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DreamIAS



INTERNATIONAL

FACEBOOK SUSPENDS TRUMP FOR TWO YEARS

Facebook Inc on Friday suspended former U.S. President Donald Trump until at least January 2023 and announced changes to how it will treat world leaders who break the company's rules on postings on its site. Facebook suspended Trump's account the day after the Jan. 6 Capitol Hill riot, determining he had incited violence. That suspension will last at least two years from the date of the initial block and would only be lifted if the risk to public safety has receded, Facebook said. Trump criticized the decision as a form of censorship and an insult to his voters. This new timeline denies Republican Trump a major social media megaphone ahead of the November 2022 national midterm elections, when his party will be competing for Congressional seats. However, it means he may be able to return to Facebook well before the next presidential election in late 2024. Mr. Trump has been permanently banned by Twitter and remains suspended by YouTube after the riot. The former President has teased plans to launch his own platform but his team has given little detail. *"Given the gravity of the circumstances that led to Mr. Trump's suspension, we believe his actions constituted a severe violation of our rules which merit the highest penalty available under the new enforcement protocols,"* Facebook's head of global affairs Nick Clegg said in the post.

U.S. DELAYS TARIFFS AGAINST DIGITAL SERVICES TAX

During the past week, the United States announced and then immediately suspended a 25% tariff on \$2 billion of imports from six countries, including India, as a retaliatory measure against each of these countries' imposition of a digital services tax impacting the giant tech corporations of Silicon Valley, including the likes of Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Microsoft. *The purported logic of suspending the tariff for up to 180 days after announcing it is to allow time for ongoing international tax negotiations to continue, and, in the words of U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) Katherine Tai, seek "a multilateral solution ... while maintaining the option of imposing tariffs under Section 301 if warranted in the future". Other than India, the countries slapped with this tariff proposal are Austria, Italy, Spain, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.*

What is the basis of the U.S.'s action?

The essence of the argument made *by the USTR office is that a "Section 301" investigation initiated by the Trump administration in June 2020 found digital services taxes imposed by each of these countries to be discriminatory against U.S. tech firms.* The Biden administration was likely aware that the deadline for authorising tariff action based on these investigations would have lapsed this week, thus necessitating the approval of the 25% tariff. *The immediate suspension of the tariff is likely in part a recognition of the fact that the six countries potentially impacted are limping through a feeble post-COVID-19 recovery and opening a new trade war front could be damaging not only to them, but also to the broader global economy.* The combination of depressed economic activity owing to the effects of the pandemic and tectonic shifts in global supply chains engendered by the Trump administration's trade war with China has already left many economies in a weakened condition.



Why is Section 301 significant?

*Under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, the USTR enjoys a range of responsibilities and authority to investigate and take action to enforce U.S. national interests under trade agreements and respond to certain foreign trade practices. Until recently, this facility was used by multiple administrations to build cases and pursue dispute settlements at the World Trade Organization (WTO). Under former President Donald Trump, however, this authority was used to promote what his administration considered to be “free, fair and reciprocal” trade, specifically to close the gap or balance of trade between the U.S. and foreign governments in cases where the latter had deployed trade practices that allegedly disadvantaged or discriminated against U.S. firms. To a great extent, the Trump administration trained its Section 301 guns on China, leading to an escalating tariff war that ultimately engulfed the final years of its tenure. Now, the *Biden administration appears to be unwilling to walk back Trump-era 301 investigations in their entirety; rather, it appears to be seeking a middle path of waving the stick of the USTR while allowing some space for continued tax negotiations with the nations concerned.**

How will it affect India?

The Finance Bill, 2021, introduced an amendment imposing a 2% digital service tax on trade and services by non-resident e-commerce operators with a turnover of over ₹2 crore. According to reports, early estimates by the USTR suggest this tax could yield approximately \$55 million annually. Negotiations with Washington that may result in the scaling back of this tax would imply that a part of this revenue would be lost to the exchequer, depending on the final rate agreed. On the other hand, close to \$118 million of India’s exports to the U.S. would be subject to the tariff proposed by the USTR, impacting 26 categories of goods, including basmati rice, cigarette paper, cultured pearls, semi-precious stones, certain gold and silver jewellery items and specific types of furniture products. India will have to consider its options carefully at this juncture. On the one hand, it would seek to avoid getting into any escalating matrix of retaliatory taxation with the U.S., as that would damage its growth prospects at a crucial point in its laborious recovery. However, it will also not be able to simply abandon its articulated intent to tax global tech firms, which have generally enjoyed low-tax operations across numerous jurisdictions.

U.S. SENATE PASSES HUGE INNOVATION BILL

The U.S. Senate passed a sweeping industrial policy Bill on Tuesday aimed at countering the surging economic threat from rival China, overcoming partisan divisions to support pumping more than \$170 billion into research and development. With both American political parties increasingly worried about competition from Asia’s largest power, the measure cleared the chamber on a 68-32 vote, one of the most significant bipartisan achievements in Congress since Joe Biden’s presidency began in January. It also represents the largest investment in scientific research and technological innovation “in generations”, according to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer. The Bill now heads to the House of Representatives, which earlier passed a different version. The two will have to be reconciled into a single Bill before it is sent to the White House for the President’s signature.



Biden encouraged

Mr. Biden said he was “*encouraged*” by the Senate’s passage of the *United States Innovation and Competition Act*. “*We are in a competition to win the 21st century, and the starting gun has gone off,*” Mr. Biden said. “*As other countries continue to invest in their own research and development, we cannot risk falling behind. America must maintain its position as the most innovative and productive nation on Earth.*” The package, a key provision of which addresses a shortage of semiconductors that has slowed U.S. auto production this year, will help U.S. industry bolster its capacity and improve technology. It is seen as crucial for U.S. efforts to avoid being out-manoeuvred by Beijing as the adversaries compete in the race to technological innovation. “Today, the Senate took a critical bipartisan step forward to make the investments we need to continue America’s legacy as a global leader in innovation,” U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said in a statement praising the passage of the Bill. “*This funding isn’t just about addressing the current semiconductor chip shortage, it is about long-term investments,*” she said. Mr. Schumer called the measure “one of the most important things this chamber has done in a very long time, a statement of faith in America’s ability to seize the opportunities of the 21st century”.

Key areas

The proposal aims to address a number of technological areas in which the U.S. has fallen behind China. *The Bill allocates \$52 billion in funding for a previously approved plan to increase domestic manufacturing of semiconductors. It also authorises \$120 billion over five years for activities at the National Science Foundation to advance priorities, including research and development in key areas such as artificial intelligence and quantum science. And it facilitates tie-ups between private firms and research universities.* “This is an opportunity for the United States to strike a blow on behalf of answering the unfair competition that we are seeing from communist China,” said Republican Senator Roger Wicker, one of the main co-sponsors.

WHITE HOUSE DROPS TRUMP-ERA ORDERS ATTEMPTING TO BAN TIKTOK, WECHAT

The White House has dropped Trump-era executive orders that attempted to ban the popular apps TikTok and WeChat and will conduct its own review aimed at identifying national security risks with software applications tied to China, officials said Wednesday. *A new executive order directs the Commerce Department to undertake what officials describe as an “evidence-based” analysis of transactions involving apps that are manufactured or supplied or controlled by China. Officials are particularly concerned about apps that collect users’ personal data or have connections to Chinese military or intelligence activities. The department also will make recommendations on how to further protect Americans’ genetic and personal health information, and will address the risks of certain software apps connected to China or other adversaries, according to senior administration officials.* The Biden administration’s move reflects the ongoing concern that Americans’ personal data could be exposed by popular apps tied to China, a chief US economic and political rival. The White House and Congress have both taken action to address Beijing’s technological advancement. On Tuesday, the Senate passed a bill that aims to boost US semiconductor production and the development of artificial intelligence and other technology in the face of growing international competition. The administration earlier this year had backed off President Donald Trump’s attempts to ban the popular video app TikTok, asking a court to postpone a legal dispute as the government began a broader review of the national security threats posed by

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



Chinese technology companies. A court filing said the Commerce Department was reviewing whether Trump's claims about TikTok's threat to national security justified the attempts to ban it from smartphone app stores and deny it vital technical services. An update to the review was due in a court case later this week. Also in limbo has been a proposed US takeover of TikTok. Last year, the Trump administration brokered a deal that would have had US corporations Oracle and Walmart take a large stake in the Chinese-owned app on national security grounds. The unusual arrangement stemmed from a Trump executive order that aimed to ban TikTok in the US unless it accepted a greater degree of American control. Trump targeted TikTok over the summer of 2020 with a series of orders that cited concerns over the US data that TikTok collects from its users. Courts temporarily blocked the White House's attempted ban, and the presidential election soon overshadowed the TikTok fight. TikTok has been looking to the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit to review Trump's divestment order and the government's national security review.

BIDEN, JOHNSON SEEK TO SIGN 'NEW ATLANTIC CHARTER'

President Joe Biden and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson met for the first time on Thursday, looking to highlight their nations' famed *"special relationship" but doing so against a backdrop of differences both political and personal*. At their first meeting in the *seaside resort of Carbis Bay, the two leaders inspected documents on Thursday related to the Atlantic Charter, a declaration signed by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt in August 1941, setting out common goals for the world after Second World War*. Those goals included *freer trade, disarmament and the right to self-determination of all people*. *It is often cited as a cornerstone of the trans-Atlantic "special relationship."* Mr. Johnson noted that *the charter laid the foundation for the United Nations and NATO*. "Yeah, I know," Mr. Biden said.

Finding common ground

At their meeting, the two leaders plan to sign what they're calling a new Atlantic Charter, pledging *to "defend the principles, values, and institutions of democracy and open societies."* Mr. Biden hopes to use his first overseas trip as President to reassure European allies that the U.S. had shed the transactional tendencies of Donald Trump's term and is a reliable partner again. But tensions could simmer beneath the surface of Mr. Biden's meeting with Mr. Johnson. *The President staunchly opposed the Brexit movement, the British exodus from the European Union that Mr. Johnson championed, and has expressed great concern with the future of Northern Ireland. And Mr. Biden once called the British leader a "physical and emotional clone" of Mr. Trump*. The British government has worked hard to overcome that impression, stressing Mr. Johnson's common ground with Mr. Biden on issues such as climate change and his support for global institutions. But *Mr. Johnson, the host for the G-7 summit that will follow his sit-down with Mr. Biden, has been frustrated by the lack of a new trade deal with the U.S.*

U.S. TO DONATE 500 MN DOSES TO WORLD

The U.S. will purchase half a billion doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine and donate them to 92 low and middle-income countries and the African Union. The vaccines will be shipped from August onwards, with 200 million doses distributed this year and 300 million by the middle of



next year, according to a 'fact sheet' released by the White House. Rich countries have come under increasing pressure to not sit on orders of excess vaccines as many in middle and lower income countries remain unvaccinated. The news of Joe Biden's plan broke on Wednesday, as the President was en route to the U.K. to attend the G7 meetings. Mr. Biden is expected to formally announce the plan on Thursday evening from Cornwall, following his meeting with U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The U.S. will work on delivering the vaccines via COVAX, an international coalition that is involved with global vaccine access. Mr. Biden is expected to emphasise, in his remarks, that his plan will give lower income countries access to mRNA vaccines, which have been mostly used in rich countries to date, partly owing to more stringent cold chain requirements, which are harder for poorer countries to ensure. Pfizer will sell the doses to the U.S. government at a "not-for-profit" price, the Washington Post reported. The doses will be produced at Pfizer's plants in Michigan, Kansas, Missouri and Massachusetts, with a combined workforce of at least 7,500 people, according to the White House. The current administration has been keen to tie its foreign policy to domestic goals and the local economic impact of the massive vaccine order is something Mr. Biden is expected to stress in his remarks, as per the White House's outline of the speech.

India will benefit

Separately, the U.S. has already begun shipping 80 million doses of mostly AstraZeneca vaccines to other countries. Three quarters of these are being allocated through COVAX and a quarter is being shared bilaterally. India is also going to be in receipt of some of these vaccines but numbers are not likely to be more than a few million. When asked at Wednesday's press briefing, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price did not confirm the total number of doses India would receive. In response to a question on how many vaccines India would receive, Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said the government was awaiting details of the U.S. plans. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar was in Washington at the end of May to discuss, among other things, vaccine procurement for India, including manufacturing within India. However, regulatory issues remain even as supply chain issues are easing up, partly due to the U.S. releasing AstraZeneca, Novavax and Sanofi vaccines from the purview of its Defence Production Act, which had resulted in export controls for raw materials that go into manufacturing these inoculations. Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla met with U.S. Chargé D'Affaires Daniel Smith in New Delhi on Wednesday to discuss, among other things, cooperation on COVID-19 and vaccine supplies.

WHO WARNS DELTA VARIANT TAKING HOLD IN EUROPE

The World Health Organisation's Europe director warned that the highly transmissible COVID-19 variant first identified in India is "poised to take hold in the region", as many countries prepare to ease restrictions and allow more social gatherings and travel across borders. During a press briefing on Thursday, WHO's Dr Hans Kluge said the variant also known as the delta variant, has shown signs of being able to evade some vaccines and warned that many vulnerable populations, particularly those over age 60, remain unprotected. We have been here before," warned Kluge, WHO's European regional director. Over the course of last summer, cases gradually rose in younger age groups and then moved into older age groups, contributing to a devastating resurgence," he said. Kluge said spike in COVID-19 ultimately led to more lockdowns and deaths in the fall and winter of 2020. Let's not make that mistake again. Kluge didn't say people shouldn't



travel, but urged any travellers to do so wisely. He also called for vaccination and other public health measures to be stepped up across the continent, saying even immunisation coverage “is far from sufficient to protect the region”.

WHAT IS A GLOBAL MINIMUM TAX AND WHAT WILL IT MEAN?

Finance Ministers from the Group of Seven (G7) rich nations on Saturday reached a landmark accord setting a global minimum corporate tax rate, an agreement that could form the basis of a worldwide deal. The deal aims to end what U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has called a “30-year race to the bottom on corporate tax rates” as countries compete to lure multinationals.

Why a global minimum?

Major economies are aiming to discourage multinationals from shifting profits — and tax revenues — to low-tax countries regardless of where their sales are made. *Increasingly, income from intangible sources such as drug patents, software and royalties on intellectual property has migrated to these jurisdictions, allowing companies to avoid paying higher taxes in their traditional home countries.* With its proposal for a minimum 15% tax rate, the Biden administration hopes to reduce such tax base erosion without putting American firms at a financial disadvantage, allowing competition on innovation, infrastructure and other attributes.

Where are the talks at?

The G7 talks feed in to a much broader, existing effort. *The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has been coordinating tax negotiations among 140 countries for years on rules for taxing cross-border digital services and curbing tax base erosion, including a global corporate minimum tax.* The OECD and G20 countries aim to reach consensus on both by mid-year, but the talks on a global corporate minimum are technically simpler and less contentious. *If a broad consensus is reached, it will be extremely hard for any low-tax country to try and block an accord.* The minimum is expected to make up the bulk of the \$50 billion-\$80 billion in extra tax that the OECD estimates firms will end up paying globally under deals on both fronts.

How would a global minimum tax work?

The global minimum tax rate would apply to overseas profits. Governments could still set whatever local corporate tax rate they want, but if companies pay lower rates in a particular country, their home governments could “top-up” their taxes to the minimum rate, eliminating the advantage of shifting profits. The OECD said last month that governments broadly agreed on the basic design of the minimum tax but not the rate. Other items still to be negotiated include whether investment funds and real estate investment trusts should be covered, when to apply the new rate and ensuring it is compatible with U.S. tax reforms aimed at deterring erosion.

What about that minimum rate?

Talks are focusing around the U.S. proposal of a minimum global corporation tax rate of 15% - above the level in countries such as Ireland but below the lowest G7 level. Any final agreement could have major repercussions for low-tax countries and tax havens. *The Irish economy has boomed with the influx of billions of dollars in investment from multinationals. Dublin, which has resisted EU attempts*



to harmonise its tax rules, is unlikely to accept a higher minimum rate without a fight. However, the battle for low-tax countries is less likely to be about scuppering the overall talks and more about building support for a minimum rate as close as possible to its 12.5% or seeking certain exemptions.

Who are the targets?

Apart from low-tax jurisdictions, the proposal for a minimum corporate tax are tailored to address the low effective rates of tax shelled out by some of the *world's biggest corporations, including digital giants such as Apple, Alphabet and Facebook*, as well as *major corporations such as Nike and Starbucks. These companies typically rely on complex webs of subsidiaries to Hoover profits out of major markets into low-tax countries such as Ireland or Caribbean nations such as the British Virgin Islands or the Bahamas, or to central American nations such as Panama.* The US Treasury loses nearly \$50 billion a year to tax cheats, according to the Tax Justice Network report, with *Germany and France also among the top losers. India's annual tax loss due to corporate tax abuse is estimated at over \$10 billion*, according to the report.

What are the problems with the plan?

Apart from the challenges of getting all major nations on the same page, especially since this impinges on the *right of the sovereign to decide a nation's tax policy, the proposal has other pitfalls.* A global minimum rate would essentially take away a tool that countries use to push policies that suit them. For instance, *in the backdrop of the pandemic, IMF and World Bank data suggest that developing countries with less ability to offer mega stimulus packages may experience a longer economic hangover than developed nations. A lower tax rate is a tool they can use to alternatively push economic activity.* Also, a global minimum tax rate will do little to tackle tax evasion.

Where does India stand?

In a bid to revive investment activity, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on September 21, 2019 announced a sharp cut in corporate taxes for domestic companies to 22% and for new domestic manufacturing companies to 15%. The Taxation Laws (Amendment) Act, 2019 resulted in the insertion of a section (115BAA) to the Income-Tax Act, 1961 to provide for the concessional tax rate of 22% for existing domestic companies subject to certain conditions including that they do not avail of any specified incentive or deductions. Also, existing domestic companies opting for the concessional taxation regime will not be required to pay any Minimum Alternate Tax. This, along with other measures, was *estimated to cost the exchequer Rs 1.45 lakh crore annually. The cuts effectively brought India's headline corporate tax rate broadly at par with the average 23% rate in Asian countries.* China and South Korea have a tax rate of 25% each, while Malaysia is at 24%, Vietnam at 20%, Thailand at 20% and Singapore at 17%. *The effective tax rate, inclusive of surcharge and cess, for Indian domestic companies is around 25.17%. The average corporate tax rate stands at around 29% for existing companies that are claiming some benefit or the other.* Another official said New Delhi was “proactively engaging” with foreign governments with a view to facilitating and enhancing exchange of information under Double Taxation Avoidance Agreements, Tax Information Exchange Agreements and Multilateral Conventions to plug loopholes. Besides, “effective enforcement actions” including expeditious investigation in foreign assets cases have been launched, including searches, enquiries, levy of taxes, penalties, etc and



filing of prosecution complaints, wherever applicable. To address “the challenges posed by the enterprises who conduct their business through digital means and carry out activities in the country remotely”, the government has the ‘Equalisation Levy’, introduced in 2016 following a recommendation by a panel constituted to deliberate on taxation of the digital economy. Also, *the IT Act has been amended to bring in the concept of “Significant Economic Presence” for establishing “business connection” in the case of non-residents in India.*

THE G-7 AGENDA THIS YEAR AND WHAT IS IN IT FOR INDIA

At the invitation of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will participate virtually in the Outreach Sessions of the G7 Summit on June 12 and 13.

What is on the agenda this year?

The G7 comprises the US, UK, France, Germany, Italy, Canada and Japan. The UK currently holds the presidency and has invited India, along with Australia, South Korea and South Africa, as guest countries for the Summit, which will witness a hybrid of physical and virtual participation. The theme is ‘Build Back Better’, and the UK has outlined four priority areas for its presidency: leading the global recovery from coronavirus while strengthening resilience against future pandemics; promoting future prosperity by championing free and fair trade; tackling climate change and preserving the planet’s biodiversity; and championing shared values and open societies. The leaders are expected to exchange views on the way forward on global recovery from the pandemic with a focus on health and climate change.

How often has India attended it?

Since 2014, this is the second time the Prime Minister will be participating in a G7 meeting. India had been invited by the G7 French presidency in 2019 to the Biarritz Summit as a “Goodwill Partner” and Prime Minister Modi participated in the sessions on ‘Climate, Biodiversity and Oceans’ and ‘Digital Transformation’. During Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s tenure, India attended the G8 Summit five times. *In March 2014, Russia was indefinitely suspended following the annexation of Crimea, reducing G8 to G7.* While the UK has invited India this year, the US under President Donald Trump had extended an invitation in May last year. *Calling the G7 a “very outdated group”, Trump had said he would like to include India, Australia, South Korea and Russia in the grouping of the largest advanced economies. Trump had suggested that G7 be called “G10 or G11”, and proposed that the grouping meet in September or November ‘2020. But, due to the pandemic and the US election outcome, that did not happen.* This year, after the UK’s invitation, Modi was expected to travel to the UK, but cancelled the visit due to the pandemic situation in the country.

What’s in it for India?

India has long called for reforming global institutions and groupings to reflect modern-day geopolitical realities. Trump’s offer to expand G7 fitted into New Delhi’s idea of being part of the global high table. With an assertive China round the corner, the US is calling all like-minded countries to partner in dealing with Beijing. If Biden and Johnson want to work towards constituting a global alliance of 10-11 countries, it will be an important signal. As India faces a massive shortage of vaccines, New Delhi will be watching the allocation to be announced by the



US President. Last week, the US had said that it will distribute vaccines to India as part of its “strategy for global vaccine sharing”, days after External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar met key officials in the administration in Washington DC. While Biden made the announcement, Vice President Kamala Harris had called up Modi about Washington’s plans to make vaccines available to other countries, including India. A US statement said the Biden-Harris administration will begin sharing the “first 25 million doses” to the countries as part of the framework for sharing at least 80 million vaccines globally by the end of June. This means India is likely to get vaccines from the US — both directly as well as through COVAX. Initial estimates suggest India will get about 2 to 3 million vaccines in the first tranche. *Washington’s rapprochement with Moscow will leave New Delhi extremely relieved as the US can then focus on China. While that is easier said than done, weaning Russia away from Beijing could be a game-changer in current geopolitics.*

A NEW CHARTER

US President Joe Biden began his eight-day long European tour by signing a “New Atlantic Charter” with the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, that reaffirms Anglo-American faith in democratic values. The charter promises to work closely with all democratic partners in resolving contemporary global problems. *The Biden-Johnson declaration is a reprise of the Atlantic Charter signed by two of their war-time predecessors, President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill, in early August 1941.* Eighty years ago, *the Atlantic Charter provided the basis for the construction of a new global order after the Second World War.* The New Atlantic Charter *is based on the conviction that the West needs to reboot itself to cope with the rise of authoritarian powers like China, the devastating Covid-19 pandemic, and the expansive threat of climate change.* The *three Cs — China, coronavirus and climate change* — are expected to figure prominently in Biden’s efforts to rally the West at a series of summits with the leaders of the Group of Seven leading industrialised countries, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and the European Union. After four years of Donald Trump that deeply disturbed US relations with its western allies, Europe would have been happy to serenade Biden for simply restoring the traditional US warmth towards its partners. But Biden has set himself ambitious objectives — strengthening global governance through the G-7, rejuvenating the NATO alliance, and recalibrating America’s strained relations with the European Union. Sceptics point to the diminished relative strength of the US and G-7 in the global economy, the problem of military burden-sharing within NATO, and the growing trans-Atlantic differences on trade and technology. *If Biden wants to mobilise Europe against China, Germany appears to be more interested in doing business with Beijing and France in promoting European strategic autonomy from Washington.* Meanwhile, the presence of India and South Africa along with Australia and South Korea at the G-7 summit is a recognition of the urgent imperative to widen the basis of the West in dealing with global challenges. *If the old Atlantic Charter alienated Indian nationalism from the West, the new Charter and the rebooting of western institutions should facilitate a productive phase of India’s cooperation with the US and its allies.* Although Indian nationalism had no quarrel with the liberal internationalist framework of the old Atlantic Charter, *Churchill insisted that the principle of self-determination highlighted in the charter did not apply to India. Churchill could not stop India’s independence for long, but poisoned the well of India’s engagement with the West.* The current Anglo-American effort to institutionalise western consultations with India is a long overdue correction. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is remotely joining the discussions at the G-7 summit, has an opportunity to signal a commitment to



both address perceptions about shrinking democratic freedoms within India and offer substantive collaboration with the western democracies on global issues.

MEXICO PRESIDENT POISED TO HOLD MAJORITY IN ELECTIONS

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's party and its allies appeared poised to maintain their majority in Mexico's lower chamber of the Congress, but fell short of a supermajority, as some voters boosted the struggling Opposition, according to initial election results. Electoral authorities released "quick count" results based on voting samples that allow estimates of the voting trends to determine the rough potential makeup of the Chamber of Deputies late Sunday. *Mr. López Obrador's Morena party will have to rely on votes from its allies in the Workers Party and Green Party, but together they were expected to capture between 265 and 292 seats in the 500-seat chamber. Morena alone was expected to win 190 to 203 seats.*

Significant decline

That would signal a significant decline for the President's party. In the current Congress, Morena has a simple majority, holding 253 seats on its own. *It would also deprive the President of a qualified majority of two-thirds required to approve constitutional reforms.* He appeared to acknowledge that new reality on Monday. He praised the election as "free, clean" and said Mexicans had shown a degree of political maturity "never seen." *The opposition alliance made up of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, National Action Party and Party of the Democratic Revolution were estimated to win between 181 and 213 seats.* Those would be gains for those parties, which have often appeared rudderless in the face of Mr. López Obrador's popularity.

FUJIMORI LEADS IN TIGHT PERU PRESIDENTIAL POLL OVER CASTILLO

Right-wing populist Keiko Fujimori held a narrow lead on Monday in Peru's presidential election, but the crisis-hit nation's race was too close to call as votes were still being tabulated from countryside bastions of support for radical leftist Pedro Castillo. Ms. Fujimori had 50.2% of ballots to Mr. Castillo's 49.8%, according to partial results from Peru's electoral body, with about 90% of polling stations counted after voting on Sunday in a country battered by years of political turbulence. Whoever wins will take leadership of a nation in crisis, suffering from recession and with the worst coronavirus fatality rate in the world after recording more than 1,84,000 deaths among its 33 million population. Peruvians will also look to the winner to end years of political turmoil after four Presidents in the last three years, and with seven of the last 10 of the country's leaders either having been convicted of or investigated for corruption. The head of Peru's top electoral body (ONPE), Piero Corvetto, warned that many polling stations from rural areas — Mr. Castillo's stronghold — had yet to be tallied. "They haven't counted our votes yet," Mr. Castillo told supporters on Sunday in Tacabamba, in the northern Cajamarca region where he lives. Mr. Castillo, 51, had earlier urged his supporters to "stay calm." Ms. Fujimori, 46, also called for caution, saying: "Seeing how small the gap is, it is essential to maintain prudence and I say that for all Peruvians." Both candidates promised to respect the results as they cast their own ballots on Sunday. "We're not going to know (the winner) until the last vote" is counted, political scientist Jessica Smith said.



IN LEGALISATION OF BITCOIN IN EL SALVADOR

El Salvador, a small coastal country in Central America, on Wednesday became the first in the world to make Bitcoin, a digital currency, legal. The El Salvador Parliament approved the move by a supermajority of 62 out of 84.

