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NO CLEAR WINNER

The German elections are known to be a predictable exercise largely dominated by the Conservatives. But this time, even after the preliminary results are out, there is no clarity about which party would form the coalition and who would succeed Angela Merkel, who had announced her retirement well before the polls. There are now two wannabe Chancellors and two kingmakers, and coalition talks are expected to drag on. The centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) took a narrow lead with 25.7% of the vote, followed by the bloc led by Ms. Merkel's conservative Christian Democrats (CDU), with 24.1%, their lowest vote share. The Greens won 14.8%, their best performance in a national poll, while the liberal, pro-business Free Democrats (FDP) took 11.5%. Olaf Scholz, who put the trailing Socialists in the lead, has claimed victory and shown interest in working with the Greens. Armin Laschet, the Conservative leader, has also promised to put "every effort" to ensure a CDU-led government. That leaves the Greens and the Liberals as kingmakers. Since the Socialists and the Conservatives, currently coalition partners in the Merkel government, will not be together again, the next government is set to be a three-way coalition. Over the last 16 years, Ms. Merkel has been the undisputed face of the CDU and one of Germany's most popular leaders. Her decision to retire has left a vacuum both in the CDU leadership and in German politics. Under the uncharismatic conservative Armin Laschet, the CDU, which ruled 52 of the 72 post-war years of Germany, looked like a pale shadow of itself, while Mr. Scholz, who belongs to the pro-business sections of the Social Democrats, led a campaign focused on social justice, by promising to increase the minimum wage, build affordable houses and raise taxes on the rich. This campaign allowed the Social Democrats to eat into the traditional vote base of the Conservatives. The growing awareness of climate politics led to the rapid and visible rise of the Greens. Mr. Scholz will now seek to bring together the Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals, the so-called 'traffic light' coalition that will have 416 seats, well beyond the 368 needed for majority. But a lot would depend on coalition talks and reaching common ground, as the CDU has also thrown its hat into the ring. When Ms. Merkel took over the reins of Germany in 2005, Europe's largest economy was stalled with high unemployment. She overcame crises, strengthening Germany's economic prowess and transforming its role in Europe. But she also saw German politics getting fragmented and the rise of the neo-Nazi AfD, which got a 10.3% vote share in Sunday's poll. Whoever succeeds Ms. Merkel has their task cut out to offer stable governance, address growing social disquiet and strengthen the EU. And a bigger challenge is to take up this ambitious agenda while leading a three-way coalition.

CHINA SENDS 25 JETS INTO TAIWAN AIR ZONE

Taiwan said 25 Chinese military planes crossed into its defence zone on Friday, the same day that Beijing marked the founding of the People's Republic of China and its biggest incursion there in months. The show of force on China's National Day near the self-ruled democratic island, which Beijing claims as part of its territory, came in the same week it accused Britain of sending a warship to the Taiwan Strait with "evil intentions". Taiwan's Defence Ministry said it scrambled its aircraft to broadcast warnings on Friday after 22 Chinese fighters, two nuclear-capable bombers and one anti-submarine aircraft entered the island's southwest Air Defence

Identification Zone (ADIZ). China often sends military aircraft into Taiwan's air defence zone to display displeasure and *last week it flew 24 planes into the zone after Taiwan applied to join a major trans-Pacific trade pact. China's authoritarian leaders have vowed to one day seize Taiwan, by force if necessary. It has ramped up pressure on Taipei since the 2016 election of President Tsai Ing-wen, who views the island as "already independent".*

Continuous incursions

Last year, Chinese military jets made a record 380 incursions into Taiwan's defence zone, and the number of incursions for the first nine months of this year has already exceeded 500. The incursion on Friday was the biggest since 28 jets breached Taiwan's ADIZ on June 15. It came after Britain sent a warship through the Taiwan Strait on Monday for the first time since 2008, a move that challenged Beijing's claim to the sensitive waterway and marked a rare voyage by a non-U.S. military vessel. The Chinese People's Liberation Army's Eastern Theatre Command lashed out at the voyage, accusing Britain of acting out of "evil intentions to sabotage peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait". U.S. warships regularly conduct "freedom of navigation" exercises in the waterway separating Taiwan and mainland China, triggering angry responses from Beijing.

WILL AUKUS UPSET THE INDO-PACIFIC BALANCE?

On September 15, U.S. President Joe Biden, along with Prime Ministers Scott Morrison and Boris Johnson of Australia and the U.K. respectively, announced the formation of a new trilateral security partnership called AUKUS (Australia-U.K.-U.S.). Its stated aim is to "update and enhance our shared ability to take on the threats of the 21st century just as we did in the 20th century: together," according to Mr. Biden.

What are the terms of the grouping?

The summit announcement specifically referenced its intent for AUKUS to preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific in the long term. Unsurprisingly, it drew a sharp response from China, whose territorial ambitions across the Indo-Pacific may well have been a key factor behind the formation of this group. Beijing's consternation that AUKUS will "undermine" regional peace and "intensify" an arms race likely stems from the cornerstone of AUKUS: a proposal whereby the U.S. and the U.K. will transfer technology to build a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines for Australia within 18 months. A parallel development in the submarine deal was the rupture in diplomatic relations between France and the members of AUKUS because Canberra cancelled a lucrative $90-billion conventional submarine purchase order placed with Paris and opted instead for the nuclear-powered, but not nuclear-armed, submarine fleet.

Will AUKUS be a game changer?

The short answer is that it is unlikely, and the reasons are several. First, the U.S., as a leading global military power, already has a strong presence in the Indo-Pacific, especially in a grouping that includes Australia, India, and Japan — the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad. This involves joint military presence, and a wide array of war games and more in the region. Similarly, the U.S., the U.K., Australia, Canada, and New Zealand are members of Five Eyes, an intelligence-sharing alliance, which also has regional security implications. It is unclear what additional signalling

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could be achieved through the new trilateral security arrangement that does not fall within the ambit of the Quad, or in the economic realm by deepening the close ties between Washington and ASEAN. This assessment is consistent with India's response to the creation of AUKUS, which saw Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla say, "From our perspective, this is neither relevant to the Quad nor will it have any impact on its functioning." Secondly, AUKUS will not likely deter Beijing's strategic calculus across the region, particularly relating to its maritime ambitions and territorial expansionism. The one element of AUKUS that has potential to cause a recalibration of China's plans in this realm is the nuclear-powered submarines. The countries that have such submarines operational are the U.S. (68), Russia (29), China (12) the U.K. (11), France (8) and India (1). Given this balance, which implies Chinese dominance across the Indo-Pacific, the effect of AUKUS facilitating the development of a nuclear fleet for Australia may tip the scales the wrong way, perhaps by heightening Beijing's anxiety over its nuclear-powered submarine fleet. Should this fuel an arms race in the region, it will raise the stakes over strategic flashpoints such as the South China Sea and Taiwan.

Does India stand to gain from this development?

Notwithstanding its professed indifference towards AUKUS and stronger reliance on the Quad, New Delhi may indeed derive secondary benefits from having three advanced nations with arguably the most sophisticated military know-how in the world coming together to support a free and open Indo-Pacific. Given the inroads that Beijing has made in recent decades with its Belt and Road Initiative, including through projects or proposals for infrastructure development in Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and beyond into Central Asia, fears in South Block over 'encirclement' by China may be partially mitigated by AUKUS. The catch, however, is that it would likely be well over a decade before the submarine construction plans in Adelaide come to fruition and Australia operationalises a nuclear-powered fleet. To what extent and in what direction the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific would have shifted by then remains to be seen. From New Delhi's perspective, the business-as-usual approach is the best answer to such ambiguities: it implies that India will work with the transnational institutional arrangements in place, roping in like-minded nations into symbiotic partnerships, and calibrate future alliance plans to evolving security situations across one of the most complex strategic ecosystems in the world.

THE QUAD COULD END UP RUNNING OUT OF STEAM

Coming on the eve of the first in-person Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) summit in Washington DC, the new Australia-U.K.-U.S. (AUKUS) trilateral security partnership appears to be sending a subtle message to the Quad: shape up or become irrelevant. The announcement of the AUKUS and the recent outcome of the Quad summit indicate that AUKUS will go on to form a key security arrangement of the Indo-Pacific region, thereby potentially forcing the Quad to recede to the background in a struggle for attention, political will, and resources. But before we get to the implications of AUKUS on the Quad, let us briefly examine how AUKUS is also useful to the Quad.

A reassurance to allies

Still reeling under intense international criticism in the way the United States withdrew its forces from Afghanistan resulting in a humanitarian disaster, AUKUS seeks to unambiguously signal U.S. President Joe Biden's commitment to U.S. allies especially in the Indo-Pacific. In some ways,

AUKUS helps reassure its allies of the U.S.'s security commitments and underlines Washington's pivot to the Indo-Pacific. Second, the deal and particularly the sharing of American nuclear submarine technology with Australia will help Canberra overcome past hesitations about taking on China with more conviction. Third, notwithstanding the point that AUKUS may set alarm bells ringing for the Quad, AUKUS is still a shot in the arm for the larger Indo-Pacific agenda of which India, the U.S., Japan, Australia, among others, are key partners. In other words, AUKUS will help the Quad's declared aim of keeping the Indo-Pacific region free, open and inclusive thereby contributing to its core agenda.

No replacement, but...

AUKUS may not replace the Quad and yet it appears that AUKUS has ventured where the Quad has been reluctant to make forays into — the military domain. More so, AUKUS also exposes the inherent, also self-imposed, limits of the Quad, i.e., its inability and lack of desire to give itself any military role. The focus of the recently-held Washington summit, on challenges ranging from COVID-19 to climate shows that the Quad is unlikely to take a security-dominated turn; that is precisely the vacuum AUKUS seeks to fill. The larger question then is whether the Quad is losing its steam. For sure, the Quad seems to offer no clear purpose which, as a result, leads to too many items crowding the agenda. It neither has a secretariat or a charter, like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), nor a clear set of activities such as AUKUS. The ever-growing list of focal areas of the Quad will eventually make it a less than useful deliberative forum. Put differently, with too many items on its agenda, the Quad faces the danger of becoming a talk shop with very little actual work. What is ironic is that all the Quad members have security/military considerations in mind vis-à-vis China while engaging the Quad platform, but no one seems to be keen on framing it in such a manner, as is evidenced by the summit's joint statement (North Korea and Myanmar find mention in the statement though, not China). There is little interest in properly institutionalising the Quad nor has the objective for 'Quad Plus' been purposefully pursued. Let me put this somewhat differently: Indo-Pacific remains a grand strategic vision, AUKUS has the potential to become a major military/security arrangement in the Indo-Pacific, and the Quad/Quad Plus could end up becoming a talk shop within the Indo-Pacific.

New Delhi's hesitations

New Delhi has taken the stand that "there is no link between the AUKUS and the Quad" just as it had argued earlier that there is no link between the Malabar naval exercises and the Quad even though the Quad membership is replicated in the Malabar exercises and two-thirds of the AUKUS form 50% of the Quad. Technically, New Delhi's stand is accurate — just because there is a striking similarity in the membership of these forums, they are not the same institutional architecture. And yet, if one were to go beyond such technicalities, it is evident that these groupings share a larger vision about the Indo-Pacific, i.e., addressing the challenge from China, and the desire for an open and free Indo-Pacific. Be it AUKUS, which enables Australia to stand up to Chinese bullying or provides the United Kingdom — its aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, the flagship of the U.K.'s Carrier Strike Group, is in the region — with a more prominent, and desirable, role in the Indo-Pacific or the annual Malabar exercises which focus on the Indo-Pacific or the Quad, their common geopolitical theatre is the Indo-Pacific. So while they are not technically related to each other, there is a broader reality that unites them all. There is no point in refusing to accept that self-evident reality. There is also little doubt today that the Indo-Pacific is of great importance to

India for a number of reasons. For one, given the continental challenges it faces including from the new developments in Afghanistan, New Delhi would do well to shift some attention to the maritime sphere. Second, at a time when India is continentally pressed against a rock and a hard place, an opportunity has presented itself for India — in the form of growing global interest in the Indo-Pacific — to be at the centre of a new geopolitical churning which it must make use of for its own security and prosperity. Third, it is also a major way of bringing together like-minded states to check Chinese hegemony in the region. Given this context, if AUKUS potentially overshadows the enthusiasm around the Quad, it would be disadvantageous to India's interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Other Quad counties are either on the AUKUS or are alliance partners; India is neither. Eventually, therefore, the Quad faces the potential challenge of becoming a talking shop without an actionable mandate. More so, bereft of any defence arrangement, the material returns from the Quad over time would also be minimal.

Indo-Pacific engagement

This situation is made worse by India's hesitation about joining major regional economic frameworks. India, for instance, is neither a member of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership nor can its trade relations with the Indo-Pacific countries rival those of China. So, given our rather weak economic influence and performance in the Indo-Pacific region, what might help the country is being part of a security arrangement which can take care of its regional defence/security concerns. Even before AUKUS, India's current engagement of the Indo-Pacific was neither capable of contributing to its national security nor promoting its economic influence in the region. And now, AUKUS may have further shrunk the potential space available for the Quad, and India, to play a serious role in the region's security architecture.

Sources of India's hesitations

Even though it is not just New Delhi which is hesitant about the Quad venturing into the security/military domain, India has been hesitant about the Quad moving beyond the non-military issues. So, what are the sources of New Delhi's hesitation regarding a robust role for the Quad in the security/military domain? One could advance two hypotheses in this regard. One, India's traditional reluctance about military alliances and the desire to maintain strategic autonomy. New Delhi fears that militarising the Quad could undo this jealously guarded tradition. It is, however, possible to explore military utility for the Quad without making it a formal military alliance. More so, exploring mutually beneficial military and security cooperation within the Quad framework need not contradict the principles of strategic autonomy. The operative part of 'strategic autonomy' is autonomy, not strategic. The second hypothesis has to do with domestic political considerations: The Narendra Modi government is keen to avoid any military overtones for the Quad due to potential Chinese reactions to it. Recall how India and Australia had for many years soft-peddled the forum for fear of provoking China. Australia seems to have overcome its hesitation, but has India done so? For the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government, any heat on the Line of Actual Control with China in the run-up to crucial State elections next year and then the 2024 parliamentary election would be unwelcome. This seems, therefore, to be a case of domestic political considerations trumping the pursuit of strategic necessities.

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PAKISTAN HOME TO 12 FOREIGN TERRORIST OUTFITS: US CONGRESSIONAL REPORT

Pakistan is home to at least 12 groups designated as 'foreign terrorist organisations' by the US, including five of them being India-centric like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), according to the latest Congressional report on terrorism. US officials have identified Pakistan as a base of operations or target for numerous armed and non-state militant groups, some of which have existed since the 1980s, the independent Congressional Research Service (CRS) said in the report. The report, 'Terrorist and Other Militant Groups in Pakistan', released by the bipartisan research wing of US Congress on the eve of the historic Quad summit hosted by US President Joe Biden at the White House last week, said that these groups operating in Pakistan can be broadly categorised into five types — globally-oriented, Afghanistan oriented, India- and Kashmir-oriented, domestically oriented, and Sectarian (anti-Shia). The Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET) was formed in the late 1980s in Pakistan and designated as a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO) in 2001. "LET was responsible for major 2008 attacks in Mumbai, India, as well as numerous other high-profile attacks," the CRS said. Jaish-e-Mohammed (JEM) was founded in 2000 by Kashmiri militant leader Masood Azhar and was designated as an FTO in 2001. Along with LET, it was responsible for the 2001 attack on the Indian parliament, among other attacks, it said. JEM also has openly declared war on the United States, it noted. Harakat-ul Jihad Islami (HUJI) was formed in 1980 in Afghanistan to fight the Soviet army and was designated as an FTO in 2010. After 1989, it redirected its efforts toward India, although it did supply fighters to the Afghan Taliban. "With an unknown strength, HUJI today operates in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, and seeks annexation of Kashmir into Pakistan," the report said, adding that HUM was designated as an FTO in 1997 and operates mainly from Pak-Occupied Kashmir and from some Pakistani cities. Finally, Hizb-ul Mujahideen (HM) was formed in 1989 reportedly as the "militant wing of Pakistan's largest Islamist political party" and designated as an FTO in 2017. It is one of the largest and oldest militant groups operating in Jammu and Kashmir. Among other terrorist groups operating from Pakistan are Al Qaeda, CRS said, adding that it has operated primarily from the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas and in the megacity of Karachi, as well as in Afghanistan. It has since 2011 been led by Ayman al-Zawahiri and reportedly maintains supportive ties with many of the groups inside the country. CRS said according to the US State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism 2019, Pakistan has "continued to serve as a safe haven for certain regionally focused terrorist groups," and has "allowed groups targeting Afghanistan ... as well as groups targeting India ...to operate from its territory". Pakistan's neighbours, including Afghanistan and India, and the US have long accused Islamabad of providing safe haven and support to militants.

HIDDEN DEBT RISING FOR PARTNERS OF CHINA'S BRI PLAN

A new study has found under-reported debts to the tune of $385 billion in projects carried out in dozens of countries under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with a rise in "hidden" debt on account of an increasing number of deals struck not directly between governments but structured through often opaque arrangements with a range of financing institutions. The study by AidData, a development research lab at the College of William & Mary in the U.S., found that "Chinese debt burdens are substantially larger than research institutions, credit rating agencies, or intergovernmental organisations with surveillance responsibilities previously understood" and

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"42 countries now have levels of public debt exposure to China in excess of 10% of GDP." The total debt, the study added, was "systematically under-reported to the World Bank's Debtor Reporting System (DRS) because, in many cases, central government institutions in LMICs [low and middle income countries] are not the primary borrowers responsible for repayment". It estimated that the average government "is under-reporting its actual and potential repayment obligations to China by an amount that is equivalent to 5.8% of its GDP" and "collectively, these under-reported debts are worth approximately $385 billion." The report studied 13,427 projects across 165 countries worth $843 billion, in the time period from 2000 to 2017, and examined how President Xi Jinping's BRI plan, launched in 2013, has changed China's overseas lending. The big difference between China and other prominent sources of overseas financing was that Chinese banks have used "debt rather than aid to establish a dominant position in the international development finance market". Since the introduction of the BRI, China "maintained a 31- to-1 ratio of loans to grants and a 9-to-1 ratio of Other Official Flows (OOF) to Official Development Assistance (ODA)", although Chinese agencies sometimes do not differentiate between loans and grants in public statements of financial assistance. The report found the average loan from China has a 4.2% interest rate, a grace period of less than two years, and a maturity length of less than 10 years.

Biggest recipients

From 2000 to 2017, Iraq ($8.5 billion), North Korea ($7.17 billion) and Ethiopia ($6.57) were the biggest recipients of ODA, while Russia ($151.8 billion), Venezuela ($ 81.96 billion) and Angola ($50.47 billion) were the biggest recipients of Chinese loans. India ranked 23rd in the list of top recipients of Chinese loans from 2000 to 2017, receiving $8.86 billion, according to the report. What has, however, led to many countries, such as Nepal and Sri Lanka in South Asia, turning to Chinese loans at higher interest rates is the lack of financing options elsewhere for infrastructure projects. This has seen a surge in lending from Chinese institutions over the past two decades. What has changed under the BRI, the study found, was that while earlier most overseas lending involved central government institutions, now nearly 70% of China's overseas lending is now directed to state-owned companies, state-owned banks, special purpose vehicles, joint ventures, and private sector institutions. These debts "do not appear on government balance sheets in LMICs" although "most of them benefit from explicit or implicit forms of host government liability protection, which has blurred the distinction between private and public debt and introduced major public financial management challenges for LMICs." The other change with the BRI is the rising number of "mega projects" (worth $500 million or more), which has prompted Chinese banks to work through lending syndicates and financing arrangements to share the risk. The share of projects thus co-financed accounts for 32%, and is another reason behind the debt being "hidden".

