight risk, whether he or she might tamper with the evidence or attempt to influence witnesses, and the gravity of the offence. But it is here that Section 43(D)(5) of the UAPA plays such a damaging role. As we have just seen, under the classical vision of criminal justice, truth — about innocence or guilt — can only be determined after the evidence of both the prosecution and the defence has been subjected to the rigours of cross-examination. However, as



lawyers and scholars such as Abhinav Sekhri and Anjana Prakash have also pointed out, *Section 43(D)(5) short-circuits that core assumption. For the grant of bail, it only looks at the plausibility of one side's evidence — that is, the Prosecution's.* It binds the court to look at only the case diary or the police report, which has not been challenged by cross-examination, and requires that bail be denied as long as the unchallenged prosecution case appears to be prima facie true.

One-sided

The perversity of Section 43(D)(5), thus, is that it forces the court to make an effective determination of guilt or innocence based on one side's unchallenged story, and on that basis to deprive individuals of their freedom for years on end. In a democratic polity, which is committed to the rule of law, this is a deeply troubling state of affairs. *The effect of Section 43(D)(5), as one can see, is that once the police elect to charge sheet an individual under the UAPA, it becomes extremely difficult for bail to be granted. Even outlandish or trumped-up cases can sound convincing until people have a chance to interrogate and challenge them. In short, unless the police prepare an extremely shoddy case — that is riddled with internal contradictions, for example — a case diary or a report will invariably make out a "prima facie" case against an individual.*

AN ACQUITTAL WITH NO GOOD, BUT THE BAD AND THE UGLY (R.K. VIJ - A SENIOR IPS OFFICER IN CHHATTISGARH)

The recent judgment of a trial court acquitting Tarun Tejpal, a former editor of a newsmagazine, who was charged, in 2013, of having sexually assaulted an employee, a young woman journalist, during an event the newsmagazine had organised in Goa, has created a furore and raised many questions about the law. The investigating officer has also been pulled up not only for the lapses in investigation but also for gaps in her knowledge of technology. The Goa government filed an appeal against Mr. Tejpal's acquittal in the Goa Bench of the Bombay High Court requesting an immediate hearing. The Solicitor General of India, Tushar Mehta, during the hearing, said that the lower court's judgment lacked sensitivity regarding crimes against women and awareness of the sections of criminal laws. "The law has evolved. The entire judgement proceeds as if the victim is on trial," he added.

Key changes

Back in 2002, based on the recommendations of the 172nd report of the Law Commission of India, *two major changes were made in the Evidence Act.* First, the Act was amended to prohibit the defence counsel from asking questions to the prosecutrix in a rape case about her general character to impeach her credibility. Second, the defence was not permitted to put questions to a witness in the cross-examination about the general immoral character of the prosecutrix and adduce evidence. *Even if it is hypothetically assumed that the survivor had had sexual relations with someone, it does not give any person the licence to sexually assault her.* The Supreme Court of India has repeatedly said that the purpose of cross-examining a survivor of rape is not to humiliate her but to get to the truth of the case. Therefore, questions about the past sexual life of the survivor should not have been permitted to be asked by the defence counsel as they violated the survivor's right to a fair trial. *The law does not permit the character assassination of a victim any more.*



Stereotypical evaluation

Second, the conduct of a survivor of sexual assault cannot be cast in a straitjacket formula. Every individual behaves differently under the given circumstances. When in this case, the survivor had been entrusted with an important task/s by her boss during the event and was afraid of losing her job by exposing her boss's crime, *her dual behaviour (i.e., in the public gaze and with acquaintances) cannot be termed unnatural. It would be too stereotypical and patriarchal to expect a survivor to be seen traumatised all the time in front of everyone.* The Supreme Court, in *Aparna Bhat and Ors. vs the State of Madhya Pradesh & Ors. (2021)* specifically said that courts should desist from expressing any stereotype opinion, in words spoken during proceedings, or in the course of a judicial order' about women. *Stereotyping excludes any individualised consideration of a person's actual circumstances and their abilities.* It affects women's right to a fair trial. Therefore, the judiciary must be careful not to create inflexible standards based on preconceived notions.

Details and omissions

Third, every omission does not amount to a contradiction; omission which by necessary implication leads to conflicting versions between the statements made before the police and the court would amount to contradiction. It is trite law that the previous statements of the prosecutrix and witnesses can be used to shake their credibility. However, *it is quite natural for a survivor to share the incident in different words and details to different individuals. She is not expected to share the same graphic details of the sexual assault on her to every individual she meets or wishes to reveal the details to.* Therefore, if the statement given during the trial is substantially consistent with the statement given to the police and judicial magistrate during the investigation, the difference of details given to other individuals through email or otherwise in the form of written statements, cannot be rejected by terming them as untrustworthy. The High Court, therefore, must clarify on this vital question of the law keeping in view the nature of the offence.

Protection of identity

The Indian Penal Code was amended in 1983 and disclosure of identity of the survivor of rape by anyone was made punishable under a newly added Section 228-A. The publication of name or any matter which may make known the identity of the survivor since then is thus prohibited. The Supreme Court in *State of Punjab vs Ramdev Singh (2003)* held that the name of the victim should not be mentioned in the judgments, be it of that Court, High Court or lower court, and she should be described as 'victim' in the judgment. It therefore implies that anything such as the survivor's husband's name, her email address, etc which could reveal her identity, should not have been mentioned in the judgment. It is against the spirit of the law.

Sensitisation is a must

It is true that the investigation must be unbiased, honest, just and in accordance with the law. The entire emphasis on a fair investigation has to be to bring out the truth of the case before the court. However, some lapses in investigation and ignorance about technical terms such as 'hash-value' with regard to electronic evidence, should not lead to a total rejection of the prosecution case. Many amendments have been made in the criminal laws since 1983 with regard to crimes against women. The police must pull up their socks to improve investigation skills, and the application of



the law should not elude justice due to a lack of proper sensitisation among other stakeholders in the criminal justice system.

CONTINUE DEMOLITION OF ILLEGAL BUILDINGS IN ARAVALI FOREST LAND'

The Supreme Court on Thursday refused to halt the demolition of about 10,000 unauthorised residential constructions encroaching into the ecologically fragile Aravali forest land near Lakarpur Khori village in Haryana. A Bench of Justices A.M. Khanwilkar and Dinesh Maheshwari had refused to give encroachers any quarter on June 7 while ordering the demolition. The court had categorically said that “land-grabbers cannot take the refuge of the rule of law” and demand fairness. However, fresh petitions were filed urging the court to revisit its order and provide for rehabilitation of the residents, including children. The petitioners, mostly residents whose properties face the axe, said they were not given time to submit documents to the local authorities to prove their claim. But the court refused to budge on Thursday.

Onus on State

The Bench said the residents had enough time to prove their claims in accordance with a notification issued by Haryana in 2020. The court said the onus was on the State to rehabilitate the residents in compliance with a 2003 scheme. The demolition would continue. “Petitioners were obligated to provide documents to come under the rehabilitation scheme, which they have failed to do. We have recorded the submission that clearance of unlawful encroachment on forest land will be carried out as per due process of law,” the court said. The Haryana government said officials and personnel were pelted with stones at the site of demolition. However, the court declined to pass any orders while merely telling the authorities, “You know what to do then.” The court had in its June 7 order made it clear that the encroachers should be evicted by the land even by force. The next hearing is scheduled on July 27.

A BUREAUCRAT FOR ALL SEASONS

When the news of Anup Chandra Pandey's appointment as Election Commissioner came on Tuesday night, it surprised many because the buzz in Delhi's power corridors was about a few other names who retired from the Government of India at the secretary level. However, the government picked the retired Chief Secretary of poll-bound Uttar Pradesh for the coveted position. A former IAS officer of the 1984 batch, the 62-year-old Mr. Pandey joins the three-member Commission as its third member. *Former Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) chairman Sushil Chandra, who is the Chief Election Commissioner, and former Finance Secretary Rajiv Kumar are the other two members. Mr. Pandey retired after an extended tenure as the Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh. He became Chief Secretary in June 2018 and retired in August 2019, after a six-month extension.* As the Election Commissioner, his first major task would be to conduct the Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh, where Yogi Adityanath will seek re-election. However, a cursory glance at Mr. Pandey's career suggests that he has been a man for all seasons and has enjoyed crucial postings during all governments. “He served at important positions in all governments in the State and his tenures have remained mostly non-controversial,” a political insider in Lucknow said. Apart from his wide experience in industries, finance, health, education and development administration, Mr. Pandey is known for his networking in the industrial sector, strategic planning



and crisis management, as per the observer. In his LinkedIn profile, Mr. Pandey describes himself as a “career bureaucrat” with more than three-and-a-half decade experience in the administration at the State as well as in the Union level in various positions. “Strong skill-set to handle complex administrative problems,” he writes in his bio, referring to his strengths.

Mega events

Further, he credits himself for successfully piloting schemes and holding mega events such as the farm loan waiver, investors’ summit in 2018 in Lucknow, Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj and Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in Varanasi, the Prime Minister’s Lok Sabha constituency, in 2019.

‘Able official’

In August, 2019, when he retired as the Chief Secretary, Chief Minister Adityanath showered him with accolades calling him an “able and proficient official” who carried out the tasks given to him efficiently. In almost all major policy initiatives of the U.P. government or politically important schemes such as farm loan waiver, Mr. Pandey’s imprints could be seen. The political bosses in Delhi, who are very choosy about appointing officials in high-profile positions, apparently saw several plus points in him besides his seeming closeness with the government in Lucknow. Interestingly, under the NDA government, he is another ex-Chief Secretary to be appointed in the poll body. Earlier, former Gujarat Chief Secretary A.K. Joti was made the Election Commissioner. *Another factor that also swung in his favour is his amiable nature to work with colleagues as well as subordinates which could help him create a sense of balance in the three-member body, which recently saw the two incumbents sparring over the holding and handling of the Assembly polls in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala and Puducherry in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.* As Election Commissioner. With his appointment, all the three members of the poll body have a common thread — U.P. Chief Election Commissioner Chandra is a former Indian Revenue Service officer from U.P. and so is Rajiv Kumar, a former Jharkhand cadre official. Mr. Pandey was born in Punjab but was allotted the U.P. cadre after he passed the civil services exam.

NOT MY CALL; NO CONSENSUS AMONG PARTIES ON VIRTUAL HOUSE PANEL MEETINGS, SAYS SPEAKER

Speaker Om Birla, who has had to preside over the Lok Sabha through unprecedented restrictions because of the pandemic, said there was “no consensus” among parties over holding meetings of the parliamentary Standing Committees online, and that he had issued no restrictions regarding not convening the same. Some Opposition members, mainly of the Congress, had demanded that the committees be allowed to meet virtually rather than not being convened at all. They had argued that through these committees, the House could give a message of solidarity to the people amidst the pandemic rather than appear as a mute spectator to Covid. However, the demand had been rejected. In an interview to The Indian Express, Birla, who is completing two years in office on Saturday, said, “In fact, there was no consensus over conducting the Standing Committees online... Of the 16 committees, 14 did not want to have virtual meetings... Anyway, I have never given any instructions not to hold Standing Committee meetings.” This week, after a two-month-long gap, Standing Committees started holding meetings again. *Birla also pointed out that Rule 266 regarding the Lok Sabha clearly says that the Standing Committee meetings be held in private. “Their proceedings can be made public only with special permission, when it is necessary. So the rules do*



not allow virtual meetings... If we need to change the rules, there has to be a discussion in the Rules Committee, with every party expressing its views. Once this is done, the mandate of the House has to be sought," he said. Sources in the Lok Sabha Secretariat said chairpersons of several committee had expressed apprehension over "not just the confidentiality aspect, but also the kind of discussions that would be held online". The senior leaders, said sources, were of the view that MPs would be apprehensive about holding discussions keeping aside party differences — which is usually the norm at such panels — due to fears these might leak. The officials concerned also noted that it would be difficult for them to respond to questions raised at the meetings. Asked about the government pressing ahead with the construction of a new Parliament amidst Covid restrictions, Birla said, "There is a need for a new Parliament House building... Our old building is still magnificent, but there is no scope to expand it... There will be delimitation and the number of members will go up, security measures have to be modernised and digital facilities have to be improved." On the Opposition criticism that the government did not take Parliament seriously, Birla said, "In the 17th Lok Sabha, there has been maximum participation of MPs in legislative business in Lok Sabha history. Look at the productivity graph, it's the highest now... The members sit till midnight to take part in discussions." Asked whether the government should make more efforts to take everyone along, Birla said, "I think the government does that. It holds discussions with every party during every session.

KARNATAKA LEGISLATURE TOPS WITH 31 SITTING DAYS

The COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdown, which affected the functioning of the legislatures of several States last year, had an apparently marginal impact on the working of the Karnataka legislature, if the number of sitting days is an indication. Compared with its average number of sitting days of 32 from 2016 to 2019, the Karnataka legislature, which is bicameral, met on 31 days last year, the highest for any State in 2020, according to a study that covered 19 States. The southern State was followed by Rajasthan (29 days) and Himachal Pradesh (25 days). For comparison, Parliament met for 33 days last year. In 2020, the average number of sitting days for the 19 States was 18, which was 11 less than the four-year (2016-19) average of 29. Kerala, which had the distinction of remaining at the top in the four years with an average of 53 days, had only 20 days of sittings of the legislature last year, stated the study report, "Annual Review of State Laws 2020," which was prepared by the PRS Legislative Research ("PRS"), a New Delhi-based think tank. As regards other southern States, Tamil Nadu had met on 23 days against its four-year average of 35, Andhra Pradesh had met on 12 days (four-year average of 26) and Telangana had met on 17 days (four-year average of 25 days). After the lockdown, Karnataka's figure of sitting days of the legislature was 10; Telengana 9; Andhra Pradesh 7; Tamil Nadu 3 and Kerala 2. However, the highest for any State, post-lockdown, was 11 in Chhattisgarh followed by 10 in Himachal Pradesh. Rajasthan, which was the number two State in terms of the overall number of sitting days, had met only on five days after the lockdown. As for the number of Bills passed last year, Karnataka again topped the list with 61 Bills, followed by Tamil Nadu (42) and Uttar Pradesh (37). For this purpose, Appropriation Bills were excluded. Among poor performers under this category, Delhi passed only one Bill; West Bengal passed two Bills, and Kerala three Bills. On the duration of time taken to pass Bills, the previous year saw 59% of the Bills being passed by the legislature of the States on the day of introduction. A further 14% was adopted within a day of being introduced. Only 9% of the Bills was passed more than five days after introduction, some of



which were referred to committees for further examination. In respect of ordinances, data from the 19 States showed that, on average, 14 ordinances were promulgated last year.