Not a precedent for monetary policy

The development in El Salvador changes little in terms of Indian monetary calculations around cryptocurrencies. *The dynamic underpinning the whole move is that El Salvador has no monetary policy of its own and hence, no local currency to protect. The country was officially 'dollarized' in 2001 and runs on the monetary policy of the US Federal Reserve.* What is relevant to monetary thinking, however, is that the move in El Salvador is in part motivated by loose and expansionary Federal Reserve policy. While banks in the US received liquidity with the stimulus, El Salvador did not but lost purchasing power instead. The official bill proposal stated explicitly that "central banks are increasingly taking actions that may cause harm to the economic stability of El Salvador... (and) in order to mitigate the negative impact of central banks, it becomes necessary to authorize the circulation of a digital currency with a supply that cannot be controlled by any central bank and is only altered in accord with objective and calculable criteria," i.e. Bitcoin. President Nayib Bukele, however, clarified that he does not believe this constitutes "de-dollarization" of the economy. *He believes the dollar will continue to remain the dominant currency in the country and Bitcoin would exist side by side.* He also appeared skeptical that Bitcoin would be held in the reserves of the country. Indeed, some analysts have pointed out how bitcoinization might change nothing on ground if "legal tender" is to be considered by its strict legal definition, in which case it places no obligation for merchants to accept the currency in transactions. However, as a result of this development, *El Salvador becomes a most interesting case study of how the dollar and bitcoin would coexist side by side, and how that would play out for Bitcoin adoption.*

Supporters of the financial change point to it as a demonstration case for how digital currency could help in a country where *70% of the people don't have bank accounts.* President Nayib Bukele, who pushed through the bitcoin law, touts it both as a way to help those many Salvadorans without access to traditional banking services and as a path to attract foreigners with bitcoin holdings to invest in El Salvador, which is the first nation to make the cryptocurrency legal tender. Experts are trying to figure out why Bukele is pushing bitcoin. They say it is unclear how the highly volatile cryptocurrency will be a good option for the unbanked and only time will tell if the new system translates into real investment in El Salvador. *Bitcoin, intended as an alternative to government-backed money, is based largely on complex math, data-scrambling cryptography — thus the term "cryptocurrency" — lots of processing power and a distributed global ledger called the blockchain, which records all transactions. No central bank or other institution has any say in its value, which is set entirely by people trading bitcoin and its value has moved wildly over time.*

TERROR IN THE SAHEL

The massacre of at least 160 people in a border village in Burkina Faso over the weekend is a grim reminder of the threat the Sahel region faces from Islamist terrorism. Nobody has claimed responsibility, but Burkinabe authorities have named the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara



(ISGS), which has carried out hundreds of terror strikes in recent years. The security situation in Burkina Faso, which saw its first major Islamist terrorist attack in 2015, has deteriorated steadily, especially along the borders with Niger and Mali. *This has been the case with much of the Sahel region, a 5,900-km-long semi-arid territory.* It has seen terrorist groups expanding their networks and stepping up attacks on civilians and soldiers. The Burkina Faso attack occurred after 137 people were killed by jihadists in Niger, in March. In Nigeria, Islamists control swathes of territories and have carried out abductions and attacks, including gunning down 27 people in a village on Sunday. Mali has been fighting terror groups since 2013. *Four main terror outfits operate in the region — the ISGS, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, the local al-Qaeda branch in Mali, and Boko Haram. Of these, the ISGS and Jama'at Nasr are reportedly in alliance to expand their influence in the Burkina-Mali-Niger border region, where they shoot down anyone who does not declare their loyalty to the jihadists. Boko Haram and the ISWAP are fighting each other but control territories in northeastern Nigeria. France has deployed troops in the region for counter-insurgency operations and is helped by the U.S., which has a drone base in Niger. The regime change policies of the U.S. and France are partly to be blamed for the problems the Sahel countries are facing today. When a NATO invasion removed Muammar Gaddafi from power in Libya in 2011, the region lost a stable bulwark against militias and jihadists. Libya, having fallen into anarchy and civil war, became a jihadist breeding ground. When trouble spread to Mali, France made a military intervention in 2013.* But it did not defeat the insurgency, which spread beyond Mali's borders. Now, jihadists find safe havens in the lawless deserts of the Sahel. When the IS-militant infrastructure was destroyed in Iraq and Syria, their foot soldiers fled to Africa, regrouping themselves in the region. The recent attacks should serve as a warning to all stakeholders. Major global powers, which worked together with regional players to defeat the IS in West Asia, should not stay away from the growing threat from Africa. They should, along with the UN, help the Sahel countries build capacity and institutions, offer stable governance and adopt sustainable counter-insurgency strategies.

THE SIGNAL FROM THE IRAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IS CLEAR (TALMIZ AHMAD - FORMER INDIAN AMBASSADOR TO SAUDI ARABIA, OMAN AND THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES)

On *May 25, the Guardian Council in Iran announced a slate of seven candidates who would compete in the presidential election on June 18. The council, in a non-transparent process, selected these seven candidates from among 592 applicants, including 40 women.* The list does not include a woman candidate. *Iran has a dichotomous political order whose two parts are constantly at odds with each other. It has the institutions of a normal democratic system — a directly elected President, an elected national assembly, and a government responsible to the assembly.* The other part of the political order is devoted to safeguarding the ideology and principles of the Islamic Revolution; this has provided the country with institutions that are unique to Iran and do much to dilute, if not undermine, the country's democratic credentials. *Placed above the popularly elected President is the Supreme Leader, who wields supreme authority in all matters of national governance — security, defence, foreign relations, the judiciary.* One of the bodies under the *Supreme Leader is the 12-member Guardian Council. The council has now carefully rejected reformist candidates and retained two who seem to be centrist, so that the slate has five so-called "hardliners".* But many of them are relatively light-weight: prominent personalities such as Assembly Speaker Ali Larijani, have also



been excluded. Clearly, the Guardian Council has decided to ensure the election of one specific candidate, *Ebrahim Raisi*.

Raisi at the helm

Raisi has been a high-profile legal luminary in Iran since the days of the Revolution. He is now head of the judiciary and deputy chief of the Assembly of Experts which selects the Supreme Leader. Raisi had stood against Hassan Rouhani for the presidency in 2017, but was soundly defeated. Raisi has been in campaign mode for the last two years and has made “fighting corruption” and “caring for the down-trodden and the under-privileged” the centre-piece of his platform. The list announced by the council has evoked sharp criticisms across the political spectrum. President Rouhani has expressed concern about the “minimal participation” in the elections that could now occur. Ali Larijani’s brother has called the list “indefensible”. Surprisingly, the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself has said that in the vetting process “some candidates were wronged”, but, so far, the Guardian Council has not revised the candidates’ list (<https://bit.ly/3cBIXR7>). Khamenei appears to have backed the narrow selection of candidates to ensure that Iran’s politics will now shift from Rouhani’s moderate reform to the hard ideological posture of Ebrahim Raisi, who is his long-term political associate. *As Iran is now once again engaged in dialogue on the nuclear issue with the United States and other interlocutors in Vienna, Khamenei would like the credit for the lifting of sanctions to go to the hardliners. But Khamenei has taken this gamble despite considerable public hostility to the overt manipulation of the election. Recent polls suggest a low voter turnout of about a third of the electorate which could dilute the credibility of the new President and condemn the country to domestic turmoil.*

Economic despair

There could be longer term political implications as well. The economist Djavad Salehi-Isfahani has pointed out (*“Iran’s middle class and the nuclear deal”*; brookings.edu) *that the educated middle class plays a central role in determining the direction of Iran’s elections: earlier, in the absence of harsh sanctions, Iran’s economy had grown exponentially and expanded the size of the middle class. In 2013, with the prospect of the end of sanctions, Rouhani won the presidential election, when the middle class was nearly 60% of the population. The lifting of sanctions after the nuclear agreement saw him through during the 2017 elections as well. However, the re-introduction of sanctions by the Donald Trump administration cost the economy about \$200 billion: the middle class has been reduced by eight million, while those living in extreme poverty have increased five-fold to 20 million. Poor medical facilities have caused pandemic-related deaths of around 80,000 people. U.S. sanctions have also changed political attitudes: support for the nuclear agreement has gone from 80% in 2015 to just 50% today, while reformist politicians have been discredited due to their failure to obtain the easing of sanctions.*

Domestic, regional outlook

The principal concern of the new President will be economic: Iran’s inflation rate has gone from 10% in 2017 to 50% today, the national currency has depreciated four times in value, while unemployment is over 12%. The easing of sanctions after an agreement on nuclear issues in Vienna will remove restrictions on Iran’s oil and financial sectors and help bring much-needed relief to the beleaguered population. However, it does not seem that much else will change. Iran’s politics



is likely to remain fractious, with the clerics seeking to ensure that effective authority remains with them, while the reformists will try to nibble away at the ideological edifice, usually with limited success. *In the regional arena, Iran is likely to continue its present approach of combining pragmatic peace moves with confrontation: quiet dialogue with Saudi Arabia on the Yemen conflict could make progress, though Syria will take longer to settle as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its ally, Hezbollah, are deeply invested in that theatre.* Again, there will be no let-up in Iran's confrontation with the U.S. and Israel. The Carnegie scholar, Karim Sadjadpour, has reported Khamenei's observation that "the revolution needs enmity with America" (<https://bit.ly/3veSaoW>). However, hostility to Iran and its Revolution is also deeply ingrained in the U.S. psyche, which has meant that earlier peace overtures from the Islamic republic have repeatedly been rebuffed by Washington. Thus, the "Cold War" between the two will continue, along with occasional skirmishes with Israel, not just in Syria, but also in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Iran will seek strategic comfort in closer ties with Russia and China. Donald Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" that, with its crippling sanctions, was meant to achieve regime change in Iran, has had the ironical effect of tilting Iran's political balance sharply in favour of the hardliners. They will now control the levers of power in Iran for the foreseeable future.

THE PROPORTIONALITY PRINCIPLE (MICHAL GUR-ARYEH - SENIOR ISRAELI DIPLOMAT)

Every war is tragic. Every civilian death is a world lost. Nevertheless, when legal discourse is applied to a war, legal terminology, concepts, and resulting conclusions should be accurately implemented. *One common misconception concerns the term 'proportionality'. Particularly, it is the argument that proportional use of force is a numbers game; that one only needs to compare the number of casualties on each side of the conflict in order to deduce which side used force disproportionately.* From a legal standpoint, this notion is flawed. *Had this been true, many NATO operations would have been guilty of being disproportionate and unlawful.*

What proportionality means

The principle of proportionality is defined as the obligation to refrain from "any attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss or injuries to civilians, or damage to civilian objects, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated". What does this mean in practice? At the outset, it may be useful to stress what 'proportionality' does not mean: clearly, it does not address casualties in a collective manner pertaining to the whole conflict, but rather, refers to particular attacks; it does not address only civilian casualties and damage, but also the intended military advantage; and it is not examined in hindsight, but before the attack takes place. *The proportionality principle means that before every military strike, military commanders must assess two factors. First, they must examine the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated from an attack, when naturally, the neutralisation of some targets would have a higher advantage than others. In order to offer such advantage, the target must be a military target, such as a weapons depot. Importantly, a seemingly civilian object, used by the adversary for military purposes (for example, a residential building used to store weapons) may be considered a lawful target. Second, the commanders must assess, based on reasonably available information at the time of the attack, what the expected collateral damage would be. They must assess how many civilians, if any, will be present in the area of the planned attack. Then they must assess the extent of expected damage to civilian property, including indirect damage that is to be accounted for, such as*



infrastructure. Lastly, they must implement all feasible precautions to mitigate harm to civilians and civilian objects. If the assessment of the two factors leads to the conclusion that the expected damage to civilians or civilian objects is deemed excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage, carrying out an attack would be unlawful. It follows that not every civilian death in armed conflict necessarily testifies to a breach of international law. This principle of proportionality is the way that the law, created by states, saw fit to balance the military needs of states, who fight to protect civilians, with humanitarian imperatives.

Wrongfully blamed

How is the principle of proportionality affected when instead of protecting its civilians, Hamas intentionally conducts its military activity from within densely populated areas? How is Israel expected to protect its major cities from Hamas rockets, when these rockets are developed, built and launched from within Gazan civilian population? Hamas is committing a double war crime – endangering Israeli civilians by targeting them and endangering Gazan civilians by using them as human shields. What does international law require Israel, a law-abiding state, to do, when facing Hamas' unlawful tactics? The law of armed conflict states that when civilian presence is used to shield military objectives from attacks, that presence does not grant the target immunity. When Hamas commits the double war crime of attacking Israeli children, schools and airports from within its own civilian population, the analysis of the situation would be distorted if its criminal behaviour is not taken into account. Despite Hamas's blatant disregard for the law or its citizens' well-being, Israel does everything feasible in order to prevent or at least minimise harm to the Palestinian civilian population, often at the cost of operational advantage. In doing so, Israel employs precautions that exceed the requirements of international law, as well as the practices commonly employed by advanced militaries of western states. Fighting an enemy that deliberately abuses the law of armed conflict raises grave challenges for Israeli soldiers. Nevertheless, Israeli commanders apply international law, including the principle of proportionality, in every military action. Why is Hamas using its own population as human shields? This brings us back to the misconception of the principle of proportionality, and the knee-jerk reaction that ignores the question, who put Gazan civilians in danger in the first place? In other words, Hamas pays no price for its war crimes and often it is Israel that is wrongfully blamed. This situation provides an incentive to Hamas to continue with its heinous practices.

CEASE THE CONFLICT AND BUILD THE PEACE (RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO - DIRECTOR, MAHATMA GANDHI CENTRE FOR PEACE, JINDAL GLOBAL UNIVERSITY, SONIPAT)

The recent clashes between young Palestinians and Israelis in Jerusalem and in the occupied West Bank are a reminder of why it is so important to understand that the challenge of peace in that region of the world is actually the challenge for all of us who have been witnessing for the past 70 years a murderous and horrific conflict between Arabs and Jews.

A common humanity

The refusal to kill or to legitimate murder is the starting point where Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation can begin. The question is can Israelis or Palestinians imagine each other's death and their shared responsibility for it? Can they perceive themselves as perpetrators of violence as well as its victims? Can an Israeli father or mother imagine that a Palestinian child is as precious



as his/her own? Can a Palestinian feel the same sense of horror, disgust and sorrow when he or she sees the image of Israeli children blown up by rockets or suicide bombers? Forming an answer to these questions begins with Palestinians and Israelis recognising their common humanity and shared values beyond a continuous reinvention of their victimhood, and beyond a persistent tendency to blame the other. The moral courage to accept one's wrongdoings can help stop the perpetuation and a deepening of a war between the two nations. *Fearful men and women who cannot visualise a goal or goods beyond a mere instinct to survive cannot help the process of peace. A fearful person cannot love, have desire, or have hope. It is perhaps too much to hope that a community, a state or for that matter, even an isolated individual, can admit being wrong.* But to hope is already a step forward and to do one's best for such hope is a giant leap forward. There is no doubt in anybody's mind that the clash between Israelis and Palestinians is a clash between two versions of the same lived experience. There are no good guys and bad guys in this conflict, as most people living outside this region tend to perceive it. We are talking about two nations that have been living with their shattered dreams and broken hopes. In a way, dying together, more than living together, has brought Israelis and Palestinians to share the same fate. They are burning in the same fire. So either each nation can run for its own life and let the other fade or both nations can try to fight the flames together. *This is because neither Israeli Jews, nor Palestinian Arabs can find a national homeland anywhere else. This is why the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is neither a clash of cultures nor a clash of religious traditions, but a clash of intolerances and prejudices among two nations who share the same boat.* For too many years an iron wall of hatred, violence and fanaticism has separated the world of Israelis from that of Palestinians. As a result, we have a traumatised and untrusting peoples on both sides. *For much too long, the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world have treated Israel as an infection that will simply go away. For their part, many Israelis have treated the entire Palestinian issue as no more than a vicious invention of a pan-Arab propaganda machine, aimed at undermining Israel's legitimacy in order to destroy it.* In terms of violence committed in the region, the major human rights violations are generally perpetuated by the Israeli military and various Palestinian militant groups that claim responsibility for killing civilians. However, the peoples of both countries are in broad agreement that it is never justified for an individual person or militaries to target and kill civilians.

Grounded in reality

Many young Israelis and Palestinians reject violence in the long run and favour non-violent forms of negotiation as the best approach to achieving self-determination and security. Is this an idealistic dream? Maybe. But perhaps idealism is the most realistic approach at this time, because non-violence is the solution most grounded in reality. As we have seen in the past 70 years, violence has not worked and submission to domination has been intolerable. Non-violence, it would seem, is the only alternative. This is the only strategy that can assure Israelis their security and Palestinians their state. The key requirement for any peace settlement is that violence must end. This does not mean that we have to be silent in an undignified way in face of the deaths of innocent civilians on both sides. It means that we need to launch a global movement of non-violent resistance to the violent policies of those who are against a coherent and proactive negotiating position.



Wheel of victimisation

The path to a workable peace — one with a Palestinian state alongside Israel, and both with internationally recognised borders — has been well known for long. But a succession of Israeli and Palestinian leaders have been reluctant to pick up the challenge. If each side has refused to understand the other, it is because each side has seen itself only as a victim. A sense of victimisation has accompanied both sides, with a justification and legitimisation of violence. There is doubt on whether there can be a partner to deliver peace. *But how can we get out of this cycle of violence and how can the two sides reverse direction and start looking towards the future? No realist would believe that today there is a brilliant formula or shining piece of paper that will end the Palestinian-Israeli tragedy in our time.* This is true, but the years and decades to come will be very challenging for both Israelis and Palestinians. Roughly speaking, *Israel is caught in a dilemma. If it does not end the occupation and retreat, it will lose both its integrity as a Jewish democratic state and its international legitimacy. But if Israel does end the occupation and withdraw without a peace accord, it will be perceived by its neighbours as an act of weakness. To solve this dilemma, Israel must get its act together. It must reform its political system; it must come up with a government of wisdom and common sense.* But it must do more than that. It must create a new, relevant narrative, which is a narrative of tolerance and dialogue. As for the Palestinians, they have no way of regaining their rights without the active participation of Israelis in their democratic effort. If there is a permanent agreement with the Palestinians on this issue, Israel will no longer be able to view its Arab citizens as permanently suspect and unofficial enemy agents. In the coming decades, Israelis will be confronted with a fundamental question — whether to ensure the peaceful transition towards an egalitarian society in which Palestinians are given the same rights as Jews. However, this does not mean that they have to artificially engineer solutions. On the contrary, it means that for one people to realise their dreams, another should not lose everything. It is time for Israel and Palestine to underline the renunciation of violence and murder as a moral imperative and an alternative course of action. *But for that, they both need to understand that they are victims of the same fear, prejudice and intolerance.* Undoubtedly, light and hope can only come from a non-violent dialogue between young Palestinians and Israeli youth.

CHINA HOSTS ASEAN FOREIGN MINISTERS

China is hosting Foreign Ministers from the 10 ASEAN countries on Monday and Tuesday, with Beijing pushing for closer economic cooperation and aligning COVID-19 recovery efforts even as it looks to push back against the recent regional outreach of the Quad grouping. Chinese officials have in recent weeks stepped up criticism of the Quad — the informal India, Australia, Japan and the United States grouping — and of Washington in particular. During recent visits to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, China's Defence Minister called on both countries to reject "military alliances" — a term that some Beijing are using to describe the Quad, but a label that the group rejects. China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said in a statement the *China-ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting, in the city of Chongqing, would mark the 30-year anniversary of relations and also "focus on combating COVID-19, promoting economic recovery, [and] better dovetail[ing] strategic plans."* A vaccine passport connecting China and ASEAN countries is also being discussed. *China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi will hold bilateral meetings with all the visiting Ministers, and also chair a meeting of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.*



Economic cooperation

Deepening economic cooperation, particularly following the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade deal, would be China's focus, analysts in Beijing said, even as it grapples with disputes over the South China Sea. Recently, *China and the Philippines have clashed over the presence of Chinese vessels near a disputed reef, while Malaysia alleged the intrusion of 16 Chinese aircraft into its airspace. The Communist Party-run Global Times on Monday blamed the U.S. for those tensions rather than China's moves that prompted the protests from the Philippines and Malaysia. Countries "see clearly that quarrels on South China Sea are not the biggest threat to regional stability; it is the U.S., whose warships frequently sail through the sensitive waters and try to force ASEAN countries take sides to confront China," the newspaper wrote.* After the first Quad leaders' summit held in March and the announcement of a regional vaccine initiative, many Chinese analysts framed ASEAN as a key space where Chinese and Quad initiatives may rub up against each other. China "cannot rule out the possibilities that Quad members will further rope in ASEAN members to counter China as Southeast Asia is of great significance to the U.S.' Indo-Pacific Strategy," wrote Yuan Zheng, senior fellow of the Institute of American Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. *"Yet ASEAN will not easily take sides." The framing of the Quad as "an Asian NATO" by Beijing has been criticised by the group's members. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in April described the using of words such as "Asian NATO" as "a mind game which people are playing".*

THE COMING TOGETHER OF THE POWERFUL FIVE

Twenty years after it was first thought of, the BRICS group of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa still mystifies all. Hailed by members as an alternate grouping of emerging economies that challenge the post-War world order, sneered at by critics as a rag-tag band of disparate countries across four continents with little in common, and which, aside from China, have not fulfilled their economic potential, BRICS still defies a focus. In addition, ties between countries such as Russia and China are growing at a much strong pace than the group's own cohesion, which is increasingly tested by tensions between members like India and China. In recent months, it seems, India's membership of the U.S.-India-Australia-Japan Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (Quad) is taking a higher profile, with a major vaccine initiative and summit of the leaders planned later this year. India, Brazil and South Africa have equal, if not stronger, strategic ties with western powers today, prompting Rachel Salzman, author of Russia, *BRICS, and the Disruption of Global Order*, to ask *whether BRICS is a bridge between the east and west or whether it is being positioned as a bulwark against them. To be clear, BRICS was not invented by any of its members. In 2001, Goldman Sachs' Jim O'Neill authored a paper called "Building Better Global Economic BRICs", pointing out that future GDP growth in the world would come from China, India, Russia and Brazil. Significantly, the paper didn't recommend a separate grouping for them, but made the case that the G-7 grouping, made up of the world's most industrialised, and essentially Western countries, should include them. Mr. O'Neill also suggested that the G-7 group needed revamping after the introduction of a common currency for Europe, the euro, in 1999. In 2003, Goldman Sachs wrote another paper, "Dreaming with BRICs: Path to 2050", predicting that the global map would significantly change due to these four emerging economies, and that BRIC economies combined would outstrip the western dominated world order before 2039. In 2006, leaders of the BRIC countries met on the margins of a G-8 (now called G-7) summit in St. Petersburg, Russia, and BRIC was formalised that year. The global financial crisis of*



2007-08 reinforced the idea as BRIC countries had been relatively unscathed in the market collapse. *On June 16, 2009, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met with Presidents Hu Jintao, Dmitry Medvedev and Lula da Silva for the first BRIC summit in Yekaterinburg, and South Africa was subsequently admitted two years later.* Common ground for the members was built by ensuring that no bilateral issues were brought up, but the contradictions remained. Many economists soon grew tired of “emerging” economies that didn’t reach the goals they had predicted. Others saw India’s closer ties with the U.S. after the civil nuclear deal as a sign its bonds with BRICS would weaken. Meanwhile, *Russia, which had hoped to bolster its own global influence through the group, had been cast out of the G-7 order altogether after its actions in Crimea in 2014. China, under Xi Jinping, grew increasingly aggressive, and impatient about the other underperforming economies in the group, as it became the U.S.’s main challenger on the global stage.*

Long-term prospects

China’s decision to launch the trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative in 2017 was opposed by India, and even Russia did not join the BRI plan, although it has considerable infrastructure projects with China. South Africa’s debt-laden economy and negative current account has led some to predict an economic collapse in the next decade. Brazil’s poor handling during the Covid-19 crisis has ranked it amongst the world’s worst-affected countries, and its recovery is expected to be delayed. India’s economic slowdown was a concern even before Covid-19 hit, and government policies like “Aatmanirbhar” were seen as a plan to turn inward. Meanwhile, concerns about aggressions from Russia in Ukraine and Eastern Europe and China in the South China Sea, the border with India and internally in Hongkong and Xinjiang, as well as creeping authoritarianism in democracies like Brazil and India have made investors question long-term prospects of the group. In the market, BRICS has been mocked for being “broken”, while others have suggested it should *be expanded to include more emerging economies like Indonesia, Mexico and Turkey, called the “Next-11”.* Others suggested BRICKS (including South Korea). Perhaps the biggest blow to the BRICS firmament was dealt by the very company that laid its foundations: In 2015, Goldman Sachs wound up its BRIC fund, which had reportedly lost 88% of its asset value since 2010, and merged it with a larger emerging markets fund. In an article he wrote for Project Syndicate in 2021, to mark the idea of “BRICs at 20”, Mr. O’Neill said he was disappointed by the group’s performance but hadn’t lost hope entirely. All the contradictions and criticism notwithstanding, BRICS is an idea that has endured two decades, an idea its members remain committed to, and not one has skipped the annual summits held since 2009. *Along the way, BRICS has created the New Development Bank (NDB) set up with an initial capital of \$100 billion, a BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement fund to deal with global liquidity crunches, and a BRICS payment system proposing to be an alternative to the SWIFT payment system. While its raison d’être was economic, BRICS statements have always been deeply political, calling for more inclusion in the multilateral world order, decrying U.S.-Europe backed military interventions, and expressing an independent line on several world events from Afghanistan to West Asia.*

Reforming the UN

India is set to host the *BRICS summit under Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s chairmanship, either virtually or in person with Presidents Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Jair Bolsonaro and Cyril Ramaphosa later this year.* The BRICS ministerial meeting held this week sent several important signals to that end, issuing two outcome documents, including the first “standalone” joint



statement on reforming multilateral institutions, including the UN and the UNSC, International Monetary Fund and World Bank and the World Trade Organization. *It remains to be seen how far countries like China and Russia, which are already “inside the tent” at the UNSC, will go in advocating for the other BRICS members to be a part of a reformed Security Council. Another important agreement was the BRICS ministerial decision to support negotiations at the WTO for the waiver of trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPs) for vaccines and medicines to tackle the Coronavirus pandemic.* While it stopped short of backing the India-South Africa proposal for a three-year waiver, something Brazil has been holding out given opposition from big Pharmaceutical companies, BRICS support at the WTO for the TRIPs waiver negotiations will be a boost for the effort. *It will also be interesting to watch how BRICS countries move ahead on a “BRICS Vaccine Centre”, proposed to be based in Johannesburg, given that at least three members — Russia India and China — have manufactured a substantial chunk of all globally authorised vaccines.* What appears clear is in the post-Covid world, priorities for all economies will change, and offer up a churning in the world of the kind seen two decades ago, when the idea of a grouping of emerging economies was first floated. For BRICS, the next few months could crystallise that idea, or sink it further, leaving others to wonder whether the “Rise of the Rest” as it was once called, is an idea whose time will ever come at all.

A CHINESE ENCLAVE IN SRI LANKA?

Last month, Sri Lanka passed the controversial Colombo Port City Economic Commission Bill, which governs the China-backed Colombo Port City project worth \$1.4 billion, amid wide opposition to the creation of a “Chinese enclave” in the island nation.

Why is the project surrounded by controversies?

The Colombo Port City has grabbed headlines in Sri Lanka in recent months even as the relentless third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps through the country. Almost an artificial island, the territory coming up on 2.69 square kilometres of land reclaimed from Colombo’s seafront has stirred controversy since its inception. *Those backing it see in that patch of land their dream of an international financial hub — a “Singapore or Dubai” in the Indian Ocean. But sceptics claim that it could well become a “Chinese colony”, with the Bill, which is now an Act, providing the Port City and the powerful Commission that will run it substantial “immunity” from Sri Lankan laws, besides huge tax exemptions and other incentives for investors. Pitched as a “world-class city for South Asia”, the development is envisioned under five distinct “precincts” — the Financial District, the Central Park Living and the Island Living; residential areas under The Marina, which is planned as a leisure destination, and the International Island, which would include educational institutions and convention centres. The Port City project is scheduled for completion by 2041.*

When was it launched?

The project was launched in September 2014 by Chinese President Xi Jinping during a visit to the island nation under the Mahinda Rajapaksa administration’s second term. After President Mahinda Rajapaksa was ousted in January 2015, the successor “national unity” government of Maithripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe went ahead with the project after briefly halting it. On returning to power in November 2019, the Rajapaksas vowed to expedite the project. The Sri Lankan government says the project will bring in around 83,000 jobs and \$15 billion initially.



What is the extent of China's involvement?

The project is financed chiefly through Chinese investment amounting to \$1.4 billion, via CHEC Port City Colombo, a unit of the State-owned China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). In return, the company will receive 116 hectares (of the total 269 hectares) on a 99-year lease. *The Colombo Port City — separate from but located adjacent to the Colombo Port, the country's main harbour — is the third major port-related infrastructure project where China has a significant stake. China Merchants Port Holdings has an 85% stake in the Colombo International Container Terminals Ltd. (CICT) at the Colombo Port, under a 35-year 'Build Operate and Transfer' agreement with the Sri Lanka Port Authority.* In 2017, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration, unable to repay the Chinese loan with which it was saddled by the previous government, handed over the Hambantota Port in the Southern Province to China on a 99-year lease. *Effectively, China has substantial control over two key infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka for a century. These projects are within the ambit of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, in which it sees strategically located Sri Lanka as a trusted partner.* In March this year, Mr. Xi told Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa that the two countries must “steadily push forward” in major projects and promote “high-quality collaboration in jointly building the Belt and Road”, Xinhua reported.

What are the concerns?

Since its launch, the Colombo Port City project has faced opposition from environmentalists and fisherfolk, who feared that the project would affect marine life and livelihoods. However, in the absence of wider political and societal support, their resistance did not dent successive governments' resolve to pursue the project. *The more recent opposition was specific to the Colombo Port City Economic Commission Bill. The resistance came from Opposition parties and civil society groups, including many who do not oppose the project per se, but rather its governance by “an all-powerful commission answerable to no one”.* Significantly, a section of *Buddhist monks, wielding much influence in Sri Lankan politics and the Sinhala society, also opposed the Bill and said that it eroded Sri Lanka's sovereignty.* During a heated parliamentary debate, Opposition MPs said the Bill paved the way for a “Cheelam” or “ChiLanka”, referring to China's “control” over the Colombo Port City. Trade unions resisted too, contending that labour rights had no protection under the new physical and legal entity. For the first time, there was widespread resistance to a Chinese-backed project from within the Rajapaksas' support base. As many as 19 petitions challenged the Bill in the Supreme Court, leading it to recommend a few amendments, which some Opposition legislators termed “cosmetic changes”. The government accepted these promptly to avert the constitutional requirement of a two-thirds majority in Parliament and/or a referendum of people. The amended Bill received a parliamentary majority.