Scandals, corruption

The report found that Chinese institutions use collateralisation to mitigate risk, for instance with loans collateralised against future commodity export receipts to minimise repayment risk, or later priced at higher interest rates, up to 6%. The report said 35% of the BRI infrastructure project portfolio has encountered major implementation problems, such as corruption scandals or labour violations, with Pakistan topping the list of countries with the most number of projects hit by scandals and corruption.

A LESSON FROM CHINA ON GIG WORKERS' RIGHTS

On September 20, 2021, the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers, on behalf of gig workers, filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court demanding that the Union government provide succour to workers affected by the pandemic. The petition has asked for 'gig workers' and 'platform workers' to be declared as 'unorganised workers' so they come under the purview of the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008. In short, the petition demands social security benefits from food delivery platforms such as Zomato and Swiggy and taxi aggregator apps such as Ola and Uber. That same week, China strode ahead in this regard. Owing to public pressure, two of its food delivery platforms, Meituan and Ele.me, committed to end the practice of forcing workers to register as 'independent businesses', which has long helped these platforms evade responsibilities as employers. Both platforms run a duopoly in the sector, capturing over 90% of the market share, and employ millions of gig workers. In a notice to labour aggregator partners, Meituan said it prohibited signing on delivery workers "through deceptive or coercive means".

'Invisible' to 'frontline'

The one major factor that the pandemic has helped change is the erstwhile 'invisibility' of delivery workers. Through 2020, a trend that spanned China, India, the U.S. and Europe saw 'invisible workers' being propelled to 'frontline workers'. In China, this was especially the case in Wuhan, the pandemic's epicentre, where there was a clear transition of social discourse in favour of delivery workers. People's Daily, the largest state-affiliated daily in China, responded to public sentiment by ranking delivery work among the top 10 occupations. The media aided this transformation. In the fall of 2020, Renwu, a monthly Chinese magazine, took an exhaustive look at the plight of delivery workers across the two food delivery platforms. Titled 'Delivery Riders, Trapped in the System', the article was shared over 200 million times on the Chinese internet indicating how deeply Chinese social media users connected with the issue. One indicator of how seriously an issue is taken by the public is its virality on the Chinese web. In 2015, for instance, a TED-style talk on China's pollution crisis got 100 million views across major video streaming sites within 48 hours of its release, resulting in policy change. The Renwu piece highlighted how delivery workers were trapped in a "sophisticated labour control system" that they had unwittingly downloaded onto their phones. Simply put, the algorithm that is put in place by platforms is designed to create animosity between app users and workers, where the platform inherently shifts the pressure of receiving orders and maintaining smooth flow of deliveries onto the workers. But it is important to note that the pushback against influential platforms had begun long before COVID-19. Over the years, strikes in different parts of China have reflected this growing backlash. As food delivery platforms expanded through the pandemic period, growing massively in revenue and scale, strikes increased in numerous Chinese cities and have continued despite various barriers to collective action. In early 2021, in successive strikes spanning over two months, delivery workers protested against poor working conditions. In cities such as Shenzhen, Tongxiang and Linyi, delivery workers protested against new company policies that slashed their pay per delivery. A protest in Taizhou saw a delivery worker set himself on fire demanding unpaid wages. In 2018, an Associate Professor of Sociology at Harvard University, Ya-Wen Lei, documented strikes in Chongqing, a municipality in southwest China. She found that workers had mobilised through social media and offline meetings. They united to protest against "decreasing

piece rates" and "unilateral change of contract terms or platform rules". At the time of her fieldwork, the Chinese state had not intervened in the market to restrain the monopoly powers of platforms or initiate antitrust investigations. This provided platforms with unrestricted powers to exercise technological control. But the pandemic was curious in this regard. It began with the Chinese state indicating that platforms should help soak up the devastating effects of the pandemic on the workforce. And it ended with the state asserting "increased control" over major tech companies, including Meituan for allegedly abusing its dominant market position, via the new anti-monopolistic guidelines. In China, where the government is now focused on "common prosperity", which seeks to narrow a widening wealth gap that threatens the country's economic rise, the government's scrutiny over food delivery platforms has increased. The authoritarian context, a weak civil society and the absence of independent labour unions leaves gig workers in China with very little option but to go on strike or protest, despite the risks, to affect change. In April, Caixin reported that a government official disguised himself as a Meituan driver and worked a 12-hour shift barely making RMB 41 ($6.32) for a day's work. He was featured in a television programme in Beijing and stated that the experience left him feeling humiliated. In July, seven government agencies jointly passed guidelines directing online food delivery platforms that they should not set evaluation criteria based on optimisation algorithms, must respect the rights of delivery workers and ensure that they earn at least a minimum wage with social insurance. Many of these government initiatives have been public-driven. It was in the government's interest to intervene when it realised that there was growing discontent not only among the delivery workers but also the public about their plight.

The Indian context

The situation is vastly different in India. Any reform in this sector is led wholly by delivery workers, not the public. For 27 days in 2020, close to 3,000 delivery workers from Swiggy went on strike in Hyderabad to protest the slash in remuneration from ₹35 to ₹15 per order. The strikes disbanded only after the Joint Commissioner of the Labour Department called a hearing with the platform's operations manager and the workers' union. It was the first time in India that such a negotiation was taking place, that too on the street. This year, in the lead up to Zomato's July IPO, several anonymous Twitter accounts set up by delivery workers called customers' attention to what they deem as "exploitative practices" employed by platforms. The PIL in the Supreme Court is another major step in this regard. The biggest lesson from China is the swell of public opinion that has partly led to government regulation and change in company policy. In the U.S., a gig workers collective has urged customers to delete the Instacart app as a show of solidarity until demands for better working conditions are met. Indians could make an effort to be better informed about the way platforms work by seeking out delivery workers and asking about their work conditions and the pressures they face. We will then be aware of the price that a person, who we only see as a miniature bike on our apps, pays for our convenience.

CHANGE OF GUARD

The election of Fumio Kishida as the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leader opens a new chapter in Japan's otherwise status-quoist politics at a time when its geopolitical prominence is growing amid China's rapid rise and the United States' pivot to the region. Mr. Kishida, a former Foreign Minister, is certain to be elected the next Prime Minister when Parliament convenes next

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week, as the LDP controls the legislature. Japan was thrown into a leadership contest after the unpopular Prime Minister, Yoshihide Suga, announced his resignation earlier this month amid mounting public anger over his government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated economic woes. The traditionally conservative, pro-business LDP, which has dominated Japan's post-war politics, was apparently not confident of going to the parliamentary polls in November under the leadership of Mr. Suga; his approval rating had plunged from 60% in January to below 30% in August. In the initial round of the voting on Wednesday among four candidates to lead the party, Mr. Kishida was neck-and-neck with Taro Kono, a serving Minister in the Suga government, who enjoyed higher popularity among the party's rank and file. But in the run-off, most legislators supported Mr. Kishida, who had the backing of the LDP establishment. Mr. Kishida's most immediate big task is leading the party to the parliamentary elections within weeks. With the COVID situation easing, the LDP appears to be confident of victory under the new leadership. But winning elections would only be the first of a host of key challenges awaiting Mr. Kishida. He needs to come up with a programme to lift the world's third largest economy out of its sluggishness. Even when the U.S. and China had surged back to growth after COVID lockdowns, Japan's economy continued to falter under the long national emergency declared to fight the virus. Despite the LDP's conservative past, Mr. Kishida had taken a centre-left position on the economy during the campaign. He promised increased spending to revive the economy and asked corporations to distribute more of their profits to middle-class workers. What is to be seen is whether these were instances of mere election-time rhetoric or if Mr. Kishida would turn them into policies to address Japan's economic woes and widening inequality. A tougher challenge would be in the realm of foreign policy. After announcing the AUKUS alliance with the U.K. and Australia, under which Australia would be supplied nuclear submarines, the U.S. has made it clear that the Indo-Pacific is the new theatre of great power rivalry. Japan, an American ally in the Pacific with deep economic ties with China, would find it difficult to sit on the fence for long. Mr. Kishida, who called Taiwan "a frontline in the struggle by democracies against authoritarianism" and supported building Japan's missile-strike capability, has already indicated which direction he would be taking on China. If he walks the talk, tensions are going to rise in East Asia.

TALIBAN TO 'TEMPORARILY' ADOPT 1964 MONARCHY CONSTITUTION

The Taliban said on Tuesday they will temporarily adopt a 1964 Constitution that granted women the right to vote, but eliminate any elements they disagree with. The Taliban's Acting Justice Minister issued a statement saying the Islamists planned to introduce a Constitution used during Afghanistan's short-lived golden age of democracy, but only briefly and with amendments. "The Islamic Emirate will adopt the Constitution of the former King Mohammad Zahir Shah's time for a temporary period," Mawlavi Abdul Hakim Sharaee said. But anything in the text found to be in conflict with Sharia law and the principles of the Islamic Emirate would be discarded, he added. Nearly six decades ago, before the world's superpowers intervened in the country, Afghanistan enjoyed a brief period of constitutional monarchy during the reign of King Mohammad Zahir Shah. The king ratified the Constitution a year after coming to power in 1963, ushering in nearly a decade of parliamentary democracy before he was overthrown in 1973. The 1964 Constitution, which gave women the right to vote for the first time and opened the doors for their increased participation in politics, would appear an awkward fit with the Taliban's hardline views. The group, which took over power in mid-August, has vowed a softer and more inclusive approach

than during their brutal 1996 to 2001 rule. But when they presented their caretaker government earlier this month, all the top positions went to hardliners and no women were included.

ICELAND ELECTS EUROPE'S FIRST WOMEN-MAJORITY PARLIAMENT

Iceland on Sunday became the first country in Europe to have more women than men in Parliament, a day after a general election that saw the left-right coalition win a clear majority. Of the 63 seats in the Althing parliament, 33 were won by women, or 52%, projections based on the final results showed on Sunday. No other European country has had more than 50% women lawmakers, with Sweden coming closest at 47%, according to data compiled by the World Bank. Around the world, five other countries currently have Parliaments where women hold at least half the seats, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union: Rwanda (61%), Cuba (53%), Nicaragua (51%) and Mexico and the United Arab Emirates (50%).

No quota

Unlike some other countries, Iceland does not have legal quotas on female representation in Parliament, though some parties do require a minimum number of candidates be women. The Nordic country has long been a pioneer in gender equality and women's rights, and has topped the World Economic Forum's ranking of most egalitarian countries for the past 12 years. Iceland was the first country to elect a woman as President in 1980. While Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir's left-right coalition won a majority in Saturday's vote, it remained to be seen whether the three parties would continue to govern together. The coalition has brought Iceland four years of stability after a decade of political crises, but Ms. Jakobsdottir's Left-Green Movement emerged weakened after losing ground to its right-wing partners, which both posted strong showings. The Left-Green Movement, the conservative Independence Party and the centre-right Progressive Party together won 37 of 63 seats in Parliament, up from the 33 they held before the vote. But the Left-Green Movement itself won only eight seats, three fewer than in 2017, raising questions about Ms. Jakobsdottir's future as Prime Minister.

Eyeing the top job

The largest party remained the Independence Party, whose leader Bjarni Benediktsson — the current Finance Minister and a former PM — has been eyeing Ms. Jakobsdottir's job. It won almost a quarter of votes and hung on to its 16 seats. However, the election's big winner was the centre-right Progressive Party, which gained five seats to 13. After four years of concessions on all sides to keep the peace within the coalition, it is conceivable that the two right-wing parties may want to try to form a government without the Left Greens.

PUNCHING UP

Manny Pacquiao is quick on his feet, has great instincts, formidable power both to his right and left and a knock-out one-two combo. Push the boxing metaphors far enough, and you have the makings of a political campaign. Pacquiao (42) who registered as a presidential candidate for the 2022 elections in the Philippines and announced his retirement from professional boxing earlier this week, is undoubtedly one of the greatest pound-for-pound fighters of all time. But in the political arena, it's all that much harder to go the distance. And like in the boxing ring, no one

wants the decisions to go to the judges. It's not as though Pacquiao is a complete novice to Philippines politics, or is merely trading on his fame as a sportsperson. He has served as a senator and was once close to outgoing President Rodrigo Duterte. Recently, though, Pacquiao has been vocal about the alleged misappropriation of relief funds meant for the poor in the aftermath of the pandemic as well as Duterte's "cosy" relationship with China. That Duterte is contesting for the post of vice-president on a different ticket (the Philippines constitution bars him from being president for six years) makes it seem that he is trying to circumvent the rules in order to retain power. In an era of populist strongmen, a boxer — who is also a national hero and international icon — certainly has a fighting chance. Besides, Pacquiao has, literally, punched his way out of poverty, which gives his slogans some credibility. Given that Pacquiao is oscillating between third and fourth position in opinion polls at the moment, his task is cut out for him. His real challenge, though, will be to provide the people of the Philippines with an alternative to the violent, populist government of his one-time political ally. But then, boxers — far more than politicians — know the importance of the rules of the game.

SWISS VOTERS SAY BIG 'YES' TO SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Nearly two-thirds of Swiss voters backed the government's plan to introduce same-sex marriage in a referendum held on Sunday, with campaigners calling it a historic day for gay rights in Switzerland. With results in from 20 of the wealthy Alpine nation's 23 cantons, 64% of voters backed the move, on a 52% turnout. Switzerland was one of the last countries in western Europe where same-sex marriage remained illegal. The government's "marriage for all" proposals were challenged by opponents, who successfully triggered a referendum. "The Swiss have dropped a massive 'yes' into the ballot box," Olga Baranova, a spokeswoman for the "yes" committee, said. She was at a restaurant in the Swiss capital Bern hosting the "yes" campaign's celebrations — decked out in balloons in the rainbow colours — where drag artist Mona Gamie sang Edith Piaf's "Hymn to Love" to rapturous applause. "Today does not change my country," Ms. Baranova said. "Today reflects the change of mentality over the last 20 years. It is really the reflection of a very broad and very important acceptance of LGBT people in society." Switzerland decriminalised homosexuality in 1942, but numerous local and regional police forces continued to keep "gay registers", some into the early 1990s. Same-sex couples can already register a civil partnership, with around 700 established each year.

HOW WILL COVISHIELD NOD IMPACT TRAVEL TO U.K.?

The United Kingdom updated its travel guidelines for international travel this week, saying that from October 4, the U.K. will recognise passengers vaccinated in the U.S., the U.K. and Europe, and 17 other jurisdictions (16 countries and Taiwan), which do not include India. Adding to the measures, against which India protested, the U.K. amended the guidelines ensuring that passengers from those named countries who had taken the India-made Covishield vaccine would be allowed entry without having to be tested or undergoing the mandatory 10-day quarantine, but Indians who have taken the vaccine in India would still need to go through both.

Is the U.K. rule discriminatory?

The U.K. guidelines, originally put out this week, were not just discriminatory but also contradictory. The beneficiaries of the new rule would be the allies of the U.K., like European countries and the United States, as well as the named 17 jurisdictions: Australia, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Bahrain, Brunei, Canada, Dominica, Israel, Japan, Kuwait, Malaysia, New Zealand, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan (https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-changes-international-travel-rules-4-october). Many of these countries still have COVID-19 cases, and all don't have higher vaccination rates than India. What made the rules particularly confusing was that many of these countries have accepted India's Serum Institute-made AstraZeneca variant Covishield, including the U.K. itself that received five million doses. Officials said Covishield was not the problem, but the U.K. had questions about India's CoWIN certification process.

What are the concerns?

U.K. High Commissioner Alexander Ellis didn't spell out the specific concerns, but said British and India officials are in talks to discuss the interoperability of the CoWIN app, which holds the database of vaccinated Indians, with the U.K. NHS app. This has raised speculation that there are questions in the U.K. about the authenticity of CoWIN data, a contention that Indian officials have rejected outright, saying more than 50 countries worldwide have reportedly expressed an interest in adopting CoWIN technology. However, more questions were raised after the government announced a record 2.5 crore vaccinations on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's birthday, which does not match the demonstrated Indian capacity on other days. By the end of the week, both the U.K. and Indian officials said their teams had no "technical concerns" over the process, but the U.K. guidelines still haven't been amended for Indians as the government had hoped. If the issue is not resolved in the coming week, the guidelines will come into place from October 4.

What was India's reaction?

The government called the British decision "discriminatory" and lodged strong protests in Delhi, London and New York, where External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar met his U.K. counterpart Elizabeth Truss on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly and warned of reciprocal measures against the U.K. India mandates travel under an "air travel bubble" arrangement, but accepts mostly Indian citizens and OCI (U.K. nationals of Indian-origin) on flights into India. It also has a separate rule for passengers from the U.K., who must undergo RT-PCR tests and 14 days of home quarantine when they arrive, and it remains to be seen what further reprisals India would wish to take if the U.K. doesn't resolve the issue (https://www.civilaviation.gov.in/en/about-air-transport-bubbles
https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/Guidelinesforinternationalarrivals17022021.pdf). Significantly, the government has also diluted its earlier position, wherein it demanded that the U.K. and other countries not only recognise Covishield, which has World Health Organization (WHO) approval, but that they recognise all Indian vaccines like Covaxin that are certified by Indian processes.

How does this impact India-U.K. ties?

India and the U.K. are in the process of talks on upgrading ties, including their strategic partnership, negotiating a trade agreement, and discussing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, and

the current controversy makes for bad optics, particularly since it involves the Covishield vaccine, once hailed as a symbol of U.K.-India collaboration with British technology and Indian manufacturing. If unresolved, the issue could also overshadow an expected visit by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to India in the next few months. His previously scheduled visits in January and then April this year had to be cancelled owing to COVID-19 outbreaks in India and the U.K.

GRAIN DIPLOMACY

There was a time when the US used food aid as a powerful diplomacy tool to contain hunger-induced discontent that, it feared, could trigger communist revolutions in underdeveloped countries. Successive post-World War II administrations made the Food for Peace programme, better known as PL-480, a cornerstone of US foreign assistance. India alone imported nearly 24 million tonnes (mt) of wheat under PL-480 during 1964-66. The US even supplied some 9.1 mt of subsidised wheat and corn to the Soviet Union in 1973, whose ideological significance wasn't lost on anybody. For the US, food shipments, on concessional or outright grant terms, served both as a bulwark against communism and a means to relieve its massive farm surpluses. John F Kennedy estimated that it cost 20 cents a year to store a bushel of wheat and 38 cents to ship the same grain to India. Exporting grain free, then, was cheaper than stocking beyond two years. The same opportunity — what Kennedy called "turning our great agricultural abundance into a blessing, for ourselves and for all the world" — presents itself, albeit in a smaller manner, to India today. At 90.41 mt as on September 1, the country's public stocks of wheat and rice were the highest ever for this date, with the new paddy arrivals from October only going to add to these. Moreover, the stock pileup has taken place, despite a record 93 mt-plus grain offtake from the Central pool during 2020-21, much of it given out free/near-free post the pandemic. With government agencies procuring over 103 mt last year, the quantities flowing into the Food Corporation of India's warehouses are far in excess of that going out. The "carrying cost" — interest, storage and other expenses — of the excess buffer has been estimated at Rs 5,589 per tonne for 2021-22. Clearly, there is economic as well as diplomatic sense in donating or bartering this surplus grain abroad. And where better to do it than in our immediate neighbourhood? Afghanistan is now facing an acute food crisis from a combination of prolonged drought, regime change and associated instability. Sri Lanka, too, is grappling with food shortages, worsened by dwindling foreign currency reserves. What stops India from offering, say, 2 mt of wheat to Afghanistan as humanitarian aid and one mt of rice to Sri Lanka against payment in local currency similar to that under PL-480? Wheat can only be eaten or, at worst, diverted as animal feed. There should be no moral compunction, hence, in supplying it even to a regime that India cannot recognise. Grain diplomacy — a simple message that nobody in South Asia shall starve while we are here — can be symbolic of the New India: One that cares and matters to the world.