BJP MEMBERS OF HOUSE PANEL FLAG RISING FUEL PRICES

An overwhelming majority of members of the Standing Committee on Petroleum, at a meeting on Thursday, felt that petrol and diesel should be brought under the GST regime to avoid the multiple taxation by the Centre and the States, which they claimed was responsible for the rise in fuel prices. *The committee is chaired by BJP member Ramesh Bidhuri. However, a select few, including CPI(M)'s K. Sivadasan, opposed the idea. All the MPs, including those from the BJP, according to sources, expressed concern and posed sharp questions to Petroleum Secretary Tarun Kapoor. The Congress recently pointed out that the prices of petrol and diesel had increased over 25 times in the last month and a half. Both diesel and petrol have become dearer by over ₹6 since May 2, when results of the Assembly election in four States and a Union Territory were announced.*

'A flogging horse'

Mr. Kapoor, according to the sources, quoting the example of Delhi, explained that the base price of petrol was merely ₹36. But it was being sold at nearly ₹97 a litre. The difference in the base price and the selling price was taxes both by the Centre and the State. The Opposition members said the spiralling costs had a cascading effect on other essential commodities. *"Fuel is being used as a flogging horse to make up for all the revenue deficit. If this flogging is already hurting the common man, the government has to step in,"* one of them said. A war of words erupted between Mr. Bidhuri and the Congress's Pradyut Bordoloi. A member said, "Mr. Bidhuri claimed that in 2003, the petrol price was ₹33 a litre, but by 2012, it had risen to ₹66, a 100% increase. To this, Mr. Bordoloi pointed out that during the *UPA rule, international oil prices had shot up to \$144 a barrel, while the current rate was \$78.*"

MHA ORDER INVITING CITIZENSHIP APPLICATIONS FACES SC CHALLENGE

A May 28 order of the *Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) inviting non-Muslim refugees such as Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists belonging to Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan residing in 13 districts of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Haryana and Punjab to apply for Indian citizenship is increasingly becoming the focus of challenge before the Supreme Court.* A recent petition filed in the top court by Anis Ahmed, through advocate Selvin Raja, said the government order "utterly discriminates and deprives a class of persons namely, the Muslims". *Mr. Ahmed argued that the May 28 order does not withstand the test of Article 14 in as much as it treats people within a particular class, or persons entitled to apply for citizenship by registration and naturalisation, unequally by virtue of their religion. Identical arguments have been made in two earlier petitions filed by the Indian Union of Muslim League (IUML) and the Popular Front of India in the Supreme Court against the Executive Order issued by the Ministry.* Mr. Ahmed urged the court to declare the MHA order "unconstitutional, discriminatory and ultra vires" as it seeks to "utterly deprive the Muslims to seek for citizenship by registration and naturalisation unequally by virtue of their religion under Sections 5 and 6 of the Citizenship Act, 1955". A fortnight ago, the IUML, through advocates Haris Beeran and Pallavi Pratap, urged the Supreme Court to stay the May 28 order. It said the order delegates the power to grant citizenship by registration and naturalisation to the Collectors



of these districts. *The IUMI said the Home Ministry's Order was a ruse to implement the "malafide designs" of the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) to grant Indian citizenship on the sole basis of religion. According to the CAA, Indian citizenship would be given to non-Muslim persecuted minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan — Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Parsi and Christian — who came to India till December 31, 2014. The party said the CAA was already under challenge before the Supreme Court and the May 28 order intends to circumvent judicial scrutiny. The government had earlier averted a stay on the CAA by assuring the top court that the rules under the Act had not yet been framed.* There were widespread protests in different parts of the country following the enactment of the CAA in 2019. Delhi had even seen riots in February last year. The IUMI had said classification of applicants for citizenship on the basis of religion is illegal. The order does not "*withstand the test of Article 14 in as much as it treats people within a particular class i.e. persons entitled to apply for citizenship by registration and naturalisation unequally by virtue of their religion*".

SHINE THE LIGHT

The allegations of corruption surrounding the purchase of land in Ayodhya by the Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust only underscore the opacity of land markets in India. The chasm in prices between two transactions involving the same piece of land has led to doubts of the dealings not being kosher; there is inadequate transparency on how the price of the land in question escalated so quickly so sharply. On its part, the trust maintained that the land was purchased at a rate much lower than the market price of a nearby area, and that the payment was made through official banking channels. But, as reported in this paper, official records also show that the trust purchased two parcels of prime land in Ayodhya on the same day, at two very different prices. Considering the stakes involved and the fact that assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh are only a few months away, it is unlikely that this controversy will fade away on its own. Land acquisition in India is a complicated, tortuous affair, with inefficiencies deeply entrenched in the process of acquisition. Information asymmetry and the lack of clear titles add to the challenges. Over the years, numerous allegations of the misuse of states' discretionary power to change land use, which can dramatically increase the value of the piece of land, have also come to light. According to estimates, around two-thirds of all civil cases in India are related to land/property disputes. The recent example of controversial land transactions in the city of Amaravati underlines some of these long-standing issues. There are allegations that those with inside information of the region being declared as the capital of the new state bought land at cheap prices, only to profit handsomely once it was officially notified. Considering the potential spin-offs of the construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya for the larger economy — the state government is hopeful that once the temple is constructed, the city will be transformed into a major tourist destination — demand for what will now be prime real estate will skyrocket. However, such periods of rapid economic transformation also provide ripe moments for unscrupulous and resourceful individuals to manoeuvre to their advantage. It is necessary to guard against crony capitalism. Care must be taken to ensure that the entire process is transparent, and subject to stringent scrutiny. Adequate checks must be put in place, lest the process is shadowed by recurrent allegations.



APEX COURT APPROVES CBSE ASSESSMENT FORMULA

The Supreme Court on Thursday gave in principle clearance to the schemes placed on record by the CBSE and the ICSE to assess the final marks of Class 12 students whose exams were cancelled due to COVID-19. The CBSE has divided the marks assessment process into two components — theory and practical. The theory component would be assessed by first giving 30% weightage to average scores obtained by the students in Class 10 in their three best performing subjects out of a total five. Secondly, another 30% weightage would be given to marks based on the theory component of the final exam taken in Class 11. Finally, 40% weightage would be given for marks obtained in one or more unit tests, mid-term exams and pre-board exams in Class 12. So, if the total marks for theory is 80, the 30% weightage of Classes 10 and 11 would come to 24 marks each and the 40% weightage derived from performances in tests conducted in Class 12 would translate to the remaining 32 marks. On the practical side, calculation would be on the “actual basis” of the marks uploaded by the schools on the CBSE’s portal. According to the scheme, the total marks awarded should be in consonance with the past performance of the school in Class 12 exams. A result committee under the principal would be formed in each school. It has been given the liberty to prepare the result by following the policy. The CBSE said it would declare the results by July 31, 2021. In case any candidate is not satisfied with the assessment done, based on the policy, he or she would be given an opportunity to take the examinations to be conducted by the Board when the situation is more “conducive”. “Most of the candidates will be happy with this scheme... When there is a manageable number you can consider holding a physical exam later,” a Bench of Justices A.M. Khanwilkar and Dinesh Maheshwari addressed Attorney General K.K. Venugopal, appearing for the Union of India, which is the CBSE’s controlling authority.

CISCE formula

The Council for the Indian School Certificate Examination (CISCE) assessment formula would include taking into consideration the students’ Class 10 ICSE Board exams, project and practical work in subjects, best marks obtained in school exams in Classes 11 and 12 and the best performance of the school itself in the past six years.

A PLACE FOR DISRUPTIVE TECHNOLOGY IN INDIA’S HEALTH SECTOR (SURJITH KARTHIKEYAN - AN INDIAN ECONOMIC SERVICE OFFICER, SERVING AS DEPUTY SECRETARY IN THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE. GOWTHAM DAAS RAJENDRAN - A POST GRADUATE IN PUBLIC POLICY FROM THE LEE KUAN YEW SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY)

As frontline warriors fighting COVID-19, the medical community has been selfless, but also losing a number of staff in the process. Nurses and attendants, on full-time duty, donning mainly masks and gloves as the only protective gear have been exposed to great risk. *It is in such a situation that the relevance of disruptive technology and its applications comes into focus, potentially helping to reduce the chances of hospital staff contracting the infection.* There are reports in the global media of established innovative field hospitals using robots to care for COVID-19 affected patients. *There are hospitals, in China, that use 5G-powered temperature measurement devices at the entrance to flag patients who have fever/fever-like symptoms. Other robots measure heart rates and blood oxygen levels through smart bracelets and rings that patients wear; they even sanitise wards.* Last year, in India, the Sawai Man Singh government hospital in Jaipur held trials with a humanoid

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



robot to deliver medicines and food to COVID-19 patients admitted there (<https://bit.ly/3wLxtSQ>). *The critical aspect is how new technologies can improve the welfare of societies and reduce the impact of communicable diseases, spotlighting the importance of technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), autonomous systems, blockchain, cloud and quantum computing, data analytics, 5G. Blockchain technology can help in addressing the interoperability challenges that health information and technology systems face.* The health blockchain would contain a complete indexed history of all medical data, including formal medical records and health data from mobile applications and wearable sensors. This can also be stored in a secure network and authenticated, besides helping in seamless medical attention. *Big data analytics can help improve patient-based services tremendously such as early disease detection. Even hospital health-care facilities can be improved to a great extent. AI and the Internet of Medical Things, or IoMT (which is defined as a connected infrastructure of medical devices, software applications, and health systems and services) are shaping health-care applications.* Medical autonomous systems can also improve health delivery to a great extent and their applications are focused on supporting medical care delivery in dispersed and complex environments with the help of futuristic technologies. *This system may also include autonomous critical care system, autonomous intubation, autonomous cricothyrotomy and other autonomous interventional procedures. Cloud computing is another application facilitating collaboration and data exchanges between doctors, departments, and even institutions and medical providers to enable best treatment.*

Furthering UHC

According to the World Health Organization (<https://bit.ly/3gtHBtT>), “Universal health coverage (UHC) is the single most powerful concept that public health has to offer. *It is a powerful social equalizer and the ultimate expression of fairness.*” *The question is about how UHC can be achieved through the application of digital technologies, led by a robust strategy integrating human, financial, organisational and technological resources. Studies by WHO show that weakly-coordinated steps may lead to stand-alone information and communication technology solutions, leading to a fragmentation of information and resulting in poor delivery of care.* India needs to own its digital health strategy that works and leads towards universal health coverage and person-centred care. *Such a strategy should emphasise the ethical appropriateness of digital technologies, cross the digital divide, and ensure inclusion across the economy. ‘Ayushman Bharat’ and tools such as Information and Communication Technology could be fine-tuned with this strategy to promote ways to protect populations. Online consultation through video conferencing should be a key part of such a strategy, especially in times when there is transmission of communicable diseases.*

Using local knowledge

In addition to effective national policies and robust health systems, an effective national response must also draw upon local knowledge. Community nurses, doctors, and health workers in developing countries do act as frontline sentinels. *An example is the Ebola virus outbreak in Africa, where communities proactively helped curtail the spread much before government health teams arrived. Another example is from Indonesia, where the experience of backyard poultry farmers was used to tackle bird flu. Primary health centres in India could examine local/traditional knowledge and experience and then use it along with modern technology.*



Possible challenges

In the developing world, and this *includes India, initial efforts in this direction should involve synchronisation and integration, developing a template for sharing data, and reengineering many of the institutional and structural arrangements in the medical sector.* Big data applications in the health sector should help hospitals provide the best facilities and at less cost, provide a level playing field for all sectors, and foster competition. The possible constraints in this effort are a standardisation of health data, organisational silos, data security and data privacy, and also high investments. However, there is no doubt that disruptive technology can play an important role in improving the health sector in general.

SOON, DRONES MIGHT FERRY VACCINES

Drones could soon be used for delivering COVID-19 vaccines in remote and hard to reach geographies in the country. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has invited expression of interest from drone operators to “develop a delivery model”. ICMR’s Head of Epidemiology and Communicable Diseases Dr. Samiran Panda said the aim was to develop a model through a pilot project that could be emulated and adopted by the State governments. The ICMR had conducted a feasibility study in collaboration with the IIT-Kanpur. “We need smart vaccination instead of mass vaccination to stem an epidemic. For this, we need to focus not only on areas where the infection is intense but also on places where there are indications that the test positivity rate is still low and that if you saturate the priority groups there through innovative vaccine delivery mechanism, you can stop a surge. This is known as ring-fencing,” Dr. Panda told The Hindu.

Technical specifications

The tender document lays down the technical specifications required, which include the ability of drones to fly “beyond visual line of sight (BVLOS)”, carry a payload of up to 4 kg and cover a distance of up to 35 km. While government rules now permit only those drone operations that are within visual range, the ICMR project comes at a time the Ministry of Civil Aviation has allowed 20 entities to conduct trials for long-range or “beyond visual line of sight” drone flights.

Ice boxes

“Vaccines are carried in ice boxes containing dry ice in order to maintain required temperature levels. These boxes contain data loggers, which have 4G network connectivity to relay live recording of temperature through a mobile app to an operator on the ground,” said Wing Commander S. Vijay (retired), Chief Operating Officer, Skye Air Mobility.

GOVT. CONFIRMS FIRST DEATH FROM REACTION TO VACCINE

A government panel studying COVID-19 vaccine side effects on Tuesday confirmed the first death due to anaphylaxis following vaccination. According to a report submitted by the national Adverse Events Following Immunisation (AEFI) Committee, a 68-year-old man died from anaphylaxis (severe allergic reaction) after being vaccinated with Covishield on March 8. The death is reported as “vaccine product related reaction” in the report. The causality assessment of 31 reported adverse events following immunisation (AEFI) cases was carried out by the panel. N.K. Arora, Adviser,



National AEFI Committee, told The Hindu: “It is the first death linked to COVID-19 vaccination due to anaphylaxis. But compared to the overall numbers, only a small number had a severe reaction. *Those getting their vaccination need to wait for 30 minutes at the inoculation centre after vaccination as most of the anaphylactic reactions occur during this period and prompt treatment prevents deaths.*”

Miniscule risk

Reacting to the report V.K. Paul, Member (Health), NITI Aayog, said: “This incident should not create fear in the minds of people and there should be no apprehension about the safety of the vaccines approved for Indian population. *Whenever decisions about public health are taken, we discuss the benefits and risks involved and in this case the risk involved is minuscule as opposed to the gains.*” The report meanwhile noted that *of the 31 assessed cases, 18 were classified as having inconsistent causal association to vaccination (coincidental — not linked to vaccination), seven were classified as indeterminate, three cases were found to be vaccine product related, one was anxiety-related reaction and two cases were found to be unclassifiable.* It added that mere reporting of deaths and hospitalisations as serious adverse events does not automatically imply that the events were caused due to vaccines.

The Health Ministry on Tuesday said the number of deaths reported following COVID-19 vaccination in the country is only 0.0002% of 23.5 crore doses administered which is within the expected death rates in a population. *It is also important and pertinent to note that the mortality rates for those testing positive for COVID-19 disease is more than 1% and COVID-19 vaccination can prevent these deaths. Therefore, the risk of dying following vaccination is negligible as compared to the known risk of dying due to COVID-19 disease,* it said. The Health Ministry added that AEFI is defined as ‘any untoward medical occurrence which follows immunisation and which *does not necessarily have a causal relationship with the usage of the vaccine.* “It can be any unfavourable or unintended sign, abnormal laboratory finding, symptom or disease. Healthcare workers, doctors and vaccine recipients have been always encouraged to report all deaths, hospitalisations and events resulting in disability as well as any minor and adverse events following immunisation at any point of time after vaccination,” said the release. Charu Goyal Sachdeva, HOD, Internal Medicine, HCMCT Manipal Hospitals, added that there should be no fear or apprehension about COVID vaccines. “Taking vaccines is advisable even for people who have had the COVID-19 infection. Vaccination should be done after the government prescribed window period following COVID,” she said.

BRACING FOR A THREAT

An emerging form of the Delta variant called AY.1 is raising global concern. Five of India’s leading laboratories, since May, have submitted data to the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID) on its presence in India. Public Health England, a body in the United Kingdom, has said that of the 63 genomes in its repository as of June 7, six were from India. *AY.1, or B.1.617.2.1,* is a variant of Delta (B.1.617.2) and has all its characteristic mutations along with one called *K417N.* This particular one has previously been identified in the Beta variant (first detected in South Africa), which is an international variant of concern as it is highly infectious and known to reduce vaccine potency. The Delta variant is reportedly the most prevalent coronavirus variant in India and comprises close to a third of the genome samples, sourced from those with no international

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travel history, processed until late May. *An additional concern with the K417N mutation is that some studies have found that it was associated with resistance to a newly developed monoclonal antibody treatment drug cocktail, Casirivimab and Imdevimab, for those assessed with a moderate to severe disease risk.* Scientists have said that AY.1 marks the continued evolution of the Delta variant. The Delta variant has become globally prominent in the same way as a mutation, D614G, increased the infectivity of coronavirus in March and April last year. Coronaviruses are marked by 'convergent evolution'; some defining mutations that emerge in different strains from around the world start to become more common in subsequent variants. *These mutations are beneficial to the virus and, through a process of natural selection, help it infect human cells more efficiently as well as thwart defensive antibodies.* Evolution is an incessant process, and it is impossible to forecast if SARS-CoV-2 will become a part of the human ecosystem — less contagious, and manifesting in sporadic outbreaks but ever present or buckling into oblivion under the force of counter-offensive measures such as vaccines, masks, lockdowns. As the virus and people continue to be engaged in a dialectical battle, humanity has a tool that has been absent in previous global pandemics — that of rapid genome sequencing. Several countries, including India, have the infrastructure and the resources to track threatening mutations. Unfortunately, the potency of a mutation to increase infectivity in a region can only be known retrospectively. However, *this knowledge can help improve vaccines and enable researchers to perform quick tweaks, or in the parlance of software, develop upgraded patches that can blunt the threat from emergent variants.* India has chosen to restrict genome sequencing studies to 10 government labs and not involve private labs, some of which have the capability and the expertise. Time and again, the country has suffered the consequences of a lack of preparedness. It is important not to downplay the seriousness of the threat.