NEPAL STOPS DISTRIBUTION OF CORONIL KITS

Nepal's Department of Ayurveda and Alternative Medicines on Monday stopped distribution of Coronil kits that were gifted by the Patanjali group of Indian yoga teacher and businessman Ramdev. Kathmandu's order cited that proper procedures were not followed while procuring the 1,500 kits of Coronil that Patanjali claims are useful in dealing with the COVID-19 infection.



Move to 'delink'

The issue has drawn attention as it is being interpreted as a move to delink the leading Madhesi political families from the Indian group. *The latest order of the Government of Nepal says, the tablets and nasal oil that are part of the Coronil kit are not equivalent to medicines to defeat COVID-19 virus. While pointing at shortcomings of the kits, Nepalese officials pointed to the recent statements against Coronil by the Indian Medical Association (IMA), which has challenged Mr. Ramdev to prove the efficacy of his products to deal with the COVID-19. Nepal is the second country after Bhutan to stop distribution of Coronil kits. Bhutan's Drug Regulatory Authority has already stopped distribution of Coronil in the kingdom.* However, Nepal remains close to the Patanjali group as the organisation maintains a large production facility and distribution networks in Nepal. It is not yet clear if the ban on the distribution will be limited to the particular consignment or get expanded to cover Coronil kits across the country. Monday's order also sparked controversy within the Government of Nepal as the Coronil kits were received during the tenure of previous health minister Hridayesh Tripathi and the minister in charge of women and child development, Juli Mahato. Soon afterwards, Ms. Mahato and her husband Raghuvir Mahaseth tested positive drawing attention to attention to their support for Patanjali group. The latest order is being interpreted as an attempt by Oli government to distance itself from the Patanjali group as it is perceived to be close to Ms. Mahato's brother, industrialist Upendra Mahato. Mr Mahato is one of the biggest industrialists of Nepal and is widely known to be a partner of Patanjali group in the country.

NO DECISION YET ON INDIAN CONSULATE IN ADDU ATOLL: SOLIH

The Maldives has made no decision on opening an Indian consulate in its southern Addu Atoll, President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih said on Tuesday, a fortnight after the Indian Cabinet cleared a proposal for it. The President remarked on the proposed Indian consulate, during a press conference on the COVID-19 situation in the country, spokesman Mabrook Azeez told The Hindu from capital Male. "He [Mr. Solih] pointed out that having multiple sites offering consular services in one country is quite common," Mr. Azeez said. President Solih's comments appeared to keep the option open, amid an ongoing "#SaveAddu" social media campaign by a section of Maldivians sceptical of another Indian mission presence, in addition to the Embassy in Male. Legislators from Addu and local body representatives — from the ruling coalition widely perceived as India-friendly — have pledged support to the initiative. *Speaker Mohamed Nasheed, who is currently in Berlin, recovering from injuries sustained in an assassination attempt last month, said in a recent tweet that Addu's thinking has always been one that is open to the world. "Both Addu and Maldives will benefit from the creation of an Indian consulate in Addu," he said in a Dhivehi language tweet on June 5.* Opposition voices, which earlier led an '#Indiaout' campaign against enhanced military cooperation between the neighbours, have opposed the proposed consulate. *Apart from its strategic location in the Indian Ocean, Addu is the second largest city in the archipelago, home to over 30,000 people. Indian government sources familiar with the proposal said the rationale for the consulate was to help Addu residents with speedy visa services. All the same, the frequent visa requirements of locals is yet to convince Maldivians who see a new consulate with suspicion, especially on the heels of a \$33-million Maldivian police training facility that India is helping build in Addu. On June 3, local publication Times of Addu ran an editorial titled 'Indian consulate in Addu City; A possible 'safe house' for Indian spies?'*



Local sensitivities

Further, the fact that the announcement appeared in the Indian media last month, before either government made an announcement, has prompted criticism of Indian “heavy handedness”. According to the Maldives’s former Ambassador to India Ahmed Mohamed, who served former President Abdulla Yameen’s administration, *New Delhi must be more aware of the “sensitivities” within the Maldives. “We saw similar apprehensions among our people when India [in 2018] was reluctant to take back the helicopters sent here, even after our [former President Yameen] government requested them. It was seen as boots on the ground, a challenge on our independence and a violation of our sovereignty,”* he told The Hindu. The decision to open a consulate in Addu invokes similar suspicion, in his view. “The fact that the decision was first reported in the Indian media also shows that sort of heavy handedness.” U.K.-based Maldivian academic Hassan Ugail, who hails from Addu, underscored the need for a data-driven approach to establish a consulate. *“In principle, I am supportive of consulates of countries, including India, to be established in Addu. However, I am not supportive of the present set-up being proposed,”* he said. Pointing to the “economic growth prospects” argument made by some in favour of opening a consulate, he said there are no signs yet of “such economic growth, investments or mass tourism from India to Addu city”. *“We must first demonstrate the case with facts, figures and numbers, and demonstrate signs that such activities are actually taking place. The argument of ‘let us establish a consulate and let us wait for economic growth to take place’ makes little sense,”* Prof. Ugail said.

MALDIVES WINS UNGA ELECTION, INDIA SEEKS CLOSE COOPERATION

In a first for the Maldives, *Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid was elected the President of the UN General Assembly for 2021-22, winning 143 votes or nearly three-fourths of the 191 countries that voted in the annual election, while his rival, former Afghanistan Foreign Minister Zalmi Rassoul, won 48.* Mr. Shahid’s win was welcomed in particular in New Delhi, where Indian diplomats had been active behind the scenes in helping the Maldives canvass for him, after Maldives announced its candidate for the *76th General Assembly Presidency a year ago. Sources confirmed that given the close cooperation between both countries, Maldives is in discussions with the Indian mission for India’s deputy Permanent Representative at the UN Nagaraj Naidu to officiate as Mr. Shahid’s Chef de Cabinet.* Maldives President Ibrahim Solih called the election win “resounding” and a “great honour for the Maldives”, while former President and Maldives speaker Mohammad Nasheed said it was a “great day” for small island states and for “climate vulnerable countries everywhere”. *“This is a testimony as much to [Mr. Shahid’s] own stature as to the standing of Maldives. We look forward to working with him to strengthen multilateralism and its much-needed reforms,”* said External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar. As The Hindu had reported last week, India had made it clear to Afghanistan’s government that it would be unable to support Mr. Rassoul as it had declared its support for Maldives publicly in November, long before Afghanistan announced its candidature in January this year. *The announcement had caused an awkward tussle within the Asia Pacific group, whose turn it is to take the Presidency of the General Assembly, and especially for India, which has close ties with both countries.*

Surprising development

Sources said the announcement was a “surprising development”, and that it was important for Maldives to take the position that it has, unlike Afghanistan, never held before. *“Both Maldives and*



Afghanistan have excellent ties with India and both candidates are friends of India. However, since India had already committed its support to Maldives at a time when no other candidate was in the fray, India voted in favour of Maldives,” the sources said.

New Delhi should now ensure that the Afghan government carries no hard feelings, as some in Kabul had even hinted that India might wish to support Afghanistan as it had sacrificed its turn at the UNSC for India’s current term there. It would also be important to analyse why Kabul decided to field a candidate late in the race, and not withdraw despite it being clear that its South Asian neighbour was ahead, and did not consult India closely on the process.

Given that the previous President of the General Assembly, from Turkey, had ruffled feathers with his remarks in Islamabad that Pakistan was “duty” bound to raise the Jammu and Kashmir dispute “more strongly” at the UN, Mr. Shahid’s tenure is expected to see a far smoother term for India, especially as the Modi government focuses on showcasing the country at the UN during India’s 75th Independence anniversary next year. Above all, it is hoped that India in the UNSC and the Maldivian President of the General Assembly will work in tandem as New Delhi pursues its goals for multilateral reform, and re-energise the dormant process of effecting change in the old power structures in the global body.

PAK. PASSES BILL TO LET JADHAV APPEAL

Pakistan’s National Assembly passed a Bill to provide the right of appeal to death-row prisoner Kulbhushan Jadhav amidst a ruckus and boycott by the Opposition. *The Lower House of Parliament passed the ICJ (Review and Re-consideration) Bill, 2020 on Thursday. The Bill is aimed at allowing Jadhav to have consular access in line with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) verdict. Jadhav, a 51-year-old retired Indian Navy officer, was sentenced to death by a Pakistani military court on charges of espionage and terrorism in April 2017. India approached the ICJ against Pakistan for denial of consular access to Jadhav and challenging the death sentence. The Hague-based ICJ had ruled in July 2019 that Pakistan must undertake an “effective review and reconsideration” of the conviction and sentence of Jadhav and also to grant consular access to India without further delay. The Bill was among 21 laws passed by the National Assembly on Thursday evening, ignoring protests by Opposition MPs who wanted a proper reading of the Bills.* However, the government suspended rules of business to bulldoze 21 laws in a single sitting. *Speaking after the passage of the Bill, Law Minister Farogh Nasim said had they not passed the Bill, India would have gone to the UN Security Council and could have moved contempt proceedings against Pakistan in the ICJ.* Mr. Nasim said the Bill was being passed in the light of the verdict of the ICJ which had asked Pakistan to provide a credible review opportunity to Jadhav.

PAKISTAN MAKES PROGRESS ON TERROR FINANCE RATINGS

Pakistan improved its ratings with the Asia Pacific Group (APG) on Money Laundering, a 41-country grouping that is a regional associate of the Financial Action Task Force, ahead of a decision on its grey listing status later this month. Of the 40 parameters, Pakistan has made progress in about 21 and been downgraded on 1, the APG’s Mutual Evaluation Report (MER) published on June 4 said, adding that this meant Pakistan moves ‘up’ one category in its evaluation at the APG. “Overall, Pakistan has made notable progress in addressing the technical compliance deficiencies identified



in its MER and has been re-rated on 22 recommendations,” explained the APG’s second follow up report on the MER, adding that it had cleared 31 of 40 points in total as compliant or largely compliant of the international body’s standards on anti-money laundering/combating financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) measures. *“Pakistan will move from enhanced [expedited] to enhanced follow-up, and will continue to report back to the APG on progress to strengthen its implementation of AML/CFT laws. Pakistan submitted its third progress report in February 2021,” said the APG’s report that was presented in May, which noted that Pakistan had passed a number of new laws in the past few months that made its systems more compliant on these issues.* The APG’s meeting, which included India, also retained Bhutan on the “enhanced follow-up” list, with 29 of 40 recommendations being rated as compliant or largely compliant. Government sources here said it is not necessary that Pakistan’s improvement in the APG would also lead to a reprieve at the FATF, which will decide at its next plenary session from June 21-25 on whether to retain Pakistan on the greylist, downgrade it to the blacklist or remove it from the colour-coded list of countries facing punitive measures that has impacted its global credit rating and access to international loans. *In particular, Pakistan’s inability to end funding to the UN Security Council- designated terror groups and entities, including the Haqqani group, the Al-Qaeda, the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammad, and prosecute their leadership successfully had held up its ratings.* The Paris-based FATF, *has thus far cleared Pakistan on 24 of 27 points on the action plan it has been tasked with since 2018, leading its Industries [now Energy] Minister Hammad Azhar to declare in February 2021, that being downgraded to the FATF blacklist is “not an option” any longer.* The last three outstanding action points on which Pakistan claims it will also be cleared are: demonstrating that terrorist financing (TF) investigations and prosecutions target persons and entities acting on behalf or at the directive of the designated persons or entities; demonstrating that TF prosecutions result in effective, proportionate and dissuasive sanctions; and demonstrating effective implementation of targeted financial sanctions against all designated terrorists, particularly those acting for them or on their behalf.

SOUTH ASIA’S HEALTHCARE BURDEN (THE AUTHOR IS CHAIRMAN OF THE INSTITUTE FOR POLICY, ADVOCACY, AND GOVERNANCE (IPAG), AN INTERNATIONAL THINK TANK WITH PRESENCE IN DHAKA, DELHI, MELBOURNE, VIENNA AND DUBAI)

On May 18 this year, India recorded 4,529 deaths from COVID-19, the highest daily death toll recorded in the world after the United States in January saw 4,468 deaths. As India combats the pandemic, its neighbours are experiencing spillover from the menacing second wave. The virus has swept through Nepal, while Sri Lanka added as many as 78,218 cases in May. Pakistan crossed over 200 daily deaths in April, its highest since the pandemic started. *The situation in Bangladesh is precarious, given the recent detection of the highly contagious Delta variant. Bhutan is the only exception, with only one death and 1,724 cases so far. The country’s success stems from a well-funded and prepared public health system with stringent measures, responsible citizenship, and an accountable government.* As bodies piled up at overcrowded crematoriums in India in the last few months, several things were to blame — “super spreader” events, a fragile health infrastructure neglected for decades, citizens not following health protocols, and logistical mismanagement. *What has exacerbated the situation is a subpar public healthcare system running on a meagre contribution of a little over 1% of India’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). While the private medical sector is booming, the public healthcare sector has been operating at a pitiful 0.08 doctors per 1,000*



people, falling miserably below the World Health Organization's (WHO) prescribed standard of 1:1000. India has only half a bed available for every 1,000 people, which is a deficient figure even for normal days. Bangladesh and Pakistan fare no better, with a bed to patient ratio of 0.8 and 0.6, respectively, and a doctor availability of less than one for every 1,000 people. *While ideally, out-of-pocket expenditure should not surpass 15% to 20% of the total health expenditure, for India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, this figure stands at an appalling 62.67%, 73.87% and 56.24%, respectively. The situation in rural India, where people largely rely on threadbare healthcare facilities, is disconcerting. Numerous distressing reports have emerged in the media, from patients being treated on the hospital floor for lack of beds, to some walking hundreds of miles just to get to a hospital, let alone one with oxygen or drug supplies, and many being left to resort to homemade concoctions and local quacks.* Further, the fact that hundreds of healthcare workers have succumbed to COVID-19, unable to seek a bed in the very hospitals they serve, is telling. *While India has the world's third-largest military expenditure, its health budget is the fourth-lowest. In Pakistan, even amidst the pandemic, the defence budget was increased by 12% in the fiscal year 2020-21, to \$7.85 billion, while the spending on health remained around \$151 million.* Not too far behind is Bangladesh, with decades of underfunding culminating in a crumbling public healthcare system, pushing people to opt for private medical care even if it means exorbitant health payments. Major public sector investments by the 'big three' of South Asia, i.e., India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, are towards infrastructure and defence, with health taking a backseat. A quick look at pre-pandemic sectoral allocations explains the chronically low status of human development indicators in the three countries.

Learning from Southeast Asia

South Asia can take lessons in pragmatic healthcare policy from Southeast Asia, which has prioritised investments in healthcare systems while broadening equitable access through universal health coverage schemes. From Vietnam's preventive measures focused on investments in disease surveillance and emergency response mechanisms, to even countries like Laos and Cambodia making a constant effort towards improving the healthcare ecosystem, all have done much better than their South Asian peers. It took a debilitating global pandemic to push South Asian policymakers to direct special attention and resources towards strengthening the health systems. But is it too late? Though the Indian government in this year's budget highlighted an increase of 137% in "health and well-being" expenditure, a closer look reveals a mismatch between facts and figures. Learning from the devastation unleashed by the pandemic, South Asian countries must step up investment in their public healthcare sectors to make them sustainable, up to date and pro-poor; most importantly, the system should not turn its back on citizens. Given the high chances of another wave or even the impending crisis of climate change, stopgap measures ought to be replaced by a well-thought-out vision and political commitment for long-term healing.



NATION

MAHATMA GANDHI'S GREAT-GRANDDAUGHTER SENTENCED TO 7 YEARS IN JAIL IN SOUTH AFRICA

A 56-year-old great-granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi, who was accused in a six-million rand fraud and forgery case, has been sentenced to seven years in jail by a Durban court. Ashish Lata Ramgobin was found guilty by the court on Monday. She was accused of defrauding businessman SR Maharaj after he advanced R6.2 million to her for allegedly clearing import and Customs duties for a non-existent consignment from India. He was promised a share of profits. *Lata Ramgobin, who is the daughter of noted rights activists Ela Gandhi and late Mewa Ramgobind*, was also refused leave to appeal both the conviction and the sentence by the Durban Specialised Commercial Crime Court.

A number of other descendants of Mahatma Gandhi are human rights activists and among them are Lata Ramgobin's cousins Kirti Menon, the late Satish Dhupelia, and Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie. Ramgobin's mother Ela Gandhi in particular has been internationally recognised for her efforts, including national honours from both India and South Africa.

COUNTING THE DEAD

The real time mortality impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is an important statistical measure to guide policy responses. But measuring the actual count is not an easy task. WHO, in January 2021, had estimated, based on excess deaths data in Europe and the American continents, that actual deaths were at least 1.6 times over the official count. The problem of under-counting, even in mature public health systems across the developed world, is largely because patients who die due to cardiovascular issues among others even after apparent recovery from COVID-19 are sometimes not tracked and registered as COVID-19-related deaths. *This is why even in Kerala — with 100% registration of deaths and a relatively low case fatality rate — following criticisms about the methodology to evaluate whether a death was related to COVID-19, the health administration in the districts, rather than a State-level audit committee, will now audit deaths.* But there is another class of under-counting across States, where health bulletins mislead by reporting a lower number of cases and deaths. *This is the case with Bihar where the reported toll was suddenly increased by 72% following a Health Department review after the Patna High Court found discrepancies in figures cited by different agencies in Buxar district. Bihar is among the States in India with the lowest civil registration of deaths, with barely 34.1% of the dead being registered, according to the Civil Registration System (CRS) report of 2018.* Estimations of the actual count of the dead are difficult to obtain in other States such as Uttar Pradesh as well, where public health systems are poor and neither the infections nor deaths have been effectively tracked, especially in rural areas, where many have died outside of hospitals. *One method to assess the actual number of deaths due to COVID-19 is by calculating the excess deaths during the given period when the pandemic has raged, compared to the baseline mortality occurring in similar time frames before the pandemic. This exercise also works best if death registrations are relatively high, which should be possible in most districts as registration of deaths has improved to 76% according to CRS 2018.* Excess deaths analyses in *Gujarat, Chennai and Kolkata* based on collations of preliminary registration data by news organisations suggest that they were nearly *10, five and seven times higher*, respectively, than



reported fatalities during the second wave. If the CRS datasets, maintained by the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India besides State registrars and municipal officials with a good quality of registration, are made available, it would enable better estimation of the actual mortality figures. In the meantime, only honest reporting of the deaths will help provide better mitigation strategies.

TEST POSITIVITY RATE DROPS BELOW 5%

India recorded 99,117 new COVID-19 cases and 2,401 new deaths till 9.30 p.m. on Sunday. *The country has so far reported a total of 2,89,07,560 cases and 3,49,186 deaths. India continued to record the highest number of daily deaths in the world with 2,970 average daily fatalities on June 5. The two other countries with the highest daily death count after India were Brazil (1,639) and Mexico (758).* Twenty-eight per cent of the world's average daily deaths were recorded in India on June 5. Tamil Nadu reported 20,421 new infections, followed by Kerala (14,672) and Maharashtra (12,557). Maharashtra recorded 618 new casualties on the day, followed by Tamil Nadu (434) and Karnataka (320). Maharashtra's fatalities include backlog deaths which were missed in the previous reports. The figures do not include cases and deaths from Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh. The data are sourced from the respective States' health bulletins. *Around 20.36 lakh samples were tested on Saturday (the results for which were made available on Sunday). India's average daily test positivity rate continues to decline. It was 4.2% on June 5 compared to 9.4% recorded a week before. About 33.54 lakh vaccine doses were administered in the 24 hours ending 7 a.m. on Sunday, which is nearly 3 lakh doses fewer than what was recorded in the previous 24 hours.* However, it is 3.18 lakh more doses than what was recorded during the same period a week ago. The seven-day rolling average of daily vaccinations in the country continues to increase. It stood at 26.43 lakh on June 5, which is more than the 23.39 lakh recorded a week before (May 29). About 19.7% of adults in India, 40.2% of those aged above 45 and 44.5% of people aged above 60, have been administered with at least one dose of a vaccine, until 8 p.m. on Sunday.

INDIA'S REVISED COVID-19 VACCINATION POLICY

On Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that India will shift to centralised procurement of Covid-19 vaccines, after several states had faced difficulties in procuring and managing the funding of vaccines. This marks a change from the previous policy from May 1, when the Centre had asked states to procure 25% of the doses from the open market to vaccinate the 18-44 year age group. Before that (January 16 to April 30), the Centre had procured and allocated vaccine doses to the states for free vaccination of three priority groups — healthcare workers, frontline workers, and persons above the age of 45.

I am above the age of 18. Will I be vaccinated for free?

From June 21, every citizen above the age of 18 will be vaccinated free at vaccination centres run by the Centre or a state government. In the previous policy starting May 1, a state could administer vaccines free to the 18-44 age group at centres run by the state government. At central government centres, only the three priority groups — healthcare workers, frontline workers, and



those above age 45— were vaccinated free. *From June 21, both state and central centres will administer vaccines free to all age groups.*

What about private vaccination centres?

People of all ages will have to pay for vaccination at private centres. However, *private centres can charge only Rs 150 as service charge over and above the price of the vaccine.* The maximum price that can be charged by private centres is Rs 780 for Covishield, Rs 1,410 for Covaxin; and is Rs 1,145 for Sputnik V. The total cost of vaccination will be displayed on the CoWIN portal at the time you book your slot.

How many doses will be available free?

The Centre will directly procure 75% of the doses manufactured by vaccine companies, and distribute this among the states, to be administered free. From June 21, states will no longer have any role in procurement. Private hospitals will have exclusive access to the remaining 25%.

How many doses will be provided to which state?

These will be allocated based on *three positive metrics — population, disease burden and the progress of vaccination — and one negative metric — wastage of vaccines.* A state reporting good vaccination coverage will get a higher number of doses, while a state recording a higher wastage will receive a lower number.

Which groups will be given priority?

Healthcare workers and frontline workers will continue to get top priority at government centres. States will also have to prioritise the vaccination of citizens above 45 since this category accounts for 80% of Covid-related mortality. They will also have to prioritise the vaccination of those whose second dose has become due, the revised guidelines recommend. Within the population group of citizens in the 18-44 age group, states may decide their own prioritisation factoring in the vaccine supply schedule.

Does anything change for private hospitals?

Non-transferable electronic vouchers, approved by the RBI, will be introduced. This would enable people to financially support vaccination of economically weaker sections at private centres. The voucher can be used only for the person to whom it has been issued. It can be downloaded on your mobile; it will be scanned at the vaccination site, and the amount will be credited. It will also be captured on Cowin.

The small private hospitals in my area don't have vaccination sites. Will this change?

From June 21, the state government will aggregate the demand of private hospitals keeping in view equitable distribution and regional balance. Based on this aggregated demand, the Centre will facilitate supply to private hospitals and their payment through the National Health Authority's electronic platform. This, indirectly, would enable the smaller and remoter private hospitals to obtain a timely supply of vaccines.



I cannot book an appointment on Cowin. What should I do?

From June 21, all government and private vaccination centres will provide an onsite registration facility. A detailed procedure is to be finalised and published by the states.

SUPREME COURT HEARING THE MATTER OF VACCINATION

SC hearing on June 30

The Prime Minister's announcement comes a week after the Supreme Court asked for an affidavit from the Centre on how the sum of ₹35,000 crore allocated in the Union Budget for vaccines has been spent so far. The Court sought to know why these funds cannot be used for giving free vaccination for those in the age group of 18 to 44 years, observing that the Centre's policy of not providing free vaccines to this particular age group was prima facie "*arbitrary and irrational*". The affidavit is due on June 15 and the next hearing is on June 30. *Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik had written to Chief Ministers across the country urging a consensus on central procurement of vaccines, while Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan had written to Chief Ministers of 11 non-NDA States to unite to ask for free vaccines from the Centre.* Expressing grief at the loss of life especially during the massive second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that has hit India, Mr. Modi said his government had dealt with the challenges of resources on a war footing to deal with a "once in a century" pandemic.

ON VACCINES, INDIA ALWAYS QUICK ON THE UPTAKE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Monday presentation of India's vaccination history is at odds with the facts. "If you look at the history of vaccinations in India, whether for smallpox, hepatitis B or polio, you will see that India would have to wait decades for procuring vaccines from abroad. When vaccination programmes ended in other countries, it would not have even begun in our country," he claimed. India, even before Independence, was among the countries that indigenously manufactured vaccines a few years within their discovery, historical records suggest. While there have been several challenges to the uptake of vaccines, their availability was the least of the problems. *A vaccine for smallpox, as a history of vaccination in India published in the Indian Journal of Medical Research (IJMR) by Chandrakant Lahariya in 2012 said, was first administered to a three-year-old Indian, in 1802, a mere four years after English physician Edward Jenner published the result of his experiments on inoculating subjects with a cowpox virus.* The smallpox vaccines were imported until 1850, but preserving the liquid lymph solution was a challenge. This led to institutes in India researching ways to increase lymph supply with early success by 1895. *The first animal vaccine depot was set up in Shillong in 1890, from where it started to be produced.* While vaccination never ceased in India once it began, it had varying popularity. There was hesitancy, opposition from 'tikadaars' (who performed variolation) and those actually administering vaccines charged a small fee contributing to its fluctuating uptake. "The vaccination coverage went down and in 1944-45 in India, the highest numbers of smallpox cases in the last two decades were reported. As soon as World War II ended, the focus was brought back on smallpox vaccination and cases decreased," Dr. Lahariya said. *"In 1947, India was self-sufficient in the production of smallpox vaccines." It took until 1971 to eradicate the virus in South America and 1975 in Asia (and India) and 1977 in Africa.* The challenge, said Dr. Lahariya, was not a lack of access to vaccines, but social and economic factors surrounding



vaccination. *The history of polio vaccination in India is more complicated. "India was also the pioneer-leader in polio research — epidemiology, vaccine-prevention — and in the manufacture of both Oral Polio Vaccine [OPV] and Injectable Polio Vaccine [IPV]. India's lead position was squandered in later years due to short-sighted policies and capricious decisions, a blot in our history of public health," write T. Jacob John and M. Vipin Vashishta in the 2013 edition of the IJMR. The Pasteur Institute of India developed and produced, for the first time in India, an indigenous trivalent OPV in 1970. It was not until 2006 that IPV was licensed for manufacture in India. It was only due to the use of a combination of both kinds of vaccines, concerted sustained campaigns and inadequate attention by governments to boost vaccine production that it required until 2011 to eliminate polio. Again, it was not because India was unable to make those vaccines. The Prime Minister also claimed that since 2014, the Mission Indradhanush programme had increased the percentage of children covered under vaccination from 60% to 90%. The latest round of the National Family Health Survey, which provides data only from 17 States and five Union Territories, showed that none of the States had achieved 90% vaccination coverage.* The Health Ministry released data on this on December 2020 and was expected to provide data from the remaining States by May this year. *A vaccine against the bacterium causing plague was made by Waldemar Haffkine at the Grant Medical College, Bombay, in 1897 that he first tested on himself and later on on the inmates of the Byculla jail. A Plague Laboratory was set up in 1899 and in 1925, it was renamed the Haffkine Institute.* Several vaccine institutes came up in different provinces of the country, including the 1948 BCG (for tuberculosis) Laboratory in Guindy, Madras. These institutes enabled the manufacture of vaccines for diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus in India, before 1940.

POST REPORTS OF COWIN LEAK, IT MIN ASKS CERT-IN TO PROBE

A day after reports of an alleged leak of CoWin database being put up for sale on dark-web emerged, the Empowered Group on Vaccine Administration and the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) have asked Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) to investigate the matter. Sources at the IT Ministry said though the issue had been handled for now, CERT-In, with help of other domestic and global cybersecurity experts, was checking the entire CoWin platform once again to ensure there were no vulnerabilities. "Over the past several months ever since CoWin went live, there have been repeated attempts by several state and non-state parties. Sometimes, it is in the form of SQL (structured query language) injection attack while others we observed repeated DDOS (distributed denial-of-service) attack. We are alert to them," an IT Ministry official said. *A SQL injection attack consists of insertion of a query into the database to modify and exploit sensitive data. It allows the attacker to tamper with existing data, or steal someone's identity or become the overall administrator of the said database.* On the other hand, *a DDOS attack in an attempt to disrupt the normal working of a website or an application's server by abnormally increasing the internet traffic on that website or application's network.* On Thursday, reports claimed that the entire database of CoWin, the platform being used by the central government to register people for vaccination against Covid-19, had been allegedly hacked and the data of about nearly 150 million Indians, who had already been vaccinated, had been put up for sale for \$800. *The said leak allegedly contained names, mobile number, Aadhaar card number, location, state and other details of people who had been vaccinated.* The Central government had said the said message, claiming they had the details, "prima facie appeared to be fake". "Our attention has been drawn towards the news circulating on social media about the alleged hacking of CoWin system. In this connection we wish to state that CoWin stores all the vaccination data in

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



a safe and secure digital environment. No CoWin data is shared with any entity outside the CoWin environment,” the government had said. In March, the IT Ministry stepped up its vigil of cyberattacks on Indian firms in the vaccine, logistics, pharmaceutical and power sector. It had then asked companies in these sectors to report “any and all major cybersecurity” incidents to the Ministry and CERT-In.