WORDS AND DEEDS

For the third consecutive year in a row, and his fourth such speech since he was elected in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the UN General Assembly, outlining his outlook on India's place in the world. Referring to India's large population, he said that the world grows when India grows, and transforms when India reforms, pointing to examples of the country's progress and impact: in the area of vaccines and pharmaceuticals, particularly to counter COVID, green technology and the promise of 450 GW of renewable energy by 2030, and poverty alleviation. He

also enumerated how many Indians had been provided water connections, banking access, insurance coverage, health services and homes, although his claim that these "all-inclusive" development goals had been achieved only in the "last seven years", struck a politically partisan note that was out of place. Moving to regional matters, Mr. Modi pointed to the contrast between India's actions and those of Pakistan and China in veiled references. In an apparent message to Pakistan, he linked events in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have taken control, to the problem of "regressive thinking" that leads to the use of terrorism as "a political tool". He also called for safeguarding the maritime sphere from the "race of expansion and exclusion" and referred to the need for investigating the "origins of the coronavirus", subjects China is sensitive about. Addressing the UN directly for its own shortcomings, the PM said that time waits for no one, urging the UN to speed up the reforms process that has been flagging for more than a decade, which would include an expanded Security Council. This, he explained, is the only way to restore the credibility of global governance institutions. Mr. Modi's strongest words came at the beginning of his speech, where he launched a defence of the state of Indian democracy, which has come in for some criticism over the past few years. He said India had been named the "mother of democracy" for its adherence to democratic values, symbolised by its diversity, pluralism, inclusivity, and equality, that allowed someone like him, who had once worked at his father's tea stall, to become the country's leader. The PM's words appeared to be a response to comments made during his Washington visit, where U.S. President Joe Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris stressed the need to strengthen democratic processes internally. Even as he addressed the UN, protesters outside criticised his government for actions against activists, NGOs, the laws on agriculture and citizenship, and incidents of lynching and mob violence. While the PM's commitment to India's "great tradition of democracy" was heartening, it will be measured not by words at the world body, but by answers and actions on the ground in India.

BIDEN'S REMARKS ON INDIAN PRESS SPARK ROW AT WHITE HOUSE BRIEFING

The American and Indian press became part of the news last week, after President Joe Biden suggested, before journalists were allowed into the Oval Office on Friday for a 'press spray', that he and Prime Minister Narendra Modi not take questions and that the Indian press was "much better behaved" than the American press. "The Indian press is much better behaved than the American press… I think, with your permission, we could not answer questions because they won't ask any questions on point," Mr. Biden can be heard saying in a video clip from an Indian television channel that was in the Oval Office, setting up before reporters arrived. The Indian press has been at the receiving end of restrictions and unflattering references from several quarters in Washington DC over the last few days, around the visit of Mr. Modi to the American capital. First, the issue around restrictive access to Mr. Modi's events. Then, President Biden's hot mic moment, during which he said the Indian press were "much better behaved" than their American counterparts. Third, and most recently, in the framing of questions by American reporters at Monday's White House press briefing. Being called "better behaved" is not, generally, considered a compliment by journalists. Mr. Biden's comments in this instance are similar to his predecessor's from 2017. "You have a friendly press," former U.S. President Donald Trump said to Mr. Modi during the Prime Minister's White House visit. Asked on Monday why the American President was criticising U.S. reporters in that setting, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said: "Well, I would note first that he took questions on Friday and he took questions again today. And I think what he said is that they're [the U.S. press] not always on point." "Now, I know that isn't something that

anyone wants to hear in here [the White House briefing room], but what I think he was conveying is, you know, today he might want to talk about COVID vaccine... and some of the questions are not always about the topic he's talking about on that day. I don't think it was meant to be a hard cut at the members of the media," she said. Asked by another reporter if the President was "reticent" about taking questions in front of a foreign leader, in the context of Mr. Biden's meetings last week with Mr. Modi and, before that, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Ms. Psaki denied that was the case. "He's taken questions standing next to a foreign leader many, many times in the past and will continue to," she said. Mr. Biden frequently addresses the press — however, these addresses often consist of calling on reporters using a pre-decided list of names.

Poor ranking

Then came a question that appeared to speak to Mr. Biden's lack of knowledge of the Indian press environment as well a poor ranking of the Indian press in terms of press freedoms. "The President said that the Indian press was better behaved than the U.S. press, but the Indian press is ranked 142nd in the world, according to Reporters Without Borders, for press freedoms. How does he say that about the U.S. press, compared to the Indian press?" a reporter asked Ms. Psaki. "I would just say to you that having now worked for the President, serving in this role for nine months, having seen that he's taking questions from the press more than 140 times, including today, and Friday, that he certainly respects the role of the press, the role of the…free press. We ensure that we have press with us, of course, when we travel, that we have press with us for sprays in foreign capitals and we will continue to," Ms. Psaki said. "And I think that should speak to his commitment to freedom of press around the world." Neither leader answered questions after the Modi-Biden meet and reporters shouted questions out to them as the gathering was dispersing. The Indian press pool for the bilateral meetings with Mr. Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris as well as for the Quad, had guaranteed spots only for state-run media and one private news agency. Some outfits were assigned more than one spot (such as for handling camera and associated equipment). The White House press pool is decided by a system administered by officials and the White House Correspondents Association, the rules of which are known and shared on request. The White House Press Office did not seem aware that access to the Indian press 'pool' for the events was not an equal opportunity process. The Hindu was finally able to join the 'press sprays' at the start of each meeting (the only access any press was given). However, at no point was it informed that it would be allowed a place in these. It is still unclear how exactly this happened. Mr. Modi did not address the press during his visit. Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla held two on-the-record briefings during the course of the Washington portion of the visit. Following the Quad meeting on Friday, Australian PM Scott Morrison held a press 'gaggle' at the White House. Japanese PM Yoshihide Suga addressed the press on Friday evening and Saturday morning.

NATION

HOW TO GREASE THE WHEELS OF JUSTICE

Speaking at an event organised by the Karnataka Bar Council, Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana quoted a former Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Warren Burger, "The notion that ordinary people want black robed judges, well-dressed lawyers in fine courtrooms as settings to resolve their disputes is incorrect. People with problems, like people with pains, want relief and they want it as quickly and inexpensively as possible." He made a plea to 'Indianise' courts to make them responsive to the needs of the Indian citizens. The Chief Justice of India has the historic opportunity to make this happen. At present, despite good intentions, the nation's judiciary is hurtling towards a disaster and needs immediate attention. A measure of the justice delivery system is the pendency of cases in courts across the country. We have seen a significant deterioration in this aspect as shown in the table. More than 40% of cases are decided after three years in India, while in many other countries less than 1% of cases are decided after three years. If India does not act decisively and quickly, this percentage will keep increasing. The rich, the powerful and the wrongdoers have a field day by getting their cases expedited or delayed as they wish. The increase in corruption and crime is a direct fallout of the sluggish justice delivery system. This severely impacts the poor and marginalised. For them, the judicial process itself becomes a punishment. Data show that about 70% of prisoners in India are undertrials and are mostly poor citizens.

Filling vacancies

Two measures can be implemented within two years to tackle this issue. First, reduce the pendency of cases by filling sanctioned judicial positions. Analysis shows that between 2006 and 2019, the average increase in pendency was less than 2% per year whereas the average vacancy in sanctioned judicial positions was about 21%. If the sanctioned positions had been filled, pendency of cases would have gone down each year. The nation neither needs 70,000 judges, as claimed by former Chief Justice of India T.S. Thakur, nor does it need to double the present number of judges. It needs to add about 20% of judges. This is in line with the sanctioned strength. This figure has been endorsed by Justice B.N. Srikrishna, Justice R.C. Chavan and 100 IIT alumni. The responsibility of selecting judges is largely with the judiciary itself. The responsibility of appointments in the subordinate judiciary lies with the State governments and their respective High Courts. The responsibility of ensuring near-zero vacancies should be with the Chief Justices of the High Courts and the Chief Justice of India and they should be held accountable for the same. Right now, nobody believes that they are accountable, and filling judicial vacancies is not considered a matter of priority. Filling all vacancies may result in a requirement of about 5,000 courtrooms. A simple solution would be to run 5,000 courts in two shifts.

Use of technology

The second is to improve working with the use of technology. The e-Committee of the Supreme Court has been in existence since 2005. It has made three outstanding recommendations which are not being followed. One, computer algorithms should decide on case listing, case allocation and adjournments with only a 5% override given to judges. It said all rational reasons and limits

should be put on adjournments; case listing should give main weightage to 'first in, first out'; and case allocation should take into account logical criteria. This would be a big step in reducing arbitrariness and the unfair advantage that the powerful enjoy. Two, the courts should focus on e-filing. The e-Committee made detailed SOPs on how petitions and affidavits can be filed and payment of fees can be done electronically without lawyers or litigants having to travel to the courts or use paper. This should be implemented in all seriousness and would also save about three lakh trees annually. Three, it focused on virtual hearings. COVID-19 prompted the courts to adopt virtual hearings. However, virtual hearings were held only in some cases while physical hearings were held in most. In pre-COVID-19 years, the increase in the pendency of cases in all courts used to be about 5.7 lakh cases a year. In 2020 alone, it increased to an astonishing 51 lakh. It appears that if a hybrid virtual hearing model is not adopted, the backlog of cases could cross 5 crore in 2022. The dysfunctional justice system will be perpetually overwhelmed. All the courts in the country must switch to a hybrid virtual mode immediately and start disposing cases. Even after the COVID-19 crisis ends, it would be beneficial to continue hybrid virtual courts. This will make access to justice easier for litigants, reduce costs, and also give a fair opportunity to young lawyers from small towns. The required hardware is available in all courts.

No change in laws

All the recommendations — e-filing of petitions, affidavits and payment of fees; algorithm-based computerised listing, roster, case allocation and adjournments with only a 5% override to be given to judges; hybrid virtual hearings; filling judicial vacancies; and holding Chief Justices responsible for ensuring that vacancies in judicial positions are less than 5% — are based on the Supreme Court's various decisions and the e-Committee's recommendations. These would require no changes in laws. At a conference, High Court Chief Justices and the Chief Justice of India and the government could make decisions on all of this. If all this is done, India's judicial system can rank among the 10 top countries of the world. These changes would make India the preferred nation for international investments and also fulfil the fundamental right to speedy justice of citizens.

PLEA IN HC SEEKS REMOVAL OF VERDICT FROM NET

The Delhi High Court on Wednesday sought replies from the Centre, Google and India Kanoon on a plea seeking removal of a judgment and an order in connection with a seven-year-old FIR under 'Right to be Forgotten', and asked how far this rule can be stretched. Justice Rekha Palli issued notices asking them to respond to the petition while listing the matter for further proceedings on December 1, when several similar petitions are also fixed for hearing. The court orally observed that the 'right to be forgotten' depends on how far it has to be stretched. "Tomorrow, people who defraud the banks will come and say 'please remove the judgment'. We have to balance the rights," it said. The court was hearing a petition by one Sukhmeet Singh Anand seeking removal of a judgment and an order passed in 2015 and 2018 in connection with an FIR registered against him in 2014 by the Economic Offences Wing. The FIR was registered against the petitioner and other persons in 2014 pursuant to a complaint by Samsung Gulf Electronic FZE, Dubai. The plea, filed through advocate Tarun Rana, said merely by typing Mr. Singh's name on Google, the web page takes visitors directly to the links of the orders.

AN INSTITUTION'S RIGHT TO GOVT. AID IS NOT A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

The right of an institution, whether run by a majority or minority community, to get government aid is not a fundamental right. Both have to equally follow the rules and conditions of the aid, the Supreme Court held in a judgment on Monday. "Whether it is an institution run by the majority or the minority, all conditions that have relevance to the proper utilisation of the grant-in-aid by an educational institution can be imposed. All that Article 30(2) states is that on the ground that an institution is under the management of a minority, whether based on religion or language, grant of aid to that educational institution cannot be discriminated against, if other educational institutions are entitled to receive aid," a Bench of Justices S.K. Kaul and M.M. Sundresh said, referring to the court's T.M.A Pai decision. The Bench said if the government made a policy call to withdraw aid, an institution cannot question the decision as a "matter of right". An institution is free to choose to accept the grant with the conditions or go its own way, it said. The judgment came in an appeal filed by Uttar Pradesh against a decision of the Allahabad High Court to declare unconstitutional a provision of the Intermediate Education Act, 1921.

MAKING PARTIES CONSTITUTIONAL

A political party is an organised group of citizens who hold common views on governance and act as a political unit that seeks to obtain control of government with a view to further the agenda and policy they profess. They are indispensable links between the people and the representative machinery of government. Political parties maintain a continuous connection between the people and those who represent them either in government or in the opposition. Political parties have extralegal growth in almost every democratic country. The American Constitution does not presume the existence of political parties. In Britain too, political parties are still unknown to the law. Nonetheless, Sir Ivor Jennings, in The British Constitution, opined that "a realistic survey of the British Constitution today must begin and end with parties and discuss them at length in the middle". Similarly, political parties in India are extra-constitutional, but they are the breathing air of the political system.

The German model

The Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany (1949) gives constitutional status to political parties. Article 21 of the Basic Law deals with their status, rights, duties and functions. It provides: "(1) Political parties shall participate in the formation of the political will of the people. They may be freely established. Their internal organisation must conform to democratic principles. They must publicly account for their assets and for the sources and use of their funds. (2) Parties that, by reason of their aims or the behaviour of their adherents, seek to undermine or abolish the free democratic basic order or to endanger the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany shall be unconstitutional... (4) The Federal Constitutional Court shall rule on the question of unconstitutionality... (5) Details shall be regulated by federal laws." The German model of constitutionalising political parties is more desirable for India than the U.S. and the U.K. models. Section 29A(5) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 is the only major statutory provision dealing with political parties in India. It orders that a political party shall bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India as by law established, and to the principles of socialism, secularism and democracy, and would uphold the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India.

Political parties in developed nations maintain high levels of internal democracy. In the U.K., the Conservative Party has the National Conservative Convention as its top body. It has a Central Council and an Executive Committee. The Central Council elects its President, a Chairman and Vice Chairmen at its annual meeting. It also elects an Executive Committee which meets once a month. In the U.S., both the Democratic and the Republican Party have the National Committee as their top decision-making body. The National Committee plays an important role in the presidential election and agenda setting. The Indian Constitution is the one of the longest Constitutions in the world. It even elaborately deals with the co-operative societies. The right to form co-operative societies is a fundamental right under Article 19 (1)(c), but the right to form political parties is not. It is astonishing that such a meticulous Constitution overlooked political parties, the vital players in the political system, for constitutional regulation. Most of the parties are openly caste- or religious-based. Their finances are dubious and opaque. Almost all the parties — the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Samajwadi Party, the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, the Indian Union Muslim League, etc. — are family fiefdoms. The Congress high command is only a euphemism for the Gandhi family. There are no periodical in-party elections in Indian parties except in a few like the CPI(M). Political parties are the agents of democracy and safety valves in the political system. They desperately need reform. Hence, it is high time to constitutionalise political parties to ensure in-party democracy, to impart transparency in their finances, and to de-communalise them.

READING GANDHI AS A LESSON OF POLITICAL MATURITY

Nearly 74 years after his death, Gandhi remains the most widely known political leader of modern India. Gandhi's stature as a major historical figure was confirmed by his successful non-violent movement against British rule in India. Yet, what makes Gandhi so relevant and meaningful for our world is that his political legacy and his philosophical significance continue to inspire millions of people around the globe — to fight against inequality, injustice and historical wrongs.

An imperative

Accordingly, what distinguishes Gandhi from all politicians in today's world is not only his simplicity and honesty — which have become rare characteristics for many men and women who pretend to represent our wills and wishes around the globe — but also his belief in the moral growth of humanity. In a world such as ours which suffers from an immaturity of politics and politicians, either in tyrannical situations such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, Syria, etc. or in democracies such as the United States, Spain, Poland, India, etc. reading Gandhi as a lesson of political maturity is an ethical imperative. As such, and not strangely, Gandhi believed in no divorce between politics and ethics. For Gandhi, politics was essentially an ethical mode of conduct. He never pretended to be a teacher of truth. However, others took him to be a guru, and there is no doubt that his attempts to encourage people to experiment with the truth were both philosophical and pedagogical.

Culture of patience

Therefore, as a practitioner of empathetic humanism and a pluralist thinker, Gandhi was an exemplar of a lifelong process of listening and learning. He actually played the role of an exemplar in prescribing "patience" as a means to understand and approach the other. The dialogical nature of Gandhi's culture of patience finds its roots in the idea of epistemic humility as a necessary

methodology in approaching and understanding other cultures and religions. As such, the entire Gandhian thought in the realm of religion and politics revolves around this concept of epistemic humility. That is why Gandhi had a profoundly ethical view of religions. In other words, he recognised neither the infallible authority of prophetic texts nor the sanctity of religious traditions. At the same time, he was the foremost critic of the epistemological arrogance of modern rationality and its authoritarian practices in terms of colonial thinking and imperialistic domination. It is on account of his overriding concern for the self-respect of individuals and nations that Gandhi joined the two notions of truth and non-violence to that of the term Swaraj. Gandhi believed that all individuals irrespective of their religion, race and culture had the right to self-governance. Accordingly, what we can call the Gandhian moment of Swaraj was actually for him a constant experimentation with modes of cross-cultural and inter-faith understanding and dialogue. In other words, the capacity to engage constructively with conflicting values was an essential component of Gandhi's practical wisdom and empathetic pluralism. As a matter of fact, Swaraj as a space of self-realisation was where the ethical and the political joined in the Gandhian political philosophy. For Gandhi, politics, like spirituality, was a space to examine and experience Truth, which he considered not as a given process, but as an effort of re-evaluation and reformulation of reality.

A self-transcendence

In this sense, Gandhi did not consider freedom as a mere political act, but he defined it primarily as an ethical enterprise. That is why Gandhi argued, "I am but a seeker after Truth. I claim to have found a way to it. I claim to be making a ceaseless effort to find it. But I admit that I have not yet found it. To find Truth completely is to realize oneself and one's destiny, i.e., to become perfect. I am painfully conscious of my imperfections, and therein lies all the strength I possess, because it is a rare thing for a man to know his own limitations." We have here a process of individual self-transcendence that Gandhi also applied to the idea of civilisation, since he considered civilisation as an exercise of human maturity. Gandhi firmly believed that the anthropological and ethical origins of such a state of maturity resided in the spiritual capacity of human beings. But he also underlined this move towards maturity as a process of learning to be responsible towards oneself and the others. As a result, everything Gandhi did and wrote during his lifetime was an attempt to bring into the open his own journey of intellectual and political maturity. He, therefore, used the concept of maturity not only in the social context, but also as an expression of character building which he distinguished from literary training. As he asserted, "Literary training by itself adds not an inch to one's moral height and character-building is independent of literary training." Therefore, according to Gandhi, character-building was an art of developing a sense of autonomy and having authority over one's self. In other words, maturity for Gandhi was a state of mind and a mode of being, where one had the capacity to form one's life in a social sphere. It was on the basis of this act of maturity that Gandhi established his political anthropology and pedagogical premises. He believed that an autonomy formed by a mature judgment prepared a life according to morality. Gandhi, therefore, approached pragmatic politics as a form of character-building and not necessarily a struggle for getting elected or grasping power. Gandhi's acknowledgment of the moral imperative of maturity and his devotion to democratic transparency continues to distinguish his political psychology from most of the other discourses in Indian and world politics. As such, Gandhi's suggestion to us in relation to moral excellence and spiritual maturity presents itself at the same time as an invitation to self-respect and self-restraint.

A continuing relevance

As he argued, "Where there is egotism, we shall find incivility and arrogance. Where it is absent, we shall find a sense of self-respect together with civility... He who holds his self-respect dear acts towards everyone in a spirit of friendship, for he values others' self-respect as much as he values his own. He sees himself in all and everyone else in himself, puts himself in line with others. The egotist keeps aloof from others and, believing himself superior to the rest of the world, he takes [it] upon himself to judge everyone and in the result enables the world to have the measure of his smallness." Therefore, it goes without saying that by reading Gandhi closely and correctly, we can get to the conclusion that, despite all his shortcomings, his appeal to mature and conscientious politics and nobility of spirit continues to be a strong ethical response to the political issues and challenges of our time. Maybe, that is why, Gandhi remains our contemporary, while he belongs to our future.