PLANNING FOR A BIOSECURE FUTURE (HAPPYMON JACOB - ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AT THE SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, JNU)

COVID-19 has made it clear that our traditional imagination of national security is no longer credible. The preparedness of nation states and tenuous global security arrangements were insufficient in dealing with the crisis. The future of national security studies, therefore, will be forced to undergo a paradigm shift if it must retain any policy impact at all — it would need to rethink the sources of insecurity, to begin with. *The growth of exponential technologies such as synthetic biology, artificial intelligence and nanotechnology is bound to change the theory and practice of national security.* COVID-19 has quickened the inevitable. Among the exponential technologies shaping the world today, the biological revolution is of exceptional importance. The rapid rise of synthetic biology in the last two decades and its still-to-be-understood implications haven't received sufficient attention from the security studies or policy communities. *COVID-19 has further highlighted the biosecurity concerns of synthetic biology. The argument is not that COVID-19 originated in a lab, but that dangerous bio-weapons can come from labs.*

Synthetic biology

That new organisms, biological parts and devices can be created or that existing natural life forms can be redesigned should ideally be the subject matter for scientists to concern themselves with or for ethicists to debate. But today, there is a growing realisation that exponential technologies have hitherto unforeseen national and global security implications. In 2014, for instance, the U.S.



Department of Defense categorised synthetic biology as one of the six 'disruptive basic research areas' even though linkage between national security and synthetic biology is yet to become an agenda item in mainstream national security debates. *Synthetic biology is a revolutionary technology which can help us manipulate biological organisms and processes for human betterment, especially in treating diseases, by re-engineering cells. But it is a double-edged sword.* There are many risks associated with the technology which must be addressed before it becomes widely accessible. For one, there is the possibility of deliberate misuse. While the technology is still not easily accessible, the day is not far off when such technologies won't be difficult to access. *There is a need to carefully review, especially in the wake of the pandemic, the biosecurity systems in place where such technologies are in use. Accidental leaks of experimental pathogens are another concern. Insufficiently trained staff, inadequately safeguarded facilities, and lack of proper protocols could all be behind such leaks. The reality is that there has been very little focus on threats emanating from biological sources.* Contrast this with the focus on nuclear weapons, facilities and material. Not only are they tightly controlled but are also the subject of strong global regimes. This is despite the fact that a well-orchestrated biological attack could have serious implications even though it would be less 'spectacular' since its effects are less immediate. This was before synthetic biology came into play. *A well-planned attack using highly infectious pathogens synthetically engineered in a lab could be disastrous. What if such attacks are contemplated and carried out by state actors against adversaries? How easy would it be to pin responsibility on a specific actor if the incubation period is high and the pathogen can be modified to hide its origin? Unlike the nuclear domain, the fields of biology or synthetic biology are not regulated internationally despite growing military interest in synthetic biology applications and their potential misuse. The 'weapon of mass destruction' (WMD) capability of bio-weapons has been long recognised but very little has been done by the international community about it. Of the three types of WMD, nuclear weapons have received the maximum safety and security attention given the treaty and institutional arrangements associated with it. Chemical weapons come next. There is an international convention and an implementing body. However, when it comes to bio-weapons, all we have is the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) of 1972 with no implementing body.* The BTWC does not have a verification clause, nor does it have clearly laid down rules and procedures to guide research in this field. *The dilemma is evident in Article 1 of the BTWC itself which bans "microbial or other biological agents, or toxins, whatever their origin or method of production" that "have no justification for prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes".* In other words, *while bio-weapons are banned, research for medical and bio-defence purposes are allowed. While this is understandable, the problem is that there is a thin line between bio-defence research and bio-weapons research. Since bio-defence research routinely uses pathogens and toxins for experimental purposes, processes, know-how and outcomes of bio-defence research could potentially be used to create bio-weapons, especially with the new advancements in synthetic biology.* More so as the pharmaceutical industry has vehemently opposed any intrusive inspection regime. *An Ad Hoc Group set up in 1994 to negotiate a Protocol to enhance the transparency of treaty-relevant biological facilities and activities to help deter violations of the BTWC submitted a report at the Fifth BTWC Review Conference in 2001 but was not accepted by the member states.* The initiative has since been shelved. Pandemics have also highlighted that the traditional distinction at the international institutional level between biological weapons (a field governed by the BTWC) and diseases (a domain under the World Health Organization) may not be useful anymore. There needs to be more conversation between health specialists and bio-weapons/defence specialists. *The November 2021 BTWC review conference must take stock of the advances in the field, address*

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the thinning line between biotechnology research and bio-weapons research, and consider international measures for monitoring and verification.

India uniquely unprepared

India is at a uniquely disadvantaged position compared to the more developed countries in this area given poor disease surveillance, insufficient coordination among various government departments dealing with biosecurity issues, and the pathetic state of the healthcare system. India has multiple institutions dealing with biosafety and biosecurity threats but there is no coordination among them. For instance, implementation of biosafety guidelines is the responsibility of the Science and Technology Ministry and the Environment Ministry. However, labs dealing with biological research are set up under the Indian Council of Medical Research and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, which are under the Ministries of Health and Agriculture, respectively. This highlights two issues pertaining directly to biosecurity. One, the multiplicity of bodies and ministers makes coordination difficult, especially in the absence of an empowered coordinating body. Two, given the rising risk of diseases of zoonotic origin, the traditional ministry-wise separation might not be useful. Another important question is whether India, with its porous borders and ill-trained border control institutions, is prepared for defending against pathogens or dangerous biological organisms or agents arriving from abroad. COVID-19 should serve as a wake-up call.

NEW GUIDELINES ON REMDESIVIR, STEROIDS

The Union Health Ministry has revised its guidelines for the treatment of COVID-19 patients, particularly for the use of steroids, with doctors reporting a worrying rise in medical complications, such as mucormycosis, due to the abuse of drugs and therapies during treatment. The new protocol advises doctors to *drop from usage medicines such as ivermectin, doxycycline and hydroxychloroquine to treat mild COVID-19 cases.* The revised guidelines, issued on May 27, recommend the *use of antipyretics for fever and antitussives for cold in asymptomatic and mild cases.*

What are the complications being reported?

Mucormycosis causes black lesions on the nasal bridge or the upper inside of the mouth, which can quickly become more severe, leading to blurred or double vision, chest pain, breathing difficulties, and coughing of blood. COVID-19 patients with diabetes and a weakened immune system are particularly prone to this fungal attack. Doctors point out that it is clear that the virus affects not just the respiratory system but other organs as well, including the liver and kidneys.

Which drugs have been dropped from the list?

For patients with mild symptoms, the Ministry dropped from its recommendations several drugs that were being used widely for treatment until now. For example, the Ministry has removed hydroxychloroquine, ivermectin, azithromycin, doxycycline, zinc and favipiravir from its list of recommended drugs for treating patients with mild infection. Plasma therapy, which was previously used extensively, has also been dropped from the list. The Ministry also dissuaded medical practitioners from prescribing unnecessary tests, such as CT scans. For asymptomatic cases, the guidelines said no medication is required, while medications for other co-morbid conditions



should be continued. The new protocol calls for a healthy balanced diet with proper hydration, while advising patients and their families to stay connected and engage in positive talks through phone, video calls, etc. In mild cases, the guidelines recommended self-monitoring for fever, breathlessness, oxygen saturation or worsening of any symptoms. People may take antipyretics or antitussives for symptomatic relief, and may inhale budesonide at a dose of 800 mcg twice a day for five days for cough, the guidelines said. “No other COVID-19-specific medication required. Patients may have to be investigated further if symptoms persist or deteriorate,” the document states.

What do the guidelines specify on medicines?

The Ministry has also revised its policy on Remdesivir, stating that it can be given only to “select moderate/severe hospitalised COVID-19 patients” on supplemental oxygen. The Ministry noted that this is a reserve drug approved under Emergency Use Authorisation based only on limited scientific evidence globally. It further stated that the drug is not to be prescribed for patients with mild symptoms who are under home care or at COVID Care Centres, and that doctors are advised to exercise extreme caution in using this reserve/experimental/Emergency Use Authorisation drug. The Ministry said the advisory and revised guidelines are aimed at stopping the misuse of drugs and therapies which cost a lot and have limited availability, along with the potential to cause harm. In the case of Remdesivir, particularly, the government said that the drug should be taken on advice by senior faculty members or specialists directly involved in a patient’s care. “It should be procured and provided by the hospitals only; the patient’s attendants/relatives should not be asked to procure Remdesivir from the retail market,” the Ministry said. *On Tocilizumab, the guidelines said that it is an immunosuppressant drug and that it has been approved for use as an off-label drug only in severe and critically ill patients.* The document notes that steroids are harmful in asymptomatic and mild cases of COVID-19. It points out that steroids are to be prescribed only in patients who are hospitalised with moderately severe and critical symptoms and are to be administered at the “right time, in the right dose and for the right duration”.

What do the guidelines say for asymptomatic patients?

For asymptomatic and mild cases, the guidelines suggest a six-minute walk test. Patients should walk for six minutes with a pulse oximeter attached to a finger. If oxygen saturation falls below 94% or if the reading varies from three to five percentage points, or if the patient feels unwell (lightheaded, short of breath), admission to a hospital for observation may be required.

Has anything been suggested for children with COVID-19?

The government has issued comprehensive guidelines for the management of COVID-19 among children under 18 years of age, in which Remdesivir has not been recommended and rational use of HRCT (high-resolution computed tomography) imaging has been suggested. Also, *the guidelines note that steroids are harmful in asymptomatic and mild cases of infection. Mask is not recommended for children below five years of age. However, children aged between six and 11 years may wear a mask, but only under the supervision of parents and the consulting doctor, the guidelines said.* For asymptomatic infection among children, the guidelines recommend no specific medication and advise following appropriate measures (wearing a mask, following strict hand hygiene, physical distancing) and a nutritious diet. The guidelines say that for mild infection, paracetamol at 10-



15mg/kg/dose may be given every four to six hours for fever; throat-soothing agents and warm saline gargles in older children and adolescents have been recommended for cough. *Doctors have noted that a high percentage of children who got infected and were hospitalised during the second wave of infections had either co-morbidities or low immunity.* They added that healthy children with mild illness recovered without the need for hospitalisation.

BIRTH, DEATH REGISTRATIONS UP IN 2019

The level of registration of births and deaths in the country improved in 2019, according to the “Vital Statistics of India Based on The Civil Registration System” report. Some States and Union Territories were, however, lagging behind. The report states that the level of birth registration increased from 87.8% in 2018 to 92.7% in 2019; and death registrations went up from 84.6% to 92% during the period. While 14 States/Union Territories achieved 100% level of birth registrations, 19 States/Union Territories achieved the same level in cases of death.

Sex ratio at birth

Based on the information received from 32 States/Union Territories, the share of institutional births in the total registered births was 81.2%. The number of registered births increased to 2.48 crore in 2019 from 2.33 crore in 2018. The share of male and female was 52.1% and 47.9%. In the case of registration of births within the prescribed period of 21 days, 15 States/Union Territories achieved more than 90% registration. The highest sex ratio at birth (SRB) based on registered events was reported by Arunachal Pradesh (1,024), followed by Nagaland (1,001) Mizoram (975) and Andaman & Nicobar Islands (965). The lowest SRB was reported by Gujarat (901), Assam (903) and Madhya Pradesh (905), followed by Jammu & Kashmir (909). The number of registered deaths increased from 69.5 lakh in 2018 to 76.4 lakh in 2019. The share of male and female was 59.6% and 40.4%. Based on the information received from 31 States/Union Territories, the share of institutional deaths in total registered deaths was 32.1%.

Infant deaths

Eleven States/Union Territories achieved more than 90% registration of deaths within the prescribed period of 21 days. In the case of registration of infant deaths, the share of urban area was 75.5% compared to 24.5% in rural areas. In the north-east, Arunachal Pradesh reported 100% registration of births, but only 38.6% of deaths. Nagaland also registered 100% births, but just 30% deaths, while Manipur recorded 67.7% births and only 21.4% deaths. In Sikkim, there was 100% registration of deaths, but 61.2% registration of births.

Full registration

However, Mizoram and Tripura reported 100% registration of both births and deaths. Meghalaya had 100% registration of births and 97.6% registration of deaths, while Assam reported 100% registration of births and 74% registration of deaths. In Bihar and Jharkhand, the levels of registration of births were 89.3% and 84.3% and the levels of registration of deaths were 51.6% and 58.8%. In Daman & Diu, the figures were 50.7% and 61%. Listing the limitations, the report said the level of registration of States/Union Territories and India level presented in the report was arrived at using the mid-year projected population of the respective States/Union Territories



of 2011-2019 based on 2011 census (Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections, July 2020, National Commission on Population, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare) and, therefore, was not comparable with rates presented in previous reports.

Incomplete data

The level of registration was arrived at using Sample Registration System Rates for 2018 as the survey for 2019, which was scheduled for 2020, could not be completed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, some States/Union Territories submitted incomplete or partial data, which was not included.

CENTRE LISTS FOOD SCHEMES FOR MIGRANT LABOURERS

The Centre on Monday informed the Supreme Court that the States and the Union Territories have purchased nearly 3.7 lakh tonnes of foodgrains at concessional rates from the Food Corporation of India this year to supply to migrants without ration cards and others outside the protective cover of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), debunking apprehensions raised in court that those without ration cards may be left to die amid a devastating pandemic. *The Supreme Court had asked the Centre to explain "how food will reach migrant labourers without ration cards". The Centre has placed on record details of its schemes to feed migrants, the poor and the badly affected in the public health crisis. Besides the purchase of grains by the States and the UTs under the Open Market Sales Scheme (OMSS) in 2021-22, the Centre said, NGOs and charitable organisations had purchased 421 tonnes of food commodities.* "NGOs run kitchens for supply of cooked food to non-card migrants," the Centre, represented by Additional Solicitor-General Aishwarya Bhati, said in written submissions in the court. *However, the responsibility to distribute foodgrains lies with the States, it noted. "Union of India is committed to making sufficient foodgrains available to the States at highly subsidised prices under the above schemes, to tide over the difficulty of food security during the current crisis. However, the responsibility of identification and distribution to the beneficiaries lies with the States/UTs," it submitted.* The Centre also said it had written twice to the States/UTs — on May 20 and May 25 — advising them to "avail their requirements of foodgrains under the schemes and to provide foodgrains to those not covered under the National Food Security Act".

REVERSE MIGRATION

Leaders switching parties and parties recruiting turncoats are not unheard of in Indian politics. A shrinking party would lose leaders while an expanding party would gain them. The talent acquisition strategy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) goes far beyond such familiar opportunism. In the recent years of its growth, it has built entire electoral strategies around leaders who crossed over from other parties. In Assam, its two consecutive Chief Ministers were in other parties not long ago; the current incumbent, Himanta Biswa Sarma, was not just any other Congress leader but a decision maker in the 15-year-long tenure of the party until 2016. Perhaps encouraged by the success in Assam, the party launched a similar strategy in West Bengal. It recruited dozens of leaders from other parties, particularly the Trinamool Congress (TMC). *Not surprisingly, a good number of the leaders who crossed over to the BJP due to its lure or fear of the central agencies investigating scams and irregularities, are now flocking back to the TMC.* Even as it continued to induct defectors from the Congress and the Telangana Rashtra Samithi this week,



Mukul Roy left the BJP to return to the comfort of his old party, the TMC. Several others may follow suit. The TMC itself is a haven of defectors — dozens of leaders from the Congress and the Left Front have joined it since it won power in 2011. The political flux is unlikely to end soon. The BJP has achieved significant growth in West Bengal in a short span of time. Had it relied more on leaders who had organically grown with it, the BJP would not have been in such an embarrassing position. Its hurry to be in power even in places where it has not established itself as a viable party is harming it. It is also coarsening the political debate and harming democracy itself, simultaneously. *If the reverse migration of TMC leaders is rattling the BJP in West Bengal, in Kerala, another State where it tried to punch far above its weight, it is caught in a vortex of corruption allegations. Allegations range from bringing money from Karnataka for the campaign in Kerala through hawala routes and bribing an ally. The leaders that the BJP recruited from other parties in Kerala have added up to nothing. All this should point the BJP towards the virtue of patience, which is not unfamiliar to it. Replacing grassroots activism with large-scale defections from other parties can only win short-term rewards, if at all.* In the long run, such trends undermine the parties, the persons involved and the democratic processes. The BJP must learn to be more modest in victory and gracious in defeat. Tactics too focused on the short term can only harm the larger interest over the longer term.