ODISHA’S TRIBALS FLEE VILLAGE FEARING JAB

Tribals in Odisha’s Rayagada district fled the village after locking up their houses to avoid taking the COVID-19 vaccine. The incident took place at Champakana, under Kolnara block of Rayagada, on Wednesday. The district administration had held an awareness camp, explaining the benefits of inoculation. “However, when our team reached the village with 100 doses for those aged above 45, it did not find anyone available. Four to five villagers present there were not ready to take the jab,” said D. Sailaja, Kolnara medical officer. *Dr. Sailaja said the tribals belonging to the Kandh community were apparently misled by some WhatsApp videos, which predicted death within two years of vaccination.* The population of Champakana is 500. After three hours of persuasion involving the chieftain, three persons came forward for inoculation. “During the drive, we have faced a similar situation in four to five villages. We hope the vaccine hesitancy will disappear,” she said.

Major worry

Hesitancy has been a major issue for district administrations across the State. Last month, the Rayagada district administration had to sit with the Dongria Kondhs, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), for days to make them agree to vaccination. Close to 1,000 Dongria Kondhs have so far been administered the vaccine.

Tough to convince

Similarly, it was difficult to convince Chuktia Bhunjia, another PVTG residing in the Sunabeda plateau of Nuapada district, on vaccination. The tribesmen said they feared they would die soon after getting the jab. Odisha has so far managed to administer the first dose to 9,68,188 people aged between 18 and 44. Only 3,70,095 have received the second dose. While 54,34,038 people aged above 45 have been inoculated, 11,22,935 have been given the second dose.

FREE RICE OFFER BOOSTS VACCINATION DRIVE

An administrative circle in Arunachal Pradesh has scaled up vaccination among those above 45 years of age with a free rice offer. Rumours about COVID-19 vaccines causing impotency and microchips being injected through them have deterred many in the Northeast, specifically those above 45 years, from taking the jab. *Requests and threats have not worked in districts such as Baksa in Assam, which have among the lowest vaccination coverage in India.* Tashi Wangchuk Thongdok, the circle officer of Yazali in Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh, hit upon the idea of giving *20 kg of rice free to each person aged 45-plus who came forward to get inoculated. The offer worked.* More than 50 persons turned up on Monday for vaccination despite heavy rain. “We have been working on various strategies to improve the vaccination coverage in the Yazali circle. We wish to continue giving away free rice until we achieve 100% coverage by June 20,” Mr. Thongdok, a 2016-batch



officer of Arunachal Pradesh Civil Service, said. He thanked two local activists — Taba Nagu and Lich Birbal — for donating the rice for distribution.

BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE CAN REDUCE TRANSMISSION

Most of us in India will agree that there are two large parts to this pandemic: medical science and human behaviour. Universal vaccination will reduce infections, but with vaccine availability currently challenging, 'herd immunity' is still many months, if not years, away. Lack of physical distancing and proper hand washing are among the reasons for daily new infections. But the biggest reason for the surge is that people are wearing masks inconsistently, incorrectly, or not at all. Data from a global survey of COVID-19 knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) produced by the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs show that from July 2020 to March 2021, India saw a 5% drop in mask wearing. In the two-week period starting on March 15, 84% reportedly wore masks. However, the number varied sub-nationally and it was not measured whether the mask wearing was correct or consistent. Nevertheless, this is discouraging. While there will always be a minority who do not believe in the virus, masks or vaccines, a great majority would like to do what it takes to put this pandemic behind us. Relying solely on medical science, especially treatment, takes the agency away from the average people to act.

Channels for communication

With behavioural data and strategic approaches, resources can be more efficiently used in reaching different audience segments with information through the channels they trust. *Here are seven ways, rooted in behavioural science, that we can employ to improve mask wearing and other COVID-19 prevention measures.* First, we all need basic information on why masks are effective in preventing COVID-19 transmission. We also need to know who should wear them, when and where. We need clarity on what types of masks are most effective, how to wear a mask correctly, and when is it important to double mask. The COVID-19 KAP survey shows that scientists and health experts are the most trusted sources of information on COVID-19, followed by the World Health Organization, television, newspapers, radio, and local health workers. These trusted channels should be used together to share basic information. As new information becomes available that is different from, or that adds to, the baseline information that people have, it should be shared with everyone in a comprehensive and timely way. We should not discount or put down people's beliefs or misconceptions, but counter them with credible facts (Limaye, Sauer 2021). Addressing those barriers creatively through expert testimonials, infographics and statistics that explain how masks have prevented infection transmission is important. Second, not everyone has the same information needs. Some don't believe that masks prevent COVID-19 infection whereas some know and agree that masks do prevent infection but don't wear them consistently or correctly for various reasons. Communication to each group of people should be tailored accordingly. Generic messages saying 'wear your mask' can only serve as reminders at best; they will not help someone who, say, only wears a mask when she decides that she is in a risky situation. For that person, the message should convince her that any situation outside the home can pose a COVID-19 risk and that masking up any time you leave your house is critical. Third, we need to communicate the benefits of mask wearing. We need to highlight stories that show how COVID-19 infections are low among communities where mask wearing is high. Sharing testimonials from people who wear masks regularly and explaining how they have managed to avoid getting infected



could help. Making masks a symbol of being cool (for the image-conscious), a sign of being considerate and respectful (for people who have elders and vulnerable people at home), and a badge of being smart (for those who want to protect themselves) could all be ways of reaching out to different kinds of people.

Positive social norm

Fourth, we need to create a positive social norm around mask wearing. People are more likely to practise a behaviour if they believe that everyone else is also doing it too. Each audience segment has its own influencers, whether in their community or in the media. Those influencers should be routinely seen wearing a mask or heard talking about it. Advertisements, messages and visuals all positively reinforce mask wearing. Fifth, we need to enforce correct and consistent mask wearing. Many people do not follow proper masking behaviour because there is no consequence for their inaction. We rely only on the police to enforce mask wearing. While that is needed, we should all take collective responsibility. We need language that shows us how to politely tell an unmasked or poorly masked community member to wear a mask. If each of us can influence the people around us, the positive multiplier effect of wearing masks will be significant in curbing infections. Sixth, we need compassionate leadership. Leaders, at every level, can play a positive or negative role in influencing our behaviour. From the head of a family to the head of a country, leaders have to lead with empathy, and build and hold the trust of the people they lead. Religion, politics and profit have no role when we are in such a dire situation. These leaders should themselves consistently convey and enact positive behaviours like mask wearing and vaccinations.

The role of media

Seventh, we need responsible media. If fear of the threat (COVID-19 in this case) is stronger than our perception that we can do something about it, we will ignore the threat rather than trying to address it (EPPM, Witte et al. 1992). We look to the media for brave and honest reporting and there have been some great examples of that during the pandemic. However, when many channels sow more panic than positivity, the audience grows numb. People feel that there may be no point in them doing anything if it is all doom and gloom anyway. In their helplessness, people indiscriminately share information, misinformation and disinformation on social media. We need sections of the media to hold themselves to a high standard and report on much more than just burning pyres, struggling hospitals, the oxygen crisis and vaccine and drug shortages. When we see uplifting and inspiring stories of prevention efforts, ideas and innovations to promote masking, distancing and vaccination, we will feel inspired to do our bit for prevention. If we want to finish this year being able to celebrate festivals, hug our loved ones and enjoy a real holiday, we need to invest in a comprehensive, behavioural approach to address COVID-19 behaviour. While no expense is being spared in engaging the best scientific experts from around the world to address questions and explain the pandemic, the human behavioural aspect has only been addressed in an ad hoc manner. Understanding, predicting and shaping human behaviour is a science too. Indeed, it is the less expensive way of digging ourselves out of the hole we are currently in.



ADOPTION ISSUE

Disasters may bring out the innate generosity of people, but sometimes even well-intentioned initiatives may go wrong. Many believe that children orphaned by calamities are free for adoption and that growing with well-off adoptive parents will give them a shot at a better life than they can get from impoverished surviving relatives. However, adoption can be an option only when the children's safety and welfare can be ensured. *By ordering that no adoption of children orphaned since last year should be permitted contrary to the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, the Supreme Court has made one more benign intervention to mitigate the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.* It had earlier passed various orders on the economic and health aspects of the pandemic, including those aimed at the protection of migrant workers, prisoners and jail staff and the people at large. When its attention was drawn to advertisements and messages inviting people to adopt children who have lost one or both parents to COVID-19, the court warned that *no such adoption could be permitted without the involvement of the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA).* It is important that the order is adhered to, as past experience shows that the danger of children falling victim to traffickers under the guise of adoption is ever-present. *Even when they reach the hands of genuine adoptive parents, there is a possibility that they will be uprooted out of their social and cultural milieu through inter-country adoptions without the option of growing up with a relative or adoptive parents closer home being explored.* Many may recall that following the *December 2004 tsunami*, there were ill-advised campaigns calling upon the people to adopt children rendered orphans in several Asian countries. It took a while for some affected countries to wake up to the reality that lax enforcement of adoption rules may have led to child trafficking in some cases. In the present situation, it appears that the Union government and the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights are quite alive to the problem. The NCPCR is collecting details of children affected by the pandemic from all State governments and the administration of Union Territories. It has drawn the Supreme Court's attention to public announcements by some unscrupulous agencies inviting interested people to adopt the children and also disclosing the children's identities. The court's order asking all authorities to prevent illegal adoptions and fund-collection in the names of the affected children came in response to this. The court has also passed orders for the continuance of the children's education and other steps to coordinate the implementation of schemes in their favour. These orders are a necessary reminder to the authorities that they have a special responsibility to protect the interests and welfare of children in times like this.

POEM ON BODIES IN GANGA: GUJARAT SAHITYA AKADEMI SEES 'ANARCHY', 'LITERARY NAXALS'

An editorial in the June edition of Gujarat Sahitya Akademi's official publication, Shabdashrushti, has hit out at a poem by Gujarati poet Parul Khakhar on the bodies of suspected Covid victims found floating in the Ganga in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar for spreading "anarchy". It also called those who discussed or circulated it "literary Naxals". The Akademi's chairman, Vishnu Pandya, confirmed writing the editorial. While it does not mention Shav Vahini Ganga specifically, he also confirmed that he meant the poem, which has drawn much praise and been translated into several languages. Describing the poem as "pointless angst expressed in a state of agitation", the editorial says the words had been "misused by forces who are anti-Centre and anti-Centre's nationalist ideologies". "The said poem has been used as a shoulder to fire from by such elements who have started a



conspiracy, whose commitment is not to India but to something else, who are Leftist, so-called liberals, to whom nobody pays any attention... Such people want to quickly spread chaos in India and create anarchy... They are active on all fronts and in the same way they have jumped into literature with dirty intentions. The purpose of these literary Naxals is to influence a section of people who would relate their own grief and happiness to this (the poem).” While in Gujarati, the editorial uses the term “literary naxals”. The editorial goes on to note that Khakhar’s earlier works had been published by the Akademi, and she “ would be welcomed by Gujarati readers if she wrote some good pieces in the future”. Pandya told The Indian Express: “There is no essence of poetry in it (Shav Vahini Ganga) and neither it is the proper way to pen down poetry. This could be merely venting out one’s anger or frustration, and it is being misused by liberals, anti-Modi, anti-BJP and anti-Sangh (RSS) elements.” He added that he had no “personal grudge” against Khakhar. “But this is not a poem and several elements are using it as a weapon for social fragmentation...” Khakhar had posted the 14-line poem on her Facebook page on May 11. Despite repeated attempts Wednesday, she could not be contacted.

PROTECT LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY: HC

Empathising with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and such others' (LGBTQIA+) community, the Madras High Court on Monday directed the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment to enlist non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that could provide counselling, monetary support, legal assistance and protection to them until a law could be enacted to protect them. Justice N. Anand Venkatesh ordered that the Ministry upload the details of the NGOs, along with their address, contact details and the services provided by them, on its website within eight weeks and revise the information periodically. Any person who faced an issue because he/she/they belonged to the LGBTQIA+ community could approach any of the enlisted NGOs for safeguarding their rights, the judge said. *It was also ordered that the NGOs, in consultation with the Ministry, should maintain confidential records of such persons who approached them and the aggregate data be submitted to the Ministry bi-annually.* Making it clear that the victims should be provided need-based relief, the court said the NGOs should also coordinate with the police with respect to offences committed against them. The court further ordered that appropriate changes be made to the existing government short stay homes, anganwadi shelters, Garima Greh (shelter home for transgender persons) for providing accommodation, food, medical care and recreational facilities to those from the community in need of such assistance. The Ministry was directed to create the infrastructural requirements within 12 weeks. *Sensitisation programmes could also be conducted for stakeholders, including police and prison authorities, judges, physical and mental health professionals, educational institutions, health workers, public and private workplaces,* the judge said and directed Additional-Solicitor General R. Sankaranarayanan and Advocate-General R. Shunmugasundaram to file their compliance reports by August 31. The interim orders were passed on a writ petition filed by two young women who had fled from Madurai to Chennai because their parents were opposed to their relationship. After directing the Madurai police to keep their hands off the issue, Justice Venkatesh decided to pen down an elaborate judgment on the subject at the request of the petitioners’ counsel, S. Manuraj.



SEDITION CASE AGAINST LAKSHADWEEP ACTIVIST AISHA SULTANA FOR CALLING ADMINISTRATOR PATEL 'BIO-WEAPON'

Lakshadweep police on Thursday registered a case of sedition against local resident and film activist Aisha Sultana for calling the Union Territory's administrator, Praful K Patel, a bio-weapon being used by the Centre on the island's people. *The case was registered at Kavaratti police station, based on a complaint from BJP's Lakshadweep unit president C Abdul Khader Haji, under Section 124 A of IPC (sedition). Khader's complaint cited a recent debate on Malayalam channel 'MediaOne TV' on the ongoing controversial reforms in Lakshadweep, in which Aisha had purportedly said that the Centre was using Praful Patel as a 'bio-weapon' on the islands.* The remarks had sparked protests from the BJP's Lakshadweep unit. BJP workers had moved complaints against Aisha in Kerala as well. A film professional, Aisha has been in the forefront of campaigns against the reforms and proposed legislation, which have taken Lakshadweep and Kerala by storm. Justifying her controversial reference to the administrator, Aisha posted on Facebook, "I had used the word bio-weapon in the TV channel debate. I have felt Patel as well as his policies [have acted] as a bio-weapon. It was through Patel and his entourage that Covid-19 spread in Lakshadweep. I have compared Patel as a bioweapon, not the government or the country.... You should understand. What else should I call him..." *Lakshadweep Sahitya Pravarthaka Sangam on Thursday extended support to Aisha.* "It is not proper to depict her as anti-national. She had reacted against the inhumane approach of the administrator. It was Patel's interventions that made Lakshadweep a Covid-affected area. The cultural community in Lakshadweep would stand with her," the organisation's spokesperson, K Bahir, said. While the UT Administration has said Patel's controversial proposals are aimed at ensuring safety and well-being of residents along with promoting the islands as a tourist destination on par with Maldives, residents view them as ripping the social and cultural fabric of the islands.

MEDIA AND SEDITION

It has long been recognised that strident criticism of government will not amount to an attempt to excite disaffection and disloyalty towards government. Yet, the archaic and colonial view that an intemperate attack on an incumbent ruler should be met with fierce prosecution for sedition prevails among many in power even today. In a significant judgment, the Supreme Court has quashed a criminal case registered in Himachal Pradesh against journalist Vinod Dua by invoking the narrowed-down meaning of what constitutes an offence under Section 124A of the IPC, the provision for sedition, set out in *Kedar Nath Singh (1962)*. *Every journalist, the Court has ruled, is entitled to the protection of that judgment, which said "comments, however strongly worded, expressing disapprobation of actions of the Government, without exciting those feelings which generate the inclination to cause public disorder by acts of violence, would not be penal".* The law on sedition has come a long way from the formulation of British-era judges Comer Petheram and Arthur Strachey that "feelings of disaffection" towards the government connote "absence of affection... hatred, enmity, dislike, hostility... and every form of ill-will towards the government" *to the more rational reading that only a pernicious tendency to create public disorder would be an offence.* Yet, it appears that every generation needs a judicial iteration of this principle, and that is because of two reasons: *that Section 124A remains on the statute book and that powerful political figures and their minions are unable to take criticism in their stride. Enacted to put down journalistic*



criticism of the colonial administration from an increasingly vocal press, Section 124A is essentially a provision which seeks to protect the government's institutional vanity from disapprobation using the interests of public order and security of the state as a fig leaf. It has often been criticised for being vague and “overbroad”. Its use of terms such as “bringing (government) into hatred or contempt” and “disloyalty and all feelings of enmity” continues to help the police to invoke it whenever there is either strong criticism or critical depiction of unresponsive or insensitive rulers. The explanation that disapproval of government actions or measures with a view to altering them by lawful means will not amount to an offence is not enough to restrain the authorities from prosecution. The mischief lies in the latitude given to the police by an insecure political leadership to come down on the government's adversaries. It is unfortunate that the Bench did not go into the aspect of political motivation behind the police registering FIRs without checking if the required ingredient of incitement to violence is present. The Court's verdict brightens the hope that the section's validity will be re-examined. For now, it is a blow for free speech and media freedom.

TELANGANA HIGH COURT TO GET 18 MORE JUDGES

The Telangana High Court will see one of the biggest hikes in judicial strength across the country in a long time after Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana took up with the Prime Minister and the Union Law Minister the High Court's two-year-long pending request for more judges to tackle an alarming increase in its case pendency. The High Court will witness a 75% increase in its sanctioned Bench strength with immediate effect. This would take the number of judges in the High Court from 24 to 42. The High Court's request for more judges had been lying with the Centre since February 2019 even as its case backlog climbed to 2.37 lakh. *The proposal for a hike in the sanctioned Bench strength was first sent to the Union Law Minister by the then Chief Justice of the High Court in 2019. Though the request was endorsed by the Chief Minister and the Governor, the Centre chose to keep it “in abeyance”.*

Assurance given

The issue had remained dormant until CJI Ramana, along with other concerns of the judiciary, took it up with the Prime Minister and the Law Minister soon after assuming office as top judge in April. *They had both, in turn, agreed to “get the matters examined expeditiously”.* However, this assurance did not stop the CJI from writing to the Law Minister on May 27 about the High Court's still unresolved request. *Chief Justice Ramana observed that the High Court's request was reasonable and fully endorsed by the Telangana Chief Minister. The High Court desperately needed more judges for faster delivery of justice. The request has been pending for over two years. The CJI also affirmed that the necessary infrastructure was already in place to accommodate 42 judges.* The Law Ministry responded this time by swinging into action, concurring with the CJI to enhance the sanctioned Bench strength in the High Court. The Ministry conveyed its decision to the CJI on June 7. The CJI has given his requisite final approval to the proposed hike on June 8. The path is clear for the Ministry to notify the hike.



SC PANEL RELEASES DRAFT RULES FOR LIVESTREAMING COURT PROCEEDINGS

Taking a step closer to live-telecasting of court proceedings, the e-committee of the Supreme Court headed by Justice DY Chandrachud Monday released draft model rules and invited suggestions from stakeholders. *According to the draft rules, all proceedings in high courts can be telecast except for cases relating to matrimonial disputes, gender-based violence, those involving minors and “cases, which in the opinion of the Bench, may provoke enmity amongst communities likely to result in a breach of law and order”.* “The final decision as to whether or not to allow the Live-streaming of the Proceedings or any portion thereof will be of the Bench, however, *the decision of the Bench will be guided by the principle of an open and transparent judicial process. The decision of the Bench shall not be justiciable,” the model rules state. The rules also allow for objections to be filed against livestreaming in specific cases at the stage of filing of the case or at a later stage.* With at least five cameras in courts that will be positioned at different angles, a dedicated control room and a viewing area to avoid overcrowding of courts, the draft rules allow for archiving of court proceedings for six months. However, discussion amongst judges, notes made by judges during hearings or communication between the advocate and her client will neither be telecast live nor archived, the rules said. *The rules also prohibit recording or sharing the telecast on media platforms, including social media and messaging platforms, unless authorised by the court. “The use of authorised recordings in their original form may be permitted by the court, inter-alia to disseminate news and for training, academic and educational purposes. Authorised recordings handed over for the aforesaid purposes shall not be further edited or processed.* Such Recordings will not be used for commercial, promotional purposes or advertising in any form. The draft model rules were finalised last month after a sub-committee comprising of judges from Delhi, Bombay, Madras and Karnataka High Courts held extensive deliberations. Last week, *Karnataka High Court became the second high court in the country after the Gujarat HC to livestream its proceedings on YouTube.* Two petitions seeking live-streaming of court proceedings are currently being heard in the Allahabad High Court and the Madhya Pradesh High Court.

NPR SLIPS VALID FOR LONG-TERM VISAS: MHA

Migrants belonging to six non-Muslim minority communities from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, while applying for long-term visas (LTVs), can also produce National Population Register (NPR) enrolment slips as proof of the duration of their stay in India, according to a Union Home Ministry manual. The NPR number is part of an illustrative list of more than 10 documents that could be provided to apply for an LTV, which is a precursor to acquiring Indian citizenship either by naturalisation or registration under Section 5 and 6 of the Citizenship Act, 1955, for the six communities — Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis, Christians and Buddhists — from the three countries. The special provision of LTVs for Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan and Afghanistan was first made in 2011. The NPR was first compiled in 2010 simultaneously with the decadal Census exercise and later updated in 2015. It already has a database of 119 crore residents. The NPR is a register of usual residents linked with location particulars down to the village level and is updated periodically “to incorporate the changes due to birth, death and migration”. *The next phase of the NPR, expected to include contentious questions on date and place of birth of father and mother, last place of residence and mother tongue, was to be simultaneously updated with the 2021 House Listing and Housing Census that has been indefinitely postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.* According



to detailed guidelines issued by the Home Ministry on documents that can be produced to prove the date of entry of the minority community migrants currently in India, the “slip issued by the Census enumerators” during the survey for the preparation of the NPR prior to December 31, 2014, can be provided. Migrants who can apply for LTVs will have to produce any document issued by the governments of Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan “clearly showing the religion of the applicant like school certificate etc. to establish that the applicant is from a minority community”, the guidelines said. *As reported, the Home Ministry has been sensitising the States about the relevant provisions under the Citizenship Act, 1955, which could help the six communities who entered India on legal documents before 2014 and are here on LTVs, expedite their citizenship applications.* Ministry officials assert that the awareness drive is not related to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA), which is intended to benefit undocumented migrants from the six groups who entered India before the 2014 cut-off date. The CAA is yet to be implemented.

CENTRE UNLIKELY TO ALLOW RETURN OF FOUR KERALA WOMEN, WHO JOINED IS

The four Indian women lodged in an Afghanistan prison, who accompanied their husbands to join the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), are unlikely to be allowed to return to the country, a senior government official said. The women, all from Kerala, travelled to Nangarhar in Afghanistan between 2016 and 2018. *Their husbands were killed in different attacks in Afghanistan. The women were among thousands of Islamic State fighters and affiliates who surrendered before the Afghanistan authorities in the months of November and December 2019.* On April 27, Ahmad Zia Saraj, the head of the National Directorate of Security, told reporters in Kabul that 408 members of the Islamic State from 13 countries are lodged in Afghanistan prisons. This included four Indians, 16 Chinese, 299 Pakistanis, two Bangladeshis, and two from the Maldives, among others. Mr. Saraj also said the Afghanistan government had begun talks with the 13 countries to deport the prisoners. While Afghan officials in Delhi declined to comment, senior officials in Kabul indicated that they awaited word from India on what it proposes to do. A source, however, said there was no consensus among various government agencies on the return of the four women and it was unlikely that they would be allowed to come back. The women, accompanied by their children, were interviewed by Indian security agencies in Kabul in December 2019, a month after their surrender. *In March 2020, Stratnewsglobal.com, a strategic affairs website, published a video of the interrogation of the three women. The four women who appeared in the video were identified as Sonia Sebastian, alias Ayisha; Reffeala; Merrin Jacob, alias Mariyam; and Nimisha, alias Fathima Isa. A senior official added that there were two other Indian women and a man who had surrendered to the authorities.*

‘Highly radicalised’

“One line of thought was to allow them to come back and become approvers in the cases here. However, their interview revealed that they are highly radicalised. The France model may be followed and the Afghanistan authorities can be requested to put them on trial there,” said the official. The Interpol has issued red notices against the women on India’s request. The National Investigation Agency (NIA) had filed a chargesheet in 2017 after a group of 21 men and women from Kerala, including Sebastian, left India in 2016 in batches to join the ISKP in Afghanistan. They crossed over to Afghanistan on foot from Iran. The NIA said Sebastian, from Kasargod in Kerala, had left India on May 31, 2016, with her husband, Abdul Rashid Abdulla, from Mumbai airport.



The agency said, *"The couple held secret classes in support of IS and jihad, as propagated by it, during last part of Ramadan."* Merrin Jacob alias Mariyam was married to Bestin Vincent, a resident of Palakkad. Both escaped to Afghanistan in 2016 to live in the IS controlled territory. The couple converted to Islam after their marriage and Vincent assumed the identity of Yahya. Vincent was later killed in Afghanistan. Vincent's brother Bexon and his wife, Nimisha alias Fathima, who also converted to Islam had also escaped to Afghanistan with them. Reffeala was married to Ijas Kallukettiya Purayil, 37, a physician from Kasargod, who was likely one of the IS terrorists who stormed a prison in Eastern Afghanistan's Jalalabad in August 2020. Around 30 persons were killed in the attack. A June 1, *United Nations Security Council report said the ISKP "remains diminished from its zenith, following successive military setbacks that began in Jowzjan in summer 2018." "However, since June 2020, it has had an ambitious new leader, Shahab al-Muhajir and it remains active and dangerous" adding that the territorial losses have affected the group's ability to recruit and generate new funding but it is assessed to retain a core group of approximately 1,500 to 2,200 fighters in small areas of Kunar and Nangarhar Provinces.*

77 attacks

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) recorded 77 attacks claimed by ISKP during the first four months of 2021. Mainly comprising defectors from Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), the Wilayat Khorasan of Islamic State in Afghanistan came into existence in 2015. Senior government officials however maintain that ISKP is run by Pakistan's Inter State Intelligence.

THE ROPE OF FEDERALISM AND AN UNWANTED TUG-OF-WAR

The Centre-West Bengal controversy on the conduct of Bengal's former Chief Secretary, Alapan Bandyopadhyay in the final days of his tenure, in May, has thrown up several political and administrative issues that deserve our attention for the future health of our federal polity. In the overall context, there are two elements which need to be kept in mind while discussing this subject. First, *India is a 'union of states' and in this union, the State governments are not subordinate agencies of the central government.* There are, no doubt, matters enunciated in our Constitution, where the Centre's decisions have primacy over those of the State governments, but this does not extend to holding of meetings, even if these are called by the Prime Minister. *A State's functionaries — both political and administrative — are requested or advised to attend such meetings and this necessitates courtesy and consideration on the part of both sides.* It is possible that due to the no-holds-barred electoral campaigns in the recently held Assembly elections, which included West Bengal, these considerations were given a go-by; the result is an unseemly controversy which is best avoided for healthy Centre-State relations.

Relief and the third tier

Second, the meeting that became a flashpoint was the one called by the Prime Minister on May 28 to review cyclone relief work — in connection with cyclone Yaas — in West Bengal. The allegation is that Mr. Bandyopadhyay reached the meeting late and then left abruptly along with West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, to visit the cyclone-affected areas in her State. In real life, most relief and rehabilitation work in the event of a natural calamity or management of a disaster is of a local nature and is carried out by the district, sub-divisional and village level officials working under the State governments. *Over time, the States have conceded space to the Centre for disaster*



management for getting financial, technical and logistical support. Even then, the comprehensive framework under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 operates mainly at the State, district and local levels. The conduct of Mr. Bandyopadhyay, an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, must be seen in this overall context along with the central government's reactions which together raise issues regarding the norms of civil service conduct, political and administrative arrogance and revengeful behaviour. New Delhi has sent show-cause notices and a charge sheet for Mr. Bandyopadhyay's failure in fully and properly participating in the meeting called by the Prime Minister in West Bengal for cyclone relief review. He has since replied to the Centre.

The services and fine balance

The All-India Services, that includes the IAS, were conceived by the makers of our Constitution to provide uniformity and high standards of public service in both the Centre and the States, and to provide a measure of administrative unity in our diverse and plural society. The architecture has been exquisitely designed. *To ensure quality and as a measure of convenience, IAS officers are recruited by the Union Public Service Commission and formally appointed by the President of India. But they are ultimately borne in State cadres which makes them subject to the control of the respective State governments as well, especially when they are in the employment of their States.* To that extent their position is somewhat different from that of the central services who go through similar recruitment procedures but are under the Centre's total control. *The IAS officers work for the central government on "deputation" from their respective State cadres and during their central deputation, their loyalty is of course to the central government. IAS officers will face acute trust-deficit, if while working for a State government, they show preferential allegiance or loyalty to central government functionaries by reason of the fact that they were initially appointed by the President of India.*

High-handed approach

As a measure of the vindictive assertion of its rights and power, Mr. Bandyopadhyay was initially called to the Centre on 'deputation' and asked to report in New Delhi on the day he was superannuate. It is a different matter that he chose to retire on that day instead of availing himself of the three-month extension given to him earlier. Several commentators have pointed out that the "concurrence" of the relevant State government is required before an officer of its cadre is deputed to the Centre. Also, there must be prior consultation between the Centre and the State for the latter's viewpoint to be overruled. The Central government did not exactly cover itself with glory by violating these requirements. Further, *action has been initiated against Mr. Bandyopadhyay under Section 51(b) of the Disaster Management Act for failing to comply with the Centre's direction to attend the review meeting taken by the Prime Minister.* This is an absurd interpretation of the provision that is meant to deal with cases of defiance of the lawful orders or action of the competent authorities (handling disaster management) under the Act. Besides, Mr. Bandyopadhyay was with the Chief Minister, his administrative boss. *It is obvious that in the performance of his official duties, an All-India service officer, or any officer for that matter, will have to act under the direction of his official superior. Obviously, Mr. Bandyopadhyay listened to his boss; this is what it should be when IAS officers work for a State government or any other government; otherwise, there will be chaos and indiscipline in administration.* It is very unfortunate that for some inexplicable reasons, a mountain has been made of a molehill, as the cliché goes. *In these*



circumstances one misses the sagacity, wisdom and sophistication of some of our tall political leaders who steered the destiny of our nation in the past.