A FUND WITHOUT A CARE FOR THE RTI

It may not be an exaggeration to say that when it comes to seeking answers and information under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) is consistent in putting up a screen. The manner in which the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM CARES) Fund was set up — with its acronym created to publicise the point that the Prime Minister cares for people — shows a bypassing of the statutory obligations of a public authority.

The other funds

A statutorily constituted National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF), which was established under the Disaster Management (DM) Act of 2005, is deliberately ignored while a new, controversial, unanswerable, and 'non-accountable' vehicle is created; its character is not spelt out till today. The NDRF is mandated to be accountable, and answerable under the RTI Act, being a public authority, and auditable by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India. The Government seems to consider statutory provisions for enquiry and information seeking to be embarrassing obstacles. The DM Act provided for a Disaster Response Fund — state and district level funds (besides the national level) and also to collect and use the donations at the local level, with mandatory transparency and audit provisions. The PM CARES Fund centralises the collection of donations and its utility, which is not only against the federal character but also practically inconvenient. There is the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund operative since the days of Jawaharlal Nehru. The website says (https://bit.ly/39PlqdI): "In pursuance of an appeal by the then Prime Minister, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru in January 1948, the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF) was established with public contributions to assist displaced persons from Pakistan. The resources ... are now utilised primarily to render immediate relief to families of those killed in natural calamities... and to the victims of the major accidents and riots. Assistance from the PMNRF is also rendered, to partially defray the expenses for medical treatment ... The fund is recognised as a Trust under the Income-Tax Act and the same is managed by [the] Prime Minister or multiple delegates for national causes." The fact is that there is substantial money also left in the PMNRF. But the Narendra Modi government does not want to use it. The PMNRF has the President of India and the Leader of Opposition also as trustees. The Centre now considers it as another obstacle and has created a new trust with the Prime Minister and his Ministers only. While both funds, the NDRF and the

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PMNRF, have been relegated to the back burner, the PM CARES Fund is in the limelight. It has been created not by law, not by notification, but by the mere creation of a webpage, and set up last year in March to raise funds for those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The page lists its structure, functions and duties in an arbitrary manner. The official appeals for funds are made under the emblem of the Saranath lions and 'Satyameva Jayathe', which means "Truth Alone Triumphs". Therefore, the recent affidavit, where the Delhi High Court was informed that "the PM CARES Fund is not a Government of India fund and that the amount collected by it does not go to the Consolidated Fund of India", is strange. The affidavit was filed by an Under Secretary at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), who added that the trust functions with transparency. The most significant lie of this sworn statement is that the Government has no control over the Fund.

Query and response

After initial denials, the Government has conceded it to be a public charitable trust, but still maintains that it is not a 'public authority'. In his public speeches, the Prime Minister often makes assurances of transparency. The Bharatiya Janata Party also says it is committed to its promise made in its election manifesto — of there being zero tolerance for corruption. If these are true, then the PM CARES Fund should be declared as 'a Public Authority' under the RTI Act, and all RTI queries answered truthfully. Going back to the affidavit about the PM CARES Fund, the Under Secretary's response reflects the adamance to not be transparent and is a stand in defiance of the RTI Act. The issue arose after a petitioner/lawyer, Samyak Gangwal, filed a petition seeking that the PM-CARES fund to be declared as the "State" under Article 12 of the Constitution. In another plea, he had sought for the fund to be designated as a "public authority" under Section 2(h) of the RTI Act (https://bit.ly/3uqiFJk). The point is that the PMO operates the Fund, but says it cannot supply any information about the PM CARES Fund because it is not a public authority. The PMO completely glosses over the fact that the PMO is a public authority and has to give us answers about the fund under the RTI.

More questions and gaps

Some of the claims made in the affidavit are: The PM CARES Fund was neither created by the Constitution of India nor by any statute. If that is the case, under what authority does it use the designation of the Prime Minister, designated symbols of the nation, the tricolour and the official (gov.in) website of the PMO, and grant tax concessions through an ordinance? Why does the Prime Minister make appeals for contributions to this fund saying it will help the Government fight COVID-19? The link, "About PM CARES Fund" (https://bit.ly/2Wm8Lvw), makes it clear. The amount received by the Fund does not go to the Consolidated Fund of India. If it goes to the CFI, it could have been audited by the CAG. Because this Fund is not audited by CAG, the Government has to ensure that it is answerable and foreclose any possibility of corruption. It should be transparent when it comes to its sources and fund disbursement. The third claim is: "This Trust is neither intended to be or is in fact owned, controlled or substantially financed by any Central Government or State Government or any instrumentality of the any Government. In other words, there is no control of either the Central Government or any State Government/s, either direct or indirect, in functioning of the Trust in any manner whatsoever". The Prime Minister is the ex-officio Chairman and three cabinet Ministers (for Defence, Home and Finance) are ex-officio members. A Government advertisement for the PM CARES Fund says: "PM announces new fund for people to donate towards Govt. fight against Coronavirus". Another advertisement makes the claim, "MY

Govt or Meri SARKAR". It is interesting that the Prime Minister is the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees (https://bit.ly/3um6Of6), when the claim is that it is not connected with the Government. If the PM CARES Fund is unconnected with the Government, then the Fund could become an office of profit. And that could disqualify him and the three Ministers from holding those constitutional offices. The composition of the board of trustees can never be a determinative factor to ascertain whether the respondent is a "public authority" or not; the Prime Minister as chairman and three Cabinet Ministers as members, in their official capacity, determines it to be a public authority. This board decides how to spend the funds collected, which is the prime function. The Prime Minister's Office administers the activities. This is 'substantial control' which is the test to determine its character as a public authority under the RTI Act as highlighted in the landmark judgment of the Supreme Court of India in Thalappalam Service Coop. Bank Ltd. vs State of Kerala. The point that some Government officer provides ex gratia services to the public trust is of no relevance; a Government officer providing secretarial assistance on an honorary basis while discharging his official duties can never be a relevant consideration for declaring a body to be a public authority. By agreeing that it is a public trust managed by the Prime Minister and three Ministers in their ex-officio capacity, the Government cannot say that it was irrelevant to declare it as a public authority. The Prime Minister and the Ministers do not take decisions in their personal capacity. They have to work to implement the objectives of the trust.

Funding avenues

The mere grant of certain tax exemptions with regard to the voluntary donations made to a public trust is not a determinative factor for the purpose of Section 2(h) of the RTI Act. An ordinance was promulgated to amend Income Tax Act, 1961 and declare that the donations to the PM CARES Fund "would qualify for 80G benefits for 100% exemption". The official website and the Press Information Bureau (https://bit.ly/3D2cFcR) also declared that donations to the PM CARES Fund "would qualify for 80G benefits for 100% exemption under the Income Tax Act, 1961. Donations to PM CARES Fund will also qualify to be counted as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) expenditure under the Companies Act, 2013... PM CARES Fund has also got exemption under the FCRA [Foreign Contribution Regulation Act] and a separate account for receiving foreign donations has been opened". All this amounts to substantive funding. Section 19 of the Indian Trusts Act mandates the trustees to present full and accurate information of the amount and state of the trust property to the beneficiaries. Because of this statutory access, all information about the PM CARES Fund should be accessible as per Section 2(f) of RTI Act; "information" here means any material in any form, including records, documents, memos, e-mails, opinions, advices, press releases, circulars, orders, logbooks, contracts, reports, papers, samples, models, data material held in any electronic form and information relating to any private body which can be accessed by a public authority under any other law for the time being in force" (this enables access to information of trust even if it is private, through the Indian Trusts Act). The claim that the PM CARES Fund is not a public authority is absurd to say the least.

ROCKY ROAD FOR RTI ACTIVISTS IN BIHAR, 20 KILLED IN PAST 11 YEARS

Bihar has proved to be hostile terrain for Right to Information (RTI) activists, with as many as 20 having been killed since 2010. Six activists were killed in 2018 alone. The RTI Act came into force in June 2005. Sashidhar Mishra from Begusarai district was the first RTI activist killed in 2010 and

just last week, Bipin Agrawal, 46, was killed, allegedly for exposing encroachment on government lands in East Champaran district. Agrawal had filed at least 900 RTI applications seeking details on government land encroachment in the district. His home was attacked by assailants in 2020 as well. Following the incident he had sought protection from local police but that was not provided to him. "Bihar has always been unfriendly for RTI activists with as many as 20 of them having been killed in different districts for raising their voice against corruption in government system," veteran RTI activist Shiv Prakash Rai told The Hindu. Mr. Rai, in fact, had to face a jail term for 29 days in 2008 for exposing malfeasance in providing solar lights. A case of extortion was lodged against him by a top district official and he was sent to jail. He was later released as the case proved false. "District officials get annoyed with RTI activists as mostly we expose misappropriation of funds through our applications," Mr. Rai said.

CRIME AND THE PANDEMIC

The annual report, 'Crime in India', released by the National Crime Records Bureau in mid-September this year needs to be carefully parsed before gleaning insights or making State-wise comparisons. The reason is the significant variances in case registration across States and Union Territories, especially serious crimes pertaining to rape and violence against women. States/UTs such as Tamil Nadu with 1808.8, Kerala (1568.4) and Delhi (1309.6) recorded the highest crime rate (crimes per one lakh people) overall. But it is difficult not to see these numbers as a reflection of better reporting and police registration of cases in these States and the capital city, respectively. On the other hand, while there was an 8.3% decline in registered cases of crimes against women in 2020 (of which the bulk of them, 30.2%, were of the category "Cruelty by husband or his relatives"), this number has to be assessed along with the fact that the year saw prolonged lockdowns during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic (between late March and May 2021 in particular). This period coincided with a high number of complaints of domestic violence — the number of complaints received by National Commission for Women registered a 10-year high as of June 2020. The seeming mismatch between the NCW and NCRB data must be studied and can only be explained by a lack of registration of cases in some States where crime reporting remains sluggish either due to a fear of doing so or a lackadaisical approach to such cases by law enforcement. On the other hand, the lockdown also led to an overall fall in crime related to theft, burglary and dacoity. The COVID-19 related disruption also led to a greater registration of cases overall (a 28% increase in 2020 compared to 2019) largely due to a 21-fold increase in cases related to disobedience to the order duly promulgated by a public servant and over four times in cases involving violations of other State local laws. This is not surprising either. India had one of the most stringent lockdowns and law enforcement spared little in enforcing strictures on physical distancing. The question of registration does not apply to some types of cases such as murders — which showed only a marginal increase of 1% compared to 2019. Worryingly, while there was a reduction in the registered number of economic offences (by 12% since 2019), cybercrimes recorded an increase of 11.8% . The increase in cybercrimes is cause for concern as this requires sharper law enforcement as seen even in highly developed societies. While cases related to sedition declined from 93 in 2019 to 73 last year, Manipur and Assam led with 15 and 12 cases each. Sedition has increasingly been used as a weapon to stifle dissent and this trend needs to be reversed urgently.

NO CLEAN SWEEP

Seven years after launching his government's marquee programme, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has announced the second phase of Swachh Bharat Mission-Urban (SBM-U) and the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), with a fresh promise to make India's cities clean. For all the attention it has received, the goal of scientific waste management and full sanitation that Mahatma Gandhi emphasised even a century ago remains largely aspirational today, and the recent lament of Principal Economic Adviser Sanjeev Sanyal on dirty, dysfunctional cities drives home the point. That urban India, in his view, is unable to match cities in Vietnam that has a comparable per capita income is a telling commentary on a lack of urban management capacities in spite of the Swachh Bharat programme enjoying tremendous support. SBM-U 2.0, with a ₹1.41-lakh crore outlay, aims to focus on garbage-free cities and urban grey and black water management in places not covered by AMRUT. In its first phase, the Mission had an outstanding balance of ₹3,532 crore, since the total allocation was ₹14,622 crore while cumulative releases came to ₹11,090 crore. The issue of capability and governance underscores the challenge — of being able to process only about one lakh tonnes of solid waste per day against 1.4 lakh tonnes generated — to transition to a circular economy that treats solid and liquid waste as a resource. Raising community involvement in resource recovery, which the rules governing municipal, plastic and electronic waste provide for, calls for a partnership that gives a tangible incentive to households. The current model of issuing mega contracts to big corporations — as opposed to decentralised community-level operations for instance — has left segregation of waste at source a non-starter. In the absence of a scaling up of operations, which can provide large-scale employment, and creation of matching facilities for material recovery, SBM-U 2.0 cannot keep pace with the tide of waste in a growing economy. On sanitation, the impressive claim of exceeding the targets for household, community and public toilets thus far obscures the reality that without water connections, many of them are unusable, and in public places, left in decrepitude. State and municipal governments, which do the heavy lifting on waste and sanitation issues, should work to increase community ownership of the system. As things stand, it is a long road to Open Defecation Free plus (ODF+) status for urban India, since that requires no recorded case of open defecation and for all public toilets to be maintained and functioning. Equally, the high ambition of achieving 100% tap water supply in about 4,700 urban local bodies and sewerage and septage in 500 AMRUT cities depends crucially on making at least good public rental housing accessible to millions of people.

RENUNCIATION OF INDIAN CITIZENSHIP NOW SIMPLER

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has simplified the process for Indians who want to renounce their citizenship. Provisions have been made for applicants to upload documents online, with an upper limit of 60 days for the renunciation process to be completed. Over 6.7 lakh Indians renounced their citizenship between 2015-19, the Lok Sabha was informed in February. In 2018, the MHA revised the Form XXII under the Citizenship Rules for declaration of renunciation of citizenship, which for the first time included a column on "circumstances/reasons due to which applicant intends to acquire foreign citizenship and renounce Indian citizenship". An official familiar with the subject said there was no sudden surge in the number of applications to renounce citizenship but the online process has been initiated to check fraudulent documents and

"reduce the compliance burden". As many as 1,41,656 Indians renounced their citizenship in the year 2015, while in the years 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019, the numbers stood at 1,44,942, 1,27,905, 1,25,130 and 1,36,441, respectively. The Ministry issued new guidelines on September 16 stating that the form, after being filled online, has to be downloaded, signed and submitted at the District Magistrate's office, if the applicant is in India, or at the nearest Indian mission, if she or he is in a foreign country.

FROM RIOTS TO RECONCILIATION

The beauty of liberal democracy is that it offers space to sociopolitical movements that contribute to political discourses in a manner that political parties often fail to do. India's anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act protests and the ongoing farmers' movement have been able to subvert Hindutva narratives in their own ways and have renewed the appeal for secular politics. Since the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots, Hindutva politics has become hegemonic, particularly in western Uttar Pradesh, and religious polarisation has become the only game in town. However, farmer leader Rakesh Tikait's slogan, "Allahu Akbar, Har Har Mahadev", at a recent mahapanchayat in Muzaffarnagar has sent a message of Hindu-Muslim unity in that riot-torn city. One mahapanchayat certainly cannot repair the enormous damage that Hindutva politics has inflicted on the secular social fabric of western Uttar Pradesh or the rest of India. But what is comforting is that at least an attempt is being made to turn the page.

Birth of an iconic slogan

This slogan has a long history, which can be traced to the early days of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), led by Mahendra Singh Tikait. During its early days in the late 1980s, the BKU organised a major protest over farmers' issues. Two farmers — Akbar Ali, a Muslim, and Jai Pal, a Hindu — were killed in police firing during that protest. Keeping their bodies on the main road, the BKU continued the protest. The iconic slogan was born there to celebrate and symbolise the BKU's secular structure. One of Tikait's comrade-in-arms was Ghulam Mohammad Jola. After Mahendra Singh Tikait's death in May 2011, his sons, particularly Rakesh Tikait, began to speak the language of the Hindu Right thus threatening the secular nature of the movement. Provoked by the Tikait sons' behaviour and the 2013 riots, Mr. Jola broke away from the BKU and formed his own farmers' union, the Bharatiya Kisan Mazdoor Manch (BKMM). This outfit had a new slogan: "Ek Ho, Nek Ho (Come together, Be Pious)". In a recent interview to this author, Mr. Jola, an octogenarian, described Mahendra Singh Tikait as a quintessential secular leader. With great enthusiasm, he recalled how the senior Tikait had once urged him and a couple of Muslim farmers to offer Friday namaz on the premises of Har Ki Pauri in Hardwar during a protest since the nearest mosque was located more than 8 km away. When people complained, the senior Tikait apparently assuaged them by saying, "He was offering namaz and namaz is not an abuse." The region that once displayed such understanding of religious harmony is now the hotbed of religious polarisation.

New attempt at polarisation

Although the 2013 riots took place during the tenure of Akhilesh Yadav, it was the BJP that drew enormous electoral capital from it. Some even consider the 2013 riots to have created the background for the Modi wave that swept north India. Some evidence of the ebbing of religious

polarisation is visible now, but there are also attempts being made to polarise Uttar Pradesh around the conversion issue. A prominent cleric of Muzaffarnagar, Maulana Kaleem Siddiqui, was recently arrested for allegedly running the "biggest conversion syndicate". That Muslims of all rank and file are busy preaching Islam and are converting Hindus to Muslims in every nook and corner of the country with the sole objective of turning India into a Muslim land has been one of the Hindu Right's most favourite campaigns. The attempts by Uttar Pradesh's governing regime to weaponise this campaign using state might are likely to dominate political conversations over the forthcoming Assembly elections. One is not too sure how far this polarisation can help the incumbent regime's electoral ambitions. But the farmers' movement has clearly disrupted the Hindutva narrative and has ignited the need for Hindu-Muslim reconciliation, at least in western Uttar Pradesh.

BUREAUCRACY'S DIGITAL CHALLENGE

The biggest challenge today to Indian bureaucracy is the shift from desk to digital. This shift is not limited to a transition towards e-office and e-governance, but includes the organisational and bureaucratic response to digital spaces, especially the use of social media. The focus has been mostly on the former, while the latter has remained largely unaddressed.

To use or not to use social media

There are two opinions on the use of social media by civil servants. While there are many people, including former civil servants, who are in favour of civil servants using social media in their official capacity, others argue that anonymity, the defining feature of Indian bureaucracy, gets compromised in the process. In fact, as an organisational form, the bureaucracy is incompatible with social media. While bureaucracy is characterised by hierarchy, formal relationships and standard procedures, social media is identified by openness, transparency and flexibility. It is true that many civil servants have become accessible to the common people and public service delivery issues have been resolved through the use of social media. Social media has also created a positive outlook towards an institution long perceived as opaque and inaccessible. Social media has increased awareness among people about government policies and programmes. But social media also does more. It provides an opportunity to bureaucrats to shape the public discourse and engage with the public while being politically neutral. At a time when the tendency among the political executive is to receive the very remarks or advice from bureaucrats that they want to hear, social media ensures that blind obeying is minimised and bureaucrats serve the people. Anonymity has been a hallmark of Westminster bureaucracies, including in India. But there is a basic contradiction in remaining habitually anonymous while governance in public is now the new normal. Further, values are becoming more dominant than facts in public policymaking. And both values and facts are getting reshaped due to fake news and systematic propaganda within public policy circles as well. In such a scenario, the bureaucracy, which is expected to be the epitome of public values and a storehouse of facts, shouldn't be expected to govern in private. The use of social media is gradually getting institutionalised in many Westminster system-based countries. During the Brexit debate in the U.K., many civil servants shaped public debate through the use of social media even while remaining politically neutral. In India, civil servants haven't reflected on this aspect of digital bureaucracy. Anonymity and opaqueness have already been watered down through the Right to Information Act of 2005. But they continue to be prominent features.