ENERGY INEFFICIENCY CAN SHORT CIRCUIT COOLING INDIA (ANNA AGARWAL - A FELLOW AT THE CENTRE FOR POLICY RESEARCH, NEW DELHI)

More frequent and intense heat waves are expected with a rise in global temperatures due to climate change. In the last three decades, there have been 660 heat waves across India causing 12,273 deaths (<https://bit.ly/3pXxtNj>). India, with currently low penetration levels of air conditioners (ACs), will likely require substantial cooling services to keep citizens healthy and productive. *The India Cooling Action Plan (<https://bit.ly/3pZNm5B>) projects the number of room air conditioners to become about four times in the next 10 years, and about 10 times in the next 20 years, making India the world's largest energy user for cooling.*

Scant data

Here lies a conundrum. Cooling will likely be at the forefront of India's adaptation to climate change, but if cooling needs are met with inefficient ACs, it could be the bane of India's mitigation efforts. Indian homes will be an important site where this conundrum between cooling needs and potential emissions will play out. Despite its clear importance, the implications of an increase in residential cooling demand have not been carefully examined. Estimates of AC ownership and usage, the two factors which will determine the extent of future cooling demand, have little empirical backing. We know little about what cooling appliances people seek, and how and why people make their purchase decisions. *The pursuit of energy efficiency, too — for instance, who buys efficient technologies and why — remains underexplored.*

Delhi survey results

In a recently published paper (<https://bit.ly/3vBtTtu>) in the Environmental Research Letters, my colleagues and I look at household cooling patterns, and unpack household characteristics that are leading to increased use of air conditioners and adoption of energy efficient choices. The findings are based on a door-to-door household survey in areas of Delhi, with above average levels



of AC penetration. We find that the desired levels of cooling vary greatly even among relatively homogenous communities. In Delhi's wealthy neighbourhoods, 43% of the households own an AC, 39% own coolers and 18% only have a fan. Further, the way households use ACs also differs quite a bit. *While most households use an AC for three to four hours a day during peak summer months, about 15% use ACs for over eight hours a day. It is interesting to note that the India Cooling Action Plan in its estimation of residential cooling demand, assumes that an average household uses an AC for eight hours a day, which as per our study seems to be an upper bound.* People prefer different AC set-point temperatures, again indicative of varying perceptions of thermal comfort. Half of the households set their ACs between 24°C-26°C, and 27% prefer their AC temperature to be between 21°C-23°C. *This wide range of preferred AC temperatures have important implications on energy demand requirements, as every 1°C increase in AC set-point temperature can lead to additional 6% energy savings (<https://bit.ly/2TDcd3j>). Unfortunately, energy efficiency does not feature as a priority in the purchase of cooling appliances.* Only 7% of the households have an energy efficient (star-rated) fan, and 88% of the coolers are locally assembled. Most people prefer to buy a three-star AC, and less than 20% of AC-owning households bought the highest rated five-star AC.

An obstacle

Large-scale adoption of efficient cooling appliances will be essential to providing the required thermal comfort in a low carbon manner. We find that low levels of energy efficiency awareness are a major bottleneck that hinders the purchase of more efficient appliances. A third of the households did not know of the Star Labelling programme, which is a government programme mandatory for refrigerators and air conditioners. Of the households that had heard of the programme, only half of them understood what it meant. We find that it is this set of informed households that are more likely to own a higher efficiency AC, and also likely to use the appliance efficiently. Higher upfront cost and low market availability of more efficient air conditioners (four-star and five-star) are other reasons for buying a less efficient AC. *We find that many households also use alternative cooling strategies to keep cool, with the use of a fan being the favourite non-AC cooling option, and use of non-energy cooling methods such as natural ventilation being a common practice. Households using such non-AC cooling methods were found to use their AC for fewer hours.*

Other solutions

The impending cooling demand transition in India offers a potential advantage. Because *a majority of investments in cooling technologies, infrastructure, and behaviours are yet to be made, there is a unique opportunity to lock-in energy efficient consumption patterns. Awareness campaigns on the benefits of energy efficiency along with subsidies and financial incentives that help with the higher upfront costs can help drive up the adoption of more efficient technologies. Encouraging the use of passive cooling alternatives including energy efficient building designs can help provide the desired thermal comfort with reduced dependence on energy intensive cooling technologies.*

CLOSURE, COMPENSATION

Nine years after two Italian marines shot dead two fishermen off the Kerala coast under the belief that they were pirates, the criminal proceedings against them are set to be formally closed. The Supreme Court of India has ordered that the criminal trial against them be stopped, after Italy deposited compensation of ₹10 crore. The Permanent Court of Arbitration, a tribunal under the



United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, had last year ruled that even though India and Italy had concurrent jurisdiction to try the case, the marines — Salvatore Girone and Massimiliano Latorre — enjoyed immunity from Indian jurisdiction as they were acting on behalf of a state. The UN tribunal had also ruled that the Indian fishing boat, St. Antony, and the victims were entitled to compensation, as Enrica Lexie, the Italian vessel, had violated the boat's right of navigation under the Law of the Sea. The two marines are likely to face trial in Italy, but as far as India is concerned, the monetary compensation may have to be treated as the only available form of closure for the moment. Given the legal tangles over jurisdiction, the lawfulness of their arrest and the location of their trial, as well as the provisions of law under which they should be tried, legal accountability through a criminal trial had been rendered extremely difficult. The legal heirs of the two victims are likely to get ₹4 crore each, and the owner of the fishing vessel, ₹2 crore. In hindsight, the diplomatic turbulence the incident set off in the early days, the nationalist passions the killings raised and much of the delay in resolving the issue could all have been avoided. A possible way out was to have agreed to Italy's offer of compensation and a trial in its own jurisdiction — the very thing that came out of the UN tribunal's ruling. At that time, many in India believed it was an act of wanton killing, while those in Italy believed the fears of piracy were genuine. India's efforts to assert criminal jurisdiction succeeded in national courts, with the Supreme Court ruling in 2013 that prosecuting the marines, who had been brought into Indian waters from the Contiguous Zone, where the incident took place, was solely in the Union government's jurisdiction. However, when the NIA invoked a stringent anti-piracy law — the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against Safety of Maritime Navigation and Fixed Platforms on Continental Shelf Act, 2002 — it was received with consternation in Italy. European nations objected to the trial taking place under a law that provided for the death penalty. The provisions of the Act were dropped, but this led to significant delay in prosecuting the matter. A lesson is that such incidents should be dealt with a combination of legally sustainable steps and diplomatic efforts to find early resolution.

WHAT LOSS OF SAFE HARBOUR MEANS FOR TWITTER

Micro-blogging platform Twitter is facing fresh heat from the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) for failing to adhere to norms while appointing executives in the roles of Resident Grievance Officer, Nodal Officer and Chief Compliance Officer. *This, according to the government, means that the protection under Section 79 of the Information Technology (IT) Act, accorded to Twitter for being a social media intermediary, now stands withdrawn.*

What is the protection accorded to intermediaries under Section 79 of IT Act?

Section 79 says that any intermediary shall not be held legally or otherwise liable for any third party information, data, or communication link made available or hosted on its platform. This protection, the Act says, shall be applicable if the said intermediary does not in any way initiate the transmission of the message in question, select the receiver of the transmitted message, and does not modify any information contained in the transmission. This means that as long as a platform acts just as the messenger carrying a message from point A to point B, without interfering with its content in any manner, it will be safe from any legal prosecution brought upon due to the message being transmitted.



And what is the central government's complaint?

In a series of tweets on Wednesday, the Minister for Law & Justice, Communications, Electronics and Information Technology Ravi Shankar Prasad flogged Twitter for having “deliberately chosen the path of non-compliance”. “It is astounding that Twitter which portrays itself as the flag bearer of free speech, chooses the path of deliberate defiance when it comes to the Intermediary Guidelines. Further, what is perplexing is that Twitter fails to address the grievances of users by refusing to set up process as mandated by the law of the land. Additionally, it chooses a policy of flagging manipulates media, only when it suits, its likes and dislikes,” Prasad posted.

How does this impact Twitter, then?

In the short run, since the protection accorded to Twitter under Section 79 of the IT Act is now gone, it opens up the platform to the possibility of any and all penal action that is likely to be taken against it as a publisher of content. This means that if someone puts out any content on Twitter that leads to some form of violence, or violates any Indian law with respect to content, not only the person that has put out the tweet will be held responsible, even Twitter will be legally liable for the content as it no longer has the protection.

Is there something else that can happen subsequently?

In the longer run, there is also the theoretical possibility that Twitter might be subjected to the 26 per cent cap of direct foreign investment in media and publishing, which in turn means that the platform may be forced to look for an Indian buyer for the remaining 74 per cent stake.

RULES REGULATING CABLE TV NETWORK AMENDED

*The Information and Broadcasting Ministry on Thursday amended the rules regulating cable television networks, providing for a “statutory” mechanism for complaints raised by citizens regarding any content broadcast. At present, there are over 900 TV channels that are required to comply with the Programme and Advertising Code laid down by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting under the Cable Television Network Rules. The Cable Television Networks (Amendment) Rules, 2021, provides for a three-level grievance redressal mechanism — self-regulation by broadcasters, self-regulation by the self-regulating bodies of the broadcasters, and oversight by an Inter-Departmental Committee at the level of the Centre. A viewer could file a complaint directly to the broadcaster, who would have to respond within 15 days. If the complainant was not satisfied with the response, the complaint could be escalated to the self-regulating bodies set up by TV channels, which should deal with the case in 60 days. “If the complainant is not satisfied with the decision of the self-regulating body, he may, within 15 days of such decision, prefer an appeal to the Central government for its consideration under the Oversight Mechanism,” it said. Such appeals would be dealt with by the Inter-Departmental Committee set up under the Oversight Mechanism. The Committee would be headed by the Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, and have members from the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Home Ministry, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Defence, and representatives of other Ministries and organisations, including experts, as the Centre may decide. This **third tier was not only kept aside to hear the appeals, it could take up complaints that come directly to the Centre.***



RAJASTHAN GOVT. TO SET UP VEDIC EDUCATION BOARD

The Congress government in *Rajasthan will set up a Vedic Education and Sanskar Board to revive the knowledge of ancient Sanskrit scriptures and connect the learnings of the Vedas with science and yoga. The board is likely to be set up in the coming four to five months. Minister of State for Sanskrit Education Subhash Garg said here on Monday that a committee appointed to define the aims, objectives and functioning of the board had submitted its report to the State government.* Based on the panel's recommendations, the board will adopt education modules revolving around Vedic knowledge. The ruling Congress had promised the establishment of the Vedic Education and Sanskar Board as well as steps to promote Sanskrit language and education in its manifesto for the 2018 State Assembly election.

CM's announcement

Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot had announced in January this year that the work for setting up the board would be expedited to encourage the students to carry out research on the Vedas and enable them to assimilate the country's "glorious traditions". He had pointed out that Ayurveda and Sanskrit universities had also been established in the State during the tenure of the Congress government earlier. The committee has reportedly studied several models of Vedic teaching being followed in other States and recommended a curriculum for schools, which would include subjects such as science, mathematics, Sanskrit, yoga and meditation.

INDIA TO LAUNCH DEEP OCEAN MISSION

The Union Cabinet has approved the long-pending deep ocean mission, which among other things involves developing a submersible vehicle that will allow a crew to plunge 6,000 metres into the ocean and hunt the floor for precious metals. If this works, India will be among a handful of countries able to launch an underwater mission at such depths. In the works since 2018, the mission is expected to cost ₹4,077 crore over the next five years. The estimated cost for the first phase of three years (2021-24) would be ₹2,823.4 crore. *The Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) will be the nodal Ministry implementing this multi-institutional mission. There are six components to the programme. A manned submersible will be developed to carry three people to a depth of 6,000 metres in the ocean with a suite of scientific sensors and tools. An integrated mining system will be also developed for mining polymetallic nodules at those depths in the central Indian Ocean.* "The exploration studies of minerals will pave way for the commercial exploitation in the near future, as and when commercial exploitation code is evolved by the International Seabed Authority, an United Nations organisation," says an accompanying press note. *The second component involves developing Ocean Climate Change Advisory Services, which entails developing a suite of observations and models to understand and provide future projections of important climate variables on seasonal to decadal time scales.*

Microbes, minerals

The next component is searching for deep sea flora and fauna, including microbes, and studying ways to sustainably utilise them. The fourth component is to explore and identify potential sources of hydrothermal minerals that are sources of precious metals formed from the earth's crust along the Indian Ocean mid-oceanic ridges. The fifth component involves studying and preparing detailed

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



engineering design for offshore Ocean Thermal Energy Conversion (OTEC) powered desalination plants. The final component is aimed at grooming experts in the field of ocean biology and engineering. This component aims to translate research into industrial applications and product development through on-site business incubator facilities. The Deep Ocean Mission was in 2019 envisaged as a ₹8,000 crore mission, as *The Hindu* has earlier reported. India has been allotted a site of 75,000 square kilometres in the Central Indian Ocean Basin (CIOB) by the UN International Sea Bed Authority for exploitation of polymetallic nodules (PMN). These are rocks scattered on the seabed containing iron, manganese, nickel and cobalt. Being able to lay hands on a fraction of that reserve can meet the energy requirement of India for the next 100 years, say officials at the Earth Sciences Ministry.

COAST GUARD INDUCTS THREE ALH MK-III HELICOPTERS

The Coast Guard on Saturday inducted the first batch of three Advanced Light Helicopters (ALH) Mk-III designed and manufactured by Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL). "The ALH Mk-III marine version has been designed and developed with in-house customisation of 19 additional equipment by HAL to meet Coast Guard requirements," a Coast Guard statement said. "The HAL will supply 16 ALH Mk-III to the ICG by mid next year," it stated. On induction, the 16 ALH Mk-III will be positioned at four Coast Guard squadrons in Bhubaneswar, Porbandar, Kochi and Chennai. *The Navy inducted the first batch of three ALH Mk-III helicopters into service at INS Hansa in April. Early this week, the Navy inducted three ALH Mk-III at INS Dega in Visakhapatnam.*

OPERATION OLIVIA' TO THE RESCUE OF OLIVE RIDLEYS

Every year, the Indian Coast Guard's "Operation Olivia", initiated in the early 1980s, helps protect Olive Ridley turtles as they congregate along the Odisha coast for breeding and nesting from November to December. "For optimal results, round-the-clock surveillance is conducted from November till May utilising Coast Guard assets such as fast patrol vessels, air cushion vessels, interceptor craft and Dornier aircraft to enforce laws near the rookeries," a Coast Guard officer said. "From November 2020 to May 2021, the Coast Guard devoted 225 ship days and 388 aircraft hours to protect 3.49 lakh turtles that laid eggs along the Odisha coast." *The Olive Ridley (Lepidochelys olivacea) is listed as vulnerable under the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red list. All five species of sea turtles found in India are included in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, and in the Appendix I of the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora which prohibits trade in turtle products by signatory countries. The Orissa Marine Fisheries Act empowers the Coast Guard as one of its enforcement agencies. "Studies have found three main factors that damage Olive Ridley turtles and their eggs — heavy predation of eggs by dogs and wild animals, indiscriminate fishing with trawlers and gill nets, and beach soil erosion," the officer said. Dense fishing activity along the coasts of Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Bengal, especially ocean-going trawlers, mechanised fishing boats and gill-netters pose a severe threat to turtles. Coordination of efforts is done at various levels, the officer explained, including enforcing the use of turtle excluder devices (TED) by trawlers in the waters adjoining nesting areas; prohibiting the use of gill nets on turtle approaches to the shore; and curtailing turtle poaching.*



Nesting habits

The Olive Ridley has one of the most extraordinary nesting habits in the natural world, including mass nesting called arribadas. The 480-km-long Odisha coast has three arribada beaches at Gahirmatha, the mouth of the Devi river, and in Rushikulya, where about 1 lakh nests are found annually. "Sea turtles generally return to their natal beach, or where they were born, to lay eggs as adults," the Coast Guard officer explained. Mating occurs in the offshore waters of the breeding grounds and females then come ashore to nest, usually several times during a season.