LADAKH RESERVES ALL JOBS FOR REGION RESIDENTS

All jobs in the Union Territory (UT) of Ladakh have been reserved for the residents of the region, according to an order issued on Tuesday. *“No person shall be qualified for appointment to the service unless the person is a resident of the UT of Ladakh,”* reads the order issued by Lieutenant-Governor R.K. Mathur. *The new recruitment rules are mentioned in the Clause 11 of the Union Territory of Ladakh Employment (Subordinate) Service Recruitment Rules, 2021. The move has met a long-pending demand of the people of Ladakh, after it was carved out as a UT on August 5, 2019.* “It was our demand since the bifurcation of J&K almost two years ago. It’s a welcome move,” Chief Executive Councillor, Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council-Kargil, Feroz Ahmed Khan told The Hindu. He said the order has come very late as many unemployed youths have crossed the upper age limit in the past two years. “We will also demand age relaxation for fresh recruitments,” Mr. Khan said. He said there should be similar laws on land too. “At present, the State land of the UT comes under twin elected councils, Leh and Kargil. However, private land does not have any protection.” Mr. Khan said till the Centre meets the demand of the Sixth Schedule for the UT, it should also grant legislative powers to the twin councils.

BUILDING TRUST IN GOVERNANCE (VIRAJ TYAGI - CEO, EGOV FOUNDATION)

Historically, Indians have had low social trust and have looked to authorities to enforce compliance. But over the last decade, India has witnessed a big and welcome change in social trust. Indians are increasingly comfortable sending money to a phone number from their phones (UPI, PayTM) and getting into taxis driven by strangers (Ola, Uber).

How trust grows

This trust is experiential: it is built as consumers get consistent information and predictability, over time, every time. When we book an Ola cab, we get an OTP every time, we can track our cab every time, the OTP works every time we give it to the driver, and so on. Of course, the actual delivery of service needs to live up to expectations for trust to be built, and there can be the occasional glitch. Still, having visibility of interactions directly (without having to go ask someone to look up a request status or complaint number) and a mechanism to hold the service provider accountable is fundamental to building trust. In our experience in working in the area of service delivery by urban local bodies, we find that citizens’ default position is low trust. Their past experiences, where requests have not been responded to, or have vanished into the ether, adds to this sense of apprehension. Corruption makes this worse. The worst is paying a bribe and still not being served. We also observe power imbalance: citizens feel that they do not have any recourse. These frictional interactions pile up over time. They lead to apathy, disengagement, a ‘nothing will happen’ mindset. The good news is that when government service delivery manifests this new currency of social trust — visibility of status, alerts at key stages, knowing who is accountable, ways to escalate the complaint, ways to rate or give feedback — the confidence of citizens starts to grow. Over time, the trust deficit is reversed, and citizen participation increases. In Andhra Pradesh, we at eGov Foundation partnered with the government to roll out a citizen services



delivery platform (PuraSeva) in all 110 towns and cities. We saw the positive impact of this platform on social trust. One of the areas reformed was the complaints process: multiple channels to lodge complaints, prompt acknowledgment with a reference number assigned, SMS notifications providing an expected completion date and responsible person, and notifications of each status change. Finally, citizens are invited to provide a star rating upon completion. Moreover, citizens and civil society groups can view the performance data for their localities through open dashboards.

Encouraging results

The results have been encouraging. The number of complaints has increased — not because problems have gone up, but because citizens trust the government to resolve them. The speed of resolution and the percentage of complaints resolved within the designated time have both increased sharply. Perhaps the best indicator of this new approach is that if a citizen does not provide a star rating, they will get a call from the local government, asking them to rate their satisfaction with the services received. When the government seeks and responds to feedback, it is rewarded with trust. *When a digital system is designed, its attention to the small things creates these trust-building environments.* These include what the user sees when they first log in, how many steps they are being asked to take, what feedback or signal they are receiving at each step, and so on. Each interaction is an occasion to send a trust signal, to raise low expectations and meet new, high ones. This is how the ‘nothing will happen’ mindset gets replaced with the confidence that yes, something will be done.

13 INMATES IN AGRA JAIL MOVE APEX COURT FOR FREEDOM, DIGNITY

Thirteen persons who started their 14 to 22 year stretches in the Agra Central Jail as juveniles have moved the Supreme Court for their freedom and dignity. The writ petition, filed through advocate Rishi Malhotra, highlighted the “very unfortunate and sorry state of affairs” in Uttar Pradesh, where many prisoners allegedly continued to languish in jail despite proving their claim of juvenility. *An accused can raise a claim of juvenility at any stage of a criminal trial or even any time after his conviction and sentence for a crime. If the claim is found true, the court should maintain the conviction, but set aside the sentence and forward the case to the Juvenile Justice Board. A juvenile can be punished only for a maximum period of three years.*

‘Clear rulings’

According to the petition, there were “clear and unchallenged rulings” from the Juvenile Justice Board declaring the 13 prisoners as juveniles at the time of the commission of their crimes. “Yet, no steps have been taken to release them forthwith. The miseries are further compounded by the fact that these petitioners who are languishing in Agra Central Jail have already undergone judicial incarceration for periods ranging from 14 to 22 years,” the petition said. *Mr. Malhotra said they had spent years in “hardcore jails” among “hardcore criminals”. “This completely negates the purpose and objects of the Juvenile Justice Act,”* the petition said. *The petition argued that a delay in raising the ground of juvenility could not be a reason to let them languish behind bars for years.* “The delay in raising the claim of juvenility cannot be a ground for the rejection of such a claim. The claim of juvenility can be raised in appeal, even if not pressed before the trial court, and can be raised for the first time before the Supreme Court, though not pressed before the trial court and



in the appellate court,” the petition said, referring to a 2012 judgment of the apex court on the issue.

BJP RECEIVED ₹786 CRORE IN DONATIONS

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) received *₹785.77 crore in donations from companies and individuals in 2019-20, over five times as much as the contributions to the Congress, according to the party's annual contribution report submitted to the Election Commission of India (ECI)*. The party's contribution report for 2019-20, though filed on February 12, was published by the ECI on Tuesday night. *The report includes all contributions of ₹20,000 or more made via cheque and bank transfer. Out of the total ₹785.77 crore in contributions declared by the party, ₹217.75 crore came from the Prudent Electoral Trust, which in turn received funds from DLF Ltd., Bharti Airtel Ltd., GMR Airport Developers, and other major corporate houses.* The BJP also received ₹45.95 crore from the Jankalyan Electoral Trust, which received funds from companies of the JSW Group, including JSW Cement, JSW Energy and JSW Energy. Samaj Electoral Trust and AB General Electoral Trust, which was funded by Hindalco Industries Ltd., gave the party ₹3.75 crore and ₹9 crore respectively.

ANUP CHANDRA PANDEY TAKES CHARGE AS EC

Retired IAS officer *Anup Chandra Pandey on Wednesday took charge as Election Commissioner, the Election Commission of India (ECI) said in a statement. Mr. Pandey, a 1984 batch IAS officer of the Uttar Pradesh cadre, joins Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Sushil Chandra and Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar to complete the three-member commission.* He retired as Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh in 2019. “Under his administrative leadership as Chief Secretary, the State successfully organised the Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj and Paravasi Bhartiya at Varnasi Diwas in 2019,” the statement read.

Interest in writing

Mr. Pandey had served in the Defence and Labour and Employment Ministries. “*Mr. Pandey has a keen interest in writing and has authored a book titled Governance in Ancient India, which explores the evolution, nature, scope, functions and all related aspects of ancient Indian Civil Service from the Rig Veda period to 650 AD,*” the ECI said. Mr. Pandey was appointed by the President on Tuesday, filling the vacancy that was created after Mr. Chandra was elevated to the post of CEC upon the completion of then CEC Sunil Arora's term in April.

GOVT. OFFICIALS TARGETED IN PHISHING ATTEMPT

Several government offices, including Defence Ministry officials, were on Wednesday targeted by a malicious web link sent on WhatsApp and SMS, asking them to update their vaccination status. The message asked officials to click on www.covid19india.in to generate a digital certificate of COVID-19 inoculation. The SMS, signed with an abbreviation “MoHFW”, that expands to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare said, “as per directives of MoHFW, Confirm your COVID status on <https://covid19india.in> and generate your vaccination certificate”. An official said that when he clicked on the link, it directed to a page “@gov.in” that resembled the government website mygov.in, and asked to key in the official e-mail and password. An e-mail received by a



Defence Ministry official said that as part of an awareness drive regarding “post vaccination measures to be followed by armed forces” a questionnaire was required to be filled and a Google drive link was shared. Some officials even received phone calls where the caller said he was calling from an Army Hospital and the official need to update the vaccination status on a link being sent on WhatsApp. The officials were sensitised to not click on the link as it appeared to be a phishing attempt to access their official e-mails and correspondence. A considerable part of government offices are still working from home owing to COVID-19 restrictions.

DIRECTIVE WITHDRAWN IN LAKSHADWEEP

In the face of criticism, the Director of Port, Shipping and Navigation in the Lakshadweep administration has quietly withdrawn the order for the deployment of government staff on fishing boats. Director Sachin Sharma also reversed the May 28 order by which the security around ports, jetties, ships and other vessels was raised to level-2 “on the basis of recent intelligence inputs”. The Lakshadweep Government Employees’ Union had recently taken exception to the order asking for government employees to go on board fishing vessels for intelligence collection. The order was also criticised by fishers’ forums. Sources said *maritime security agencies were also peeved with the order, which was interpreted as interfering with their jurisdictional powers.* The June 2 communication was about a security review meeting chaired by an Advisor to the Union Territory Administrator. It said decisions had been taken to deploy government staff on fishing craft, strengthen security measures to monitor local fishing boats, and intensify checking of motorised and passenger vessels. It had also ordered measures for the installation of CCTV cameras at berthing ports and the helibase, and the baggage and passenger checking facility at the Mangalore and Bepore ports. The LDCL had been asked to “inform ship masters to remain vigilant and alert”.

CENTRAL DEPUTATION OF OFFICERS VERY LOW, DOPT TELLS STATES

With the States not nominating enough officers for Central deputation, the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) has shot off a letter to the State governments, cautioning them that not sending enough officers may affect future cadre review proposals. *For instance, Uttar Pradesh has over 500 Indian Administrative Service officers but data show that only 32 IAS officers are presently on Central deputation.* West Bengal has around 280 IAS officers but only 11 are posted with the Central Ministries. Bihar fares better with 32 IAS officers on Central deputation out of 208, whereas 28 out of the 167 IAS officers of the Assam-Meghalaya cadre are serving the Centre. Out of the 241 Gujarat cadre officers, 27 are posted with the Union government. Rajasthan has deputed 13 out of its 247 IAS officers to the Centre. *An official of Uttar Pradesh cadre, however, said it was not that officers were not willing to go on Central deputation but the no-objection clearance was hard to come by. The final clearance is given by the Chief Minister. “Many officers from Uttar Pradesh have applied but they are not getting a clearance,”* said the official. As per norms, States have to depute All India Services (AIS) officers, including Indian Police Service (IPS) officers, to Central government offices and at any point it cannot be more than 40% of the total cadre strength. In a letter to States on June 4, the DoPT has said “the number of nominations received so far has been very minimal and as such the representation of officers from various cadres/ services, especially at the deputy secretary/director level, is extremely low.” The DoPT had sent a similar communication in December 2020 but in the past two years it has not been able to fill vacancies

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at the director and joint secretary level in various Central ministries. Around 40% or 390 CSS posts are at the joint secretary level (more than 19 years experience) and 60% or 540 such posts are at the rank of deputy secretary (nine years) or director rank (14 years of service). "... every cadre is allowed a deputation reserve to ensure that officers have the opportunity to work on deputation including that under the Central Staffing Scheme [CSS], which adds to their experience. The utilisation of this reserve is low and this underutilisation, particularly at the deputy secretary/director level, causes serious gaps in cadre management. This aspect will also be kept in view by the DoPT while considering cadre review proposals, to be received in future. The cadres that have not been forwarding adequate nominations for the CSS at various levels may have to settle for less number of additional senior duty posts in future by way of corresponding reduction," the letter stated.

Age limit

The DoPT has stated that officers nominated for Central government posts should not be more than 54 years. "It is also requested to ensure that the officers who are on the verge of promotion, as may be relevant, during the year are not nominated, often necessitating their early repatriation to avail of promotion in the cadre. It may be ensured that the names of only those officers are forwarded who are likely to remain available under the Central Staffing Scheme for full tenure," it said. Last year, to tide over the crisis, the DoPT changed norms and made it mandatory for IAS officers from 2007 batch onward to mandatorily serve for two years in Central deputation within first 16 years of their service if they wanted to be empanelled for a joint secretary rank in the future. Before any officer of the AIS is called for deputation to the Centre, his or her concurrence is required. The Establishment Officer in the DoPT invites nominations from the State governments. Once the nomination is received, their eligibility is scrutinised by a panel and then an offer list is prepared, traditionally done with the State government on board.

RENGMA NAGAS DEMAND AUTONOMOUS COUNCIL

The Rengma Nagas in Assam have written to Union Home Minister Amit Shah demanding an autonomous district council amid a decision by the Central and the State governments to upgrade the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) into a territorial council. The Rengma Naga Peoples' Council (RNPC), a registered body, said in the memorandum that the Rengmas were the first tribal people in Assam to have encountered the British in 1839, but the existing Rengma Hills was eliminated from the political map of the State and replaced with that of Mikir Hills (now Karbi Anglong) in 1951. Narrating its history, the council said that during the Burmese invasions of Assam in 1816 and 1819, it was the Rengmas who gave shelter to the Ahom refugees. The petition said that the Rengma Hills was partitioned in 1963 between Assam and Nagaland at the time of creation of Nagaland State and the Karbis, who were known as Mikirs till 1976, were the indigeneous tribal people of Mikir Hills. "Thus, the Rengma Hills and Mikir Hills were two separate entities till 1951. Karbis have no history in the Rengma Hills. People who are presently living in Rengma Hills are from Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya. They speak different dialects and do not know Karbi language of Karbi Anglong," the memorandum said. RNPC president K. Solomon Rengma told The Hindu that the government was on the verge of taking a decision without taking them on board and thus they had written to Mr. Shah and Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. "How can they do this? We have been writing to them for many years. The KAAC population is around 12 lakh and the



Karbis constitute only 3 lakh, the remaining are non-Karbis, including the Rengma Nagas, whose population is around 22,000. We are also demanding a separate legislative seat for Rengmas," he said. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland or NSCN (Isak-Muivah), which is in talks with the Centre for a peace deal, said in a statement on Monday that the Rengma issue was one of the important agendas of the "Indo-Naga political talks" and no authority should go far enough to override their interests. More than 3,000 Rengma Nagas were forced to relocate to relief camps in 2013 after several people were killed in a series of attacks following a call given by a Karbi insurgent group.

FARMER PROTESTS INCREASED FIVEFOLD SINCE 2017: CSE REPORT

Apart from the three contentious Central farm laws, procurement and agricultural market price-related failures have contributed to a fivefold increase in major farmers' protests since 2017, according to data collated by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). In 2017, there were 34 major protests across 15 States. *The number has now shot up to 165 protests across 22 States and Union Territories. The CSE's State of Environment in Figures 2021 report records that 12 of these are pan-India protests, including 11 agitations against the three farm reform laws introduced last year. Along with protests against State legislation and inadequate Budget allocations for the agricultural sector, such anti-policy agitations account for 96 major protests across the country. However, large numbers of farmers are also fighting against market failures and demanding fair prices, which have led to 38 major protests. Battles against acquisition of farm land for development projects, including highway and airport construction, are the prime cause of 17 agitations. At least seven agitations have been to demand loan waivers or to protest poor insurance coverage and delayed compensation.* Farmers have gathered at least four times to protest the unavailability or increased prices of farm inputs and infrastructure. The arrests of protesting farm leaders have also led to further stirs. Although Punjab and Haryana farmers have caught the limelight for the recent protests outside Delhi, data shows that the largest number of recent protests have taken place in Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. *The report notes that India now has more farm labourers than landowning farmers and cultivators. This is true in 52% of the country's districts, as well as in all districts of Bihar and Kerala. More than 28 agricultural workers and cultivators end their lives every day. The latest data available shows that 5,957 farmers and an additional 4,324 farm labourers died by suicide in 2019. The CSE has called for better maintenance of agricultural data, noting that 14 States had actually witnessed a deterioration in the quality of their land records. "India is sitting atop a massive time-bomb of agrarian crisis and disquiet, and the clock is ticking away," it said.*

JNU ENTERS LIST OF TOP 1,000 UNIVERSITIES

Jawaharlal Nehru University has entered the top 1,000 of the QS World University rankings for the first time, as its new undergraduate engineering programme now makes it eligible for the rating. It debuted at the 561-570 ranking band in the rankings, which only rate institutions offering both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Overall, there are 22 Indian institutions in the top 1,000 list compared to 21 last year, with the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) in Guwahati, Kanpur, Kharagpur and Madras making major strides in rankings. However, some institutions are still worried that the rankings do not accurately reflect the quality of education in India, as they are largely dependent on international perception factors. IIT Bombay maintained its position as

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the top Indian institution for the fourth consecutive year, although it fell five places in the global rankings to the joint 177th position. IIT Delhi (185th rank) overtook the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore (186th rank), giving India three institutions in the world's top 100. IISc was also declared the world's top research university by the indicator of most citations per faculty member, when adjusted for faculty size. The citations per faculty metric were also key to the 75 rank jump by IIT Guwahati and the 73 rank jump by IIT Kanpur, according to QS regional director Ashwin Fernandes.

Commercial pressure

However, one IIT director, who did not wish to be named, alleged that this year's improvement in scores was simply a manipulation of numbers by the rankings agency, driven by commercial pressures. Of the 35 Indian institutions in the rankings, 20 have improved on academic reputation this year. "Half of the score comes from reputation indicators which are based on perception, rather than any objective methodology. They cannot afford too much unhappiness, or they may face a boycott like the THE [Times Higher Education rankings], so they manipulate the numbers. It does not reflect the quality of Indian education in any real sense," said the director.

HOW PERFORMANCE GRADING INDEX ASSESSES STATES IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

The Education Ministry released the latest edition of the Performance Grading Index or PGI on Sunday. This relatively new index measures the performance of states in school education.

How is PGI worked out?

It assesses states' performance in school education based on data drawn from several sources, including the Unified District Information System for Education Plus, National Achievement Survey, and Mid-Day Meal. States are scored on a total of 1,000 points across 70 parameters, which are grouped under five broad categories: access (eg. enrolment ratio, transition rate and retention rate); governance and management; infrastructure; equity (difference in performance between scheduled caste students and general category students) and learning outcomes (average score in mathematics, science, languages and social science). *States are graded and not ranked to discourage the practice of one improving only at the cost of others, "thereby casting a stigma of underperformance on the latter".* According to the government, the objective is to help the states prioritise areas for intervention in school education. The Education Ministry released the first PGI in 2019 for the reference year 2017-18.

What does the grading system reflect?

The PGI grading system has 10 levels. Level 1 indicates top-notch performance and a score between 951 and 1,000 points. Level II, also known as Grade 1++, indicates a score between 901 and 950. Those with Grade 1+ (or Level III) have scored between 851 and 900. The lowest is Grade VII, and it means a score between 0 and 550 points.

How have states performed this time?

In PGI 2019-20, no state or Union Territory could achieve the highest grade, that is Level I. Even in the 2017-18 and 2018-19 editions, no state had reached Level 1 and *Grade 1++*. *Chandigarh,*



Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Andaman and Nicobar and Kerala have scored more than 90% and obtained Grade 1++ (or Level II), which makes them the best performing states. This is the first time that any state has reached Level II. The top-performing states of Gujarat, Chandigarh, and Kerala in 2018-19 were given Grade 1+ (or Level III), that is, a score between 851 and 900 points. Only the UT of Ladakh has been placed in the lowest grade, that is Grade VII, but that's because it was the first time it was assessed after it was carved out of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019.

How does their performance compare with that in the last two editions of PGI?

A total of 33 States and UTs have improved their total PGI score in 2019-20 as compared to 2018-19, indicating a general upward shift. "For some of the states/UTs, the reason for this improvement has been improvements in their data reporting mechanisms while for some others, the improvements have been in specific domains..." the report states. However, there are still 31 states and UTs placed in Level III (Grade 1) or lower, showing that they still have a lot of ground to cover. The biggest improvement in PGI this year has been shown by Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Punjab, and Arunachal Pradesh. All three have improved their score by 20%.

What are the areas where the states still have to improve?

According to the report, states and UTs mainly need to improve their performance in terms of governance processes. This domain carries several parameters, including teacher availability, teachers training, regular inspection, and availability of finances. "In the domain Governance Processes, there are 24 States/UTs which have scored less than 288 (80% of the maximum possible score). It clearly implies that this is the area many States and UTs must focus upon. The PGI too accords the highest importance to this Domain because compliance with the indicators here will lead to critical structural reforms in areas ranging from monitoring the attendance of teachers to ensuring a transparent recruitment of teachers and principals." It adds, "The second area that requires attention is the Domain for Infrastructure and facilities, where twenty States/UTs have scored less than 120 (80% of maximum possible score in this domain). Two States, Bihar (81) and Meghalaya (87) recorded lowest scores in this domain. This is a cause for concern as a proper school building with adequate facilities is a must to improve the overall quality of school education."

MONSOON MALADY

The monsoon over the greater Mumbai region has come to be characterised by the unsettling annual spectacle of collapsing buildings, and this year is proving to be no different. An unsafe multi-storeyed building in a core area of the city has collapsed on to another, leaving at least 11 people dead and exposing once again, the decrepit base of dwellings in India's much-romanticised economic powerhouse. The disaster has brought in its wake the familiar litany of accusations, of people occupying unsafe and illegal buildings, and civic authorities failing to act in time. Mumbai's Mayor Kishori Pednekar has responded to criticism with a helpless exhortation to the city administration to remove dangerous structures. Going beyond these predictable impulses, the overburdened city needs a time-bound and accountable system of ensuring the safety of its housing stock. Coinciding with this year's monsoon, *the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority identified 21 structures in Mumbai as being extremely dangerous, with an advisory to over 700 occupants to move to transit accommodation, while reconstruction is*



undertaken. Understandably, the occupants are reluctant, since the alternative housing is far away from their education and work locations. This is a conundrum that Maharashtra will have to address, treating it as a crisis that will only be aggravated by changes to monsoon rainfall intensity over time. Coastal Maharashtra sits in the pathway of extreme monsoon weather events, which are forecast to increase in frequency due to ongoing warming of the Arabian Sea. Scientists including those of the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology have proposed, in the context of the deluge a few years ago, that accurate monsoon forecasting over central India, incorporating changes to sea surface temperature, would help governments prepare better to save lives and agriculture. For Mumbai, what this means is to accelerate its repair and rehabilitation programme for weak structures and replace those that cannot be salvaged. The city desperately needs channels for huge volumes of water to flow out, and a plan to create new urban wetlands where feasible to store the precipitation. *A rejuvenated Mithi river — its planned clean-up has been delayed by the COVID-19 crisis — could offer some relief, but more waterbodies are needed. And it will take a mass housing programme to make life safer for the thousands in hovels. A far-sighted plan to shift people from squalid buildings to modern ones is also a health imperative;* such a start must be made with the most dangerous structures. It is also unseemly for political parties to use a disaster such as the one in Malad as a cudgel against the government, considering that Mumbai's civic base lies neglected over the decades regardless of who ruled.

FAIR WIND

If everything aligns, India could see a third consecutive year of surplus rainfall. *The IMD has said that monsoon rains will likely be 101% of the Long Period Average (LPA) of 88 cm. In 2020, it was 109% of the LPA and in 2019, 110%. While the forecast 101% LPA is short of the rainfall received in these years and still within the range of what the IMD considers 'normal' rainfall, it is positive news because the current forecast is 'above normal' rainfall in the core agricultural zone.* This zone includes States where agriculture is significantly rain-fed including Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal. *The IMD's estimate of the distribution of this rainfall also suggests that except for the Northeast, where rainfall is expected to be 'below normal', other regions are expected to get above normal rainfall. A general pattern of the monsoon is that weakened rains over Northeastern India — which has a higher base rainfall than other parts of India — translate into stronger rainfall in Central India. Propitious rain this year is premised on forecasts from Indian and global climate models, veering towards no excess sea-surface temperatures at the Equatorial Pacific conditions. There are also 'negative' IOD (Indian Ocean Dipole) conditions over the Indian Ocean during the monsoon season, meaning warmer water and greater precipitation in the eastern Indian Ocean.* Put together, they mean that these larger climate factors are, as of now, unlikely to have a significant influence over the prevailing monsoon. A good monsoon could aid agriculture which has been among the few bright spots in the Indian economy. Two good years of rains have boosted storage in the key reservoirs. However, *the flip side of a forecast for a bounteous monsoon is the possibility of flash floods, landslides and disease outbreaks. In the last year and before it, the IMD had not, in June, warned about the exceptionally high rains.* While three consecutive years of above normal rain are exceedingly rare, *the IMD itself assigns a 22% probability of it occurring, which is just below the 40% probability of 'normal' rainfall.* India is now moving to a system where medium range forecasts, or expected changes in monsoon or larger weather patterns over two weeks, are better captured by the monsoon models deployed. *These inputs must be used by the Government to better prepare infrastructure in the eventuality that excessive rains can wipe out the potential gains*

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for agriculture. It may also be worthwhile to encourage farmers to sow higher-value crops than only rice via the MSP route. The favourable tidings should not be an excuse to abandon caution.

A HOSPITAL'S MISPLACED PRIORITIES (PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN TEACHES ECONOMICS AT ASHOKA UNIVERSITY, SONIPAT, HARYANA)

A noted botanist of Indian origin working in the United States, Kamaljit Bawa, had expressed an important idea — that our identity is also determined by our geography. *He had gone on to suggest that given the range of life forms found in India due to a variety of climatic zones, we should see biodiversity as part of our identity.* As is only reasonable to expect, *the botanist might have been motivated by the need to preserve his turf at any cost, but, at any rate, he has opened up scope for imagination. That we should think of the biodiversity of India as an aspect of our identity is not just perceptive but also a constructive suggestion, at a time when the ruling dispensation in India is hell-bent on beating the country into a homogenous mass professing Hindutva.* Before Hindutva was sprung upon us, there was a linguistic majoritarianism project highlighted by the concerted effort to impose the Hindi language on all of India. And it would be naive to believe that the duo of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, who are prone to addressing this linguistically diverse country in Hindi alone, are the sole champions of this project. The team of Arvind Kejriwal and his Cabinet colleagues, which runs the Delhi government, has now constituted itself into a suitable B-team.