Accessibility and accountability

In India, the role of social media in bureaucracy has taken a different direction. Social media is getting used by civil servants for self-promotion. Through their selective posts and promotion of these posts by their social media fans, civil servants create a narrative of their performance. All this is justified in the name of accessibility and accountability. There is a wrong notion getting entrenched in the public consciousness that social media is the way to access civil servants and make them accountable. Social media may have improved accessibility and accountability, but it is important to note that civil servants are at an advantage to share the information they want and respond to those they want. It is not a formal set-up where accessibility and accountability are based on uniformity of treatment. Social media accountability is no alternative to institutional and citizen-centric accountability. It is, in fact, partly unethical to use social media during office hours and justify it when some people who have travelled long distances are waiting outside the office. Bureaucrats should use social media to improve public policies. If they don't use social media appropriately, their role as independent advisers stands threatened.

STOPPING SHORT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The one unequivocal finding in the 165-page Justice Rajan Committee report is that the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) has adversely impacted the chances of less privileged students in gaining admission to government medical colleges in Tamil Nadu. Several parameters have been used by the Committee to assess privilege (or the lack of it), such as studying in a Tamil medium school, studying in a government school, being a first-generation graduate, and belonging to a household with an income of less than ₹2.5 lakh. Every one of these criteria demonstrate that the already abysmal share of the less privileged in medical education became even more abysmal after NEET was introduced. One needs no other reason to accept that admission based on higher secondary marks serves the cause of equity better.

School education is inequitable

But a caveat is necessary here: admission based on higher secondary marks is by no means equitable. The number of government school students who were able to gain admission to government medical colleges in the pre-NEET era was around 38 per year. This came down to three or four post-NEET till the 7.5% quota for government school students was introduced. The number then rose to 336 in 2020-21 (page 55). The repeated assertion by the Committee that NEET coaching skews the results of the medical exam is true, but the Committee ignores the fact that the results of the State Board examinations can also be skewed through coaching. The domination of medical admissions from coaching schools in Rasipuram in the pre-NEET area clearly demonstrated this. The blunt truth is that school education in India, including in Tamil Nadu, is grossly inequitable. There is a spectrum of inequity in education with the government schools catering to the most underprivileged and a range of private schools catering to various strata of the privileged. Unless this inequity is addressed, all talk of coaching is empty.

Logical fallacies

If one were to delve into the report for answers to questions that the Committee engages with, such as what type of student should be selected for medical education, what mode of selection will

ensure that such students are selected, and how we can best reconcile the perceived social needs of medical education with the aspirations of individual students, one will be deeply disappointed. Furthermore, one can appreciate the descriptive statistics, but the inferential statistics are terribly flawed. The entire document is peppered with logical fallacies. For example, on page 26, the report says: "The analytical section of this report, in the later pages, also vindicates that the ever present socio economic disadvantages and other educational, geographical and linguistic backwardness facing the students of the Tamil Nadu state do not favour the practice of a common entrance exam as it causes injustice to the disadvantaged majority people of the state." Do these disadvantages not cause "injustice" in the result of the 12th Standard exam? Further, on pages 83 and 84, the Committee compares the Higher Secondary School marks with the marks obtained in NEET and says, "Now, the question remains before us is who is meritorious (in terms of percentage marks) - those who secured '98.16 % (HSc)' or those who secured '89.05% (HSc)' and simultaneously 49.65% (NEET)'? Surely, it is 98.16% is the answer." Recognising that this argument sounds rather silly, the Committee then says, "Comparison between the HSc and the NEET scores is like comparing orange with apple, but it is not in the wisdom of this Committee to compare this way, however, the Committee has to do so in response to the arguments of the critics of HSc who argue that NEET is the best assessor of students' standard and abilities, because of its assessment and syllabus superiority." To refute one logical fallacy with another is hardly good policy. The greatest disappointment with the report comes from its failure to engage with the most inequitable of all factors in medical education: the insurmountable barrier placed by the very high financial commitment required in private medical education, said to be in the order of ₹1 crore and more. The opaque admission methods and extremely high charges incurred in private medical education was the cause for repeated challenges in the courts, which finally resulted in the NEET. Abolishing NEET without addressing this problem will be a farce, with little real benefit. The statistical prowess of the Committee does not extend to revealing the fees and other charges being collected by these institutions, the background of the students in these institutions, how many of them serve in rural areas, and so on — all of which are criteria that the Committee uses to say that NEET will be detrimental to social justice. Private medical education now accounts for around 50% of seats. The remarkable silence of a Committee, whose terms of reference included "advancing the principles of social justice", is deeply disappointing.

The way forward

The experience of the NEET has highlighted the grossly inequitable school system in Tamil Nadu. The number of government schools has greatly increased but learning outcomes are very poor. An article in this paper by Kalaiyarasan A. ("Dravidam 2.0 as a time to reflect, for action") pointed out that Tamil Nadu scored the lowest among the southern States in the Performance Grading Index in 2019-20. Using the higher secondary marks for admission to medical colleges will help a few of the most disadvantaged students get admission to government medical colleges. But it will do nothing to advance the cause of social justice which requires, in the short term, access to the 50% of medical seats in the private sector which are now reserved for the extremely wealthy, by virtue of the high financial commitments required, and in the long term, a vast improvement in the quality of education imparted in government schools. Anything short of this is mere window-dressing.

IDENTITY AND PUBLIC POLICY

Some political parties have demanded that caste be enumerated in the Census. Actually, the demand amounts to one of counting the Other Backward Classes, for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes are already counted. The demand has been accompanied by the argument that the efficacy of public policy for enhancing well-being across the population is tied to the enumeration of Indians by their caste. One approach to assessing this argument would be to compare development outcomes in States where political parties have adopted caste-based mobilisation with those in States where political programmes for ending deprivation have taken the social democratic route, without resorting to identity politics. Tamil Nadu would be an example of the former, while Kerala would be an example of the latter. A comparison of the developmental experience of these States would therefore be instructive.

Findings along three variables

As the availability of data across social groups is limited, we focused on three variables. These were adult literacy, infant mortality and consumption. Each of these indicators is related to one of the three components of the United Nations Development Progamme's Human Development Index. Having chosen the development indicators of interest, there are two ways in which we may assess the difference made to the condition of the least well-off in a population, in this case the SCs, by differently driven social programmes. For any indicator, we may focus on either the impact made in terms of its distribution among groups or the absolute level achieved by a cohort. In a comparison of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, for consumption — a proxy for income — the gap between the general population and the SCs is greater in Kerala than it is in Tamil Nadu but smaller when it comes to the other two indicators. However, when it comes to the absolute level achieved, the SCs of Kerala are better-off than the SCs of Tamil Nadu on all the three indicators. Interestingly, they are also better off than the general population of India, i.e., they have superior consumption, literacy and infant mortality outcomes. This is striking. At the same time, the exercise also revealed a hazard when focusing on relative standing alone. We found that for more than one indicator, the distance between the SCs and the general population is far lower for the country as a whole than it is in at least one of the two States considered, even though the State concerned registered a superior level for the same indicator. This leaves us veering towards the maximin principle in evaluation, according to which that policy is preferred which maximises the position of the worst off in a society. Now, Kerala will be chosen as better performing, for the most disadvantaged have higher indicators there. Though we could do with more analysis and the use of controls to arrive at a definite conclusion, this evidence at least suggests that identity-based public policy may not be as effective as one based on an identity-less or universalist approach that is the hallmark of a social democracy.

Women's empowerment

Though we are already in a position to say something about the potential of information on the caste status of individuals in the elimination of deprivation, we take our investigation to another field before concluding. It has been known for decades that gender inequality exists in India. Knowledge of low literacy and high infant mortality among females has, however, done little to spur counteracting public policy that will ensure women's empowerment. Returning to the two States of our study, Kerala greatly disappoints when it comes to women's empowerment, and lags

behind Tamil Nadu on labour force participation, the proportion of female legislators and judges, and crimes against women. Counting the number of women through a census has proved insufficient to eliminate the deprivation and inequality they face. Politics and not the availability of information drives public policy.

THESE INVESTIGATIONS ARE A FACE WITHOUT A HEART

Gasping for breath — that is how our investigating agencies leave our citizens and now the press. Two recent cases clearly demonstrate that our investigating agencies are a face without a heart. On September 10, 2021, officers of the Income-Tax Department visited the premises of NewsClick and Newslaundry. According to the Editors Guild of India, NewsClick and Newslaundry are news websites. The visit by the officers was styled as a survey and this was confirmed by the Department to a private news channel. A survey by officers of the IT-Department is governed by Section 133A of the Income-Tax Act.

Entry that is limited, specific

Section 133A authorises an income-tax authority to enter premises where a business or profession is carried on. The purpose of entry is limited and specific — to inspect books of account or documents, check or verify the cash, stock or other valuable article or thing which may be found in the premises and furnish such information that the authority may require. A survey is not a fishing expedition. A survey can be carried out only during the time the premises are open for conduct of business or profession. A statement released by Newslaundry indicates that the officers came to its premises at about 12:15 p.m. and left the next day at 12:40 a.m. Similarly, a statement released by NewsClick suggests that the officers came at about noon and left around midnight. The first question: are the premises of these news websites usually open for business at midnight with the same staff? If not, the officers violated the law in continuing the survey till the witching hour, without any compunction. Some side issues also arise. For example, what do the officers do for lunch, dinner and snacks when a survey takes place for 12 hours? Do they carry their tiffin boxes and water bottles? What about the people in the premises — can they go out for a bite or are they expected to remain hungry? Can they even inform their family that they have been locked up for several hours and cannot come home? Section 133A authorises the officers to inspect the books of account, place identification marks on them, and on other documents, and even make copies. They may impound the books of account or other documents inspected by them, for reasons to be recorded in writing. They are also entitled to make an inventory of the cash, stock or other valuable articles verified by the officers. Finally, they are authorised to record the statement of any person in the surveyed premises, though not on oath.

Court's view

The Orissa High Court has taken the view that the primary objective of a survey is to inspect and if impounding is necessary, specific reasons (not general reasons) must be recorded; the reasons must be recorded at the time of impounding and not even a day later, otherwise the impounding would be bad in law. Section 133A contains a specific prohibition that the officers "shall, on no account, remove or cause to be removed from the place... any cash, stock or other valuable article or thing". How much more prohibitory can it get? The legal Lakshman rekha having been delineated, what is it that transpired during the survey on September 10, 2021? The version of

the I-T Department is not in the public domain, so it is not known, and perhaps might never be known.

The two cases

In its statement, Newslaundry informs us that its CEO was not allowed to use his phone to contact his lawyer. In fact, he was asked to hand over his phone to the officers. He was asked to comply with on-the-spot directions without taking legal advice. Even a criminal is entitled to contact his or her lawyer and family. Second question: Under what authority of law was the CEO asked to hand over his phone and refrain from contacting his lawyer? Books of account may be impounded, but prohibiting use of a mobile phone, even temporarily? The personal mobile phone, laptop and office machines (presumably desktops) were taken control of and the data on them or in them was downloaded. Ordinarily, a search warrant is required for this. Apart from anything else, this is a classic case of invasion of the fundamental right of privacy. The CEO was not given a copy of the downloaded data, which is his property and he is entitled to it as of right. On the contrary, he was asked to delete his personal data from his mobile phone within one hour so that they could take it away (which they did). Third question: Why should he delete his personal data? The I-T Department has accepted before the Delhi High Court that it has "seized" material (including perhaps his mobile phone and laptop) and it is in safe custody. Under which law is not explained. Fourth question: Are officers of the I-T Department entitled to violate the law with impunity and without any accountability? The sequence of events clearly suggests that the staff of Newslaundry was subjected to some sort of a house arrest or office arrest, cut off from the world for 12 hours and denied their constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights. Is this permissible? The fate suffered by NewsClick is no better. NewsClick issued a statement to the effect that 30 employees and support staff were 'locked up' (so to speak) for the duration of the survey, that is for 12 hours and their phones seized. If any family member had faced an emergency during those 12 hours, bad luck. To make matters worse, they were prevented from accessing their computers and indeed from working. Why? And under which law? It seems quite clear that the employees and staff underwent office arrest, something akin to house arrest. Fifth question: are the fundamental rights of speech, freedom of the press and privacy suspended during a survey of books of account by the I-T Department? Surely, our fundamental rights are not that meaningless. The phone of the Editor-in-Chief was also impounded containing private, personal and confidential data. It appears that the fundamental right to privacy is stillborn in respect of some people, particularly journalists. He may have received information from a source that he does not desire to disclose. In law, he cannot be compelled to disclose the source, being privileged information, but a well-planned survey can achieve that purpose. Journalists beware or don't care - the choice is yours. Loose papers were taken away from the surveyed premises. It appears that no list was prepared of these papers and no copy of the loose papers supplied to the employees concerned. E-mail dumps were taken of the Editor-in-Chief and the Editor. Sixth question: was the survey a façade for some other purpose? Nobody will know until the next 'raid'.

More the norm now

So many questions arise from these two surveys and they provide obvious answers, but nobody cares. The issue is not what Newslaundry and NewsClick have done or not done, in terms of adhering to and complying with the law. The issue is whether there is a rule of law prevailing and how easy it is for the authorities to harass citizens if they want to. The other issue is that

government officers can get away with just about any abuse of their powers, including unlawful house or office arrest, and this is becoming the norm rather than the exception. There is no longer any respect for the citizen's rights, including journalists; only a single-minded assertion of unaccountable authority. One last question. Are the authorities accountable for their actions at any point, or should journalists resign themselves to defenselessly watch the erosion of their rights? Harassed journalists and vulnerable targets may seek the path of least resistance. After all, they have families to feed. They did not set out to be test cases for democratic resilience. Constitutional offices, on the other hand, have a duty to not look away. Have officers forgotten that citizens of India, journalists included, deserve humane treatment under the law or is it that they do not have a heart?

THE NEW SEDITION

In July, during the course of preliminary hearings on a bunch of petitions that challenged the sedition law, the Chief Justice of India, N V Ramana, expressed concern over the misuse of the law and the lack of accountability of executive agencies. The Supreme Court's stance lent weight to the growing criticism that the colonial-era law was being increasingly misused by an overreaching state to curb citizens' liberties, including free speech. In recent times, the Court has been steadily raising the bar on sedition by calling out the lack of rigour and due process in the imposition of the archaic law. It has pointed to the low conviction rate in these cases that have, according to NCRB data, shown a significant spurt since 2016. In this backdrop, the 5,000-page chargesheet filed by the UP Special Task Force against Delhi-based journalist Siddique Kappan only confirms the many fears and anxieties that have been expressed by civil liberties groups, and endorsed by the apex court. The chargesheet makes ludicrous allegations against Kappan, who was arrested a year ago, while on the way to Hathras in UP, to report the murder of a Dalit woman. Kappan was booked under the stringent UAPA, and also charged with sedition (Section 124 A of IPC). He has been accused of conspiring to stoke unrest and riots — the chargesheet claims that Kappan did not write like a "responsible" journalist, "only and only reports to incite Muslims", and sympathised with Maoists and Communists. It has presented sections from 36 articles Kappan wrote in Malayalam — on the anti-CAA protests, riots in Northeast Delhi, the Nizamuddin Markaz gathering during Covid — as evidence. The STF has appended a case diary note, which, while discussing an article Kappan wrote during the protests against the CAA in Aligarh Muslim University, says, "In the writing, the Muslims have been portrayed as victims (who were beaten by police and were asked to go to Pakistan)." Kappan has also been accused of serving as a "think tank" of Popular Front of India (PFI), a radical Islamist outfit. It would be stretching these "allegations" unbearably to think that they could constitute sedition. Clearly, the UP STF is attempting a new definition of the offence, wherein any disagreement with, and criticism of, the government makes the grade. The chargesheet against Kappan is an enormously disturbing document that militates against the Supreme Court's attempts to read down the sedition law and curb its misuse. It raises the very fear the Court has flagged — of executive agencies severely constricting individual liberties and criminalising dissent by wielding a vaguely worded law.

BANALITY OF VIOLENCE

Who will police the Uttar Pradesh police? This question comes up with an increasing and alarming frequency in the state. It is being asked again after a late-night knock on a hotel room in

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Gorakhpur, during what the police claimed was a routine raid, ended up in the death of a 38-year-old businessman. The man's family and two of his friends, who were with him in the room, have accused the policemen of assaulting Manish Gupta, resulting in his death. The police first said he died of a fall. Six policemen have now been suspended and an FIR under IPC Section 302 has been filed against six cops, three identified and three unnamed, after sustained pressure. This is not the first instance of UP police officials being accused of grave misdemeanour: In this year alone, as this newspaper has reported, there have been five custodial deaths in which their role is under a cloud. This banality of violence is a part of official record in UP — since 2017, 146 people have been killed in 8,472 "police encounters", and 3,302 alleged criminals injured in such shootouts. Unfortunately, this is not something that Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath appears to be embarrassed by. Early in his term, he had laid out the terms of his "thoki raj", where trigger-happy punishment would be given more importance, the message was, than patient investigation or due process. In serving this agenda, the UP police have crossed several red lines, leading to a culture in which extra-judicial killings are celebrated as justice, the National Security Act is slapped on cases of cow slaughter as a way to reinforce an anti-minority political agenda and anti-CAA/NRC protestors named and shamed through public posters. It leads to the spectacle of indignity against a Dalit victim of gang-rape that was seen in Hathras a year ago. Empowering the police with a licence for overreach diminishes the rights of citizens; and codes a rhythm of violence into the everyday — so much so that a routine trip to a hotel in another city can end in tragedy. The BJP government prides itself on ending the alleged jungle raj of bahubalis in UP. But that must not be achieved by creating a cadre of all-powerful cops armed with impunity. Truth must out in the case of the death of the businessman. The UP government must reaffirm the rule of law — not ensure, or be seen to ensure, that the police force is above the law.

KASHMIR TO LADAKH, ALL YEAR ROUND

At 14.15 km, the Zojila tunnel will be India's longest road tunnel, and Asia's longest bi-directional tunnel. A connecting tunnel from Z-Morh on NH1 to the Zojila tunnel will be built in the Zojila Ghats between Sonmarg and Kargil. The work on the entire 33-km span is divided into two divisions.

* The first part involves development and expansion of the 18.475-km highway between Z-Morh to Zojila. A 3-km stretch will be expanded; the rest will be newly developed. The highway will have 2 twin-tube tunnels, 5 bridges, and 2 snow galleries.

* The second part is building the 14.15-km Zojila tunnel itself — 9.5 m wide, 7.57 m high, 2 lanes, in shape of a horseshoe.

* In addition, a 2,350-m concrete 'cut and cover' tunnel will be built, along with 3 ventilation caverns/shafts. Works also include construction of portals, control buildings, ventilation buildings and muck disposables along the route.

TWO UTs CLOSER TOGETHER

When complete, the Zojila tunnel will allow travel between Srinagar and Ladakh throughout the year. The distance from Baltal to Minamarg will come down to 13 km from the present 40 km, travel time is expected to be cut by an hour and a half, and the journey is expected be less

strenuous. The project is expected to lead to integrated development of both Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh.

ANTI-DEFECTION LAW, FOR INDEPENDENT LEGISLATORS

Jignesh Mewani, an independent MLA from Gujarat, has said he has joined the Congress "in spirit" as he could not formally do so, having been elected as an independent. The Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, popularly known as the anti-defection law, specifies the circumstances under which changing of political parties by legislators invites action under the law. It includes situations in which an independent MLA, too, joins a party after the election.

The 3 scenarios

The law covers three scenarios with respect to shifting of political parties by an MP or an MLA. The first is when a member elected on the ticket of a political party "voluntarily gives up" membership of such a party or votes in the House against the wishes of the party. The second is when a legislator who has won his or her seat as an independent candidate joins a political party after the election. In both these instances, the legislator loses the seat in the legislature on changing (or joining) a party. The third scenario relates to nominated MPs. In their case, the law gives them six months to join a political party, after being nominated. If they join a party after such time, they stand to lose their seat in the House.

Covering independents

In 1969, a committee chaired by Home Minister Y B Chavan examined the issue of defection. It observed that after the 1967 general elections, defections changed the political scene in India: 176 of 376 independent legislators later joined a political party. However, the committee did not recommend any action against independent legislators. A member disagreed with the committee on the issue of independents and wanted them disqualified if they joined a political party. In the absence of a recommendation on this issue by the Chavan committee, the initial attempts at creating the anti-defection law (1969, 1973) did not cover independent legislators joining political parties. The next legislative attempt, in 1978, allowed independent and nominated legislators to join a political party once. But when the Constitution was amended in 1985, independent legislators were prevented from joining a political party and nominated legislators were given six months' time.