WHY THE SOUTHWEST MONSOON IS EARLY

Just about 10 days after it broke over the Kerala coast two days behind schedule, the southwest monsoon has progressed rapidly to cover two-thirds of the country.

How far has the monsoon progressed?

On Tuesday, the northern limit of the monsoon (NLM) continued to pass through Diu, Surat, Nandurbar, Bhopal, Nagaon, Hamirpur, Barabanki, Bareilly, Saharanpur, Ambala, and Amritsar, according to the India Meteorological Department's daily weather report. Across some areas of south peninsular and central India, the monsoon has arrived 7 to 10 days ahead of its scheduled date. So far, the monsoon has missed Northwest India — Gujarat, Rajasthan, western Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab and Delhi. As of Tuesday, the entire country except West Bengal and the Northeast, Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, Kerala, and Gujarat had received cumulative rainfall (since the official beginning of the southwest monsoon season on June 1) in excess (20%-59%) or large excess (60% or more) of normal.

Why is it early this year?

Cyclone Yaas, formed in the Bay of Bengal during the third week of May, helped the monsoon make a timely arrival over the Andaman Sea on May 21. Despite a two-day delay from its normal onset over Kerala, where it arrived on June 3, the southwest monsoon made fast progress in subsequent days. This was mainly due to strong westerly winds from the Arabian Sea, and also the formation of a low-pressure system over the North Bay of Bengal on June 11 that currently lies over eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The monsoon currents strengthened and it advanced into the Northeast, West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar and parts of Chhattisgarh. An off-shore trough, prevailing for a week between Maharashtra and Kerala, has helped the monsoon arrive early over Karnataka, Goa, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra and southern Gujarat.

Is this unusual?

In the last one decade since 2011, the monsoon has covered the entire country in June itself on four occasions — 2020 (June 1–26), 2018 (May 28–June 29), 2015 (June 5–26) and 2013 (June 1–16). In all the other seven years, arrivals were delayed over major cities or regions. Cyclone Vayu in 2019 and Cyclone Mora in 2017 had delayed the monsoon progress by a few days. But overall, advancement during these seven years was as per normal dates and the monsoon covered the country around July 15 (the normal date, followed until 2019). In the years when the monsoon has arrived early, its progress has picked up towards the final phase; that is, the North and Northwest India regions have witnessed early arrival.

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



Will it continue this pace?

Although the monsoon has made rapid progress along the regions on the west and east coasts, and East, Northeast and some Central India regions, further progress is likely to be slower. This is not expected until around June 25. An advance will take place when there is a fresh pulse to revive the monsoon currents. "Over Northwest India, the monsoon becomes active only when the monsoon currents — either from the Arabian Sea or the Bay of Bengal — reach the region. As it is not expected to happen soon, the monsoon progress will remain slow," said Mrutyunjay Mohapatra, director general, IMD. Also, a stream of mid-latitude westerly winds is approaching Northwest India, which will hinder the monsoon advancement in the immediate coming days.

Does early onset mean more rainfall overall?

The time of monsoon onset over a region has no direct impact on the rainfall quantum received during the season, or in the monsoon's progress. For instance, the monsoon took 42 days in 2014 and 22 days in 2015 to cover the entire country. Even with such distinct ranges, India recorded deficient rainfall during both years. This year, the monsoon is most likely to cover the entire country by the end of this month. Although it is too early to predict the seasonal rainfall, it is possible that June rainfall could end in surplus over the normal of 170 mm. As on June 15, it was 31% above normal.

How does early rainfall impact paddy sowing?

Early rainfall will not directly impact paddy sowing, with seedlings still in the nursery stage in most paddy growing states. "There is still time for undertaking paddy transplanting over most areas that grow rice. Due to rainfall over coastal Karnataka and Konkan, farmers can undertake paddy transplanting in the third to fourth weeks of June," said R Balasubramanian from the Agriculture Meteorology Division of IMD, Pune. Transplanting is being currently undertaken in Kerala. However, with not much rainfall recorded over Madhya Maharashtra (except Kolhapur, Satara & Sangli districts and the ghat areas) and Marathwada (except bordering districts with Vidarbha) farmers may undertake sowing once these sub-divisions get sufficient rainfall, he said. In Odisha and West Bengal, too, saplings are yet to reach the transplantation stage.

The early monsoon also means a shorter summer. Is this unusual?

Although the IMD considers June 1 as the beginning of the monsoon season over India, the summer in Northwest India is not yet over. In West and Northwest India, day temperatures remain above 40°C. For example, Fatehgarh in eastern UP recorded 42.4°C on Monday. "Recently, Rajasthan and neighbouring areas of Northwest India reported heatwave-like conditions. Once the low-pressure system weakens in the next two to three days, the temperatures over North and Northwest India – where the monsoon is yet to reach – will increase," said D Sivananda Pai, head, Climate Research and Services, at IMD, Pune.

Can these patterns be placed within the context of climate change?

After the monsoon onset over Kerala, its progress can either be rapid, consistent or slow, based on ocean-atmospheric conditions. The onset of the monsoon over various parts of the country each year can be ahead of time, in time or late. These variations are generally considered normal,



given the complexity of the monsoon. However, climate experts have linked extreme weather events like intense rainfall over a region within a short time span or prolonged dry spell during these four months as indications of climate change.

TIGRESS RESCUED FROM DEFUNCT U.P. FACTORY

A tigress living in an abandoned rubber factory in Uttar Pradesh's Bareilly district at least since December 2019 was rescued after an 18-day tracking operation, officials said on Friday. She was released in the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve at night. The tigress was first found in the dilapidated factory, around 6 km from Bareilly, in November-December 2019, Mayukh Chatterjee, head of Human-Wildlife Conflict Mitigation, Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), told The Hindu. *The operation was carried out by a team of the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department, along with the Pilibhit Tiger Reserve and the WTI. Sushant Soma, wildlife biologist, WTI, said, "The tigress is a fully mature adult, roughly aged around five-seven years.* For her age, she seems a little less developed at just 115 kg with a relatively small stature (body length is 140 cm) and pug size."

Dense vegetation

Spread over 1,200 hectares, the synthetic rubber chemical factory shut down three decades ago, leading to dense growth of vegetation on the compound. As a result, there was ample prey available, including black buck, wild pigs and rhesus macaques, said Mr. Chatterjee. The tigress was tranquillised after it was spotted in an old oil tank and an earthmover was used to tear the tank open, he said. Chief Conservator of Forests, Bareilly zone, Lalit Verma said it was a tricky operation because the tigress was confined in the oil tank. "We were hoping it would come out due to hunger, but it did not," he said. Mr. Verma said the animal was first spotted in March 2020, and stayed on the premises for 15 months.

Second tiger

"Normally, in such time the animal moves elsewhere but it was continuously being spotted that too late night or in early hours," he said. A tracking operation was started then but due to the pandemic, the officials had to stop their efforts. This is the second tiger to be rescued from the factory in the last three years.

GOVT. REPORT FLAGS 'LAPSES' IN NAGALAND BAT

More than a year after a probe into a filovirus study of bats in Nagaland by the Bengaluru-based National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) and the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), the government has concluded that there had been "concerning lapses" in the conduct and protocols followed for the study, even as an inter-department row continues over where the bat samples should be stored. The Hindu had first reported in February 2020 on the enquiry being initiated into whether adequate permissions had been sought for the study that had listed two scientists at the Wuhan Institute of Virology as "co-authors", and was partially funded by the U.S. Department of Defense through its Defence Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA). In 2020, a committee convened by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), which consisted of officials from the Ministries of External Affairs, Defence, Home Affairs, Health, Environment, Law, Departments of Science & Technology, Development of the North Eastern Region, and others met to "to streamline



processes and avoid such lapses in the future,” a report by the Ministry of Health said. Both the foreign-funding of the study, which cost an estimated ₹1.9 crore, as well as concerns over the storage of the bat samples collected came up for scrutiny.

No Wuhan link

The findings of the report became significant given the debate over the origins of COVID-19 worldwide, and handling of bat samples at the Wuhan Institute laboratory. However, scientific experts and officials that *The Hindu spoke to made it clear that the Nagaland bat study on filoviruses (Ebola and Marburg) was in no way related to the coronavirus (SARS) studies at Wuhan.* When contacted, NCBS Director Satyajit Mayor said he had no knowledge of the Health Ministry’s report’s conclusions. “We are not aware of lapses,” said Mr. Mayor, in written replies to The Hindu. *“The [bat] samples we have collected are invaluable to research and understanding zoonotic pathogens,”* he added, directing all further enquiries on the clearances and bat samples to the Ministry of Health. However, both the Ministry of Health report dated February 2021, as well as a series of communications between the Ministry of Health and Welfare, and the Department of Atomic Energy, which oversaw the NCBS study in October-November 2020, referred to the issues. The Hindu has seen copies of these documents. *“The research publication raised serious concerns as the samples were collected from humans and bats with intent to test for viral pathogens and resulting antibodies of highly infectious pathogens (risk group 4 viruses). The study didn’t have the requisite approval of ICMR. Moreover, the facility at NCBS was not equipped in terms of biosafety and biosecurity to undertake such testing,”* states the Health Ministry report. *“The inquiry committee (including Health Ministry and ICMR officials) visited NCBS, Bangalore as well as Nagaland to understand the work done, methodology followed, and places visited during the course of the study,”* said the report, adding that they found “concerning lapses in the study protocols and procedures”. *“All the lapses were discussed and appropriate actions were suggested,”* it added.

Safe storage issues

Meanwhile, differences over the storage of the Nagaland bat samples between the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE), and the Ministry of Health continue. The Health Ministry wants the samples of nucleic acid extract stored at the Bio Safety Level -4 (BSL-4) standard facility at the National Institute of Virology laboratory in Pune, rather than NCBS’s Bengaluru facilities, that are rated BSL-3 at present. While the DAE contends that the samples were “non-infectious” and had been checked for the presence of filoviruses (Ebola and Marburg), the Health Ministry contends that such samples must be handled in a laboratory equipped for “biosafety and biosecurity conditions” as otherwise they can pose a “significant public health hazard”. “The issue of bio-security comes under the Department of Biotechnology, and the ICMR has no business raising any concerns on a study done by the NCBS, which is an institution under the Department of Atomic Energy,” said noted virologist Gagandeep Kang. When asked, however, an official said that a 1987 Health Ministry order had designated ICMR Director General and the Health Secretary as the Chairpersons on the committee clearing all research involving foreign funding and foreign collaboration. According to the citation in the study, named *“Filovirus-reactive antibodies in humans and bats in Northeast India imply zoonotic spillover”,* that was published in 2019, the research was funded by U.S. Dept of Defense, U.S. Naval Biological Defense Research Directorate, and Indian Department of Atomic Energy, and credits researchers at Duke-NUS Singapore, U.S. Uniformed Services University as well as Shi Zhengli and Xinglou Yang from the Wuhan Institute for “writing- review and editing” the paper.



SALE OF ILLEGAL HTBT COTTON SEEDS DOUBLES

The illegal cultivation of herbicide-tolerant (HT) Bt cotton has seen a huge jump this year, with seed manufacturers claiming that the sale of illegal seed packets has more than doubled from 30 lakh last year to 75 lakh this year. Industry lobbies have written to the Agriculture Ministry, demanding that action be taken to stop such sales and punish offenders, noting that cultivation of the genetically modified cotton variant has serious environmental and economic consequences. However, a senior official at the Ministry said it was up to the State governments to enforce the policy. *This comes even as activists from the Shetkari Sangathan have stepped up the reach of their civil disobedience movement to demand the legalisation of HTBt cotton by encouraging farmers to plant the seeds in violation of government regulations. Bt cotton is the only transgenic crop that has been approved by the Centre for commercial cultivation in India.* It has been *genetically modified to produce an insecticide to combat the cotton bollworm, a common pest. The HTBt cotton variant adds another layer of modification, making the plant resistant to the herbicide glyphosate, but has not been approved by regulators. Fears include glyphosate having a carcinogenic effect, as well as the unchecked spread of herbicide resistance to nearby plants through pollination, creating a variety of superweeds.* “This year there is a big increase in such illegal cultivation especially in Maharashtra from 30 lakh packets last year to about 75 lakh packets this year,” said a recent letter from the Federation of Seed Industry of India executive director Shivendra Bajaj to Agriculture Secretary Sanjay Agarwal. *“To make matters worse, the illegal seeds are sold using the brand name of prominent companies ... Farmers are at risk with such illegal cotton seed sale as there is no accountability of the quality of seed, it pollutes the environment, the industry is losing legitimate seed sale and the government also loses revenue in terms of tax collection,”* he added, noting that HTBt seeds are often produced in Gujarat and then moved to Maharashtra. “It will not only decimate small cotton seed companies but also threatens the entire legal cotton seed market in India,” National Seed Association of India president Prabhakar Rao said on Friday. “Regulators are only limiting their checking to licensed dealers and seed companies while this illegal activity of HT seed sales is carried mostly by unorganised and fly by night operators. The focus must be shifted to catching them and taking exemplary and strong punitive action.” Deputy Seeds Commissioner Dilip Srivastava admitted that such complaints had become widespread. “Centre has made the policy to ban this variant. But it is the State governments that must take action. We are issuing advisories from time to time,” he told The Hindu. Another official said following Central advisories to all cotton-growing States, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Telangana have seized HTBt stock and taken punitive action against the culprits.

FLYING SIKH MILKHA SINGH, INDEPENDENT INDIA’S FIRST SPORTING SUPERSTAR, DIES AT 91

Milkha Singh never looked back in anger at that one moment when he’d fatefully looked back. Missing what could have been India’s greatest track and field medal — a bronze at the Rome Olympics in 1960 by 0.1 seconds — independent India’s first sporting superstar taught a nation entering its teens what a heartbreak felt like. An Army man, who impressed a Pakistan General so much that he gave him the famous moniker “Flying Sikh”; a track legend who put India at the starting blocks of the biggest sporting stage; and a trailblazer who demanded excellence from all those who represented the country — Milkha Singh passed away from Covid-related



complications late Friday at the age of 91. Five days ago, Milkha's wife, Nirmal Kaur, a former India volleyball captain, had lost her battle with the virus at a Mohali hospital. Milkha is survived by 14-time international winner and golfer son Jeev Milkha Singh, daughters Mona Singh, Sonia Singh and Aleeza Grover — and a legacy that is part of India's sporting lore. While his four gold medals in the Asian Games and duels with Pakistan's Abdul Khaliq lit up stadiums, one of Milkha's more famous wins was his historic 400m gold at the then British Empire and Commonwealth Games in Cardiff, UK. Running in the outermost lane at Cardiff Arms Park in front of more than 70,000 fans, Milkha pipped the then world record holder, South Africa's Malcom Spence, clocking 46.6 seconds to make history, and receive his medal from Queen Elizabeth. After the race, as he told the BBC that he had fulfilled his duty towards his motherland, a young nation learned to strut around overnight. After the riots during Partition claimed his parents and three brothers, Milkha landed in Ferozepur in a military truck after a nightmare journey from Multan in a train soaked in blood. Still a boy, he would shine boots of soldiers and, on bad days, be forced to steal ration to feed his empty stomach. After two failed Army recruitment attempts, Milkha joined EME, Secunderabad. And it's in the shadow of the Golconda Fort that he made a 10-man shortlist out of 500 for a 6-mile run and came under the tutelage of his first coach, Havaladar Gurdev Singh. Chipping away at competition at inter-services meets, Milkha made the India camp in 1956, and booked a berth for the Melbourne Olympics, beginning his 400m stint. He'd watch the greats streak past, as the ambition to run as fast as them took root. Training till he dropped and with an obsession to win, Milkha started setting national records, trying his best to stick to a regimen scribbled for him by Olympic champion Charles Jenkins in Melbourne. He was soon Asia's best, and the highly-touted Pakistan runners would start falling short. It was Pakistan president General Ayub Khan who anointed Milkha the "Flying Sikh", after he blitzed past the home nation's Abdul Khaliq at an international race in Lahore. Yet, while reflecting in the glow of hindsight after his retirement, Milkha would generously credit those he beat, and was beaten by, calling them the pacesetters of his life. A survivor of the Partition, Milkha wouldn't let the wounds fester, believing that destiny's victims suffered on both sides. He firmly acknowledged how his childhood in Pakistan and youth in India shaped him as a battle-hardened sportsman. And he'd always refer to Abdul Khaliq as his shadow, walking ahead sometimes, falling back on others, but twinned forever, each pushing the other. There was epic grace in his failing at the Olympics, too. In a race where Otis Davis of USA set a world record of 44.9 seconds with Carl Kauffman of Germany finishing a close second, Milkha set the national record of 45.6 seconds. Later, he conceded that looking back at the midway stage had cost him precious time, but wouldn't brood on it. He embraced the result as destiny. Milkha was always grateful for whatever he achieved, rather than staying sullen over what he missed. As he nursed his drink and busied his hard-earned retirement years of comfort in Chandigarh, playing golf and growing old surrounded by grandchildren, with an undiminished zest for life, Milkha taught his country how to take all that life threw at him, in what was his legendary stride.