Intolerant attitude

In a curious case, the GB Pant Hospital, which comes under the Delhi government, issued a notice on June 5: *"A complaint has been received regarding Malayalam language being used for communication in working places in GIPMER. Whereas maximum patient and colleagues do not know this language and feel helpless causing a lot of inconvenience ... it is directed to all Nursing Personnel to use only Hindi and English for communication otherwise serious action will be taken."* The notice was soon revoked after it received a nationwide backlash. It is mind-boggling that language should be the Delhi government's first concern during a raging pandemic. The entire country watched, with sympathy, how Delhi struggled without the most basic health infrastructure during the violent second wave of infections. *It could neither provide adequate oxygen supplies nor prevent the black-marketing of essential drugs. Instead of supporting frontline workers, which includes doctors, nurses and support staff, it chose to shower a section of them with cultural intolerance.* There is a saying in Malayalam that translates to: "Turning on your mother after losing in the bazaar." Its relevance in this context is direct. On March 31, Kerala, *the home of the nurses of GB Pant Hospital, had a COVID-19 case fatality rate that was only a little more than a third of Delhi's, and a death rate that was less than one fourth by comparison (deaths per population). Perhaps the political leadership of the capital has something to learn. Far from being non-compulsory, bedside manner is a necessary qualification for medical workers. It is not negotiable that they should treat their patients with empathy, and language is a part of this human exchange. But it is odd that Malayali-speaking nurses are somehow found deficient in this area in Delhi alone when they have been prized members of the health system in West Asia, Europe and North America for decades now. Ultimately, it is a failure that Delhi finds itself at odds with a section of its health workers. It can surely learn from the treatment of migrant workers in Kerala. A publicly built housing complex for them in Palakkad is called "Apna Ghar" (our home). There is something hypocritical in accepting a person's labour but hating their language.*



DELHI HOSPITAL REVOKES BAN ON MALAYALAM

An order banning the nursing staff of the Govind Ballabh Pant Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research (GIPMER), a Delhi government-run hospital, from speaking in Malayalam in the hospital has been revoked, said its medical director, Anil Agarwal, on Sunday. On Saturday, GIPMER warned the nursing staff of “serious action” if they did not converse in English or Hindi, as per an order issued by the hospital. “The circular which was issued by the Nursing Superintendent, G B Pant Hospital, without any instructions or knowledge of the hospital administration and the Delhi government stands withdrawn with immediate effect,” a new order read. “The order was issued without our knowledge and it has been revoked. The matter is being investigated and strict action will follow,” Dr. Agarwal said. Nurses at the hospital and unions had criticised the ban saying they always spoke to patients in Hindi. “A complaint has been received regarding Malayalam language being used for communication in working places in GIPMER. Whereas maximum patients and colleagues do not know this language and feel helpless causing a lot of inconvenience. So it is directed all nursing personnel to use only Hindi and English for communication otherwise serious action will be taken,” the initial order read. The Action Committee, Delhi Malayali Nurses, in a statement, said they were withdrawing their agitation. The Twitter campaign was also withdrawn.

RECOGNISING SEX WORK AS WORK (T. SUMATHY (A) THAMIZHACHI THANGAPANDIAN - MP, SOUTH CHENNAI PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY)

The pandemic has hit millions of people and caused a great deal of suffering across communities. But there is one community that is especially hard hit and that is sex workers. *Owing to the non-recognition of sex work as “legitimate work”, sex workers have mostly been kept at arm’s length from the government’s relief programmes.* COVID-19 has thus provided more reason to consider a long-pending demand of sex workers in India — decriminalisation of sex work and a guaranteed set of labour rights.

An archaic, regressive view

The legislation governing sex work in India is the *Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act*. The *Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Children Act* was enacted in 1956. Subsequent amendments were made to the law and the name of the Act was changed to Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act. *The legislation penalises acts such as keeping a brothel, soliciting in a public place, living off the earnings of sex work and living with or habitually being in the company of a sex worker.* This Act represents the archaic and regressive view that sex work is morally wrong and that the people involved in it, especially women, never consent to it voluntarily. After all, in popular depiction, entry into sex work is involuntary, forced, and through deception. As a consequence, *it is believed that these women need to be “rescued” and “rehabilitated”, sometimes even without their consent.* While this is a valid argument for minor girls, for many consenting adult sex workers, it has been a problem. This is what has led to the classification of “respectable women” and “non-respectable women”. This view is based on the belief that sex work is “easy” work and no one will or should choose to practise it. It thus perpetuates the prejudice that women who do practise sex work are morally deviant. *The Act has not only criminalised sex work but also further stigmatised and pushed it underground thus leaving sex workers more prone to violence, discrimination and*



harassment. The Act denies an individual their right over their bodies. Moreover, it imposes the will of the state over adults articulating their life choices. It gives no agency to the sex workers to fight against the traffickers and in fact, has made them more susceptible to be harassed by the state officials. *The Act fails to recognise that many women willingly enter into agreements with traffickers, sometimes just to seek a better life as chosen by them. Evidence shows that many women choose to remain in sex work despite opportunities to leave after 'rehabilitation' by the government or non-governmental organisations.*

Labour rights

The Justice Verma Commission had also acknowledged that there is a distinction between women who are trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation and adult, consenting women who are in sex work of their own volition. We must recognise sex work as work and stop ourselves from assigning morality to their work. Adult men, women and transgender persons in sex work have the right to earn by providing sexual services; live with dignity; and remain free from violence, exploitation, stigma and discrimination. It is time we rethink sex work from a labour perspective, where we recognise their work and guarantee them basic labour rights. The judiciary is moving in the direction of recognising sex workers' right to livelihood. *The Supreme Court, in Budhadev Karmaskar v. State of West Bengal (2011), opined that sex workers have a right to dignity.* Parliament must also take a re-look at the existing legislation and do away with the 'victim-rescue-rehabilitation' narrative. During these times of crisis especially, this is all the more important.

UNDER FIRE OVER BIHAR'S POOR SDG INDEX RANK, JD(U) REITERATES SPECIAL STATUS DEMAND

Under fire from the Opposition over Bihar's poor performance in NITI Aayog's recently released *Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) index for 2020-21, the JD(U) has reiterated its demand of special category status for the state. In a special category state, the Centre-state funding of Centrally-sponsored schemes has a ratio of 90:10, unlike a share of 60:40 or 80:20 in other states. Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has been demanding special category status for the state since 2007.* In the latest SDG index report, which uses parameters of health, education, environment and overall human development index, Bihar ranked dead last, prompting RJD chief Lalu Prasad to say that under Nitish, the state has "ranked the top from the bottom". The JD(U), which often showcases Nitish's development agenda, attributed the poor SDG index showing on the state being denied the special category status. Party parliamentary board chairman Upendra Kushwaha tweeted, "Despite shortage of natural resources post Jharkhand being carved out of Bihar and the state often facing natural calamities, Nitish Kumar-led NDA has been trying to speed up development with deft management skills. But with present rate of Bihar's growth, it is not possible to compare it with other states. NITI Aayog's recent report is a proof." Kushwaha also requested Prime Minister Narendra Modi to meet the *JD(U)'s long-pending demand giving the special category status to Bihar and "do justice to people of the state"*. Former CM and HAM(S) chief Jitan Ram Manjhi, an ally of the Nitish government, also lent his support to the demand stating that since the NDA is in power both in Bihar and at the Centre, this was the best opportunity for the state to get special category status. "Despite limited resources, Nitish Kumar has put in his entire energy in improving law and order situation and education. Now, Bihar needs special category state status to improve its basic infrastructure. If Bihar does not get special category status in 'Double engine'



government, it would never get it,” Manjhi said, referring to the NDA governments at both the Centre and the state. Meanwhile, BJP spokesperson Guru Prakash Paswan told The Indian Express, “The NDA government has already committed to more than that (special category status to Bihar) with infrastructure projects comprising of road and connectivity in the state apart from schemes like PMGSY. (The establishment of) an AIIMS and airport in Darbhanga and multiple other projects are set to create opportunities for the people of Bihar. We are committed to the comprehensive development of the state. The focus now should be on securing people from the pandemic.”

THE MAHARASHTRA GOVT'S PROPOSED AMENDMENT FOR PROTECTION OF 'HERITAGE TREES'

The Maharashtra government will make amendments to the Maharashtra (Urban Areas) Protection and Preservation of Trees Act of 1975, to introduce provisions for the protection of 'heritage trees'. The Maharashtra Cabinet also green-lighted the formation of the Maharashtra Tree Authority in local civic bodies and councils which will take all decisions regarding the protection of trees.

What are heritage trees?

Under the proposed amendment, a tree with an estimated age of 50 years or more shall be defined as a heritage tree. *It may belong to specific species, which will be notified from time to time. Experts believe that in addition to the age, the state climate change department (which will be implementing the Tree Act), should also consider a tree's rarity, its botanical, historical, religious, mythological and cultural importance in defining a heritage tree.* The local Tree Authority will have to ensure tree census to be carried out every five years along with counting of heritage trees

How is the age of the tree determined?

The most common method of determining the age of the tree is Dendrochronology – or tree-ring dating also called growth rings. Each year, roughly a tree adds to its girth, the new growth is called a tree ring. By counting the rings of a tree, the age can be determined. However, the process is invasive. To analyse the rings, core samples are extracted using a borer that's screwed into the tree and pulled out, bringing with it a straw-size sample of wood. The hole in the tree is then sealed to prevent disease. The environment department, in consultation with the forest department, will issue guidelines to determine the age of the tree.

Why was the concept of heritage tree introduced?

A heritage tree will get special protection. *Crucially, the tree's age will determine the number of trees to be planted as part of the compensatory plantation – that is anyone cutting a heritage tree will need to plant trees in the same numbers as the cut tree's age. According to the current Compensatory Plantation in the state, one sapling has to be planted for each tree that is cut. In Mumbai, as per the Tree Authority set up in 1976, to help in regulating the felling of trees and providing for the planting of an adequate number of new trees through the Garden Department, the compensation ratios are 1:3. As per the amendment, the number of trees planted will be equal to the age of the heritage tree that is cut. For instance, if a 52-year-old tree is to be felled, then the party felling the tree will have to plant 52 trees in compensation, with each compensatory tree at least 6-8 ft in height at the time of planting.* The organization planting the compensation trees will also



have to ensure the survival of the plantation for seven years and geo-tag the trees. Such plantations can be carried out either in the same plot or a common amenity plot. Through the introduction of a heritage tree, the state environment wants to discourage the cutting of heritage trees.

What is the economic value of the tree?

In case compensatory plantation is not possible, the tree feller has to pay compensation for the economic valuation of the trees being felled. While the state government has not defined the economic value of the tree, experts say that the amount of oxygen that a tree releases into the environment should determine its economic value. *The Supreme Court, in March this year, addressed the issue of the value of trees, beyond the wood/timber cost. In a matter about the felling of trees of ages up to 150 years for Road Over Bridges and road-widening projects in West Bengal, the SC ordered setting up a seven-member expert committee to “prescribe a mechanism for assessment of both intrinsic and instrumental value of the trees...”. To calculate “just and fair compensation...for felling of trees...it is...imperative to make a realistic assessment of the economic value of a tree, which may be permitted to fell, concerning its value to the environment and its longevity, about factors such as the production of oxygen and carbon sequestration, soil conservation, protection of flora/fauna, its role in habitat and ecosystem integrity and any other ecologically relevant factor, distinct from timber/wood,”* the court said. The amendment also has the fine for illegal felling of trees from a maximum of Rs 5,000 to Rs 1 lakh per tree.

Tree Authority formation

The amendments also make room for the formation of the Maharashtra State Tree Authority and also tree authority in local civic bodies and councils. The Tree Authority is tasked with “increasing the tree cover in urban areas and protecting the existing ones.” Experts shall be a part of the local tree authority. Their knowledge and expertise will form the basis of decisions taken up by the authority. *A proposal to cut more than 200 trees of age 5 years or more, will be referred to the state tree authority. The local TA will have to ensure that the project is not sub-divided into smaller parts to keep the number of trees below the defined threshold.* Ensure preparation of a tree plan and should aspire over the years to have 33 per cent green belt in their area.

STUDY MAPS VIDARBHA TIGER CORRIDORS; MOVEMENT FAR BEYOND GUARDED AREAS

In a first-of-its-kind project, radio telemetry has been deployed to identify corridors used by tigers in the Vidarbha landscape, tracking their actual movement — indicating that the animals are moving in a much wider swathe of area outside the protected areas than previously known. Vidarbha has 331 tigers in a forest area of around 26,775 sq km, dissected by 84,202 km of roads, apart from irrigation canals and other projects. *There have been growing instances of man-tiger conflict in the region.* The project, carried out between 2017 and 2020 using radio signals, identified 37,067 sq km, in all, of tiger corridors, further categorised into five classes as per frequency of tiger use — namely very low (10,289 sq km), low (18,727 sq km), medium (5,689 sq km), high (1,418 sq km) and very high (942 sq km). *The investigators, belonging to the Maharashtra Forest Department and Wildlife Institute of India (WII), principally tracked dispersal of 15 sub-adult tigers, including seven females, to identify the corridors. Five of them, which included four females, were from outside the protected areas. Their report says, “It (the tiger movement) extends well beyond forested structural*



corridors modelled by earlier studies. The study shows extensive use of agricultural land by tigers adjoining small fragmented forests and rivers. Tigers in these landscapes were seen pushing the boundaries of human tolerance, ready to accept the risks of exploring a human-dominated landscape. Senior WII scientist Bilal Habib, who was part of the study along with colleague Parag Nigam, says, “We have for the first time mapped actual corridors in the Vidarbha landscape. We now know how and where the tigers move. For example we tracked the epic journey of Walker (as the tiger was dubbed) *over 3,000 km from Tipeswar Sanctuary in Yavatmal district to Dnyanganga Sanctuary in Buldhana district.* The study should help wildlife managers focus exactly where they need to in order to not only provide safe passage to the dispersing tigers but also mitigate the serious man-tiger conflict in Vidarbha.” The report notes, “*The importance of tiger connectivity for wild animals in fragmented landscapes is increasingly being used as a strategy to mitigate the effects of habitat fragmentation, land use dynamic and climate change. However, movement data are yet to be systematically incorporated into assessments and prioritisation of connectivity.* This study uses movement data to quantify habitat use outside PAs (protected areas) and incorporate the same into connectivity modelling.” The report adds that a successful conservation effort should include an array of stakeholders, rather than be seen as just the jurisdiction of the forest management. “The local people, the district administration, local NGOs and various developmental agencies should now work in tandem with the forest management. The findings of this report may provide clues to managers so as to target proactive and pre-emptive management interventions for conflict prevention/mitigation and connectivity conservation.” *The co-authors of the study include Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife) Nitin Kakodkar, WII Director Dhananjai Mohan, National Tiger Conservation Authority Member Secretary S P Yadav and Additional PCCF (Wildlife) B S Hooda.*

WHAT PUTS LIONS AND TIGERS AT CORONAVIRUS RISK?

Neela, 9, a lioness at Chennai’s Vandalur Zoo, died of suspected coronavirus infection last week, having suffered nasal discharge the previous day. Since then, samples of nine lions have tested positive at the National Institute of High Security Animal Diseases at Bhopal. Also last week, a 10-year-old tiger died at Ranchi’s Bhagwan Birsa Biological Park after suffering from fever, zoo sources said. Although a Rapid Antigen Test returned negative, the viscera has been sent to Indian Veterinary Research Institute, Bareilly, while other animals at the zoo are being tested.

So, are lions and tigers particularly vulnerable?

The defining feature of a coronavirus is the spike protein on its surface. The spike protein initiates infection by binding with a host protein, called ACE2 receptor. *Different species express ACE2 to different extents, and this plays a key role in determining how much a species is susceptible to coronavirus infection. In various studies, domestic cats and their big cousins have been found or estimated to express ACE2 more significantly than many other species. Also, there are similarities in the ACE2 of cats and humans.*

What have such studies found?

STUDY: In December last year, a paper in PLOS Computational Biology looked at the ACE2 receptors of 10 different species and compared their affinity for binding with the virus spike protein. The researchers used computer modelling to test this. They also compared the “codon



adaptation index” — which is a measure of how efficiently the virus replicates after entering the cell.

FINDINGS: *The most vulnerable species to coronavirus infection, next to humans, are ferrets, followed by cats and civets.*

STUDY FINDINGS: Last August, a study in PNAS detailed a genomic analysis of the relative coronavirus risks faced by 410 species. *In humans, 25 amino acids of ACE2 are important for the virus to bind with the cell.* The researchers used modelling to evaluate how many of these 25 are found in the ACE2 of other species. The more the matches with the human ACE2, the lower the risk of infection.

FINDINGS: At very high risk are primates such as chimpanzee rhesus macaque. At high risk are species such as blue-eyed black lemur. Cats were found to have a medium risk, while dogs had a low risk.

A study in Frontiers in Veterinary Biology last August looked at tigers. Researchers of the University of Bologna collected tissues from six cats and a tiger and found wide expression of ACE2 in their gastrointestinal tracts. This was more prominent in the cats than in the tiger. There have been other cases of tigers and lions catching coronavirus in zoos: Nadia, then 4, a Malayan tiger at New York's Bronx Zoo, tested positive in April 2020, She is believed to have caught the virus from a zoo employee. Four lions at Barcelona Zoo tested positive in December.

SEIZE THE MONSOON

The farm sector grew by 3.6 per cent even as GDP fell by 7.3 per cent in 2020-21. This standout performance — all previous economic contractions in India were accompanied, if not caused, by droughts — came largely on the back of a good monsoon. That was some consolation amid the havoc wreaked by Covid-19. With the India Meteorological Department forecasting a third consecutive good monsoon this year, it is natural to expect agriculture to deliver the goods yet again. True, the pandemic has spread to rural India, unlike last year. But there is respite even here, with the number of cases declining. *The second wave should hopefully subside by mid-June, when plantings for the kharif season would also take off. Given this prognosis, what should the BJP-led government do for agriculture? One thing it must not do is waste a good monsoon; three in a row is literally manna from heaven. This is the time to make farmers grow more of oilseeds and pulses (both are massively imported and also require less water) and reduce the area under rice and wheat.* Government agencies have procured 54.09 million tonnes (mt) of rice and 41.39 mt wheat from the 2020-21 crops so far, breaking even the previous year's record. *With public stocks of the two cereals at soaring levels of 100.62 mt as on May 1, a firm signal discouraging their cultivation needs to go out. One way to do it is by freezing their minimum support prices (MSP) and raising those for pulses and oilseeds.* But more important is capping procurement of the former — at, say, 10-15 quintals per acre per farmer — and committing to make unlimited MSP purchases of the latter. That links up with yet another favourable factor: Prices. *During the recent rabi marketing season, farmers realised rates for chana (chickpea) and mustard that were close to or higher than their MSPs. Soyabean, groundnut and cotton, too, are currently trading above MSP levels, which should lead farmers to expand their acreages in this kharif season. The government can aid the process of market prices-driven crop diversification by pre-committing to procure these crops at MSP.* Even in



the event of their prices falling below MSP, the quantities bought will be nowhere near those of paddy and wheat. From a nutritional standpoint also, it makes sense to make more pulses and edible oils available through the public distribution system than just wheat and rice at Rs 2-3/kg. India's next Green Revolution should be demand-driven, while meeting not just production, but also nutritional and environmental goals.

THE MURKY SPACE OF 'SOCIAL AUDIO' (THE AUTHORS ARE LAW STUDENTS AT THE FACULTY OF LAW, ALIGARH MUSLIM UNIVERSITY)

Clubhouse, a new social networking app based around audio rooms, surpassed 2 million Android downloads across the world last month. The key feature of the app is the unique medium — audio — through which its users interact. This distinguishes it from well-established social media and messaging platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and YouTube, which employ text, images, video, or a combination of three. In Clubhouse, the concept of old-school text chat rooms is replaced with the immediacy of the human voice. The app neither has any separate texting features, nor the option to create elaborate online profiles, thus keeping the focus purely on audio-based interaction. Besides choosing their interests, users can also join various 'clubs', which are groups of members that share a common interest. After joining, users may get alerts for rooms hosted by such clubs. Clubs can also be used to interact with other people with whom they might share similar interests. A person can even start a club of their own, or 'drop-in' into any room mentioned on the Home or Explore page, as a listener or a speaker during a discussion.

Regulation challenges

The very nature of the app raises a number of questions on privacy and security. Audio rooms are *likely to throw up new challenges* for data regulators, who are yet to find effective ways to regulate traditional social media platforms. Audio-based interactions are *faster and in real time*, mirroring real-life far closely than text-based interactions. Hence, *traditional methods of content moderation may not work here*. Further, on an app like Clubhouse, cyberbullying and trolling, driven by sexism, racism and communalism, can be even more damaging. *The app allows a person to join any room that their friends are a part of, which may allow anyone to 'stalk' a person as they move from room to room; the app even sends notifications to their followers.* The experience on Clubhouse, therefore, involves constant hyper-awareness about how every action is being broadcast to followers. This is in contrast to popular platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and others, which, for all their flaws, allow browsing in relative invisibility. This awareness, along with a fear of being judged, might limit people from exploring the app's content. Concerns have been raised over how *Clubhouse temporarily records the audio in a room while the room is live, "for purposes of investigating the incident", and deletes it when the room ends. However, with the lack of end-to-end encryption, the data is still potentially accessible. Furthermore, this recording is done without the consent of the user.* According to privacy expert Alexander Hanff, the platform's practices are violative of numerous provisions of Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), including rules on security, proportionality and necessity principles and confidentiality of communications (Article 5), rules related to consent for processing of personal data (Article 6), and provisions on data protection by design and by default (Article 25). According to a report by the Stanford Internet Observatory, *the back-end infrastructure of Clubhouse is supplied by a Chinese start-up called Agora. The report also mentions a possibility of the Chinese government accessing*



raw audio, as well as other security flaws. It is important to note that India still lacks a stringent data protection law, and thus, its users are far more susceptible to data breaches and privacy violations. Currently, the Central government and WhatsApp are locked in a legal battle over the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, which require breaching encrypted channels to trace the originator of messages. *The lack of end-to-end encryption in Clubhouse could thus make it an easy tool for government surveillance.* Clubhouse also *seeks permission to access users' contacts*, which is a significant privacy concern, as it gives the app information about people who might never even join it in the first place. If a user chooses not to share their contact list, they are not allowed to send invites to others. In turn, *the contact list is shared not only with app developers but also with people in a user's contact list. There is no mechanism to control who can follow whom, which further affects privacy and contributes to the 'harassment' culture.* App permissions on smartphones have always raised questions of privacy. Even apps that are meant for limited purposes, such as sharing or managing files, or playing music or videos, often require permissions to access the phone's camera, contacts, or call history.

The big picture

The rise of Clubhouse cannot be studied in isolation. It is one of the several apps that have grown popular during the COVID-19 pandemic, as millions of people stuck in their homes look for new methods to communicate with each other. *But its flaws aside, Clubhouse, with its promise of revolutionising social media and communication through audio rooms, represents an attempt to innovate and provide an alternative to traditional platforms.* In competition law terms, one way through which powerful firms like Facebook and Twitter can be challenged is by exploiting opportunities in spaces that are adjacent to the market where these firms reign supreme. This is what upstarts like Clubhouse are trying to do, as 'social audio' is one such adjacent market that has opened up only recently. However, as has been observed over time, the Big Tech will strive to protect their dominant positions in one of two ways — either by simply acquiring the potential competitor, known as a 'killer acquisition', or by copying the unique features of their competitor apps and adding them to their own platforms. The Big Tech giants already enjoy, thanks to their massive user base, access to more data and network effects (a phenomenon whereby a product or a service gains additional value as more people use it). Thus, *they have often made clones or added features of newly popular apps to their already bloated platforms. When Snapchat introduced stories, mainstream platforms also came up with the feature a few years later.* Similar trends were noticed when Zoom shot to fame and Google introduced Google Meet, or when TikTok became popular and Instagram launched 'reels'. *With Clubhouse's growing popularity now, Twitter has introduced 'Spaces', and Facebook is working on a similar feature as well.* But this time, LinkedIn, Discord, Reddit and Spotify have also joined the bandwagon. One wonders what this means for innovation in the world of tech. However, it remains to be seen whether such moves will affect Clubhouse, which was valued at \$4 billion as of April 2021. For the average user, Clubhouse might seem like a great, lightweight app with an innovative premise. But it does not offer much in terms of privacy and data protection, and in that sense, it is not very different from traditional platforms. Apps like Signal are an exception in this regard. *While the market of 'social audio' is likely to soon become a battleground, the medium won't truly progress until innovation is balanced with respect for privacy, security and data rights.*



ROW ERUPTS AS RSS HANDLES LOSE 'BLUE TICKS'

Vice-President M. Venkaiah Naidu's personal Twitter account lost its "blue tick" of verification on Saturday morning, only to have it restored later in the day after the matter was taken up by his office with officials of the social media platform, in a set of events that set off a spiral of such complaints by several senior members of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) as well. According to Twitter, Mr. Naidu now mainly tweets from his official account @VPSecretariat rather than his personal Twitter account @mvenkaiahnaidu. Officials from the social media platform said this was the reason the blue tick of the account was removed. *According to Twitter rules, accounts that are inactive, that is, not logging in for more than six months lose the badge or blue tick of verification.* "How does Twitter determine inactivity? It is based on logging in. To keep the account active, the account holder must make sure to log in at least once every six months," said an official from the social media site. While Mr. Naidu's office got in touch with Twitter and got back the verification, it set off a social media flurry from RSS sympathisers that the Twitter handles of their senior leaders — RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, and senior office bearers like Suresh Soni, Krishna Gopal and Arun Kumar had also been divested of the blue tick of verification. RSS functionary Rajiv Tuli alleged that it "clearly shows biasness and a clear example of 'tech feudalism' by Twitter." The verification had been restored to all accounts.

MORE USERS RECEIVE TWITTER NOTICE ON LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCY SEEKING ACTION, BUT DETAILS ABSENT

Nearly a week after cartoonist Manjul and retired Indian Administrative Services officer Surya Pratap Singh were sent notices by Twitter informing them that law enforcement agencies in India had sought action against their accounts, another such mail has also sent to fact-checking platform Alt News, co-founder Mohammed Zubair. Mails sent to Manjul, Singh or Zubair do not mention the details of the law enforcement agency that had raised the legal request asking Twitter to take action against the said account. Industry sources, however, said that all such requests made to Twitter are always routed through the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY). Ministry officials denied any involvement in notices sent either to Manjul, Singh or Zubair. Sources at the ministry, however, did confirm that it was on the request of the Ministry of Home Affairs that IT ministry had written to Twitter asking it to block the account of Indo-Canadian pop singer Jaswinder Singh Bains or JazzyB under section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000. This handle was being used to post inflammatory posts provoking communal sentiments by glorifying Sikh militancy in Punjab and pro-Khalistan feelings on the anniversary of Operation Blue Star. Since he is a social media influencer, such posts made by him would make an impact on large number of people which could lead to a potential law and order problem, a source at the ministry told The Indian Express. Twitter did not respond to mails seeking to know which law enforcement agency had sought action against cartoonist Manjul's account, while IT ministry also did not respond to an emailed questionnaire seeking to know which law enforcement agency had sought their help in escalating the complaint. *As per its policy, Twitter, through an email, notifies users of the existence of a legal request pertaining to a particular account, unless it is prohibited from doing the same, or the request raised by the law enforcement agency falls into one of the exceptions to our user notice policy such as emergencies regarding imminent threat to life, child sexual exploitation, and terrorism.* When the platform receives such a request, an agent at Twitter



reviews the legal request to determine whether it meets relevant statutory requirements. If the said request raised meets all relevant statutory requirements, the agent reviews the said account or tweet to determine whether the request seeks to restrict or chill freedom of expression or raises any other concerns related to the platform's policies. The platform also says that it requests for additional context from the agency or the person raising the legal request before considering any responsive disclosure or taking action on the account. *The problem with the current system is that even the smallest unit of law enforcement, which could be a constable in any police station across India can raise a complaint through the legal request submission site of Twitter and the platform has to acknowledge it. It has to then send a response to both the law enforcement agency or officer as well as the user against whom the said request has been raised an privacy expert who has worked closely with the government said. While it was the first time that Manjul had received such a notice from Twitter, Zubair said that he had over the last year received 10-12 such notices.* Most of the Twitter notices I have been getting are about removing the tweet based on some complaint. Only one notice I received in April was about my account overall. The request raised could be from any of the state police, Zubair said.



DreamIAS



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

WORLD BANK SEES INDIA GROWING BY 8.3%

India's economy is expected to grow by 8.3% in the fiscal year that began in April 2021, the World Bank forecast in its June 2021 Global Economic Prospects released on Tuesday. The forecast, however, masked the significant expected economic damage caused by the “enormous” second wave of COVID-19, the Bank said. *Raising its projection for global growth, the bank said the world economy would expand at 5.6% in 2021, the fastest post-recession growth rate in 80 years, underpinned by U.S. stimulus spending and faster growth in China.* Observing that global output would still end up 2% below pre-pandemic projections by the year end, the development lender said *“highly unequal” access to COVID-19 vaccines was a factor in the uneven recovery.* “In India, an enormous second COVID-19 wave is undermining the sharper-than-expected rebound in activity seen during the second half of FY2020/21, especially in services. With surging COVID-19 cases, foot traffic around work and retail spaces has again slowed to more than one-third below pre-pandemic levels since March, in part due to greater restrictions on mobility,” the bank noted.

For the world as a whole, losses to per capita income would not be reversed by 2022 for some two-thirds of emerging market and developing economies, the bank said. *Low income countries that had lagged in vaccinations had witnessed a reversal in poverty reduction, with the pandemic exacerbating insecurity and other long-standing challenges.*

FINANCE MINISTRY TIGHTENS BELT

The Finance Ministry has told ministries to slash ‘controllable’ spending by 20% and drop other wasteful expenditure, introducing fresh austerity steps amid concerns with breaching the fiscal deficit target for the year following the second COVID-19 wave. Expenditure related to containment of COVID-19 is excluded from the scope of this order. *A suggestive list of object heads of controllable expenditure has been shared, that includes advertising and publicity, foreign and domestic travel, office and administrative expenses and overtime allowance.* “The government has decided that all ministries take steps to curb wasteful expenditure and aim for a 20% reduction in controllable expenditure,” the Department of Expenditure wrote in a memo, approved by Finance Secretary T.V. Somanathan, to all ministries.