Disqualification

Under the anti-defection law, the power to decide the disqualification of an MP or MLA rests with the presiding officer of the legislature. The law does not specify a time frame in which such a decision has to be made. As a result, Speakers of legislatures have sometimes acted very quickly or have delayed the decision for years — and have been accused of political bias in both situations. Last year, the Supreme Court observed that anti-defection cases should be decided by Speakers in three months' time. In West Bengal, a disqualification petition against Mukul Roy, BJP MLA now back in the Trinamool Congress, has been pending with the Assembly Speaker since June 17. On Tuesday, the Calcutta High Court referred to the Supreme Court order, observed that the three-

month window has now passed, and directed the Speaker to decide on the petition against Roy by October 7.

SOP FOR IT RULES: CLARITY ON SECTIONS 69 (A), 79 OF IT ACT, LIABILITY OF COS LIKELY

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) is likely to soon come out with detailed guidelines or standard operating procedure (SOP) for proper implementation of IT Rules, which will provide clarity on the powers to authorities, especially under Section 69 (A) and Section 79 of the IT Act, senior government officials said. The SOP is also likely to outline the civil and criminal liabilities of the nodal contact person, resident grievances officer and chief compliance officer in case of non-compliance of any of the rules prescribed under the Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code Rules, better known as the Information Technology (IT) Rules, a senior MeitY official said. "We have received representations from the industry and are aware of the fact that there has been some confusion, especially on the criminal liabilities part and which government agencies have the power to send takedown notices. The SOPs will lay down the guidelines very clearly and demarcate powers," one of the officials said. Section 69 (A) of the IT Act gives the Centre the power to "block for access by the public or cause to be blocked for access by the public any information generated, transmitted, received, stored or hosted in any computer resource". Meanwhile, under Section 79, any intermediary shall not be held legally or otherwise liable for any third party information, data, or communication link made available or hosted on its platform. This protection, the Act says, shall be applicable if the said intermediary does not in any way, initiate the transmission of the message in question, select the receiver of the transmitted message and does not modify any information contained in the transmission. Over the last month, executives from several social media intermediaries met senior officials from the MeitY and explained the need for urgent release of the SOP. The need was felt by the intermediaries once again in August, following controversy over Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's post across social media platforms, wherein he had posted a photo of the parents of a nine-year-old Dalit girl who was allegedly raped. The photo stoked controversy and was subsequently taken down by Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Simultaneously, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) sent legal notices to the platforms as well as Gandhi. Though all three platforms removed Gandhi's tweet and post, they claimed it was done based on their internal guidelines on posting and not on the notices sent by the NCPCR. Twitter was the first to lock Gandhi out of his account, allowing him access only to delete the tweet. Though Gandhi had later submitted a consent letter of the parents of the girl on Twitter, the platform had still not allowed general public access to the tweet and said it would remain hidden as it is against rules under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act.

REVITALISING PM-KUSUM

The Union Minister of Power, New and Renewable Energy recently reviewed the progress of the PM-KUSUM scheme and reaffirmed the government's commitment to accelerating solar pump adoption. Launched in 2019, PM-KUSUM aims to help farmers access reliable day-time solar power for irrigation, reduce power subsidies, and decarbonise agriculture. But pandemic-induced disruptions, limited buy-in from States, and implementation challenges have all affected the scheme's roll-out. How can we unlock the opportunities it promises?

Barriers to uptake

PM-KUSUM provides farmers with incentives to install solar power pumps and plants in their fields. They can use one of three deployment models: off-grid solar pumps, solarised agricultural feeders, or grid-connected pumps. Off-grid pumps have been the most popular, but the nearly 2,80,000 systems deployed fall far short of the scheme's target of two million by 2022. Barriers to adoption include limited awareness about solar pumps and farmers' inability to pay their upfront contribution. Progress on the other two models has been rather poor due to regulatory, financial, operational and technical challenges. Only a handful of States have initiated tenders or commissioned projects for solar feeders or grid-connected pumps, according to our study. Yet, both models are worth scaling up for they allow farmers to earn additional income by selling solar power to discoms, and discoms to procure cheap power close to centres of consumption. We propose five steps for tackling the myriad challenges linked to PM-KUSUM's implementation. First, extend the scheme's timelines. Most Indian discoms have a surplus of contracted generation capacity and are wary of procuring more power in the short term. Extending PM-KUSUM's timelines beyond 2022 would allow discoms to align the scheme with their power purchase planning. Second, create a level playing field for distributed solar plants. Selling surplus power to discoms is one of the main attractions of grid-connected models. Yet, discoms often find utility-scale solar cheaper than distributed solar (under the scheme) due to the latter's higher costs and the loss of locational advantage due to waived inter-State transmission system (ISTS) charges. To tackle the bias against distributed solar, we need to address counter-party risks and grid-unavailability risks at distribution substations, standardise tariff determination to reflect the higher costs of distributed power plants, and do away with the waiver of ISTS charges for solar plants. Third, streamline land regulations through inter-departmental coordination. Doing so will help reduce delays in leasing or converting agricultural lands for non-agricultural purposes such as solar power generation. Fourth, support innovative solutions for financing farmers' contributions. Many farmers struggle to pay 30-40% of upfront costs in compliance with scheme requirements. Further, they cannot access bank loans without collateral. We need out-of-the-box solutions like Karnataka's pilot of a farmer-developer special-purpose vehicle to help farmers install solar power plants on their farms. Fifth, extensively pilot grid-connected solar pumps. Current obstacles to their adoption include concerns about their economic viability in the presence of high farm subsidies and farmers' potential unwillingness to feed in surplus power when selling water or irrigating extra land are more attractive prospects. Further, the grid-connected model requires pumps to be metered and billed for accounting purposes but suffers from a lack of trust between farmers and discoms. Adopting solutions like smart meters and smart transformers and engaging with farmers can build trust. But piloting the model under different agro-economic contexts will be critical to developing a strategy to scale it up. The scheme, if implemented successfully, can generate thousands of jobs, reduce the carbon footprint of agriculture, and result in oil import savings.

THE SCORCHING RAYS OF ASSAMESE NATIONALISM

The Darrang killings, in Assam, wherein there were casualties in police firing during an eviction drive, have unmasked an evil social character of Assamese nationalism and its further descent into darkness. The event was so macabre and grotesque that I will still call it an act of political sadism. How else can one characterise the emotional matrix of a group of people who defile a body after a

person is shot right before their eyes and even go on to celebrate that act of humiliation? Erich Fromm, social psychologist, psychoanalyst, sociologist, has reminded us that the only way to understand the spirit of culture and social character is to pay keen attention to the 'emotional matrix'. Assamese nationalism should be evaluated and diagnosed, among others, for its emotional matrix and how it makes its followers turn to it, like flowers to the sun.

Us versus them

The minority in Assam has been visited by violence so often that it has become part of their everyday life, although it is the tribals who are the historical subjects of evictions. Among the various minorities in the State, it is the Muslim minorities who are victimised the most. Assamese society never opened its doors to them. Assamese nationalists are wont to say, 'become us' by speaking our language, but do keep your religion and culture private, or you may live like nobody. The language riots and the Nellie massacre (1983) drew definitive measurements of the horror and destiny of "Bangladeshi" bodies. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) is not the last nail in their coffin either. It was declared much before Independence that the Pakistanis, Communists and Bengalis were enemies of the Assamese. There is a convergence in how the Assamese and the Hindu nationalists think of their enemy in the Muslim or "Bangladeshi" figure in Assam. Somewhere, they both harbour the fantasies of the collective elimination of this figure. However, they have different histories and methods by which they arrived at this similar sentiment. While the latter flaunts its enemy and their desires publicly, a section of the former tries to hide behind the latter. To say that communalism in Assam and violence against the minority is only due to the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is either a prayer or a fantasy — a beautiful camouflage.

A marginalisation

Even with such clamour of hatred and enmity surrounding them, they have continued with their life, minding their own business and engaged in deep conversation with the soil and the water of the Brahmaputra. They did not have any community but their own. Everything they did was declared to cause decay to the Assamese and their existence, a danger to Assam. To echo Walter Benjamin, philosopher, critic and essayist, the minorities in Assam are prohibited from investigating (or even dreaming) about the future. They are, as the poet once said, "forever a silent sob". In the Constituent Assembly debates on minority rights, Begum Aizaz Rasul rightly qualified that denying a child an opportunity to learn in their mother tongue is militant. The minority in Assam face such militancy in primary education and in all walks of their life. Everything to do with the Muslim is screened. Clothes, children, family, museum, poetry, food, dwelling; everything is questioned, hated, and profiled. Popular songs, newspaper cartoons, wall graffiti, bureaucratic documents, gossip in the streets, classroom interactions, vernacular prose and poetry, cricket practice camps, or even films, vilify and humiliate the "Bangladeshi". The poignancy of hate is so profound, commonplace and recurrent, that any potential empathy towards the minority is hopelessly out of reach. Everywhere they look, and in everything they listen, they see their mutilated identity being projected with disturbing barbarity. Every social interaction they have with the majority in Assam is filled with dehumanisation and violence. The reactions to the Darrang brutality expressed by journalists, politicians, and the foot soldiers of Assamese nationalism reveal how hatred has crystallised into the caste Assamese social structure, and how benumbed they are. Their narcissism will not stop even when political sadism is in such naked

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display. They are so consumed with their self-image that they fail to see any other reality. And like a psychotic, there is no reality but of what they see in and about themselves.

A silence and its import

What can you say about the silence of the victims despite lakhs of them being declared stateless, kept in detention camps, hundreds of deaths by suicide and severe impoverishment? Imagine how deep a social and political legitimacy the NRC process enjoys wherein the victim, who loses everything, will not even protest. Alternatively, should they protest, they know the consequences that will visit their bodies, family and life too well. This absence speaks volumes about the degree of un-freedom the minority has and the brutality with which they are forced to live. Perhaps this silence is also the reason that connects Nellie to Darrang. Ashis Nandy reminds us that the perpetrator remains permanently afraid that whom they have oppressed will strike back, nurturing ideas of revenge. So, they attack again. Was Darrang such an unfolding? I hope I am wrong.

The connecting thread

The Darrang incident was neither an act of a lone wolf nor a disconnected event. The singular event reflects something larger than him. The action of the perpetrators is also connected to the past — to Nellie, Kherbari and the Assam Movement. The singular event takes us to the rightful owners of the sentiments — Assamese nationalism, with its distinct figure of the enemy. How do we erect psychological defences to such robust sentiments of hate for the Muslim distributed so evenly in Assamese society? I am reminded of a Zapatista slogan that said that we need to learn to host the otherness of the other, not the sameness. Perhaps, there is a lesson there and a need to cultivate such a social character of hosting the otherness and the enemy. This is a possible way to come out of the psychosis and narcissism that plagues Assamese nationalists. As for Assamese political sadism, the only exit of it is to annihilate language and culture in its current form and interest.

THE DANGEROUS SLIDE

An eviction drive that ends in the death of two people — one a 12-year-old — injuries to policemen, and macabre footage of a photographer embedded with the state police stamping on a dying man is not just a breakdown of order; it warns of a dangerous slide into sectarianism. *How the Assam government's action in Darrang district against alleged encroachers, largely drawn from the Bengali Muslim community, escalated into a situation in which the police opened fire, allegedly in "self-defence", is now the subject of an inquiry by a retired judge of the Gauhati High Court.* But this much is undeniable: Nowhere was the moderating hand of the state government, whose responsibility is to engage with people and assuage their disgruntlement, visible in Darrang. *Despite the dissatisfaction of the several hundred families served eviction notices with rehabilitation options, the district administration did not stop to accommodate their concerns.* Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma cast it as a way to free up land for the "indigenous" by ousting "illegal settlers". *While the government is within its rights to remove encroachers, the fact remains that the BJP's consistent anti-immigrant and anti-minority narrative has resulted in a gulf of suspicion between the state and the Bengali Muslim community.* This echoes a history of insider-outsider antagonism in the state. Land is at the centre of this mistrust. *Beginning in the late 19th century,*

British colonial interests had settled peasants from adjoining East Bengal in the fertile fields of Assam, creating an anxiety about the Bengali immigrant that persists to this day. In recent times, the BJP's bruising CAA-NRC politics has deepened those fault lines and overlaid it with a distinct Hindutva agenda. Sarma fought and won the BJP's second stint in power in Assam by framing it as a contest between "65 per cent (Hindus) and 35 per cent (Muslims)" and stoking the antagonism towards the "Miya Muslim". *A rhetoric that dehumanises people as "illegals" or "termites" or "Bangladeshi immigrants" also sets them up as targets for violence; legitimises social prejudice and hate.* Governance does not call for polarising rhetoric, but the will to take along the whole electorate, whatever their identity. Those responsible for Darrang's shameful descent into violence must be held to account. Instead of coming down with a heavy hand on a destitute population that has been turned homeless, the state must reach out to them in a language of humane accommodation. Assam's people have paid the cost of uncompromising identity politics with bloodshed before. It must walk away from that path of confrontation.

DONE AND DUSTED

While there may have been lulls aplenty, the next twist or turn in the long-running saga of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) update for Assam is never far. The latest seeks to imbue a sense of finality to the exercise, though it has come from what is only a quasi-judicial body. A Foreigners' Tribunal (FT) in Karimganj district of southern Assam, while removing the ambiguity around a man's citizenship, has pronounced that there is no doubt that the NRC published on August 31, 2019, is the final one. *The exercise left out over 1.9 million from a list of around 33 million applicants, whose citizenship would be determined at the FTs.* The entire updating process was monitored by the Supreme Court and executed by the State's administrative machinery. Unsurprisingly, its publication annoyed political parties across the ideological divide, with some alleging it victimised document-less Bengali Hindus and indigenous Assamese people and others that it targeted the State's Bengali-origin Muslims. In the run-up to the publication of the final document, Assam and the Centre had *petitioned the Supreme Court for re-verification of a sample of names included in the draft NRC — 20% in the border districts and 10% elsewhere — but this was dismissed after Prateek Hajela, the State NRC Coordinator, said re-verification of 27% names had been already done.* In May this year, the State NRC authority, now led by Hitesh Dev Sarma, filed a petition in Supreme Court seeking re-verification of the August 31, 2019 list, citing inclusion of ineligible names and exclusion of eligible ones, and other errors. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma is already on record as having said the State government wants 20% re-verification in the districts bordering Bangladesh and 10% in others. The crux of the matter is that post-publication progress on the NRC has been excruciatingly slow, and not just due to the pandemic. The new NRC Coordinator's petition is still pending, as is another by the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind. More crucially, on the execution side, the issuance of rejection slips to those left out of the NRC has not begun, a necessary step to file appeals in the FTs. Another iteration of the NRC, whether led by the judiciary or the executive, would rely on the same administrative set-up. The system has demonstrated dynamism: the list of excluded in the NRC draft released in July 2018 was nearly 4 million, an additional list in June 2019 left out 1,00,000 more, but the final draft absorbed 2.2 million of those. While a Registrar General of India notification has not conferred the stamp of legality on the NRC yet, that, along with kick-starting the appeals process, is perhaps the most prudent path ahead. Mounting another gargantuan exercise at a colossal cost may only yield a new set of discontents.

A HOLLOW ROAR

In a democracy, power flows from the people and elected governments act as custodians of the mandate. The political class, however, often thinks it can justify its own worst habits — from undermining constitutional norms to gagging dissent — in the name of the people. Tripura Chief Minister Biplab Kumar Deb's speech to a gathering of civil servants on Saturday is an example of this kind of hubris. The BJP Chief Minister reportedly assured bureaucrats that they do not need to fear being hauled up for "contempt of court" — as the head of the executive, Deb claimed he stood between the bureaucracy and any penal action ordered by the judiciary. The threat of "contempt of court" was no "tiger" to be afraid of, he said; "I am the tiger". The bravado does not hide the sheer hollowness of this argument in a constitutional democracy. The executive is only one part of the government, it is accountable to the legislature, subject to the checks of the judiciary — and bound by the rules of the game enshrined in the Constitution. Of course, in Tripura, too, as in many other states, power is increasingly being centralised in the office of the chief minister, who holds multiple portfolios, and runs the state through a coterie of bureaucrats. Moreover, Deb has shown a maverick persona, often reckless about political niceties, even as he is seen to be a popular leader. But neither popularity nor his office must allow him to believe, or to project, that a check on executive powers is a curb on democratic authority. His office does not place him above the law. Deb is not alone in such excess and overreach, of course. The cult of the strong leader means that successes in the electoral fray are often sought to be weaponised by governments, to curb dissent and diminish countervailing institutions. The mandate is seen not just to legitimise rule by the majority — but as a licence for majoritarianism. In such a political model, the winner takes all, and leaves diminishing space for discussion and deliberation through the legislature, the imperative to build consensus on controversial laws, respect for minority rights and civil liberties. When the executive seeks to appropriate excessive power, it is the judiciary's duty and responsibility to raise the red flags, hold it to account and enforce constitutional principles and morality. By appearing to question the judiciary's remit, the Tripura chief minister draws unflattering attention to himself and also does grave disservice to the high office he holds.

NAGA TALKS: SO FAR, WHAT NOW

Tamil Nadu Governor R N Ravi on Wednesday resigned as interlocutor for the Naga peace talks. The government is understood to be unhappy over the handling of the Naga process by Ravi — who was earlier also the Governor of Nagaland — over the past year and a half, during which time he disagreed openly with the insurgent group NSCN(IM), queering the pitch for the negotiations. Naga sources have said the NSCN(IM) views Ravi's removal as Governor of Nagaland and interlocutor as a victory.

What is the Naga peace process?

It refers to ongoing talks between the Indian government and Naga insurgent groups, in particular the NSCN(IM), since 1997 with the aim to sign a Naga Peace Accord. The Naga insurgency, rooted in Naga nationalism, is one of the oldest insurgencies in the country. The Naga-inhabited areas of the Northeast never considered themselves part of British India, and on August 14, 1947, the Naga National Council (NNC) led by Angami Zapu Phizo declared independence for Nagaland. Phizo

formed an underground Naga Federal Government (NFG) and a Naga Federal Army (NFA) in 1952, in response to which the Centre sent in the Army and enacted the Armed Forces (Special) Powers Act, or AFSPA. After years of talks, the Shillong Accord was signed in 1976 with underground groups of Nagaland, but it was rejected by many top NNC leaders on the ground that it did not address the issue of Naga sovereignty and forced Nagas to accept the Indian Constitution. Five years later, Isak Chishi Swu, Thuingaleng Muivah, and S S Khaplang split from the NNC and formed the NSCN to continue the armed struggle. In 1988, the NSCN split again into NSCN(IM) led by Isak and Muivah and NSCN(K) led by Khaplang. The NSCN(IM) is dominated by the Tangkhul tribe of Ukhrul, Manipur (to which Muivah belongs) and the Sema tribe (from which Isak hailed) of Nagaland. In 1997, the NSCN(IM) entered into a ceasefire with the Indian government, which gave rise to hope for a final settlement.

What has happened since?

There have been nearly 100 rounds of talks. In August 2015, the group signed a framework agreement with the Indian government for the Naga Peace Accord. Ravi was appointed interlocutor to take the talks to their conclusion. But while both the government and Naga groups said the talks successfully concluded on the government's deadline of October 31, 2019, no accord was signed. Relations between Ravi and the NSCN(IM) unravelled after the talks concluded. In January 2020, the government had IB special director Akshay Mishra step in and continue the engagement.

How did things go wrong?