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

DIRECT TAX RECEIPTS JUMP THIS FY

India's direct tax receipts in the first two-and-a-half months of 2021-22 have doubled to almost ₹1.86 lakh crore from the comparable period last year when the national lockdown hit collections, the Finance Ministry said on Wednesday. Economists said the tax figures suggest the economy could post double-digit growth in the first quarter.

Vivad Se Vishwas

The substantive rise in inflows could be attributed to dispute resolution scheme Vivad Se Vishwas that concluded recently, said Neeru Ahuja, partner, Deloitte India. The collections from April 1 to June 15 include Corporation Tax of ₹74,356 crore and Personal Income Tax inflows, which include the Securities Transaction Tax, of ₹1.11 lakh crore. The collections in the year-earlier period totalled ₹92,762 crore. "Despite extremely challenging initial months of the new fiscal, the Advance Tax collections for the first quarter of 2021-22 stand at ₹28,780 crore against Advance Tax collections of ₹11,714 crore for the corresponding period of the immediately preceding financial year, showing a growth of approximately 146%," the Finance Ministry said. The advance tax kitty includes ₹18,358 crore as Corporation tax and Personal income tax of ₹10,422 crore. "This amount is expected to increase as further information is received from banks," the ministry added.

GST BROUGHT DOWN ON 14 COVID RELIEF GOODS

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council on Saturday decided to waive the tax levied on two critical drugs against COVID-19 and mucormycosis — tocilizumab and amphotericin B — and reset the tax rate to 5% for 14 major pandemic relief items, till September 30. Non-BJP-ruled States registered a strong dissent, terming the continued imposition of GST on critical COVID supplies and drugs as 'insensitive' and 'totally anti-people'. They alleged that their proposals for zero-rating or reducing GST rates to 0.1% on critical supplies were ignored by the Union Finance Ministry at what turned out to be another stormy Council meeting.

Mitra's remarks deleted

West Bengal Finance Minister Amit Mitra said the Council's chairperson, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, allowed his comments to be deleted at the behest of his Uttar Pradesh counterpart, and accused the Ministry of muzzling his voice and cutting off the virtual conference link when he was trying to voice objections. The 5% GST levied on vaccines was left unchanged, following the recent changes in the country's vaccine procurement strategy that puts the Union government in charge of augmenting supplies. *The GST rate on Remdesivir and anti-coagulants like Heparin has been reduced from 12% to 5%.* The Council recommended that the same rate be levied on any other drug that may be recommended by the Health and Family Welfare Ministry and the Department of Pharma for COVID-19 treatment. Ms. Sitharaman announced that the Council had accepted all but three recommendations on COVID-19 supplies' tax rates submitted by a group of ministers (GoM) under Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma on June 6. *Ambulances, which*



*are currently taxed at 28%, will attract a GST levy of 12%, while temperature checking equipment and electric furnaces used in crematoriums will attract a 5% GST instead of 18%. For oxygen concentrators, medical grade oxygen and related devices such as ventilators, BiPAP machines, the GST rate has also been brought down to 5% from 12%. The same reduction has been approved in the levies on COVID-testing kits and pulse oximeters. The 5% rate will apply to personal imports of oxygen concentrators as well as pulse oximeters, while the 18% GST payable on hand sanitisers has been reduced to 5%. Revenue Secretary Tarun Bajaj said the tax rate changes, to be notified over Sunday and Monday, were aimed at providing some succour to the people amid the pandemic and were not driven by revenue considerations. "When it (the GST on vaccines) was discussed, it was mentioned that the Centre is buying 75% of the vaccines and will remit the GST on it and the revenue on that will be shared 70% with the States," Mr. Bajaj said, explaining that this will have no tax implications for people as they will receive the vaccine for free. **The rates will remain effective till September 30, but could be extended further based on later assessments.***

THE INVISIBLE TAX

The pandemic's second wave may have subsided but hopes of a smooth rebound in the economy in tandem with easing restrictions remain muddled, with the inflation numbers for May compounding the problem. The soaring pace of rising prices, both retail and wholesale, in the month that saw widespread lockdown-like restrictions, has come as a negative surprise. *Inflation based on the Wholesale Price Index is reckoned to have hit a 25-year record of nearly 13%, while retail inflation touched a six-month high of 6.3%.* While runaway fuel prices, that include high excise duties and taxes, were a key factor in driving up both the inflation indices, they were not the only ones at work. *Retail inflation in food hit a six-month high of 5%, from barely 2% in April, with pulses and eggs as well as edible oils leading the surge. 'Fuel and light' inflation hit 11.6%, the highest in over nine years, and no respite is in sight on this front as pump prices for petrol raced past ₹100 a litre in even more parts of the country this month.* Diesel has also crossed the century mark in Rajasthan's Sri Ganganagar, where freight costs add up on top of State and central taxes. *Even if one were to discount food and fuel prices, core inflation has crossed the 6% mark for the first time in 31 months and is estimated at 6.6%.* Reacting to the April retail inflation print of 4.3%, after averaging a steep 6.2% through 2020-21, the RBI Governor had remarked earlier this month that it brought some relief and 'elbow room' for sticking with growth-supportive policy. If anything, May's inflation prints leave no such room for manoeuvre. Though the bank's Monetary Policy Committee may not switch away from its dovish policy, no further easing of interest rates can be expected at these price levels. Most economists expect inflation to remain higher than the average 5.1% estimated by the central bank for this year. *If the Government wants the RBI to persist with its accommodative approach to facilitate growth, it must take some actions of its own to curb price rise, including meaningful cuts in fuel taxes that the RBI Governor has been advocating since February.* So far, it has only obfuscated the issue with arguments ranging from 'the States should cut taxes first' to 'let's bring petroleum products under GST', and the latest claim by the Petroleum Minister who admitted that the prices are problematic, but the Government is 'saving money to spend on welfare schemes' and buying vaccines. For a population already reeling from job and income losses and higher medical costs since the pandemic's onset, the persistently high inflation is untenable. No welfare scheme can offset its disproportionately adverse impact on the poor.



MANAGING TANTRUM

In its recent meeting, as was expected, the US Federal Reserve's Open Market Committee (FOMC) kept its benchmark policy rate unchanged, while maintaining the pace of its monthly asset purchases. But with the economic recovery in the US gaining traction — according to the IMF's world economic outlook, the US economy is now expected to grow at 6.4 per cent in 2021, up from its earlier assessment of 5.1 per cent — and with inflation firming up, the signals emanating from the meeting suggest that it is now likely to raise rates earlier than was previously estimated. The dot plot — which shows the interest rate predictions of members of the FOMC — now signals two rate hikes by the end of 2023, bringing forward the date of the policy pivot. Thirteen of the 18 members on the committee are in favour of rate hikes in 2023, while seven members expect a hike in 2022. This expected pivot will also have implications for the bond buying programme. So far the US Fed has given no indication of when it will begin to slow down its asset purchase programme. But with Jerome Powell, chairman of the Federal Reserve, acknowledging that the issue was also discussed, these signals are likely to raise fears among central banks of emerging economies of history repeating itself. In 2013, mere talk from Ben Bernanke, the then chairman of the US Federal Reserve, that the Fed would begin to “taper” its asset purchases, caused mayhem across financial markets in emerging economies — an episode known as “Taper Tantrum”. Capital began to flow out, bond yields rose and currencies collapsed. The situation was particularly grim for the “fragile five” — Brazil, India, Indonesia, South Africa, and Turkey — all of whom were then facing a toxic combination of large current account and fiscal deficits. India's currency fell by double digits. This time around too, the impact of the FOMC meeting was immediately felt. Currencies of most developing economies in Asia fell against the dollar on suggestions of a sooner than expected policy pivot. An eventual rollback of accommodative policies by the Fed may well cause market volatility. But it is likely that this time around, having internalised the fallout of the 2013 episode, communication from the Fed will be better. Clear communication of its objectives and timelines can help reduce market volatility. Markets are also likely to be better prepared this time. Further, most emerging economies also have considerably higher levels of foreign exchange. India's foreign exchange reserves have crossed \$600 billion — a cushion against such market volatility. However, such periods of uncertainty do complicate matters for central banks. In 2013, the Reserve Bank of India responded to the crisis through a mix of policy measures, including forex market intervention and monetary tightening. As an inflation targeting central bank now, while it will need to be watchful of the fallout of such policy changes, it will also have to carefully navigate this challenging terrain.

RBI: AMID RISING IMPORTS, \$600 BILLION FOREX RESERVES MAY NOT BE ENOUGH

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has indicated that the record level of \$600 billion foreign exchange reserves of the country may not be adequate, considering the projected imports and the negative international investment position. “While foreign exchange reserves provide cushions against unforeseen external shocks, levels are often deceptive, and a better gauge of external vulnerability is an assessment of specific indicators,” the RBI said in its ‘State of the Economy’ report. In terms of projected imports for 2021-22, the current level of reserves provides cover for less than 15 months, which is lower than for other major reserve holders — Switzerland (39 months), Japan (22 months), Russia (20 months) and China (16 months), the RBI said. At the end



of December 2020, India's foreign exchange reserves cover of imports increased to 18.6 months from 17.1 months at end-September 2020.

GOVT APPROVES RESTRUCTURING OF OFB INTO 7 NEW CORPORATE ENTITIES

The Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) will be dissolved, and replaced by seven new Defence Public Sector Undertakings, which will oversee the 41 ordnance factories across the country. The Cabinet on Wednesday approved the creation of the entities, which will be 100 per cent owned by the government. The transformation is likely to take place by the end of the year. Talking to reporters, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh assured that the interests of the over 70,000 OFB employees will be safeguarded. "I assure that the service conditions of the employees will not be affected by the move," he said. The Cabinet note on the decision also mentions *there won't be any change in the service conditions.* "It is a major decision from the perspective of national security... India should be Atmanirbhar when it comes to national security," he said, asking everyone to support the "historic decision". *In October last year, the OFB employees had threatened to go on an indefinite strike, which was called off after discussions with Defence Ministry officials.* A top ministry official said all OFB employees in the production units will be transferred to the new corporate entities on a deemed deputation initially for a period of two years without altering their service conditions as central government employees. Also, the official said, "pension liabilities of the retirees and existing employees will continue to be borne by the government". The move to replace the OFB with the seven corporate entities "will allow these companies autonomy as well as help improve accountability and efficiency", said an official. *The restructuring is aimed at transforming the ordnance factories into productive and profitable assets, deepen their specialisation in product range, enhance competitiveness and improve quality and cost-efficiency, the official said. The seven entities will be responsible for different verticals of the products being produced by the 41 ordnance factories.* The Ammunition and Explosives group will be engaged in production of ammunition while a Vehicles group will engage in production of defence mobility and combat vehicles. There will also be a Weapons and Equipment group, Troop Comfort Items group, Ancillary group, an Opto-Electronics group and a Parachute group, the official said. He said the new structure will help in overcoming shortcomings in the existing system of OFB by "eliminating inefficient supply chains and provide these companies incentive to become competitive and exploring new opportunities, including exports". *The decision to corporatise the OFB was taken by the Cabinet Committee on Security in July 2020, when it approved to transform it into one or more government-owned corporate entities to improve its autonomy, accountability and efficiency in ordnance supplies.* In September, the government formed an Empowered Group of Ministers headed by Singh to oversee the process. A ministry official said this EGOM will take decisions on any issue that may arise.

UNDEVELOPED OIL FIELDS: GOVT PLANS MONETISATION AMID LOW RECOVERY, SHIFT TO RENEWABLES

Low recovery of oil and gas from domestic fields and growing sentiment against fossil fuels have led to the government deciding to move ahead to monetise undeveloped fields and mature fields with falling output, according to government officials. Last Thursday, Petroleum Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said that government companies cannot hold on to undeveloped resources indefinitely and suggested that these companies should seek to find technology partners or investors who can

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



bring the expertise to monetise such fields quickly. India imports more than 85 per cent of its crude oil requirements. "There is a sentiment developing against fossil fuels if you look at the latest report by the IEA (International Energy Agency) and the judgment against Shell. So people will be reluctant to invest in oil and gas (in the future) and what may happen is that the resource in the ground might remain there unless we monetise it quickly," said a government official who wish to be anonymous. *The IEA had last month published a report recommending a halt on all new oil and gas investments to reach a goal of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. Separately, a Netherlands court has ruled that oil and gas major Shell must cut its carbon dioxide emission by 45 per cent by 2030 relative to 2019 levels.* "Whatever resource we identify underground, hardly 30-40 per cent are recoverable (by state-owned companies), why not 50-60 per cent?" said the official, noting that the Centre wanted to expand oil and gas development activity in the country and bring in more players so that new technology is brought into the domestic hydrocarbon production sector to increase the recovery factor of fields. "If there is good management and execution, the recoveries can be increased," he said, adding that *even relatively new fields such as ONGC's KG-DWN-98/2 field could benefit from expertise of large private players in recovering reserves in ultra deepwater fields.* Crude oil production by both state-owned upstream players ONGC and Oil India has fallen over the past five years, with natural gas production remaining stagnant despite both companies reporting net additions to their crude oil and natural gas reserves through new discoveries and acquisitions. India's crude oil production has fallen from a peak of 38.1 million metric tonnes in FY15 to 30.5 million metric tonnes in 2020-21.