Base year

Urging departments to take steps to curtail all avoidable non-scheme expenditure, the memo has told them to take the expenditure incurred in 2019-20 as the base for this purpose. The Expenditure Department has been directed to review the progress in the matter. The other items where spending may be controlled are general grants-in-aid, royalty payments, publications, rents and taxes, ration costs, clothing and tentage, minor works and maintenance. Separately, *ministries have also been told to expedite appraisals and clearances for schemes in their domains that need to be extended beyond March this year. Ministries that are yet to seek the requisite expenditure clearances have been given till July to do so, in order to secure funds.* “No further extension to ongoing schemes and release of funds will be allowed,” said the Expenditure Department.



HOW INDIANS SEE THE ECONOMY

*Last week, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das announced the latest Monetary Policy Review. The broad takeaway: The RBI marked down India's GDP growth forecast for the current financial year from 10.5% to 9.5% and marked up the inflation forecast for the year from 5% to 5.1%. Typically, faltering growth prompts the RBI to cut interest rates in order to spur economic activity. But rising inflation requires raising interest rates. And since the RBI is mandated by law to target inflation within the band of 2%–6%, the best it could do — and it has been doing this for several months now — is to maintain the status quo on interest rates. Actually, for most of his tenure as the RBI Governor, Das has found that the GDP growth rate has faltered while inflation has spiked. **But more salient than the RBI's decision on the benchmark interest rates were the results of the latest RBI Consumer Confidence Survey that was conducted in May.***

What is this survey?

*The RBI conducts this survey every couple of months by asking households in 13 major cities — such as Ahmedabad, Bhopal, Guwahati, Patna, Thiruvananthapuram — about their current perceptions and future expectations on a variety of economic variables. These variables include the general economic situation, employment scenario, overall price situation, own income and spending levels. **Based on these specific responses, the RBI constructs two indices: the Current Situation Index (CSI) and the Future Expectations Index (FEI).** The CSI maps how people view their current situation (on income, employment etc.) vis a vis a year ago. The FEI maps how people expect the situation to be (on the same variables) a year from now. By looking at the two variables as well as their past performance, one can learn a lot about how Indians have seen themselves fairing over the years.*

What was the main finding?

The CSI has fallen to an all-time low of 48.5 in May. An index value of 100 is crucial here, as it distinguishes between positive and negative sentiment. At 48.5, the current consumer sentiment is more than 50 points adrift from being neutral — the farthest it has ever been. It is important to note that even a year ago, the CSI had hit an all-time low. ***The FEI moved to the pessimistic territory for the second time since the onset of the pandemic.*** However, there were two peaks (of positive consumer sentiment) in the recent past; they coincide with demonetisation in 2016 and Prime Minister Modi's re-election in 2019.

What are the factors responsible for pulling down the CSI and FEI respectively?

The RBI states that CSI is being pulled down because of falling consumer sentiments on the “general economic situation” and “employment” scenario. In the survey, the RBI asks how many people currently perceive that the general economic situation has “improved”, “remained the same” or “worsened”. The difference between those who say it has improved and those who say it has worsened is the “net response”. It is in percentage terms and if it is negative, it means that more people think the situation has worsened. Suppose 40% say their perception of the general economic situation has “improved” from a year ago, 10% say it has “remained the same” and 50% say it has “worsened” then the net response would be –10%. Net responses are calculated similarly for “one year ahead expectations” and ***a negative net response implies more people expect***



things to get worse in a year. So, on the "general economic situation", RBI finds that there has been a largely secular decline in both current consumer sentiment and future expectations since PM Modi's re-election in 2019. On employment, the current sentiment has been worsening ever since PM Modi was elected in 2014. There were only two spikes, which again coincide with demonetisation and PM Modi's re-election in 2019. Beyond the medium-term trend, what also stands out is the starkness of consumer sentiments on employment. The difference between the percentage of respondents who think the employment situation has improved (7.2%) and those who think it has worsened (82.1%) from a year ago is a whopping 75%. What is equally worse is that more people expect the employment situation to worsen a year from now — that is why the one year ahead expectation line is below the zero mark. There was one more factor that is bringing down the FEI: the outlook on incomes. Much like employment, the prospects on incomes have registered a secular decline since roughly the start of PM Modi's tenure in 2014. The two positive spikes coincide, yet again, with demonetisation and the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

What else did the RBI survey find out?

The RBI also collected data on spending levels, especially spending on non-essential items such as leisure travel, eating out, luxury items etc. The net responses on this variable suggest that *while Indian had started curtailing spending on non-essential items quite sharply since the middle of 2018, the pandemic simply pulled the metrics into the negative territory.* In other words, more respondents say that they spend less today, and more respondents expect to spend less on non-essentials a year from now. This may explain why even the big firms want the government to print money and spend it on the people.

What is the big takeaway?

These data lay out the tricky challenge facing the Indian economy. *If the government's strategy for fast economic growth — expecting the private sector to lead India out of this trough by investing in new capacities — is to succeed, then consumer spending (especially on non-essentials) has to go up sharply. But for that to happen, household incomes have to go up; and for that to happen, the employment prospects have to brighten; and for that to happen, again, companies have to invest in new capacities.*

DIMINISHING OPTIONS

The RBI's latest policy statement underscores the diminishing options available to it to address the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. The bank's Monetary Policy Committee left benchmark interest rates unchanged for a sixth straight meeting and reiterated that it would keep its policy stance accommodative 'as long as necessary to revive and sustain growth on a durable basis'. *Since its May 2020 decision to cut interest rates by 40 basis points, taking the cumulative reduction in borrowing costs in the wake of the pandemic's onset to 115 basis points, the MPC has found itself in a bind.* While the first lockdown constricted supply and demand for much of Q1 of the last fiscal, pushing the economy into a record 24.4% contraction during April-June and causing full-year GDP to shrink 7.3%, the second wave has crushed all-round demand and consumer confidence. *The RBI's May round of the consumer confidence survey shows the Current Situation Index at a new all-time low, with 75% of households perceiving the economic and employment situations as having worsened further, and the future expectations index reflecting overall*



pessimism. It is hard to see the mere availability of low-cost credit helping revive the all-important consumption demand. The MPC acknowledged the bleak outlook when it slashed its projection for Q1 growth by as much as 770 basis points to 18.5%, from the 26.2% it had forecast just on April 7. Banking more on optimism than hard data, the panel bumped up its growth estimates for the second half resulting in *an overall cut of only one percentage point to its full-year growth forecast at 9.5%*. For this, *it has assumed rural demand will remain buoyant on the back of an expected normal monsoon*, while noting that *widespread infections in rural areas, which likely led to a sequential decline in tractor and two-wheeler sales in April, could undermine future demand*. The other factor the RBI is banking on to provide a fillip to economic activity is an accelerated pace of vaccinations, over which it has virtually no control. To be fair, Governor Shaktikanta Das has used the bank's liquidity spigot as a tool to address some of the economic distress. A series of measures focus on bolstering credit flow to the hardest hit MSME and contact-intensive industrial and services sectors, respectively. Still, the MPC can ill-afford to drop the ball on its primary remit — ensuring inflation remains anchored. *With international commodity prices, including crude oil, on an upward trajectory and no signs of domestic policy support to check skyrocketing petrol and diesel pump prices, inflation is sure to accelerate, posing a major conundrum to the RBI. Raising rates could risk hurting recovery, and not doing so could heighten inflation.*

ATM TRANSACTIONS: INTERCHANGE FEE, CHARGE AFTER FREE WITHDRAWALS HIKED

After almost nine years, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Thursday announced a hike in the interchange fee structure for ATM transactions, allowing an increase in interchange fee per transaction from Rs 15 to Rs 17 for financial transactions and from Rs 5 to Rs 6 for non-financial transactions in all centres. The new charges will be effective from August 1. The central bank also said customers are eligible for five free transactions (inclusive of financial and non-financial transactions) every month from their own bank ATMs. They are also eligible for free transactions (inclusive of financial and non-financial transactions) from other bank ATMs, viz. three transactions in metro centres and five transactions in non-metro centres. Beyond the free transactions, the ceiling or cap on customer charges is Rs 20 per transaction. To compensate the banks for the higher interchange fee and given the general escalation in costs, they are allowed to increase the customer charges to Rs 21 per transaction. This will be effective from January 1, 2022. As per the RBI, the last change in interchange fee structure for ATM transactions was in August 2012, while charges payable by customers were last revised in August 2014.

CENTRE ANNOUNCES HIKE IN MSP FOR PADDY, PULSES, OILSEEDS

The Central government has hiked the minimum support price (MSP) for common paddy to ₹1,940 a quintal for the coming kharif season, less than 4% higher than last year's price of ₹1,868. *The decision was taken by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs on Wednesday. In a bid to encourage crop diversification, there were slightly higher increases in the MSP for pulses, oilseeds and coarse cereals. Both tur and urad dal saw the MSP rise by ₹300, a 5% increase to ₹6,300 a quintal, while the highest absolute increase was for sesamum, whose MSP rose 6.6% to ₹7,307. Groundnut and nigerseed saw an increase of ₹275 and ₹235 respectively. However, maize saw a minimal hike of just ₹20 to ₹1,870 a quintal. The MSP is the rate at which the government purchases crops from farmers, and is based on a calculation of at least one-and-a-half times the cost of production incurred by the farmers. This year, the MSP for bajra was set at 85% above the cost of*



production, while the MSP for urad and tur will ensure 60% returns. The MSPs for the remaining crops were mostly set around the stipulated 50% above the cost of production.

The Centre said the higher rate of returns being promised for urad, tur and oilseeds was a deliberate policy move. “The differential remuneration is aimed at encouraging crop diversification,” an official statement said. “Concerted efforts were made over the last few years to realign the MSPs in favour of oilseeds, pulses and coarse cereals to encourage farmers shift to larger area under these crops and adopt best technologies and farm practices, to correct demand - supply imbalance. The added focus on nutri-rich nutri-cereals is to incentivise its production in the areas where rice-wheat cannot be grown without long term adverse implications for groundwater table,” it added.

THE BEATEN TRACK

The political fallout of the movement against the Centre's farm laws is showing. The Narendra Modi government has raised the minimum support price (MSP) of the 2021-22 paddy crop by Rs 72 per quintal, to Rs 1,940 for common and Rs 1,960 for 'Grade A' varieties. This increase, of slightly over 4.8 per cent, might seem modest. It is also true that cultivation costs — particularly on account of diesel used for powering tractors, irrigation pumps and harvester combines — have gone up. But that does not justify an MSP increase now, when rice and wheat stocks in public godowns have, for the first time, crossed the 100 million tonnes (mt) mark. Government agencies have procured over 97 mt of these two cereals from the 2020-21 crop so far, breaking even the previous year's record of 91 mt. When granaries are already overflowing — distribution of free grain under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, over and above existing National Food Security Act entitlements, has made little difference — encouraging more paddy and wheat production makes no economic sense. Farmers should actually be discouraged to grow them, along with sugarcane, as they are water-guzzling to boot. But it isn't economics and agro-ecology alone. The government should be promoting crop and animal agriculture that also leads to consumption of foods rich in proteins, vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre — as against just calories and sugar — by the people. The right way to do it is by freezing the MSPs of paddy and wheat, besides capping their procurement at, say, 10-15 quintal per acre per farmer. This must be combined with higher MSPs for pulses, oilseeds and millets. The MSPs of tur and urad are up by Rs 300 per quintal for the coming season, while even more (Rs 452/quintal) in the case of sesamum. But the absence of assured procurement means farmers have no incentive to cultivate them. Instead, they are likely to further expand the area under paddy and wheat, perpetuating the most economically, environmentally and nutritionally perverse cropping pattern. The reasons for the Modi government taking the beaten track are obvious. Since the launch of the farmer agitation, it has been under pressure to demonstrate that its reform laws aren't aimed at ending MSP-based procurement. It's not for nothing that government agencies have bought all time high quantities of paddy and wheat this time from Punjab, where the protests have also been the loudest. With the state headed for polls early next year, and the ruling party forced on to the defensive following the mishandling of the pandemic's second wave and the electoral defeat in West Bengal, a renewal of the movement is seen as politically inopportune. Once again, it is politics that has taken the driver's seat.



INDIA MAY LOSE 3-10% GDP ANNUALLY BY 2100 DUE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

India may lose anywhere around 3 to 10 per cent of its GDP annually by 2100 and its poverty rate may rise by 3.5 per cent in 2040 due to climate change, according to a report released by the London-based global think tank Overseas Development Institute on Tuesday. The report, titled 'The Costs of Climate Change in India', looks at economic costs of climate-related risks in the country and points to the possibility of increased inequality and poverty. India is already experiencing the consequences of 1°C of global warming, it said. Extreme heatwaves, heavy rainfall, severe flooding, catastrophic storms and rising sea levels are damaging lives, livelihoods and assets across the country, says the report. Observing that India has made rapid progress in boosting incomes and living standards over the last three decades, but without rapid global action, climate change may reverse development gains of recent decades, it states. "Climate change is already slowing the pace of poverty reduction and increasing inequality in India. The districts that have warmed the fastest have seen gross domestic product grow on average 56 per cent less than those that have warmed the slowest. Without rapid global action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, rising average temperatures may actually reverse the development gains of recent decades," it states. The report finds that even if the temperatures are contained to two degrees Celsius, India will lose 2.6 percent GDP annually, and in case the global temperatures were to increase to 3 degrees Celsius, this loss will magnify to 13.4 per cent annually. Pointing out that pursuing low-carbon development could mitigate projected costs, and would also yield other economic advantages, Economist Rathin Roy, Managing Director (Research and Policy) at ODI, said, "Pursuing a cleaner, more resource-efficient path to development could stimulate a faster, fairer economic recovery for India and help secure India's prosperity and competitiveness in the long term. Lower-carbon options are more efficient and less polluting, producing immediate benefits such as cleaner air, greater energy security and rapid job creation."

CABINET APPROVES 5 MHZ SPECTRUM FOR RAILWAYS

The Union Cabinet on Wednesday approved the allotment of 5 Mhz spectrum in the premium 700 MHz band to the Railways for captive use in areas of public safety and security services. With this spectrum, the Railways will introduce Long-Term Evolution (LTE)-based Mobile Train Radio Communication (MTRC) on its routes. This will help prevent train accidents and reduce delays by enabling real-time interaction between the Loco Pilot, Station Master and the Control Centre. The project, targeted to be completed in five years, is estimated to cost over ₹ 25,000 crore. This will also enable the Railways to take up Internet of Things (IoT)-based remote monitoring, particularly of coaches, wagons and locos, and monitor live feeds of CCTV cameras in the coaches.

WHY PETROL AND DIESEL PRICES ARE CONTINUING TO RISE IN INDIA

Union Petroleum Minister Dharmendra Pradhan on Monday blamed a "surge in global crude oil prices" for the rising domestic prices of petrol and diesel. Petrol has crossed the Rs 100 mark in at least six states as a result of a Rs 4.9 per litre hike in its price since the beginning of May. In Mumbai, petrol is retailing at Rs 101.5 per litre, while diesel is retailing at Rs 93.6 per litre after total hikes of Rs 11.6 per litre and Rs 12.4 per litre, respectively since the beginning of the year.



How have rising crude oil prices impacted fuel prices?

The price of crude oil has risen sharply in 2021 on the back of a recovery in global demand as the world economy recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic. The price of Brent crude has risen by 37.1 per cent to about \$71 per barrel from about \$51.8 per barrel at the beginning of the year. *The price of petrol and diesel are pegged to a 15-day rolling average of the international prices of the petrol and diesel.* However, *current petrol prices are significantly higher than prices in FY14 when the average price of India's crude basket was \$105.5 per barrel. The price of petrol was decontrolled in 2010 while the price of diesel was decontrolled in 2014.* In June 2013, when India's average crude basket was at \$101 per barrel, petrol was retailing at Rs 63.09 per litre or about Rs 76.6 per litre, when adjusted for the depreciation in the value of the rupee against the US dollar. Similarly, in October 2018, when the average cost of India's crude oil basket was at \$80.1 per barrel, the price of diesel peaked at Rs 75.7 per litre.

What is the impact of taxes?

Increasing central and state taxes on petrol and diesel are the key reason for the prices of petrol and diesel being at record highs, even though the *price of crude oil is only 3.5 per cent higher than at the beginning of 2020*, before the Covid-19 pandemic led to a sharp fall in the demand for crude oil. In Delhi, *central and state taxes account for about 57 per cent of pump prices of petrol and about 51.4 per cent of the pump price of diesel.* The central government had *in 2020 hiked the excise duty on petrol by Rs 13 per litre and on diesel by about Rs 16 per litre to shore up revenues as the pandemic led to a sharp fall in economic activity.* While a number of states including *Rajasthan, West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya have reversed hikes in state levies imposed during the pandemic, the central government has not cut central taxes despite calls from the RBI that taxes on auto fuels should be cut to curb inflation. Central levies account for 71.8 per cent of total taxes on diesel and 60.1 per cent of total taxes on diesel in the national capital.* Pradhan said on Monday that the government was not currently considering any cuts in taxes on petrol and diesel. "At present, the earning is less. We cannot compromise on the expenditure. The expenditure of health sector has increased," he said.

WHAT IS THE BEED MODEL OF CROP INSURANCE MAHARASHTRA IS PUSHING FOR?

On Tuesday, Maharashtra Chief Minister *Uddhav Thackeray* met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and *asked him for state-wide implementation of the 'Beed model' of the crop insurance scheme Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojna (PMFBY).*

How does the insurance scheme work?

Launched in 2016, the flagship PMFBY insures farm losses against inclement weather events. Farmers pay 1.5-2% of the premium with the rest borne by the state and central governments. It is a central scheme implemented by state agriculture departments as per central guidelines. For farmers, the low rate of premium and relatively decent coverage make the scheme attractive. *A premium of Rs 1,300 can insure an hectare of soyabean for Rs 45,000. Prior to 2020, the scheme was optional for farmers who did not have loans pending, but mandatory for loanee farmers. Since 2020, it has been optional for all farmers.* In Maharashtra, over the years, more non-loanee farmers have enrolled, although it was optional for them. *A total of 422 lakh farmers in the country had enrolled for the scheme paying a combined premium of Rs 3,018 crore (farmers' share only) and insuring 328 lakh*



hectares in 2019-20. Till date, 184.9 lakh farmers have received claims worth Rs 20,090 crore (according to the Fasal Bhima Yagna website; some kharif claims are yet to be finalised.)

Why does the state want changes?

Even before the Shiv Sena-NCP-Congress government came to power, voices were raised in Maharashtra about the need to change the scheme. Dr Anil Bonde, the then state Agriculture Minister, had held an open consultation of farmers where the loudest voices against the scheme were from BJP supporters. *Delay in claim settlement, failure to recognise localised weather events, and stringent conditions for claims were among the concerns.* Another complaint was about alleged profiteering by insurance companies. For Maharashtra, where farmers predominantly depend on monsoon rains to water their crops, the scheme soon turned out to be non-profitable for insurance companies given the high payments they had to make. Payouts were close to or exceeded the premium collected in some years, leading to losses to insurance companies.

What is Beed model the state government wants implemented?

Located in the drought-prone Marathwada region, the district of Beed presents a challenge for any insurance company. Farmers here have repeatedly lost crops either to failure of rains or to heavy rains. Given the high payouts, insurance companies have sustained losses. The state government had a difficult time getting bids for tenders to implement the scheme in Beed. *During the 2020 kharif season, tenders for implementation did not attract any bids. So, the state Agriculture Department decided to tweak the guidelines for the district. The state-run Indian Agricultural Insurance Company implemented the scheme. Under the new guidelines, the insurance company provided a cover of 110% of the premium collected, with caveats. If the compensation exceeded the cover provided, the state government would pay the bridge amount. If the compensation was less than the premium collected, the insurance company would keep 20% of the amount as handling charges and reimburse the rest to the state government.* Last kharif season, Beed reported premium collection of Rs 803.65 crore (farmers' share was Rs 60.82 crore while the rest was borne by the state and central governments). Kharif claims stood at Rs 8.61 crore, and thus insurance companies reimbursed the state with Rs 6341.41 crore of premium after deducting Rs 160.63 crore as handling charges. *In a normal season where farmers report minimal losses, the state government is expected to get back money that can form a corpus to fund the scheme for the following year.* However, the state government would have to bear the financial liability in case of losses due to extreme weather events.

Why is the government pushing for it for the entire state?

The reason why Maharashtra is pushing for this scheme is that in most years, the claims-to-premium ratio is low with the premium being paid to the company. *In the Beed model, the profit of the company is expected to reduce and the state government would access another source of funds. The reimbursed amount can lead to lower provisioning by the state for the following year, or help in financing the paying the bridge amount in case of a year of crop loss.* For farmers, however, this model does not have any direct benefit. Chances of the model being implemented for the present kharif season appear slim. Questions remain on how the state government is going to raise the excess amount, and how the reimbursed amount would be administered.



PLUG, CHARGE, RIDE: LOW-COST CHARGING SYSTEM COULD BE GAME-CHANGER FOR ELECTRIC BIKES AND 3-WHEELERS

A low-cost charging system for two- and three-wheeler electric vehicles, expected to hit the market in about six months, could prove to be a game-changer for electric mobility in the country. Two- and three-wheelers account for about 80 per cent of vehicle sales in the country, and are a major source of vehicular emissions. Government officials said the adoption of electric mobility in this segment could be much faster if a low-cost and easily accessible charging system was made available. The new charging system, developed as a government-industry partnership, could be priced as low as Rs 3,500. Existing charging solutions cost anywhere between Rs 15,000 to Rs 20,000. A prototype has already been developed and at least half a dozen companies are currently working to manufacture it on scale, officials said. The new system has been the result of an initiative led by the Department of Science and Technology (DST), the office of the Principal Scientific Advisor to the government, and industry and research groups. *The all-weather charging device can be installed in any place with access to a 220-volt, 15-ampere power line.* Parking lots of Metro and railway stations, shopping malls, hospitals, office complexes, apartments and even small coffee shops or kirana outlets could be ideal spots. *The charging system has a charger, a smart electric socket capable of communicating with a mobile phone, and mobile apps with provisions to make payments.* “One of the biggest hurdles in the widespread adoption of electric vehicles in India has been the limited availability of charging stations. This proposed solution seeks to address that problem. It is designed to be installed almost anywhere at an affordable cost. People can charge their vehicle batteries in a few minutes. *The hesitancy with regard to electric vehicles, even cars, has typically stemmed from ‘range anxiety’ — can I get my battery recharged whenever I want, the way I can get my petrol tank filled? I think this charging system could be the solution we have been waiting for,*” said V Sumantran, a veteran auto industry leader and chairman of a government committee for creating charging infrastructure. *A full charge, from 0 to 100 per cent, can be done within half an hour to 45 minutes. With current batteries, a full charge is enough to travel 80 to 100 km in a city.* As Sumantran pointed out, if these charging systems are available easily, users won’t always look for full charge. “It is like charging your mobile phone, or filling your petrol tank. You want to be in a comfortable position, not necessarily always at full capacity, provided there is an assurance that you will get a recharge when you need it. So a 15-minute charge, for example, would be enough to take the battery from 30 per cent to 70 per cent,” he said. The government committee has also finalised standards for this device enabling multiple companies to start manufacturing their own products.



LIFE & SCIENCE

CHIME TELESCOPE YIELDS UNPRECEDENTED RESULTS

Scientists with the Canadian Hydrogen Intensity Mapping Experiment (CHIME) Collaboration, who include researchers at the Pune-based Tata Institute for Fundamental Research (TIFR) and the National Centre for Radio Astrophysics (NCRA), have assembled the largest collection of fast radio bursts (FRBs) in the telescope's first FRB catalogue. While catching sight of an FRB is considered a rare thing in the field of radio astronomy, prior to the CHIME project, radio astronomers had only caught sight of around 140 bursts in their scopes since the first FRB was spotted in 2007. *FRBs are oddly bright flashes of light, registering in the radio band of the electromagnetic spectrum, which blaze for a few milliseconds before vanishing without a trace.* These brief and mysterious beacons have been spotted in various and distant parts of the universe, as well as in our own galaxy. Their origins are unknown and their appearance is highly unpredictable. But *the advent of the CHIME project — a large stationary radio telescope in British Columbia, Canada — has been a game changer and has nearly quadrupled the number of fast radio bursts discovered to date.* With more observations, astronomers hope soon to pin down the extreme origins of these curiously bright signals. *The telescope has detected a whopping 535 new fast radio bursts in its first year of operation itself, between 2018 and 2019.* For each of the 535 FRBs that CHIME detected, Professor Masui and his colleagues measured its dispersion and found that most bursts likely originated from far-off sources within distant galaxies. The fact that the bursts were bright enough to be detected by CHIME suggests that they must have been produced by extremely energetic sources, he said. As the telescope detects more FRBs, scientists hope to pin down exactly what kind of exotic phenomena could generate such ultra bright, ultra fast signals. According to Professor Masui, the scientists plan to use the bursts, and their dispersion estimates, to map the distribution of gas throughout the universe.

WHY DO AIRCRAFT RUN INTO TURBULENCE; HOW CAN YOU BE SAFE DURING ONE?

Eight passengers on board a Vistara flight from Mumbai to Kolkata on Monday, June 7, suffered injuries after the Boeing 737-800 encountered severe turbulence during its descent. While five of the eight passengers suffered only minor injuries, the other three had to be taken to hospital upon landing. The civil aviation regulator, Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), has classified the event as an "incident", which means that it will investigate the causes behind its occurrence.

What happened and when?

The Boeing 737-800 aircraft with 113 passengers on board was on its way from Mumbai to Kolkata on Monday, June 7. Around 15 minutes prior to landing, when the aircraft was at an altitude between 15,000 feet and 20,000 feet, it encountered what has been reported as "severe turbulence". Upon landing, the passengers were examined by the airport medical team, which cleared all but eight passengers. Five of these passengers were administered first aid, and the remaining three were admitted to three different hospitals in Kolkata. One of the passengers, a woman aged 61 years, has a fracture in her right hand; another passenger, aged 77 years, has suffered a spinal tenderness injury. The third passenger, aged 36 years, received a minor cut on the forehead, and was released after being administered first aid.

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

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Telegram: http://t.me/DreamIAS_Jamshedpur



What happens when an aircraft encounters turbulence?

As a bare concept, *turbulence means disruption of airflow over the wings of an airplane, which causes it to enter an irregular vertical motion.* There are at least seven different kinds of turbulence which an aircraft can face. *Turbulence can be weather-related, in which the plane flies through a thunderstorm or a heavy cloud, or it can be clear air turbulence, which is mainly caused by wind or jet streams.* Other kinds of turbulence include “wake turbulence”, which forms behind an aircraft when it flies through air, creating wingtip vortices.

Are turbulence incidents dangerous?

It depends on the nature and intensity of the turbulence. Aircraft face some form of turbulence on a regular basis, and pilots are trained to deal with these disturbances. However, there have been several instances of turbulence bringing down modern jetliners. But in these cases, *while intense turbulence has been the main cause of an accident, several other contributory factors — such as lack of proper training, poor dissemination of weather- or wind-related information — have played a huge role in the accident.*

What will the investigation into the Vistara incident focus on?

As a standard practice, the investigation will try to ascertain why the incident caused severe injuries to the passengers. It will look at factors including weather conditions when the plane encountered turbulence, whether the pilots were caught unprepared, and whether they had asked the cabin to prepare for the upcoming disturbance. Notably, the passenger charter of rights issued by the Ministry of Civil Aviation in 2019 says that in case of death or bodily injury to a passenger on board a domestic flight, the airline is liable to pay compensation up to Rs 20 lakh.

What must passengers do when an aircraft encounters turbulence?

According to the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), “passengers can easily prevent injuries from unexpected turbulence by keeping their seat belt buckled at all times”. The FAA advises passengers to listen to instructions given by the flight attendants; pay attention to the safety briefing at the beginning of the flight and read the safety briefing card; wear a seat belt at all times; use an approved child safety seat or device if a child is under two; and to adhere to your airline’s carry-on restrictions. This same advice is often given by pilots and flight attendants on Indian domestic flights. Passengers are routinely instructed to go back to their seats and refrain from using the washroom whenever there is turbulence, and the pilot has switched on the seat belt sign.

(M)NOSY ELEPHANTS

Elephants have two nostrils in their trunks. They can also suck up water at a speed of three litres per second into their trunk and then blow it into the mouth. New research (Journal of The Royal Society Interface) has now found that elephants can dilate their nostrils to create more space in their trunks, allowing them to suck up to nine litres of water. First author Andrew Schulz, said in a release that the trunks act like suitcases, capable of expanding when necessary. The team studied elephants eating various foods, to decode the suction mechanism. They used an ultrasonic probe to measure the trunk walls and see how the inner muscles worked. *By contracting those muscles, the animal*

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



dilates its nostrils up to 30%. The team suggests elephants can inhale at speeds comparable to Japan's bullet trains. Lead author David Hu explained that an elephant uses its trunk like a Swiss Army Knife: It can detect scents and grab things, other times blowing objects away like a leaf blower or sniffs them in like a vacuum. The researchers note that by investigating the mechanics and physics behind trunk muscle movements – a combination of suction and grasping – they could build better robots.