Why the IM hardened its stance has never been made public. Sources in the security establishment say things started to go sour after Ravi realised that the NSCN(IM) and the Indian government differed in their understanding of the framework agreement. The group was insistent on a Naga constitution, and was pushing for a Greater Nagalim stretching beyond the boundaries of the present Nagaland state. Naga sources, however, say that during the talks, the IM had softened its stance on the demand for a separate flag and constitution. Sources say even the various competencies of the accord had been agreed upon, although a few bones of contention remained. In November 2017, Ravi signed an agreement with seven groups who had come together under the banner of the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs), which did not include the NSCN (IM). The IM, which considers itself the principal representative of Naga aspirations, has been a rival of many of the NNPG groups. In a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2020, the IM accused Ravi of attempting to "segregate the Naga civil society". After becoming Nagaland Governor in 2019, Ravi expressed frustration at the delay in concluding the deal. In October 2019, after talks with Naga society representatives, Ravi said the NSCN (IM) had "adopted a procrastinating attitude to delay the settlement" by raising the "contentious symbolic issues of separate Naga national flag and constitution". A mutually agreed draft comprehensive settlement was ready to be signed, he said. Ravi wrote a scathing letter to Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio, calling the NSCN(IM) an "armed gang", and accused it of running a "parallel government" and engaging in extortion. In response, the NSCN(IM) hardened its position, saying the Naga flag and constitution were non-negotiable. It claimed the framework agreement included the idea of unification of all Naga inhabited areas in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur. It accused Ravi of twisting the document by deleting key words that suggested Nagaland would co-exist with India as a sovereign. Ravi rejected the demand for a separate flag and constitution outright, and warned that

"any misadventure to disintegrate this great nation shall not be tolerated". The IM responded by calling Ravi's actions "mischief", and demanding his ouster. Ravi, meanwhile, continued to engage with the other Naga groups, and declared that the Accord would be signed with or without the NSCN(IM).

Amid all this, what are the real issues?

Sources in the security establishment say the enthusiasm with which the framework agreement was announced led to unreasonable expectations of an imminent Accord. "The Naga issue is very complex, and the NSCN(IM) is in a delicate position. It is led by a Tangkhul from Manipur, for whom it is difficult to abandon the demand for a Greater Nagalim. But India cannot accept that demand, and a middle path has to be found, which may take some time," a senior officer said. Sources said there was no way the government would accept a separate constitution for Nagaland. "This was never under discussion. There was, indeed, an opinion that the flag could be given. But that went off the table after the decisions of August 5, 2019 in Kashmir, when the region's flag was taken away," another official said. Ravi's open criticism made the NSCN(IM) publicly harden its position, officials said. "There was already pressure on the NSCN(IM) because of NIA cases against its members... There was no need to openly chide them. You can't be the good cop as well as the bad cop as a negotiator," a Home Ministry official said. The move to appoint Ravi as Governor too, did not go down well with the IM. And Ravi's enthusiasm in matters of governance was taken by the state government as interference.

What is the way forward?

The government has roped in former IB officer Mishra as the new pointsperson for talks. Mishra met some representatives of IM this week, after Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and Rio met Muivah and others. Mishra, who sources say could be formally appointed the new interlocutor, is known to be a quiet worker, and has been talking to Naga groups since January 2020. "It is important to understand that there cannot be an accord without the NSCN(IM). It continues to get young recruits and wields considerable influence in the region. The idea is to slowly bring them to accept what India can give," a senior officer said. One of Mishra's tasks would also be to delicately close the gap between the IM and NNPGs, which shared a good relationship with Ravi. Sources in the NNPGs have said they are not averse to working with Mishra; however, they have pointed to the "ambiguity" of his role since, they argue, following the conclusion of the talks on October 31, 2019, "there is no longer a need for an interlocutor". Some demands that need ironing out include one for a bicameral Assembly with at least 40 nominated members representing different tribes; absorption of cadres as local armed forces or in the Indian paramilitary; setting up of autonomous councils in Naga-dominated areas of neighbouring states; and the use of the Naga flag for at least customary events.

PLUG THE LEAK

For the better part of his long stint as Bihar Chief Minister, the sobriquet Sushasan Babu seemed well-earned for Nitish Kumar. Women's welfare schemes, better roads, improvement in law and order and increased access to electricity are testaments to his governance successes. In the past five years, however, shelter home abuse cases, encephalitis deaths and mishandling of the problems of the flood-affected have taken away much of the sheen of Kumar's record. The state's

recent success in providing tap water to the poor — the "Har Ghar Nal Ka Jal" project, which has covered 95 per cent of its target — could have gone a long way in repositioning good governance as the Bihar administration's centrepiece. However, a four-month long investigation by this newspaper has revealed glaring irregularities in the implementation of the scheme — the Nitish Kumar government's largest welfare initiative in terms of scale and reach. The beneficiaries of political patronage involved in the scheme are long. Amongst those who have manipulated due procedures to corner contracts for infrastructural facilities under the project are members of Deputy Chief Minister Tarkishore Prasad's family, a nephew of an ex-minister and a long list of VIP contractors. What makes this unseemly spectacle even more sordid is that Prasad has chosen to brazen out the charges of cronyism. "We are in business, should we not do it," he told this paper. Har Ghar Nal Ka Jal started out as a poll promise by Janata Dal (U) in 2015. Launched a year later, the scheme has provided more than 150 lakh tap water connections, changing lives for the better in villages that were dependent on the declining water table. But a tap water connection hasn't always ensured supplies. *Last mile delivery failures — such as the lack of an electricity connection to pump water from borewells to tanks — have deprived the project from reaching all its intended beneficiaries. This, of course, is a familiar failing of several social sector projects in the country, especially water supply schemes. But in Bihar, the possibilities of corruption were built into the bidding process of the state's flagship water supply project.* The system did not have a way to check dummy competitors and gave ample opportunities to privileged players to game the bidding process. Given that contracts have been given for five years, the possibility of issues related to infrastructure maintenance dogging the scheme in the future cannot be ruled out. *Bihar has a history of people's health being affected because of using groundwater contaminated with arsenic and fluoride.* The state can ill-afford the Har Ghar Nal Ka Jal project to go wrong. The Bihar government has promised an investigation in the wake of this newspaper's investigation. It must hold the culprits to account; more importantly, the Nitish Kumar government must also address the systemic failures that fostered corruption in the first place.

NEEDLESS ROW

The controversy over the recent amendment to the Rajasthan Compulsory Registration of Marriages Act is unnecessary, as it clearly does not amount to validating or legitimising child marriage. However, the issue made by the Opposition and the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights may occasion a reconsideration of the legal framework dealing with child marriages that continue to take place despite a statutory prohibition. The Rajasthan law enacted in 2009 provided for compulsory registration of all marriages. It is largely similar to the enactments in other States, and is based on the Supreme Court's verdict in Seema vs Ashwani Kumar (2007), which directed that all marriages in India should be registered. The original law itself did not exclude registration of child marriages, and all that the amendment does is to change the age at which the obligation to register shifts from the parents or guardians to the parties to the marriage. Earlier, it was the duty of the parties to the marriage to submit a memorandum on their marriage to the registrar if they were both above 21 years; and if younger, it was the duty of the parents or guardians. The amendment changes this age limit to 21 for men and 18 for women. It is difficult to see this change authorising the bride herself to participate in the marriage registration after the age of 18, as one that permits child marriage. Under the law, child marriages are not void, but only voidable at the instance of one of the parties, who may approach the court for nullifying the marriage within two years of attaining majority. Registering such a marriage

may help establish the legal rights of the underage party and those of any children born and deter any attempt to deny the marriage later. It may even help prosecution of those solemnising child marriages and implement provisions relating to maintenance and residence of the girl whose marriage is invalidated later. Nothing prevents the marriage registrar from alerting the child marriage prohibition officer after registering the marriage. One must note that there was never any specific prohibition on registering child marriages. Even the Supreme Court observed that even though registration itself could not be proof of a valid marriage as such, it would have "great evidentiary value in the matters of custody of children, right of children born from the wedlock of the two persons whose marriage is registered and the age of parties to the marriage". As a fallout of this controversy, Parliament ought to consider the Law Commission's recommendation to amend the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, to make child marriages below 16 years void, and those solemnised when either party was between 16 and 18, voidable.

CULTURAL MAPPING OF 75 VILLAGES SOON

Having made little progress since its launch in 2017, the National Mission on Cultural Mapping (NMCM) has now been handed over to the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), which is gearing up for a trial run in 75 villages in October, according to officials. The Culture Ministry had approved the mission in 2017 with a ₹469 crore budget from 2017-18 to 2019-20, according to the administrative approval for the project. However, officials said the project had been slow to take off. In response to a question in the Lok Sabha on July 19, Culture Minister G. Kishan Reddy said the Ministry was working on the cultural mapping mission to build a comprehensive database of artists, art forms and other resources from organisations under the Ministry. "So far 14.53 lakh artists/artisans have been registered on NMCM portal through secondary sources State/Union Territory-wise. However, no direct benefit or assistance has been extended through this Mission to the registered artists/institution," the Minister's written reply read.

Five-year project

IGNCA member secretary Sachidanand Joshi told The Hindu that the work on creating a database for folk arts and mapping of heritage of villages would be carried out over five years. Volunteers from the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sanghathan, the National Service Scheme and students of sociology and social work would be deputed to collect such data from villages, he said. "We will start the trial run in 75 villages next month. We are selecting one village in each State and UT as well as villages that have been a part of our freedom movement as we are celebrating 75 years of Independence," he said. While the entire project would take five years and a budget of ₹89 crore had been approved for it, the IGNCA would aim to complete mapping in 5,000 villages by the end of financial year 2021-2022, Mr. Joshi said.

SLIPPING ON GROUND

The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) has an unenviable task in Chhattisgarh and other areas affected by Left Wing Extremists (LWEs). It performs a host of functions, from policing and security duties, to conducting counter-insurgency operations — the latter against an adversary that consists of Indian citizens, often deeply connected to local geography, ecology and with an

intimate knowledge of the terrain. Given these persistent challenges, it is disturbing that a CRPF review of the forces based in Chhattisgarh by senior officials has found *a significant dip in the quality of operations in the Maoist-violence affected state over the last two years.* As reported by this newspaper, a report based on the review has been sent to Sukma, Konta, Bijapur, Dantewada, Jagdalpur, and Raipur and lays much of the blame for the decline on the fact that *the involvement of senior officers at the level of commandant and second-in-command has considerably decreased.* It is not difficult to see what a lack of hands-on leadership can lead to — for instance, the report found that *there have been slip-ups in setting up tactical resting sites during operations*. This, of course, leaves troops open to ambushes, which have led to considerable casualties over the years. Most recently, the Sukma-Bijapur ambush led to the death of 22 security personnel. With over a thousand security personnel killed in the state since 2011, the paramilitary forces can ill-afford a decline in operational leadership. The question of training and leadership in the CRPF also has a grave impact on the communities where they function: *Recently, the Justice V K Agarwal report concluded that the eight people, including four minors, killed by the CRPF's elite CoBRA unit in Edesmetta in 2013 were civilians, and not Maoists as the force had claimed.* In 2019, a single-judge commission concluded that the CRPF had killed 17 people, firing unilaterally in Bijapur. In both cases, the incidents were apparent "mistakes", stemming from a failure of jawans to tell civilians and extremists apart. *While a more involved leadership on the ground may not be sufficient to deal with both operational and intelligence failures that have led to the deaths of jawans as well as the killing of civilians, it is certainly a necessary first step.* The CRPF needs a leadership that is more empathetic to its personnel and equal to the harsh circumstances they face. Equally, paramilitary forces must be sensitised to the plight of people in states like Chhattisgarh, who face the brunt of poverty, a security state and Maoist violence.

WOMEN MANAGERS: MEGHALAYA TOPS LIST; ASSAM, HARYANA LAST

Sikkim, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab had the highest ratio of female workers as against male workers employed as legislators, senior officials and managers in 2019-20, the annual bulletin of the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2019-20 showed. The report released by the National Statistical Office also showed that the ratio of female workers at senior- and middle-level management positions in rural areas was higher than urban areas in 2019-20, with some Northeastern states leading among all states and Union Territories (UTs) in the country. States/UTs with the lowest ratio of female workers to total workers in managerial positions included Jammu & Kashmir (9.2 per cent), Andaman and Nicobar Island (9 per cent), Delhi (7.9 per cent), Haryana (7.5 per cent) and Assam (6.9 per cent). These states also ranked lower for the senior and middle management roles. Meghalaya topped the list among all states/UTs in 2019-20 with 34.1 per cent ratio of female workers to total workers employed in senior and middle management positions. Sikkim followed next with a ratio of 33.5 per cent, Mizoram with 33.3 per cent, Andhra Pradesh with 32.3 per cent and Punjab with 32.1 per cent, the PLFS bulletin showed. The ratio of female workers to total workers employed in senior and middle managerial positions stood at 21.5 per cent in 2019-20, which was higher than 16.5 per cent in urban areas. Overall (rural and urban) ratio of female workers in senior and middle management positions stood at 18.8 per cent in 2019-20. Among the ratio of female workers to male workers working as legislators, senior officials, and managers, Sikkim had the highest share with 50.4 per cent, followed by 47.9 per cent in Andhra Pradesh and 47.3 per cent in Punjab. For professionals and technical workers, the ratio of female workers to male workers in 2019-20 was highest for Sikkim (120.2 per cent), followed by Daman & Diu

(110.7 per cent), and Meghalaya (101.5 per cent). The ratio of female workers of 15-64 years to persons of age 15-64 years in the labour force, as per the usual status approach, was also higher at 30.1 per cent in rural areas in 2019-20 than 23.6 per cent in urban areas. The overall (both rural and urban) ratio of female workers stood at 28.2 per cent in 2019-20. The quality of work attributed to female participation rate in the workforce has been an area of concern, a trend which has been worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic. The earlier released main report of PLFS 2019-20 had shown a surge in female labour force participation rate — a positive sign — but with the catch that much of this increase is in the most sub-optimal category of unpaid family workers.

TIME TO SOUND THE BELL WITH CLASS DOORS REOPENING

The sight of children going to school evokes normalcy and hope. Our children's lives are centred around schools, and the learning, the routine, and fun that come with it. But for nearly a year-and-a-half since the novel coronavirus pandemic in 2020, schools had to shut their doors, and shift to remote learning. Children could not meet their friends, or eat hot school meals. Some suffered mental distress. Many faced violence. Millions of children missed critical developmental milestones. What started off as a health crisis fast turned into an acute child rights crisis. Learning loss was a big fallout of the pandemic.

The gaps in online learning

While remote, online learning is the only resort to connect students with teachers. It is a pale substitute for in-person learning. Many children have been excluded from online classes, due to the digital divide. There is also grave concern over the learning outcome for children who can connect. Eight out of 10 parents of students aged between five to 13 years are of the opinion that their children were learning less or significantly less remotely compared to when in school. More than nine of every 10 children in Classes 2 to 6 have lost at least one specific ability in language from the previous year. Across India, States have started reopening schools as COVID-19 cases plateau. Large numbers are now vaccinated, and it is steadily moving up. The government prioritisation of teachers for vaccination is very reassuring.

Back at school

However, the decision to reopen schools is fraught with emotions, fears, and heated debates. The questions being raised by parents need to be addressed. Schools must put in place and implement all safety protocols. An online survey conducted by UNICEF reached nearly 11,000 respondents (parents, teachers, and students). By and large, all 6,157 responding parents felt that being vaccinated is the most important safety measure for children to return to school. While parents (55%) said they were not keen on sending their child to school yet, parents (60%) did not feel confident that their child's school and staff are ready for safe reopening. Out of 4,451 teachers who responded to the survey; 65% said they have been provided support and guidance on how to work safely in schools as they reopen. While 93% said school staff should be fully vaccinated before classes resumed. Out of 366 student respondents, 71% were excited to go back to school. Schools can focus on getting back younger children first, as primary and pre-primary-school age children are the least likely to be infected. Children are mostly asymptomatic and are less likely to spread the virus when compared to adults. We have evidence to show that schools are not the main drivers of community transmission and that children are more likely to get the virus outside

of school settings. In fact, keeping schools closed for more than a year did not prevent the raging second wave of the pandemic. With measures firmly in place, schools can be safer environments for children than other places. Teachers have shown remarkable courage and commitment across India. They stepped up to support online and offline learning across high tech, low tech and no tech settings. And used various other platforms for learning and even did door-to-door visits with students.

Learning now and solutions

The novel coronavirus pandemic has paved the way for a blended teaching-learning approach combining online and offline lessons. Teachers may assess the levels of progress in students in remote learning and plan for lessons based on these levels. Parents, teachers, students and school managements need to work together to find solutions. Positive examples have emerged from different States such as open-air classes under trees. Despite doubts, there is no better alternative to the safe reopening of schools. The longer children are out of schools, the more difficult it would be for them to return and learn. The social and economic costs of children continuing to be out of school have become too high. Here is an example of a student's reaction: "When schools were closed, it did not feel right, I got bored and missed my friends. Schools have now opened, we are again meeting every day, playing with friends. We show others how to follow COVID appropriate behaviours in and outside of school. We request our teachers and friends to always wear masks. And that is how we keep everyone safe." Many children are finding rhythm and normalcy in going to schools, like Anshu Kumari, a Class eigh student of Jay Mangal School in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, said. In India, equity must guide how children return to school, and continue to learn and grow.

FAILING ON FOOD

The approval of the PM POSHAN scheme by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs until 2025-26 comes at a critical time when real income declines and the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected the ability of families to ensure good nutrition. The findings in Phase I of the NFHS-5 for 22 States and Union Territories in December 2020 were shocking: childhood stunting rose in 13 States, there was high prevalence of anaemia among children and women, and wasting was a serious concern in 12 States. The slippage over the previous survey period exposes the worsening scourge of malnutrition, threatening to deprive millions of children of a fully productive adult life. It will take a serious effort to address this hidden crisis, backed by strong budgetary commitment. The centrally supported hot meal programme in Government and Government-aided schools, covering 11.8 crore children, will be supplemented with nutritional elements in identified aspirational districts and areas with high anaemia. The scheme, which is proposed to be extended to pre-primary children, provides for social audit, creation of school nutritional gardens to source fresh produce, involvement of farmer-producer organisations as providers, and lays emphasis on local food traditions. While these are positive features, momentum towards eradicating malnutrition hinges crucially on annual budgetary outlays and proof of POSHAN's working will lie in measurable outcomes. Support for the PM POSHAN, which the Government says has been approved over the five-year period at ₹1,30,794 crore, including ₹31,733 crore from States and UTs, must remain elastic. While some child growth metrics such as stunting require a longer window to measure, problems such as anaemia and low weight lend themselves to speedy amelioration. The Government must demonstrate that Saksham

Anganwadi-Mission POSHAN 2.0, which amalgamates the POSHAN Abhiyan and schemes covering anganwadis, crèches and adolescent girls, is fiscally stronger than its erstwhile component parts. There must be a meaningful increase in the current Budget estimate over the combined past outlay for the subsumed individual schemes. On nutritional planning, the renewed plan should introduce a greater diversity of diets that compensates for micronutrient and protein deficiency. Strong supplementation of nutrition at school, in the community, and at childcare centres is critical at a time when criticism of food inflation has met with a tone-deaf response, and pandemic-induced income declines have depressed essential consumption. The lower offtake of foodgrains for the noon meal scheme during the pandemic over the previous year and patchy food distribution mechanisms in many States should set alarm bells ringing. The future of a generation of Indians is at stake.