CENTRUM TO TAKEOVER PMC BANK, PARTNER BHARATPE TO LAUNCH SFB

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday granted "in-principle" approval to Centrum Financial Services Ltd to set up a small finance bank (SFB), paving the way for it to take over the scam-ridden Punjab and Maharashtra Co-operative Bank in a joint venture with digital payment firm BharatPe. The RBI in a statement said an in-principle approval was given after Centrum Financial Services submitted an expression of interest for PMC Bank Resilient Innovations Private Limited (BharatPe), one of India's leading fintech companies, will be an equal partner in the SFB. "Starting off with existing capabilities of an NBFC and a fintech, active and potential customer base, digital reach and technology, should enable the SFB to scale up quickly," Centrum said. Jaspal Bindra, executive chairman, Centrum Group, said: "We are delighted that a new banking license will be issued to an NBFC after a gap of nearly 6 years and would like to thank the RBI for the opportunity and confidence shown in us. We are excited to partner with BharatPe to create this new age bank, with a strong team." "We are delighted at the opportunity to build a high performing technology led small finance bank serving the payment, investment and credit needs of the under-served," said Ashneer Grover, CEO and co-founder, BharatPe. As of March 2020, PMC Bank had a deposit base of Rs 10,727 crore and loans worth Rs 4,473 crore. The share capital of the bank is Rs 292.94 crore. However, the bank registered a net loss of Rs 6,835 crore during 2019-20 and has a negative net worth of Rs 5,850.61 crore. PMC Bank is under regulatory restrictions after the RBI found out financial irregularities in its functioning, hiding and classification of loans given to Housing Development Infrastructure Ltd (HDIL). The bank has an exposure of over Rs 6,200 crore to HDIL. The RBI has superseded the board of the bank and appointed an administrator in September 2019. Last year in November, the bank came out with an EoI (expression of interest) to identify a suitable equity investor/ group of investors willing to take over management control so as to revive the bank and commence its day-to-day operations. BharatPe and Centrum Group

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



reportedly submitted a joint EoI to the RBI to collectively take over the troubled PMC Bank. Four bidders had submitted EoIs for the takeover of PMC Bank. *When the RBI sacked the board of PMC Bank, it initially slapped a deposit withdrawal restriction of Rs 1,000 per account which was later increased to Rs 50,000. About 78 per cent of the depositors have since been allowed to withdraw their deposits within the withdrawal limit of Rs 50,000. While this limit was further enhanced to Rs 1 lakh in June last year, many depositors who have bigger amounts parked in the bank are still not able to get their money back.* “We hope to get back our money stuck in PMC Bank with the Centrum takeover,” said a depositor. In 2019, the Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of Mumbai police arrested PMC Bank’s former managing director Joy Thomas in connection with the fraud at the bank. The promoters of HDIL, Rakesh Wadhawan and Sarang Wadhawan, too, have been arrested and are currently in jail, facing money laundering charges. Incidentally, the net-worth of all SFBs currently in operation is in excess of Rs 200 crore. Centrum was founded by Chandir Gidwani and the late Khushrooh Byramjee. Founded in 1997, the Centrum group has diversified fee businesses and a lending platform for institutions and individuals. Institutional services include investment banking, mid-corporates and SME credit and broking. It also provides MSME credit, wealth management to the rich and family offices, affordable housing, and micro finance. It also offers funds across private debt and venture capital through its asset management business. BharatPe, founded in late-2018, offers a finance platform to small merchants. In the same year 2018, it launched the first UPI interoperable QR code, first zero MDR payment acceptance service, and first UPI payment-backed merchant cash advance service.

WHY NCLT THINKS VEDANTA IS GETTING VIDEOCON FOR ‘ALMOST NOTHING’

Videocon Industries is set to come under the fold of Anil Agarwal’s Vedanta Group, with banks taking a substantial haircut of 95.85 per cent from their total claims in the resolution plan approved by the banks and cleared by National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT). But the Mumbai bench of the NCLT has raised questions about Vedanta group company Twin Star Technologies’ Rs 2,962 crore bid for 13 Videocon group companies, noting that the applicant was paying “almost nothing”. The resolution of the 13 companies of the Videocon group is the first group insolvency resolution completed under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC).

How much will lenders get as per the resolution plan?

As per the resolution plan approved by the Committee of Creditors, assenting secured financial creditors would get only 4.89 per cent, dissenting *secured financial creditors would get only 4.56 per cent, assenting unsecured financial creditors would get only very meagre amount of 0.62 per cent, dissenting unsecured financial creditors would get “nil” amount and operational creditors would also get a very meagre amount of only 0.72 per cent.* “Out of total claim amount of Rs 71,433.75 crore, claims admitted are for Rs 64,838.63 crore and the plan is approved for an amount of only Rs 2,962.02 crore which is only 4.15 per cent of the total outstanding claim amount and the total haircut to all the creditors is 95.85 per cent,” NCLT said in its order. In short, banks won’t get back Rs 68,471.73 crore that they claimed under the plan. NCLT says the successful resolution applicant (Twin Star Technologies) “is paying almost nothing and 99.28 per cent haircut is provided for operational creditors (hair cut or tonsure or total shave)”.



MSMEs to take hit

According to the NCLT, during the course of hearing, it was submitted that voluminous number of operational credit are also MSMEs and if they are paid only 0.72 per cent of their admitted claim amount, in the near future, many of these operational creditors may have to face insolvency proceedings which may be inevitable. NCLT requested both CoC and Twin Star to increase the pay-out amount to these operational creditors, especially MSMEs, as this is the first group consolidation resolution plan of 13 companies having a large number of MSMEs.

How will Twin Star take control?

Twin Star Technologies is an Indian entity, 100 per cent held by Twin Star Overseas Ltd, which is the investment arm for technology investments for the Volcan group of the Anil Agarwal group of companies. NCLT says by just paying Rs 262 crore (8.84 per cent of total plan value) — cash balance available with the corporate debtors is around Rs 200 crore — Twin Star will get possession of all the 13 corporate debtors to run these units and the first payment of Rs 200 crore as part redemption amount of NCDs will be paid within 25 months from the closing date and the balance amount of Rs 625 crore each is spread over four instalments starting from third year onwards up to sixth year from the closing date and the interest rate for the NCDs is also a nominal of only 6.65 per cent payable annually.

NCLT doubts confidentiality clause

The liquidation value of the corporate debtor is Rs 2,568.13 crore which is very close to the amount approved by the lenders. As per the CIRP Regulations, the liquidation value and fair market value is kept as confidential and informed to the lenders panel members only at the time of finalising the resolution plan. Even in the present case, the resolution bids were opened in the 15th CoC meeting held on September 2, 2020. “Even if the confidentiality clause is in existence, in view of the facts and circumstances, a doubt arises on the confidentiality clause being in real time use. Therefore, we request IBBI to examine this issue in depth so as to ensure the confidentiality clause is followed unscrupulously, without any compromise in letter and spirit by all the concerned parties, entities connected in the CIRP,” NCLT said. Manoj Kumar, partner at law firm Corporate Professionals, said: “Initially under the IBC, valuations were disclosed to resolution applicants but later it was decided that these would be kept confidential as in most cases the bids that were submitted were close to the liquidation value.”

No compensation for shareholders

The equity shares of Videocon will stand delisted from the BSE and the NSE in accordance with the order of the NCLT. It is estimated that the liquidation values of VIL and VAIL (Value Industries Ltd) are not sufficient to cover debt of the financial creditors of VIL and VAIL respectively in full. Therefore, the liquidation value due to the equity shareholders of VIL and VAIL is nil and hence, they will not be entitled to receive any payment and no offer will be made to any shareholder of VIL or VAIL.



CABINET PANEL APPROVES ADDITIONAL FERTILIZER SUBSIDY

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs has approved the proposal to hike subsidy rates for phosphorus and potassium-based fertilizers by 140% in a bid to provide relief to farmers as the kharif sowing season begins. The estimated additional subsidy burden is around ₹14,775 crore, with the Centre emphasising that this is a one-time measure as part of COVID-19 relief. *Unlike urea, where the Centre sets a fixed maximum retail price, non-urea fertilizer prices are decontrolled, with the Centre fixing nutrient-based subsidy rates.* So far, a 50 kg bag of di-ammonium phosphate (DAP), the fertilizer most popular with Indian farmers after urea, was sold at ₹1,200, including a subsidy of about ₹500. However, the bull run in the global commodity markets has seen a surge in prices of the imported raw materials as well as the finished fertilizer. In early April, a number of Indian fertilizer companies hiked their DAP prices to ₹1,900 per bag. Farmers' groups protested against the ₹700/bag hike, pointing out that their input costs for the kharif season would spiral out of control. After a high-level meeting on May 19, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that the subsidy would be increased to ₹1,200 per bag, ensuring that farmers would not face any price rise. That decision was approved by the Cabinet on Wednesday, applicable for the kharif season only.

IN COVID-19 PANDEMIC, FOUR FOOD RECORDS

Record offtake, record procurement, record stocks in government warehouses and record exports. This has been the story of four records in the last one year and more of the Covid-19 pandemic, when "food" – more specifically, rice and wheat channelled through the public distribution system (PDS) – has become the NDA government's preeminent social safety net programme.

Offtake

Until 2019-20, offtake of grain from the Food Corporation of India's (FCI) godowns averaged hardly 62 million tonnes (mt) per year, while even falling from almost 66 mt to just over 60 mt between 2012-13 and 2017-18. Much of it comprised PDS rations under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013. This law, passed during the previous UPA regime, entitles 81.35 crore Indians to receive at least 5 kg of wheat or rice per month at Rs 2 and Rs 3 per kg, respectively. The annual foodgrain allocation under NFSA – which includes a higher 35-kg monthly ration for 2.37 crore "poorest of the poor" households under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana – works out to nearly 55 mt. Last year, during the nationwide lockdown, the NDA government launched a new Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY). Under it, NFSA beneficiaries were provided an extra 5 kg grain per month free for April-November 2020, translating into an additional allocation of over 32 mt.

Offtake of rice and wheat from the central pool crossed an all-time-high of 93 mt in 2020-21, roughly 50% higher than in the previous year. Much of this was courtesy of PMGKAY, which, along with the Atmanirbhar Bharat Package (for returning migrant labourers) and other lockdown-related schemes, saw a total lifting of about 31.5 mt. PMGKAY has been re-launched this year, too, in the wake of the pandemic's second wave. Initially, the government allocated the 5-kg extra free grain per month to NFSA beneficiaries only for May and June 2021. But on June 7, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced its extension up to Diwali, i.e. November. That, again, is likely to boost offtake by 28 mt or more in 2021-22.



Procurement

But it isn't PDS grain offtake alone that has hit an all-time-high. *Government agencies have, as on June 11, procured 42.3 mt of wheat and 55.4 mt of rice from the 2020-21 crops.* This has broken even the record 39 mt and 51.8 mt that got procured in the previous year. The government has, in the post-pandemic period, both distributed as well as procured more grains than ever before. While the spike in offtake is an outcome of the pandemic — free food has arguably been the single biggest relief measure for those worst affected by the economic disruptions after March 2020, ahead of even MGNREGA (another UPA legacy programme) — *increased procurement is probably a fallout of the movement against the Centre's farm reform laws.* The minimum support price (MSP) value of the paddy and wheat bought by government agencies since October 2020 – the three farm laws got passed the previous month – comes to approximately Rs 238,250 crore. *Some 38.5% of that amount has gone to Punjab and Haryana, whose farmers have been at the forefront of the protests.* The government's going all out to convince farmers that its reform laws aren't aimed at ending the MSP-based procurement regime, can be seen in paddy and wheat purchases from Punjab scaling new highs in the 2020-21 crop year. *Record procurement has been its strongest defence against allegations of being anti-farmer.*

Foodgrain stocks

This links up with a third record. *Even after the unprecedented 93 mt-plus offtake, thanks to PMGKAY, stocks of rice and wheat in the Central pool were at an all-time-high of 109.44 mt as on June 1, surpassing even last year's 97.27 mt at this point. Stock levels have been rising since 2017, reversing the declining trend of the preceding four years.* If stock accumulation has largely to do with the political economy compulsions of MSP-based procurement, Covid-time distress has provided an opportunity for whittling down FCI's grain mountain. *FCI's "economic cost" of procuring, handling, transporting, storing and distributing grains was estimated at Rs 39.99 per kg for rice and Rs 27.40/kg for wheat in 2020-21. The subsidy on the 31.5 mt of grains (20.8 mt rice and 0.7 mt wheat) distributed free under PMGKAY and other special relief programmes would have, then, totalled around Rs 112,500 crore.* The actual cost, though, would have been lower, because FCI also incurs interest and storage expenses in holding excess stocks in its godowns. This "carrying cost of buffer", pegged at Rs 5.40/kg in 2020-21, is saved even when grain is given out free. The corresponding annual savings on 31.5 mt would have been in excess of Rs 17,000 crore. Similar savings will accrue on the 28 mt additional grain allocations under PMGKAY for 2021-22.

Exports

Now is the final record: *2020-21 also saw a record 19.8 mt of rice and wheat being exported from India.* On paper, practically *this entire quantity shipped out was grain procured from the open market.* According to the Department of Food and Public Distribution, a mere 75,000 tonnes wheat and 4,000 tonnes rice got exported from the central pool in 2020-21. This was wholly on "humanitarian grounds" through the Ministry of External Affairs. *The surge in exports has been significantly aided by the hardening of international prices. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization's Cereal Price Index hit a 95-month-high in May. But global prices apart, the competitiveness of Indian rice and wheat may have been also enabled by recycled/ leaked grain from the PDS.* Given the massive quantities offered free/near-free under PMGKAY/NFSA, it shouldn't surprise if some of this grain has got diverted to the open market or even for exports. However, at



the end of the day, it is the abundant crop produced by farmers that has made all four records – PDS offtake, procurement, stocks and exports – possible even amidst the worst pandemic in over a century.

WHAT IS HALLMARKING OF GOLD, AND FOR WHOM IS IT NOW MANDATORY?

The government on Tuesday announced the phased implementation of mandatory hallmarking of gold jewellery with effect from June 16. In the first phase, gold hallmarking will be available in only in 256 districts and jewellers having annual turnover above Rs 40 lakh will come under its purview. Which are these districts and how to check the hallmarked jewellery?

What is hallmarking of gold?

The Bureau of Indian Standard (BIS), which operates gold and silver hallmarking scheme in India, defines hallmarking as the “accurate determination and official recording of the proportionate content of precious metal in precious metal articles.” So, it is a “guarantee of purity or fineness” of precious metal articles.

Which metals are covered hallmarking in India?

The government, through a notification issued on June 14, 2018, notified two categories—gold jewellery and gold artefacts; and silver jewellery and silver artefacts—under the purview of hallmarking. So, hallmarking in India is available for jewellery of only two metals—gold and silver. However, a certain category of jewellery and items will be exempted from the mandatory requirement of hallmarking. According to the Department of Consumer Affairs, “Export and re-import of jewellery as per Trade Policy of Government of India — Jewellery for international exhibitions, jewellery for government-approved B2B domestic exhibitions will be exempted from mandatory Hallmarking.” The Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution said that watches, fountain pens and special types of jewellery such as Kundan, Polki and Jadau will be exempted from hallmarking.

Why hallmarking has been made mandatory only in 256 districts?

The ministry said that “based on extensive consultations with stakeholders,” it has been decided that hallmarking will be initially be starting with 256 districts of the country which have assaying marking centres. However, the ministry has given no date from which the next phase of the mandatory hallmarking will begin in the remaining districts.

MICROSOFT NAMES CEO SATYA NADELLA AS CHAIRMAN

Microsoft Corp on Wednesday named Chief Executive Officer Satya Nadella as its new chairman, in place of John Thompson. Nadella, who took over as CEO in 2014 from Steve Ballmer, has been instrumental in scaling up its business including billion-dollar acquisitions like LinkedIn, Nuance Communications and ZeniMax. The company said Thompson, who took over as chairman from the software giant’s co-founder Bill Gates in 2014, will serve as lead independent director. The top-level executive change comes just over a year after Gates stepped down from the board, saying he would focus on philanthropic works of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, one of the world’s biggest charities. The company had last month said it conducted a probe into Gates’ involvement

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



with an employee almost 20 years ago after it was told in 2019 that he had tried to start a romantic relationship with the person. Microsoft had declined to comment on whether its board had decided Gates should go.

BITCOIN PUSH

On June 9, El Salvador became the first sovereign nation to make a cryptocurrency legal tender. The law pushed by its 39-year-old President, Nayib Bukele, passed with 62 out of 84 votes. It mandates that Bitcoin should now be accepted as a valid payment by all establishments, except those that do not have the technical wherewithal to do so. *This puts the digital currency that does not answer to any government monetary policies on the same footing as the country's primary currency, the United States dollar.*

Why is the U.S. dollar the currency in El Salvador?

El Salvador fully 'dollarised' its economy in 2001. Countries adopt the U.S. dollar as their official currency for several reasons, such as when their local currencies fail (for example, Zimbabwe, which saw inflation in multimillion percentages), or to take advantage of the stability that it offers and attract investments. One of the downsides is that the economies of 'dollarised' countries get linked to the monetary policies of the Federal Reserve in Washington. The U.S. central bank could set rates that may benefit the U.S. economy but end up hurting economies that use the same currency.

What is the rationale for using Bitcoin?

The Bill that Mr. Bukele proposed said that "Central banks are increasingly taking actions that may cause harm to the economic stability of El Salvador" and that Bitcoin was being adopted "in order to mitigate the negative impact from central banks". The country's economy is also heavily reliant on remittances from El Salvadoreans working abroad. *According to World Bank data, remittances made up almost \$6 billion in 2019, which was about 20% of the country's GDP* — one of the highest ratios in the world. By enabling the transfer of money via Bitcoins, Mr. Bukele says El Salvadoreans will save on transaction fees of banks and agencies. Politically, the current government in El Salvador and the Joe Biden administration in the United States are at odds. Recently, some of President Bukele's right-hand men found mention in a U.S. State Department list of corrupt officials in central America. The United States's international aid agency is also moving money away from the Bukele government after it voted to remove all members of the Supreme Court.