SWATHES OF INTERNET GO DOWN AFTER CLOUD OUTAGE

Dozens of websites briefly went offline around the globe on Tuesday, including CNN, The New York Times and Britain's government home page, after an outage at the cloud computing service Fastly, illustrating how vital a small number of behind-the-scenes companies have become to running the Internet. The sites that could not be reached also included some Amazon pages, the Financial Times, Reddit, Twitch and The Guardian. San Francisco-based Fastly acknowledged a problem just before 6 a.m. About an hour later, the company said: “The issue has been identified and a fix has been applied.” Most of the sites soon appeared to be back online. Fastly said it had identified a service configuration that triggered disruptions, meaning the outage appeared to be caused internally. *Brief Internet service outages are not uncommon and are only rarely the result of hacking or other mischief.* Still, major futures markets in the U.S. dipped sharply minutes after the outage. *Fastly is a content-delivery network, or CDN. It provides vital but behind-the-scenes cloud computing “edge servers” to many of the web’s popular sites.* These servers store, or “cache,” content such as images and video in places around the world so that it is closer to users, allowing them to fetch it more quickly and smoothly.

GOOGLE TO CHANGE GLOBAL ADVERTISING PRACTICES IN LANDMARK ANTITRUST DEAL

Google said it would make changes to its global advertising business to ensure it did not abuse its dominance, bowing to antitrust pressure for the first time in a landmark settlement with French authorities. The deal with the French competition watchdog could help rebalance the power over advertising in favour of publishers, which held sway over the business in the pre-Internet era but lost control with the rapid rise of Google and Facebook. The settlement, which was announced on Monday and also saw Google fined €220 million (\$268 million), is the first time the U.S. tech giant has agreed to make changes to its huge advertising business, which brings in the bulk of its revenue. “The decision to sanction Google is of particular significance because it’s the first decision in the world focusing on the complex algorithmic auction processes on which the online ad business relies,” said France’s antitrust chief Isabelle de Silva. *The watchdog found that Google’s ad management platform for large publishers — Google Ad Manager — favoured the company’s own online ad marketplace – Google AdX – where publishers sell space to advertisers in real-time.* Ad Manager provided AdX with strategic data such as the winning bidding prices, while AdX also enjoyed privileged access to requests made by advertisers via Google’s ad services, the authority said. AdX, in turn, exchanged data more smoothly with Ad Manager than it did with other advertising management platforms, the watchdog added. Such platforms are crucial for publishers to manage and sell advertising space. Under the terms of the settlement, Google made commitments to improve the way Ad Manager services worked with rival ad servers and ad space sales platforms, the French watchdog said. Some changes would be implemented by the first quarter of 2022, it said, adding that Google would not appeal the decision. The French authority

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said the decision opens the way for publishers who felt disadvantaged to seek damages from Google. *It launched its investigation in 2019 following a complaint from News Corp., French news publishing group Le Figaro and Belgian press group Rossel.*

BROOD X: THE LIVES AND ENCOUNTERS OF AMERICA'S LARGEST GROUP OF CICADAS

US President Joe Biden's first trip abroad was delayed unexpectedly when a swarm of cicadas bombarded the plane Air Force One, which was about to take off for the UK. Biden had to swat a cicada away when it landed on him at the Joint Base Andrews in Maryland. Swarms of these insects have been spotted in a number of American states. These are part of a group named Brood X, based on their life cycles and periodic appearances. The cicadas in Brood X number in billions and come out of their underground homes every 17 years.

But what is Brood X?

Cicadas live underground for extended periods of time, typically 13 or 17 years, and feed on roots of trees both underground and above it. The term 'brood' refers to a population of cicadas that is isolated from other populations because of differences in their year of emergence or locality. *Brood X is the largest brood of 17-year cicadas* and is found in Pennsylvania, northern Virginia, Indiana and eastern Tennessee, according to the US National Park Service (NPS).



Last year, *another grouping of 17-year cicadas dubbed Brood IX emerged in some states on the east coast of the US.* Among periodical cicadas, there are seven species. *There are also some annual cicadas, which come out every year.* *Brood X started emerging in May and will be around until the end of June.* The time when they decide to emerge is dependent on weather, specifically *when ground temperatures reach about 17-18°C.*

What do cicadas do underground for 17 or 13 years?

When underground, cicada nymphs go through five stages of development. Once they become adults, which takes about 17 years for some periodical cicadas, the males emerge from underground. While it is not clear why cicadas take so long to develop, some researchers believe that it could be because they want to avoid predators above the soil. When they come out, they shed their exoskeleton (outer skin) to take their winged form.

But why do they come out?

Their emergence is to ensure continuation of their species. Male cicadas emerge first and start singing to attract females. Male cicadas produce the loudest sounds in the insect world, the NPS says. *Females respond with a clicking sound with their wings. This process lasts for about a month, after which the cicadas die, with most of them having accomplished the task of procreating. After mating,*



the eggs are laid in in small twigs and branches. Once they hatch after about six weeks, the nymphs fall to the ground, and burrow their way into the ground. After becoming adults, these nymphs will emerge again 17 years later (or 13 years in some broods). Some cicadas will be eaten by frogs, fish, birds or raccoons. But they come out in such huge numbers that many will be able to mate and ensuring survival of their species.

Is this brood particularly significant?

Because of their sheer numbers, cicadas in Brood X often make headlines. When the brood last emerged in 2004 in Washington DC, the cicadas made “an impact on the cultural scene, drowning out weddings, clogging pool filters, appearing on t-shirts and hats, showing up in stir-fries and in smoothies by design as well as by accident, and otherwise making their presence known in America’s most political town”, entomologist May Berenbaum wrote in the American Entomologist.

Are cicadas dangerous?

*Cicadas also do not bite or sting, but when the males sing, their collective chorus can reach up to 100 decibels, a noise level that can possibly cause severe damage if you are exposed to it for several hours. One hundred decibels is equivalent to a jet flyover at 1000 feet, a motorcycle or a powered lawn mower. The Maryland Department of Agriculture notes that *the only harm cicadas can cause is during egg laying when small twigs may be damaged by deep slits cut by the female when she deposits her rows of eggs (a typical female can lay roughly 500 eggs that are laid in over 40-50 different sites). This damage can be avoided by covering very small trees and gardens with fine cloth or netting.**

Can cicadas be eaten?

Some people harvest and eat cicadas by coating them in chocolate, deep-frying them, or using the insects as toppings for a pizza. They are considered to be nutritious and high in protein and some minerals. The news website nj.com quotes anthropology expert Cortni Borgerson from Montclair State University as recommending that cicadas from Brood X be used for a range of recipes — including tempura cicadas, singing sushi and flaming cicada fondue.

(M)MAKING PEACE WITH NATURE (ATUL BAGAI - HEAD, UN ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME INDIA AND SHOKO NODA IS UNDP RESIDENT REPRESENTATIVE, INDIA)

There has never been a more urgent need to restore damaged ecosystems. The COVID-19 pandemic is a direct result of the degradation of natural areas, species loss, and exploitation. Zoonotic pathogens are more frequently jumping from wildlife to humans, creating public health emergencies. Healthier ecosystems and a healthier respect for the wild spaces of our world will give us a healthier planet and healthier people. It is time to change how we cultivate our land, use our soils, exploit coastal and marine ecosystems, and manage our forests. The damage has been done over decades and the destruction cannot be reversed overnight. But we need to start somewhere. That’s why this World Environment Day, the UN Environment Programme and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization launched the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems on every continent and in every ocean. India must participate



actively in this decade of restoration. Ten years of sustained action to protect and revive the country's ecosystems will help India to end poverty by enhancing livelihoods, combat climate change by reviving natural carbon stores, and halt the collapse of biodiversity by rebuilding homes for wildlife. Ecosystem restoration benefits people and nature.

Path towards restoration

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has already set India on this path. *In 2019, he announced that India would raise its ambition for restoration, promising an increase in restored degraded land from 21 to 26 million hectares by 2030.* There are several steps we can take to build on this commitment. First, there must be a concerted effort to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. *Climate change is dangerous to humans, but also to the fragile ecosystems that sustain all life on earth. Globally, we must reduce net carbon dioxide emissions by 45% by 2030 compared to 2010. And we must reach net-zero emissions by 2050 to have a hope of achieving the 1.5°C Paris Agreement target.* India needs to work towards this by *transforming energy systems, land use, agriculture, forest protection, urban development, infrastructure, and lifestyles.* Crucially, this has to be aligned with conserving and restoring biodiversity and minimising air and water pollution and waste. *Given the interconnectedness of nature, all problems have to be dealt with simultaneously. We already have the goals, targets, commitments, and mechanisms under international environmental conventions that can direct this ambition.* Let us use them. *Second, we need to transform our economic, financial and production systems towards sustainability. Including natural capital in decision-making, eliminating environmentally harmful subsidies, and investing in low-carbon and nature-friendly technologies are key elements of this. By making investments in sustainable development financially attractive, we can shift the financial flows and investment patterns towards sustainability.* We already have the knowledge base, the scientific expertise, and the policymaking know-how through national and international scientific bodies that can guide this process. Let us use it. Finally, *the power to revive our environment lies with us as individuals. For a better future, India must work towards creating food systems that work with nature, reduce waste, and are adaptive to change and resilient to shocks. Empowering small-scale farmers and women farmers, changing patterns of consumption and challenging social norms and business practices are key. This can be achieved through capacity building and education.* We already have the power to effect change through cooperation and collaboration, and through changing how we consume, travel and use energy. Let us not shirk this responsibility. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres has stated, making peace with nature is the defining task of the 21st century.

HOW TO RECOVER FROM A SPINAL CORD INJURY

A violent fall, a vehicular accident, or a sports injury can sometimes damage the spinal cord and brain leading to paralysis and other life-threatening health problems. The nerve fibres that carry important information are unable to regrow, leading to irreversible damage. Using novel bioinformatics frameworks and screening platforms, researchers have now identified a new gene combination that can help enhance the growth of nerve fibres after an injury. *It is well known that mammals including humans show a high capacity for brain and spinal cord regeneration but only during young ages.* The researchers set out to decode why and how young neurons respond so well to injury. They studied a class of genes called transcription factors. *They identified a particular combination of genes KLF6/Nr5a2 that when expressed lead to enhanced growth of nerve fibres*



following injury. The results were published last month in Nature Communications. Ishwariya Venkatesh, the first and co-corresponding author of the paper explains: “If you think about growth after an injury, it is very similar to developmental growth that happens during the early embryonic stages. Inside the neuron, when you want an axon or nerve fiber to grow, there are networks of genes that work together. *Between embryonic day 18 to about a week after birth, these genes are still on because they're helping the axons grow. So, if an injury occurs during this period, the genes quickly deploy these networks to repair. But a week after birth, these genes are no longer active because active developmental axon growth has ended and they are no longer needed.*” She was a Research Assistant Professor at Marquette University when the paper was published.

Rebooting networks

“So, if we are able to turn back these gene networks in response to an injury, then we have a chance for high regenerative success. We're trying to artificially reboot those gene programs and trying to coax an older neuron to switch back to a younger, growth-competent state. And we do that by manipulating transcription factors that simultaneously regulate the expression of hundreds of growth-relevant genes because we can't go in and tweak the expression of individual genes,” she adds. When asked if there is any evolutionary basis for these genes losing their program when we are adults she explains: “There could be a couple of reasons. One is we gave up or traded the ability to regenerate because even if these axons do regenerate, the chances of them reintegrating into a functional circuit in a complex system like the mammalian system is trickier. I also speculate that the longer the distance the axons have to grow, the more guidance errors can happen, and they can synapse onto the wrong targets leading to unintended behavioral outcomes.” The team adds that these findings can open up avenues to discover additional groups of transcription factors with stronger reprogramming abilities to ultimately allow us to fully revert an older neuron into a younger growth-competent state following injury. These findings also hold promise as a novel molecular strategy for the treatment of human spinal cord injuries in the future. “We are continuing with pre-clinical tests of Klf6/Nr5a2, for example confirming the genes are still effective when delivered in the chronic injury state, many months after the initial damage. This information is critical for individuals now living with spinal injury,” adds Murray G. Blackmore, Associate Professor at Marquette University and co-corresponding author in an email to The Hindu.

THE NEW DRUG FOR ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

*A new drug for treatment of Alzheimer's disease holds promise, but comes with several caveats. For one thing, it is not a cure, but is aimed at slowing down cognitive decline. **Aducanumab**, from the company Biogen, has been approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) — the first new medication for Alzheimer's to get FDA approval in nearly two decades.*

What is Alzheimer's disease?

Dementia is an umbrella term for a range of conditions that involve a loss of cognitive functioning. *Alzheimer's dementia* is the most common type and involves plaques and tangles forming in the brain. *Forgetfulness and memory problems are often early symptoms, but as the illness progresses, patients tend to become confused, may lose their way around familiar places, and have difficulties with planning and completing simple tasks.* Dr Rajas Deshpande, neurologist at Lilavati Hospital,



Mumbai, said *the disease is basically an accelerated ageing of certain neurons in the brain that are concerned with storage and processing of memory.* According to World Health Organization (WHO) estimates for 2017, dementia affects approximately 50 million people worldwide, a number that is projected to grow to 82 million by 2030. In India, it is estimated that 5.3 million people (1 in 27) above the age of 60 have dementia in 2020, according to the Dementia in India 2020 report published by the Alzheimer's and Related Disorders Society of India. This is projected to rise to 7.6 million by 2030.

How does the new drug work?

The hallmark of Alzheimer's disease is the accumulation of the debris caused by the breakdown of neurons in the brain, leading to plaque formation. The drug aducanumab, with brand name *Aduhelm, is a monoclonal antibody* that is designed to reduce the presence of amyloid beta, a protein that forms plaques in the brain. *Aduhelm (aducanumab) aims at altering the course of the disease by slowing the deterioration of brain function.* "The process of regaining memory has not been proven. What has been shown is that it reduces plaque formation," Dr Deshpande said.

How expensive is it?

The company has said the average wholesale cost would be \$56,000 (over Rs 40 lakh) per year. Experts, however, said it would not be before a year or two before the drug is available in India. "There are some hyped medicines and it could be possible that when tried on the ground they may not be useful. Still, we are in a desperate situation and hope the drug is useful," Dr Deshpande said. *The drug is to be given as a monthly intravenous infusion. In clinical trials, some patients given the highest dose of the drug experienced brain swelling and had to be monitored. Headache is also a reported side effect of the drug.*

How much is known about its efficacy?

The drug was tested in patients at the earliest stages of Alzheimer's before the disease had a major impact in their ability to care for themselves. It was not tested in people who had progressed to moderate dementia – a state in which the patients lose the ability to care for and feed themselves. Despite not enough evidence, the drug was approved by the FDA under narrow clinical circumstances. The FDA has asked Biogen to conduct a new trial. It is for people with early-stage Alzheimer's who have had a PET scan confirming the presence of beta-amyloid in their brain

How is Alzheimer's currently managed in India?

While there is slow but growing recognition that dementia is a major public health problem, doctors say there are *low acceptance levels among families.* "A lot of time is spent refuting the problem and taking multiple opinions till such time that the patient worsens and then is taken to the neurologist," said Dr Deshpande. Sometimes *there is no sympathy about the patient not being able to remember anything and their condition is attributed to mental weakness or depression.* Once diagnosed after ruling out treatable causes of memory loss, there are *usually four types of medications, including blood thinners for vascular blockages, and memory enhancing medicines (which do not increase memory power) to increase conduction between neurons. Some patients do not tolerate some drugs due to side effects, and these have to be given cautiously as a low dose. There*



are other medicines that may cause a change in pulse rate and have to be given carefully, Dr Deshpande said.

FIRST HUMAN INFECTION OF THE H10N3 BIRD FLU

China has confirmed the first instance of human infection from H10N3, a rare strain of a virus that normally infects poultry. On Tuesday, the National Health Commission of Beijing reported that a 41-year-old man in the eastern Jiangsu province had been infected with the rare strain but no details were given as to how he caught it.

What do we know so far about H10N3?

Chinese authorities said the 41-year-old man was the first human case of an infection with the strain. They said the person was hospitalised on April 28 and was diagnosed with the strain after a month. The Beijing-based National Health Commission said *the strain has low pathogenesis — the ability to cause disease — among birds, implying that the virus did not spread easily among poultry and was likely to be restricted to limited populations.* “As long as avian influenza viruses circulate in poultry, sporadic infection of avian influenza in humans is not surprising, which is a vivid reminder that the threat of an influenza pandemic is persistent,” Reuters quoted the World Health Organization (WHO) as saying.

What is avian influenza?

H5N1 is the most common virus causing bird flu, or avian influenza. Though largely restricted to birds, and often fatal to them, it can cross over to other animals, as well as humans. According to the WHO, *the H5N1 was first discovered in humans in 1997 and has killed almost 60% of those infected.* Though it is not known to transmit easily among humans, the risk remains. There are several subtypes of the avian influenza virus. Since 2003, these avian and other influenza viruses have spread from Asia to Europe and Africa. *In 2013, human infections with the influenza A(H7N9) virus were reported in China. An outbreak of the H7N9 strain killed around 300 people in 2016 and 2017.* The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says, “All known subtypes of influenza A viruses can infect birds, except subtypes H17N10 and H18N11, which have only been found in bats. *Only two influenza A virus subtypes (i.e., H1N1, and H3N2) are currently in general circulation among people.* Some subtypes are found in other infected animal species. For example, H7N7 and H3N8 virus infections can cause illness in horses, and H3N8 virus infection cause illness in horses and dogs.” So far, the H10N3 appears mild and not very transmissible, and hence, its categorisation status remains unclear.

What are the typical symptoms of an avian influenza infection?

According to the WHO, *avian, swine and other zoonotic influenza virus infections in humans may cause disease with symptoms like mild upper respiratory tract infection (fever and cough), early sputum production and rapid progression to severe pneumonia, sepsis with shock, acute respiratory distress syndrome, and even death. Conjunctivitis, gastrointestinal symptoms, encephalitis and encephalopathy have also been reported in varying degrees depending on the subtype.*

Why are bird flu viruses a cause of concern?



Speculation about the origin of the SARS-CoV-2 has heightened worries about animal- and bird-borne viruses. The emergence of new strains, particularly among domesticated animals and birds, is a story of evolution and inevitability, and sporadic reports of new viruses infecting humans abound. An outbreak of the H5N8 virus in birds led to hundreds of thousands of poultry being culled in various European countries. In February, Russia reported that seven poultry workers in a plant were infected by the H5N8 strain. All of them recovered. India, too, faced an outbreak of the virus in flocks of poultry in January and undertook culling.

COVID-19 AND CHILDREN

Several experts have warned that the third wave is likely to affect more children, as Singapore has already been reporting. One can get immunity either after infection or through vaccination. More adults have been getting infected in both the first and second waves. Vaccination has been approved for use in adults. The absolute number of children affected in the second wave seems more than in the first wave, probably due to overall increased numbers and entire families getting affected.

Are any of the new variants more dangerous for children than for adults?

The new mutations, particularly the B.1.167 variant, have been reported to be affecting younger children in a few countries like Singapore. However, there is no official confirmation at this stage as to how many children have been affected by the new variant in Singapore. *The B.1.1.7 strain is 60% more fatal than the original strain. It is believed that since the immunity of children is better, they are not getting seriously sick even after this mutant virus attack.*

In general, are children at lower risk of contracting Covid-19 than adults? And among children, which age group is more vulnerable?

Children are just as susceptible as adults. However, *children with Covid-19 are generally asymptomatic or have less severe manifestations.* This may be attributed to a lower expression of specific receptors to which this virus binds to enter the host, and also their immune system. A U-shaped curve of severity has been demonstrated in children, with *infants under 1 year of age and adolescents (10–14 years of age) with a higher risk of developing severe Covid. Infants might be seriously ill.* Older children might develop MIS-C (multi-system inflammatory syndrome) after 2–6 weeks of asymptomatic or symptomatic Covid-19 infection.

Are symptoms in children different from those in adults?

The most common symptoms are fever (63%) and cough (34%) followed by nausea or vomiting (20%) and diarrhoea (20%). Similar to adults, the commonest clinical features are fever and cough; however, their frequency is much lower in children (60–100% in adults vs 40–60% in children). Most of the children have mild to moderate disease, and only 4% have a severe illness. On the other hand, *features like shortness of breath, fall in oxygen levels, and sputum production are more frequently seen in adults.* Like adults, gastrointestinal manifestations (diarrhoea, vomiting) are frequently seen in children and sometimes may be the sole manifestation of Covid-19 in children. Overall, *respiratory symptoms followed by gastrointestinal symptoms are the predominant manifestations in children as well as adults. Also, adults have a higher chance of having underlying*



comorbidity, which predisposes them to severe Covid illness. According to US CDC estimates, Covid-19 hospitalisation rates were 80 times higher among adults older than 85 years than among children between ages five to 17. Death rates for adults older than 85 years were 7,900 times higher than for children.

What should people do if they suspect their child is showing symptoms of Covid-19?

Children with documented or suspected Covid-19 and mild symptoms — fever, cough, pharyngitis — generally should be managed at home unless they have an underlying health problem like asthma, heart disease, diabetes, muscle dystrophies and refractory epilepsies. These may increase their risk of severe disease. Management at home is focused on prevention of transmission to others (i.e. isolation), monitoring for clinical deterioration, and supportive care.

Can a pregnant woman pass on SARS-CoV-2 to her unborn child?

At this time, there is not enough evidence to determine whether the virus is transmitted from a mother to her baby during pregnancy, or the potential impact this may have on the baby. This is currently being investigated. Pregnant women should continue to follow appropriate precautions, and seek medical care early if experiencing symptoms such as fever, cough or difficulty breathing.

A GENE THAT MAY EXPLAIN WHY SOME ARE ASYMPTOMATIC

A new study has reported evidence of a genetic link explaining why some people who catch Covid-19 don't become sick. The team led by Newcastle University, UK, has demonstrated that *the gene, HLA-DRB1*04:01, is found three times as often in people who are asymptomatic.* This suggests that people with this gene have some level of protection from severe Covid. The study has been published in the journal HLA. *The researchers compared asymptomatic people to patients from the same community who developed severe Covid but had no underlying illnesses.* They used next-generation sequencing to focus on a category of genes called HLA. *The gene they identified, HLA-DRB1*04:01, is known to be directly correlated to latitude and longitude. This means more people in the North and West of Europe are likely to have this gene, and this suggests that populations of European descent will be more likely to remain asymptomatic but still transmit the disease to susceptible populations,* Newcastle University said in a press release. The team predicts that approximately one in five people of European descent in the UK carries the gene. The release quoted co-author Dr Carlos Echevarria as saying: "This is an important finding as it may explain why some people catch Covid but don't get sick. It could lead us to a genetic test which may indicate who we need to prioritise for future vaccinations."

NEW VARIANT T478K: MOSTLY IN MEXICO, ALSO FOUND IN EUROPE

An analysis of more than one million SARS-CoV-2 genome sequences has led to the identification of a new variant that, over the past weeks, has been spreading mostly in Mexico but has also been found in Europe. Biotechnologists of the University of Bologna have published their paper in the Journal of Medical Virology, describing the new variant, *whose scientific name is T478K.* Like other strains, this presents *a mutation in the spike protein.* "This variant has been increasingly spreading among people in North America, particularly in Mexico. To date, this variant covers more than 50% of the existing viruses in this area," the University of Bologna quoted Professor Federico Giorgi, the study



coordinator, as saying. *The variant spreads evenly across males and females and age ranges, the University of Bologna says on its website. This variant represents 52.8% of all sequenced coronaviruses in Mexico, whereas in the US it shows up only in 2.7% of the sequenced samples.* As concerns Europe, the variant has spread feebly in Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland. In Italy is virtually non-existent with only 4 reported cases.

THE RED FLAGS ON THE TRAIL OF THE VIRUS (JAYANT PRASAD - FORMER DIPLOMAT AND A FORMER DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES)

The publication of science writer, editor, and author Nicholas Wade's well-researched article in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, "The origin of COVID: Did people or nature open Pandora's box at Wuhan?" (<https://bit.ly/3uWUxMI>), has set alarm bells ringing about the collusive cover up of the possible leak of the novel coronavirus from the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV). He has laid out a strong case for a fuller investigation into the event.

The U.S. link

China promoted the narrative that the virus spread from a wet market (seafood and animal market) in Wuhan to avoid any scrutiny of what was being done in the WIV. Senior health officials in the United States seemed to concur. It soon became public that the *coronavirus-related research in the WIV was funded by American money.* Most experts embraced the natural spread narrative since the alternative was unimaginable. The lab-leak proposition was discredited as a conspiracy theory simply because it was being espoused by then U.S. President Donald Trump and his Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. *With advances in biotechnology, it is now possible to genetically engineer existing pathogens to make them more lethal and difficult to treat.* Higher mortality and ethnic specificity could be the other features of such new, synthesised organisms or viruses. A possible antidote or vaccine would only be accessible to those conducting such research. Dr. Peter Daszak of the EcoHealth Alliance obtained grants from the U.S. National Institutes of Health and subcontracted research to a group headed by Dr. Shi Zhengli at the WIV. Dr. Daszak claimed in a 2019 interview that after six or years of research, over 100 new SARS-related coronaviruses, some of which were introduced into human cells in the lab, caused SARS disease in humanised mice and were untreatable. The research carried out involved the creation of novel, life-threatening and pandemic-creating viruses. *The WIV operates a Biosafety level-4 (BSL-4) facility. Its deficient safety had been flagged by U.S. inspectors, but there is no record of any remedial action.* A 2018 inspection report stated that the facility did not have appropriately trained professionals to safely operate the BSL-4 laboratory. A former Israeli intelligence official and visiting fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, Dany Shoham, now with the Bar Ilan University, Israel, has linked the WIV to China's biological weapons programme. *Why were American funds made available to a Chinese laboratory to conduct sensitive research? No doubt because it was less expensive and dangerous to carry out the experiments in China.* Besides, U.S. funding ensured it would have access to the experiments conducted at the WIV. In a recently released email, Dr. Daszak thanked the Director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, for publicly stating that scientific evidence supported a natural origin for the coronavirus and not a lab release.



China's reactions

Admittedly, *it is difficult to distinguish between a naturally occurring event, an accidental release of a genetically modified pathogen, or its deliberate use.* Because of this and the lingering suspicions, it is the responsibility of the institution and the country where the first outbreak occurred to establish the facts. China has done the opposite. It has covered up facts and impeded the investigation. *A 34-year-old doctor in Wuhan, Li Wenliang, tried to alert others on a social media platform from his hospital bed in Wuhan about a possible outbreak of a SARS-type virus.* Instead of treating the young doctor as a hero, *Chinese security officials vilified him and charged him with making false claims, spreading rumours, and disturbing the social order.* He died as a result of a coronavirus infection. While he was officially exonerated by an investigation into his death, the report has been criticised for only having recommended the reprimand be withdrawn. There are also other reports of the police making an apology to his family. *The WIV head of coronavirus research, Shi Zhengli's database on SARS-like viruses went offline just before the virus outbreak in Wuhan. Countries demanding greater transparency and accountability have been either denounced or 'punished' by China.* China's vehement opposition to further investigations, actions to suppress facts from getting out, and reluctance to share data only fuel the suspicion that China has something to hide. The release of the findings of the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 30 — and revised on April 6 (<https://bit.ly/3fVDuGH>) — on the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (coronavirus) that dismissed the lab-leak as “extremely unlikely” actually energised the controversy instead of laying it to rest. Subsequently, the WHO Director-General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, called for further studies on the virus origins and said that all hypotheses remained on the table, dismissing the earlier findings as non-definitive. *The WHO findings were tainted because Dr. Daszak, a self-declared partisan of the natural occurrence theory and with a personal financial stake in the WIV experimentation, was included in the inquiry team.* Together with a group of fellow virologists, Dr. Daszak had already declared in February that they stood together to “strongly condemn conspiracy theories” suggesting that the virus did not have a natural, zoonotic origin. *Including him in the WHO investigation team was akin to having a suspect investigate the crime scene.* It is unlikely that U.S. President Joe Biden's call to the U.S. intelligence community — “to collect and analyse information that could bring us closer to a definitive conclusion, and to report back to me in 90 days” — will result in a smoking gun being found. Unfortunately, the available evidence that is scant will compromise a credible forensic examination. Any determination of what went wrong will necessarily be circumstantial.

Present and future dangers

That the coronavirus escaped from the WIV is in fact increasingly plausible. Whether this was a negligent or wilful act can never be proven, but it is evident that the research at the WIV — bioengineering more lethal coronavirus variants — crossed ethical boundaries. *The 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC) — formerly known as the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction — has no systems to verify compliance with its prohibitions, nor any enforcement mechanisms to penalise infringement of its provisions.* These shortcomings have been repeatedly highlighted in the five-yearly Review Conferences of the BWC, but the state parties to the BWC have been unable to agree on any measures to address them, thus compromising on biosecurity and wilful breaches of the Convention. *Smallpox and other viruses*



have escaped from secure laboratories before. Public knowledge is that the U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, and the Russian State Research Centre of Virology and Biotechnology, Koltsovo, are now the only two “official” repositories of smallpox spores, but there have been persistent fears that these have been disseminated, and certain countries are experimenting with genetically modifying them. Smallpox was deadly enough. Its ‘improved’ version might be devastating. The coronavirus research conducted in the WIV for years is an example of science that has run amok, without ethical restraints or any code of conduct for the scientists, who appear to be bereft of any accountability. Such action threatens the very existence of humankind. This is why China’s role requires closer scrutiny.



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