How does Bitcoin work?

Bitcoin is the first and biggest of decentralised cryptocurrencies, which are online payment systems that are increasingly becoming mainstream. Ethereum, Tether, and Binance Coin are some of the many others that have emerged after Bitcoin. Cryptocurrencies are built on the back of blockchain technology, a system of distributed, cryptographically-secured account keeping. In this system, the users keep a tab on every digital 'coin' and transaction rather than a banking system with a governing body at its centre.



Why are governments wary?

Due to their core nature that shuns centralised control, governments globally have been wary of cryptocurrencies. A report from the U.S. Library of Congress notes that most countries have warned their citizens against investing in cryptocurrencies, let alone allowing transactions in them. Some have tried to use the technology to create government-sanctioned digital currencies. *China, a hub of cryptocurrency activity, has issued a digital Yuan on blockchain while it cracks down on other cryptocurrencies. The Bank of England has also proposed a digital Sterling.* However, *many countries, including India, have allowed the treatment of cryptocurrencies as commodities, resulting in a rising tide of investment in them.* After its introduction in 2009, Bitcoin saw its biggest gain in value last year, having started 2020 at \$7,200 per coin and touching \$65,000 in April of 2021, before falling to \$30,000 in May. Cryptocurrencies as commodities are highly volatile, a recent example being the massive swings in the values of Bitcoin and Dogecoin, based merely on the tweets of cryptocurrency ‘evangelist’ Elon Musk. Another problem is the *increasing energy use associated with cryptocurrencies.* The ‘mining’ of Bitcoin, where individuals or companies set up powerful systems to support the blockchain network, for which they are rewarded in the currency, consumes “about the same amount of energy annually as the Netherlands did in 2019”, says a Reuters report citing data from the University of Cambridge and the International Energy Agency. *“Bitcoin production is estimated to generate between 22 and 22.9 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions a year, or between the levels produced by Jordan and Sri Lanka,” says the report.*

How is El Salvador mitigating the risks?

According to Mr. Bukele, the government will protect citizens from the volatility of Bitcoin prices by guaranteeing quick convertibility to dollars. If a shopkeeper does not want to hold the Bitcoin which they now have to accept from customers, the government will purchase it through a \$150-million trust created at the country’s development bank. As for the carbon footprint, Mr. Bukele says *he has asked the State-owned geothermal electric company, LaGeo, to connect renewable energy from the country’s volcanoes to bitcoin mining facilities.*

EMBRACING CRYPTOCURRENCY

On June 9, El Salvador became the first country in the world to adopt bitcoin as legal tender. This is illustrative of the rising global trend of embracing cryptocurrencies with all its attendant risks. While not every country’s approach has been as open as El Salvador’s, the dominant theme has been to permit the growth of the cryptocurrency market subject to certain safeguards. As India finds itself at a crossroads of prohibition and regulation in its tryst with cryptocurrencies, globally, the inclination towards permissive regulation recognises the freedom of choice given to people for using a medium of exchange other than a central bank-backed fiat currency.

Swinging between extremes

The cryptocurrency market in India has developed in a largely laissez-faire regulatory space since the first recorded cryptocurrency transaction in 2010. Between 2013 and 2018, the government’s response to the rise of virtual currencies was cautionary, alerting users to the potential risks posed by cryptocurrency transactions. These fears were legitimate and stemmed from



cryptocurrencies' volatility, *their susceptibility to hacking, and the fact that they could potentially facilitate criminal activities such as money laundering, terrorist financing and tax evasion.* Instead of developing a regulatory framework to address these issues, *the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), in April 2018, effectively imposed a ban on cryptocurrency trading. This ban was overturned by the Supreme Court in 2020.* The court reasoned that there were alternative regulatory measures short of an outright ban through which the RBI could have achieved its objective of curbing the risks associated with cryptocurrency trading. While the court had an opportunity to put a label on the legal nature of cryptocurrencies, it stopped short of doing so. After swinging between the extremes of non-interference and prohibition, a clue as to India's next move lies in *the draft Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2021. The draft Bill proposes to criminalise all private cryptocurrencies while also laying down the regulatory framework for an RBI-backed digital currency.* The Minister of State for Finance, in response to a question in Parliament, stated that regulatory bodies do not have a legal framework to directly regulate private cryptocurrencies owing to their imprecise legal nature in India. As the draft Bill is yet to be tabled in Parliament, there is some hope that his concerns will be addressed in the form of a tailored regulatory approach rather than another ban.

Lessons from other countries

There are lessons in this regard from the U.K., Singapore and the U.S. The U.K. has classified cryptocurrency as property and this has paved the way for cryptocurrencies to be encompassed within a regulated legal framework in the country's economy. The U.K. has sought to regulate the functioning of crypto-businesses while still imposing some restrictions to protect the interests of investors. On the other hand, while there is no exact legal classification of cryptocurrency in Singapore, the amenability of cryptocurrency transactions to the contract law framework of the country has been firmly established and there is now a legal framework for cryptocurrency trading. *In the U.S., the open approach taken by the authorities has resulted in the trade in cryptocurrency being both taxed and appropriately regulated.* While the approaches are specific to the countries' economic realities and cannot be blindly implemented in India, the global regulatory attitude towards cryptocurrencies offers valuable insights into the alternative ways to achieve balanced regulation. *In India, the absence of an existing legal classification of cryptocurrency should not be the impetus to prohibit its use. The government should use this as an opportunity to allow private individuals the freedom to harness a powerful new technology with appropriate regulatory standards.*



LIFE & SCIENCE

TREE OF COFFEE FAMILY DISCOVERED IN ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR

*A 15-metre-tall tree that belongs to the genus of the coffee family has recently been discovered from the Andaman Islands by a team of researchers from India and the Philippines. The new species, *Pyrostria laljii*, is also the first record of the genus *Pyrostria* in India, the researchers said. Plants belonging to genus *Pyrostria* are usually found in Madagascar, but the recently discovered species is new to science. *The tree is distinguished by a long stem with a whitish coating on the trunk and oblong-obovate leaves with a cuneate base, and was first reported from the Wandoor forest in South Andaman.* The other places in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands where the tree could be located are *the Tirur forest near the Jarawa Rerserve Forest and the Chidia Tapu (Munda Pahar) forest.* *Pyrostria laljii* has been assessed as 'Critically Endangered' based on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List criteria. M.C. Naik from the Botanical Survey of India, M. Bheemalingappa from the Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Anantapuram, and Axel H. Arriola from University of the East, Manila, Philippines, published the details of the discovery a few months ago in an international, peer-reviewed journal *Annales Botanici Fennici*. Mr. Naik pointed out that the discovery was unique as the species was a big tree and had not been recorded as a new species yet. *The species has been named *Pyrostria laljii* after Lal Ji Singh, Joint Director and Head of Office, Andaman and Nicobar Regional Centre, Botanical Survey of India. "While the genus *Pyrostria* is not found in India, there are several genera from the family Rubiaceae that are common in India. These plants, including cinchona, coffee, adina, hamelia, ixora, galium, gardenia, mussaenda, rubia, morinda, have high potential for economic value.* More studies should be carried out to ascertain whether *Pyrostria laljii* could have some economic value," Dr. Singh said. Other physical features that distinguish the tree from other species of the genus is its umbellate inflorescence with eight to 12 flowers. Dr. Singh and Mr. Naik have also discovered a new species of pokeweed named *Rivina andamanensis*. *They said it was found growing under large trees, shaded and rocky areas, along with herbs and shrubby plants. "This discovery of new species, representing the first record of the pokeweed family Petiveriaceae in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, adds one more family to the islands' flora,"* the researchers said.*

Four biodiversity hotspots in India----

HARDY, VIGOROUS CORALS

*In 2014 and 2015, the brown rice coral in Hawaii was completely bleached, but the blue rice coral recovered quickly after bleaching, and blue coral was unaffected by the elevated ocean temperatures. Researchers from the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, U.S., have now decoded the reason for this resilience. Hawaiian blue rice corals have a deep blue pigment derived from algae called zooxanthellae that live inside the coral tissue. The researchers found that these algae produce sunscreen for the coral. This pigment has a protein named chromoprotein which filters out harmful UV radiation. The findings of this study were published this week in *Scientific Reports*. After the 2014 and 2015 Hawaii bleaching events, the blue rice coral was found to have exceptional reproductive vigour at 90% motility. But the brown coral's motility was only half this. A key factor in the blue rice coral's ability to reproduce successfully might be its sunscreen pigment, which the coral may retain even if it bleaches.* Lead author Mike Henley, explains in a release that by studying blue rice corals'

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



reproductive successes, we can better understand how other corals weather climate change and ocean warming.

MEET BHARITALASUCHUS TAPANI, A CARNIVOROUS REPTILE THAT LIVED 240 MILLION YEARS AGO

In the mid 20th century, researchers from the Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata, carried out extensive studies on rocks of the Yerrapalli Formation in what is now Telangana, uncovering several fossils. By studying some of these specimens stored at the Institute, an international team has now thrown light on a carnivorous reptile that lived 240 million years ago. This reptile belongs to a genus and species previously unknown to science. They named it *Bharitalasuchus tapani*. In the Telugu language, Bhari means huge, Tala means head, and Suchus is the name of the Egyptian crocodile-headed deity. The species is named after paleontologist Tapan Roy Chowdhury in honour of his contribution to Indian vertebrate paleontology and especially his extensive work on the Yerrapalli Formation tetrapod fauna. Further studies revealed that the reptile belonged to a family of extinct reptiles named Erythrosuchidae.

The team notes that *Bharitalasuchus tapani* were robust animals with big heads and large teeth, and these probably preyed on other smaller reptiles. They were approximately the size of an adult male lion and might have been the largest predators in their ecosystems. "The first Erythrosuchidae remains were discovered in South Africa in 1905 and more were found in China and Russia. The South African one is about 245 million years old, while the ones from China and Russia are around 240 million years old. So the Indian one is one of the youngest fossil records we have of an erythrosuchid," explains the first author Martin D. Ezcurra from the Argentinian Museum of Natural Sciences in Buenos Aires.

ORIGIN UNCLEAR

Over 17 months after WHO first reported a cluster of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause in Wuhan, China, scientists are yet to determine with certainty how the SARS-CoV-2 virus emerged. Much like other viruses, SARS-CoV-2 too could have a natural origin or somehow escaped from the coronavirus research lab in Wuhan, the epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak. With no hard scientific evidence available to confirm the lab leak hypothesis, there are some scientific leads that support a natural origin. *If it is a zoonotic spillover, the virus could have either directly crossed over from bats to humans or through an intermediate host. But till date, neither the bat species that hosts the SARS-CoV-2 virus nor the intermediate host has been found. China's secrecy and delay in reporting the Wuhan outbreak and in finding the natural host or the intermediary have further fuelled the lab spillover hypothesis. Finding the host animal can be daunting. While the civet cat and dromedary camel were quickly identified to be the intermediate hosts of SARS and MERS, respectively, it took years to identify the horseshoe bat that harbours SARS virus strains. To date, a complete Ebola virus has never been isolated from an animal source.* If the virus had been bioengineered, the genome sequence would carry tell-tale signs. But *scientists have not found any signature of genetic manipulation.* While a particular site (furin cleavage) on the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein that allows the virus to infect the cells has been cited as evidence of bioengineering, the fact is that it is not unique to SARS-CoV-2. A combination of nucleotides in the furin cleavage site that encode for a particular amino acid — another feature that is forwarded as supporting



laboratory manipulation — too has been shown to be not unique. For instance, the nucleotide combination encoding for the amino acid is present in other sites of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and in the 2003 SARS virus. *The possibility of SARS-CoV-2 evolving via cell culture appears bleak as scientists have found the virus losing features key to transmission and virulence unless cultured using new methods.* Reports of three Wuhan lab researchers falling ill in November 2019 by itself does not prove a lab leak hypothesis. There is no evidence that they were infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and even if they were, it is necessary to prove that it happened from inside the lab. In the absence of conclusive evidence to support either hypothesis so far, a thorough investigation is needed. While the inquiry by the U.S. intelligence might provide clues, a scientific investigation is more likely to help reach closure; China's cooperation, therefore, becomes vital and politicising the virus origin is not going to help.

THE ROLE OF ANIMAL SERUM IN MAKING OF VACCINES

The government on Wednesday issued a clarification stating that Covaxin, the Covid-19 vaccine developed by Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech, did not contain the serum of a newborn calf. This was in response to discussions on the social media about the presence of calf serum in Covaxin. In the clarification, the government reiterated the well-known use of calf serum, as also serum extracted from other animals, in the development of vaccines. *These are needed to grow the disease-causing virus, bacteria or other pathogens in the laboratory, but do not themselves become an ingredient of the vaccine.*

How viruses are cultured

Vaccines like the one made by Bharat Biotech uses the disease-causing virus itself to trigger an immune response in human beings. The virus is killed, or inactivated, before being used in the vaccine, and injected into the human body, but it is still able to trigger an immune response. To be used in the vaccine, the virus needs to be grown, or cultured, in the laboratory. Scientists try to create conditions conducive for the growth of these viruses by recreating the kind of environment that exists in an infected person's tissues. Therefore, *solutions containing 'nutrients' act as the growth medium for the virus. These nutrients, like specific sugar and salt molecules, are extracted from tissues of suitable animals like horses, cow, goat or sheep. The virus grows in these nutrient-rich solutions.* After that, it goes through several stages of purification that make it suitable to be used in a vaccine. *There is no trace of the growth medium after the entire process is over.*

Why calf serum

According to the website of the Food and Drug Administration of the United States, cow components are used mainly because cows are large animals, easily available, and rich in some of the useful chemicals and enzymes. "Cow milk is a source of amino acids, and sugars such as galactose. Cow tallow derivatives used in vaccine manufacture include glycerol. Gelatin and some amino acids come from cow bones. Cow skeletal muscle is used to prepare broths used in certain complex media. Many difficult to grow micro-organisms and the cells that are used to propagate viruses require the addition of serum from blood to the growth media," it says. *Synthetic serum, and other nutrients, have also been developed, but according to one international manufacturer of these chemicals, Thermo Fisher Scientific, serum from newborn calf, which has been used in vaccine production for over 50 years, has "proven itself as an extremely effective growth supplement".*



Animal serum in vaccines

Historically, animal serum has been used in the development of vaccines in other ways as well. *The use of horse serum as an antibody supplement in diphtheria vaccine is more than 100 years old. Horses used to be injected with small doses of bacteria that caused diphtheria so that they could develop antibodies. Later, the blood of the infected animal was used to extract the antibodies and used in the vaccine.* The story of the Poonawalla family, which graduated from owning a horse-breeding farm that also used to supply horse serum used in vaccines, to setting up the company that is now the world's largest producer of vaccines, Serum Institute of India, is very well known.

EXPOSURE TO COMMON COLD VIRUS CAN HELP FIGHT COVID-19

Exposure to the rhinovirus, the most frequent cause of the common cold, can protect against infection by the virus which causes Covid-19, researchers have found. In a new study, published in the the Journal of Experimental Medicine, researchers from Yale University found that *the common respiratory virus jump-starts the activity of interferon-stimulated genes. These are molecules in the immune system whose early response can halt replication of the SARS-CoV-2 virus within airway tissues infected with the cold.* Triggering these defences early in the course of Covid-19 infection holds promise to prevent or treat the infection, the Yale University website quotes said the study's senior author, Ellen Foxman, as saying. *One way to trigger these defences is by treating patients with interferons, an immune system protein which is also available as a drug.* "But it all depends upon the timing," Foxman is quoted as saying. Her team infected lab-grown human airway tissue with SARS-CoV-2 and found that for the first three days, viral load in the tissue doubled about every six hours. However, replication of the COVID-19 virus was completely stopped in tissue that had been exposed to rhinovirus. If antiviral defences were blocked, the SARS-CoV-2 could replicate in airway tissue previously exposed to rhinovirus.

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