BID AMOUNTS FOR PM'S MEMENTOES FALL

Bids on Olympians' gear, including Neeraj Chopra's javelin and P.V. Sindhu's badminton racket, reduced from highs of ₹9 crore-₹11 crore in the first week of the e-auction of mementoes gifted to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to near the base prices of ₹80 lakh to ₹1 crore as on Wednesday. The auction, the proceeds of which are supposed to go to the Namami Gange Mission, started on September 17, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's birthday. A total of 1,330 mementoes gifted to him were put on auction through the website pmmementos.gov.in till October 7. The equipment used by Olympic and Paralympic athletes and medal-winners had received bids of around ₹10 crore on day two of the auction. However, the amounts had been reduced after the Ministry disqualified bids that were found not to be genuine, a Culture Ministry official said. On Wednesday, gold medallist Neeraj Chopra's javelin was going for ₹5 crore, while it had received a bid of over ₹10 crore in the first week of the auction. Similarly, the badminton racket and bag of Ms. Sindhu, a bronze medal winner, had a price of ₹1.1 crore on Wednesday, down from ₹9 crore on September 18. The boxing gloves of bronze medallist Lovlina Boroghain were going for ₹80,00,100, or ₹100 over the base price of ₹80 lakh, on Wednesday, while it received a bid of ₹10 crore as on September 18. With eight days to go for the auction to end, Culture Minister G. Kishan Reddy called on the public to participate. "Come forward to be a part of a national cause…," he said in a tweet. The Culture Ministry, too, shared several tweets from all its Twitter accounts promoting the e-auction. In a statement, the Ministry said ₹15.13 crore had been received from a similar auction in 2019.

DRDO TESTS AKASH PRIME MISSILE

The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) on Monday successfully tested a new version of the Akash surface-to-air missile Akash Prime from the Integrated Test Range at Chandipur, Odisha. "In comparison to the existing Akash System, Akash Prime is equipped with an indigenous active Radio Frequency (RF) seeker for improved accuracy. Other improvements also ensure more reliable performance under low temperature environment at higher altitudes," a DRDO statement said. A modified ground system of the existing Akash system had been used for the flight test, the statement further said. In its maiden flight test after improvements, the missile intercepted and destroyed an unmanned aerial target mimicking enemy aircraft, the DRDO noted. Congratulating the team on the successful flight test, DRDO Chairman G. Satheesh Reddy said Akash Prime would further boost the confidence of the Army and the Air Force.

WHAT'S NEW IN ARJUN MARK-1A, AND WHY ITS ACQUISITION IS SIGNIFICANT

The Ministry of Defence said on Thursday that it has placed an order worth Rs 7,523 crore to Heavy Vehicles Factory (HVF), Chennai for supply of 118 units of the Main Battle Tank Arjun's Mark-1A variant for the Army.

What's new in Arjun Mark-1A?

The development of Arjun was started by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) in the late 1980s, primarily to augment the predominantly Russian-made armoured fleet until then. Trials of the earliest Arjun variant began in the early 1990s and the tank was inducted in 2004. Work on the variant Mark-1A, or Mk-1A, began in June 2010 and the tank was fielded for trials in June 2012. For the next three years, extensive trial evaluations were conducted by both the DRDO and the Army, followed by more trials, including field trials, in subsequent years. The Mark-1A variant adds 72 new features — 14 major and 58 minor — to the previous variant Mark-1. These additions have resulted in better all-terrain mobility and manoeuvrability in different modes of operation, better target acquisition, and precision firing during both day and night with a 360° view, and a multi-layered robust protective armour named 'Kanchan'. The additions, along with its robust 120 mm rifled gun, have contributed to its categorisation as the 'hunter killer'. The DRDO is currently conducting trials of firing guided missiles from Arjun. The Defence Ministry has said Mk-1A has more indigenous content than Mk-1, thus reducing dependence on foreign vendors. The new variant is also said to have added some comfort features for the four-member crew, who operate in tough conditions when deployed, and has a better transmission system. Some of the features also prepare the tank better for network-centric warfare — or effective use of information technology and computer networking in the battlefield.

What is the significance of the acquisition?

The acquisition of 118 tanks would equip three armoured regiments, as one regiment comprises 40 to 50 tanks. This acquisition holds significance in light of the Pakistan Army's latest acquisition of two tanks, VT-4 and Al-Khalid. Both tanks, which are of Chinese origin, are comparable to the Russian origin T-90 tanks that are in use by the Indian Army. Arjun Mark-1A is ideally suited for desert terrain, and even more effective and lethal compared to earlier variant due to the new additions. In exercises where Arjun squadrons were pitched against those of the T-90, Arjun is said to have matched the Russian opponent in some aspects and outperformed in some others. However, the weight of the tank puts a limitation on its deployability in high-altitude terrains. While the 72 new additions have significantly increased efficacy, they have also added somewhere between 5 and 6 tonnes to a system that was already on the heavier side. The Defence Ministry said in a press statement: "By virtue of these capabilities, this indigenous MBT proves to be at par with any contemporary in its class across the globe. This tank is particularly configured and designed for Indian conditions and hence it is suitable for deployment to protect the frontiers in an effective manner."

How big a stride is this for indigenous capability?

The new variant is said to have increased the proportion of the indigenous components. The Ministry has said the order will provide a further boost to the 'Make in India' initiative in the

defence sector and is a big step towards 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat'. "This production order to the Heavy Vehicles Factory opens up a large avenue in defence manufacturing for over 200 Indian vendors including MSMEs, with employment opportunities to around 8,000 people. This will be a flagship project showcasing the indigenous capability in cutting-edge defence technologies." Senior DRDO officials have said that from their perspective, Arjun Mark-1A was ready for induction into the Army by 2018-19. The development of the tank was led by the Chennai-based DRDO facility Combat Vehicles Research and Development Establishment (CVRDE) along with the other DRDO laboratories. In February, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had handed over the prototype Arjun Mk-1A to Chief of Army Staff General M M Naravane at a ceremony in Chennai. Officials from the Ordnance factories have said it will take at least two-and-a-half to three years till the first batch of the tank is delivered to the Army.

HIGH WATER

Tropical cyclones laden with moisture and accumulated energy pose a growing challenge, as they have the propensity to inflict heavy damage to lives and property. As the annual monsoon retreats, thousands are left assessing the impact of cyclone Gulab, a rare event for September, on coastal Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and other areas inland. This weather system, with a gusting wind speed of 70 knots at landfall, appears to have been less intimidating than cyclones Yaas and Tauktae, although it continued to keep the seas unsafe for fishermen all along the coastline north of Andhra Pradesh, after moving overland. There have been some distressing deaths and inevitable material losses for many, and the focus must now be on relief and rehabilitation; in the recovery phase of COVID-19, the weather system has upended life for many, disrupting key inter-State road links and leading to the cancellation or diversion of several trains. The imperative is to reach out to those affected by Gulab with food, shelter and health-care support, deploying the many administrative capabilities acquired during the pandemic with the same alacrity. The welcome concern for public health and economic security must lead to stronger institutional responses to natural disasters too. The northern Indian Ocean, of which the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal are a part, experiences only a minority of tropical storms annually, at about 7% of worldwide events, but their destructive impact on the subcontinent is severe due to a dense population and poor capacity to absorb large quantities of rainfall dumped in a short period over cities and towns. Financial arrangements to insure the population against material losses also remain weak, and as the experience in West Bengal with cyclone Amphan demonstrated last year, relief measures can easily fall victim to corruption. The influence of climate change on cyclone characteristics in a world that is heating up due to accumulation of greenhouse gases is an ongoing topic of study. The IPCC, in its scientific report on 1.5° C warming, said with a high degree of confidence that changes in the climate system, including the proportion of tropical cyclones, would experience a larger impact from increasing warming. Research evidence shows more cyclones forming over the Arabian Sea when compared to the Bay; overall there were eight storms of concern to India in 2019, and five last year, Amphan being a super cyclone. The Centre and all States cannot afford to allow large-scale losses to communities to continue each year, and, going beyond disaster response, must put in place institutional structures and insurance systems for financial protection. Cities must prepare to harvest every deluge that brings vast quantities of water, so vital to sustain mass populations.

FLOOD MANAGEMENT THAT CANNOT BE WATERED DOWN

Over the years, many of Bihar's districts have been facing serious challenges with recurrent and massive flooding. This year too, it has been a double whammy — of flooding and the novel coronavirus pandemic. It is the right time to look at some of the key aspects of India-Nepal flood management under the existing arrangements of India's federal system that offers enough room for better coordination between the Centre and State governments. The background: some of Nepal's biggest river systems originate in the Himalayan glaciers which then flow into India through Bihar. During the monsoons, these river systems flood causing many problems for Bihar. It is a necessity that there is process-driven coordination between the Centre and the Government of Bihar to handle the flooding in Nepal's Terai and North Bihar (largely the Mithilanchal region).

Still pending

As part of the long-term measures to address the problem of massive and recurrent floods in Bihar, the Joint Project Office (JPO), Biratnagar, was established in Nepal in August 2004 to prepare a detailed project report to construct a high dam on the Nepal side (on the Kosi, Kamla and Bagmati rivers). The Government of Bihar has raised the matter at regular intervals. The Central Water Commission (CWC), Ministry of Jal Shakti (MoJS), Government of India, convened a special meeting of the joint team of experts (India side) on February 10, 2020 at New Delhi to ascertain the status of the detailed project report. A group of officers formed by the CWC has to work on various aspects of the detailed project report and propose an action plan for its early completion. The Water Resources Department, Bihar has repeatedly requested the MoJS (most recently, through Letter no. 295, dated August 2, 2021) to expedite the progress of the detailed project report. Despite the best efforts made by the Government of Bihar, the task remains unaccomplished even after 17 years. The Minister of Water Resources Department, Bihar, Sanjay Kumar Jha, met the Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar, in September 2020 to highlight long-standing water sharing issues with Nepal. The crucial matter of water sharing with Nepal has been flagged by India officially as well. What is evident is Nepal's lack of prompt reciprocation. It is essential that Nepal shows the required will to find a long-term solution with India in ending a perennial disaster.

Flood protection work

As in the existing India-Nepal Agreement on water resources, the State government is authorised to execute flood protection works up to critical stretches inside Nepal territory along the India-Nepal border. In recent years, all such flood protection works have had to be carried out in the face of increasing local resistance. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Water Resources Department, Government of Bihar, was intensively engaged at two levels: with local Nepalese authorities and through appeals to the Central government for carrying out flood protection works in 2020. After sustained coordination between the Centre and the State (Bihar) and expedited interventions by India with Nepal, Kathmandu gave its conditional permission for manpower and machinery operation in the Nepal area of Kosi basin. Accordingly, 21 out of the 22 works could be completed. Also, some progress was made to facilitate the smooth movement of manpower, machinery and flood control materials across the Gandak and Kamla rivers situated on the Nepal side to carry out flood protection work during the flood period of 2020. But despite the requisite permission for movement on the Kosi barrage and associated embankments, the

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movement of departmental vehicles and work activities did not draw the attention of the Kosi Project Authority, Biratnagar, for various reasons. Since bilateral cooperation remains the fulcrum of water sharing and water management between the two countries, Nepal must play its part in ensuring a sustainable way forward. As in the figures shared by the Water Resources Department, Government of Bihar, a total of four new flood protection works in the Gandak basin area were proposed before the floods of 2020. A request was made on June 22, 2020 by the Water Resources Department, Government of Bihar, to the Government of India for entry into the Nepal region for execution of these flood protection works and for maintenance works of the Gandak Barrage Structure located in Valmikinagar. After receiving conditional permission from Nepal, maintenance work of the structure and components of the Gandak barrage (Valmikinagar), top regulator gates, Right Afflux Bund, and three of the proposed works in the Gandak basin were completed. During the strengthening work proposed on the right marginal bund on the Lalbekia river, the local Nepali administration claimed that the said bund area fell in no man's land. This is notwithstanding the fact that the embankment was built by India 30 years ago and there has not been any dispute regarding its maintenance all these years. Breach closure/protective work of right guide bund of the Kamla weir remains incomplete due to the lack of permission. However, resolution of the impasse is awaited. This is another important matter to be looked at. Aware of the operational impasse during the flood season in 2020, Bihar's Chief Minister Nitish Kumar visited the Jainagar weir site in Madhubani, and upon sensing the seriousness of the situation, instructed the Water Resources Department to explore converting the weir on the India-Nepal border into an efficiently operated barrage. It is evident that Nepal's attitude towards mutual issues (water sharing, flood control, etc.) has been short of collaboration, unlike in the past.

An alternative paradigm

In the best spirit of friendship, Nepal and India should restart the water dialogue and come up with policies to safeguard the interests of all those who have been affected on both sides of the border. It is time the two friendly countries come together and assess the factors that are causing unimaginable losses through flooding every year. Optimisation of the infrastructure will be decisive in finding an alternative paradigm of flood management. Moreover, it is also linked to how the Himalayan glaciers and the green cover are managed. Water cooperation should drive the next big India-Nepal dialogue, and despite the challenges, wisdom should prevail to turn the crisis into an opportunity, for the sake of development and environmental protection. Water resources are priceless assets. By controlling the flooding and using the water resources for common developmental uses such as hydroelectricity, irrigation and waterways, India-Nepal relations can be strengthened even further.

LAND RECORD DIGITISATION: REPORT STATE OF IMPLEMENTATION, CENTRE TELLS BANKS

The government has sought from banks the status regarding digitisation of land records and online creation of equitable mortgage that would help in faster disbursement of agriculture loans. The Finance Ministry has been nudging states to digitise land records and notify all districts for the purpose of creating online mortgage charge. While several states have already implemented these measures, the Central government is pushing for the online facility to direct credit flow in districts that are yet to roll it out. "States including Karnataka, Rajasthan, Kerala UP, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have fully digitised their land record, enabling

banks to create online bank charge on land records. This helps in better credit delivery. But several states, and districts in some states such as Maharashtra, are yet to fully implement this. We are in discussions with banks to effectively implement this for ensuring smooth flow of credit to the farmers," a government official said. In a circular to banks in January, the Finance Ministry had asked lenders to finalised "modalities for entry of loan/charges against parcel of land to facilitate linking land record databases with banks and financial institutions." A senior banker with a public sector bank said that the government held discussions with the lenders in August where it was emphasised that the remaining districts should also be notified for the purpose of online charge on land parcels for sanction of loans. In districts which have not yet been notified for creation of mortgage charge by the banks, farmers have to approach lenders in districts where this facility is available, leading to delays in sanctions and disbursements of credit. "Apart from helping in credit growth in agriculture and MSME sectors, land record digitisation and online creation of bank charge also helps in reducing instances of frauds," the banker said. In the Union Budget 2021-22, the government has raised the target for agricultural credit to Rs 16.5 lakh crore, from Rs 15 lakh crore in 2020-21, with greater focus on lending to animal husbandry, dairy and fisheries. In the year 2019-20, against the total agriculture credit disbursement target of Rs 13.50 lakh crore, actual disbursement was Rs 13.93 lakh crore, according to data from the Finance Ministry. As per Reserve Bank of India guidelines on priority sector lending, banks have to extend 40 per cent of ANBC (adjusted net nank credit) for total priority sector advances. The priority sector advances comprise 18 per cent of ANBC for agriculture sector and 8 per cent is kept for the small and marginal farmers. To boost credit flow to the farm sector, the government provides interest subvention reducing the rate for short term crop loans up to Rs 3 lakh to 7 per cent. For farmers who repay on time, an additional incentive of 3 per cent is given, reducing their rate of interest to 4 per cent.

NIPAH ANTIBODIES FOUND IN BAT SAMPLES IN KERALA

Nipah virus antibodies (IgG antibodies) were detected in bat samples collected by the National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune, from Kodiyathoor and Thamarassery in Kozhikode district near the panchayat where a Nipah infection was confirmed last month. The samples were collected by the NIV as part of the Nipah outbreak investigation. A sample belonging to the Pteropus species, collected from Thamarassery, was found to have Nipah antibodies, while the same was detected in another sample from the Rousettus species collected from Kodiyathoor. The results of over 50 bat samples collected as part of the outbreak investigation were still awaited, Kerala Health Minister Veena George said on Wednesday. Given the current evidence, it would be logical to conclude that the Nipah outbreak in Kozhikode did originate from bats, even though the authorities are still in the dark as to the route of virus transmission from bats to humans, Ms. George said. More bat surveillance and epidemiological studies need to be conducted before more conclusions can be drawn, Ms. George added. Meanwhile, the State is past the 21-day incubation period since the lone case of Nipah was reported at Kozhikode on September 4, during which time there were no fresh cases. Ms. George said that it was the systematic and proactive manner in which the Health Department took up disease surveillance and control measures as soon as the first case was detected which ensured that the virus did not spread to generate more cases. If no more cases of Nipah surface in another 21 days' time (42 days in all after the last case), it would be safe to declare that the outbreak has been completely brought under control. Till then, the State will continue to be on vigil against Nipah, Ms. George said. Since September 4, extensive

surveillance and control measures were taken up in Kozhikode district around the panchayat where the outbreak was detected. As part of the house-to-house surveillance taken up by the Health Department with the help of panchayat authorities, 16,732 houses and 76,074 persons were surveyed. The samples collected and analysed from 50 persons were negative for Nipah. Ms. George said that the State would be coming out with a comprehensive list of COVID-19 deaths by including all those deaths which occurred in the State within 30 days of an individual testing positive for COVID-19.

WHY HAS INDIA AGREED TO RESUME VACCINE EXPORT?

With close to 85 crore doses of COVID-19 vaccines dispensed in India so far, Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya earlier this week disclosed plans to resume export of the India-made vaccine from October, under a programme called 'Vaccine Maitri,' to foreign countries as well as COVAX. The latest supply forecast for global vaccine-sharing platform, COVAX, is that it will have distributed 1.4 billion doses by the end of 2021, less than the 2 billion doses it had aimed for earlier this year. Only 280.5 million doses have been given out through COVAX as of September 15.

How many doses has India supplied abroad?

According to data from the Ministry of External Affairs, as of May 31, 6.6 crore doses of locally made vaccines have gone out of India either as grants, exports or supplies to COVAX. The last despatch was on March 29. Close to 99% of the vaccines supplied were Covishield.

Why did India stop vaccine exports?

India's vaccination drive began in January for healthcare workers and was gradually expanded to those aged over 60. Until February, the uptake was slow. The first two months were also marked by a declining trend (that commenced in September 2020) in daily fresh cases of infection. By February, the daily count had dipped to an all-time low of below 10,000 — something not witnessed since June 2020. Some government-backed epidemiological forecasts as well political messaging began giving out the impression that India had likely passed the worst of the pandemic. By mid-February however, several districts in Maharashtra started reporting a sharp spike, and by March the ascension was rapid enough for a growing public demand that vaccines be made freely available. India had not yet approved foreign-made vaccines, and though Bharat Biotech's Covaxin was approved before the results of its ongoing phase-3 trials, there was too little of it available to the public. By March-end, India placed "restrictions" on the export of Covishield, and stopped it by mid-April.

What is Covishield's role in COVAX?

The Pune-based Serum Institute of India (SII) was expected to be the mainstay for COVAX. Along with the unexpected spike in demand in India following the second wave, a fire at its facility in January meant it struggled to meet its stated production target of 100 million doses a month and was languishing at around 60 million doses. The speedy production of Covishield was aided by a $300-million investment in SII, in November 2020, by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to offset the risk from producing billions of doses of vaccine and in case it was proven to be not

effective. However, with the second surge and the export restrictions, COVAX and its member-partners have over the last few months expressed concerns that SII's inability to manufacture has meant that COVAX's commitment to supply two billion doses by the first quarter of 2022 would be impacted. African Union countries are expected to receive 470 million doses by the end of 2021, but the forecast is 25% lower than predicted in June 2021.

What has changed now?

Regarding the resumption of exports, India has said only "excess supplies" will be eligible for exports. Vaccine production has nearly doubled since April and could rise to over 30 crore doses by October, thus freeing up supplies. Several factors favour India. There is a steady decline in new cases, over half the adults have got at least one dose and, despite reports of fully inoculated people catching the infection, there is no worrying rise in severe disease or mortality. However, Covishield continues to be India's vaccine mainstay. The supply of Covaxin has increased, but it still accounts for only around 11% of India's total vaccine output. Millions of doses of Sputnik V, Sputnik Light, Corbevax and ZyCoV-D are projected to be available in the next few months but so far none has started rolling off the shelves. With nearly 100 crore doses needed to fully vaccinate all adults, it is unlikely that all will be fully vaccinated by the year-end. For that, one crore doses need to be administered every day. India's average daily pace now is about 70 lakh doses.

UNIQUE DIGITAL HEALTH ID AND YOU

On Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM), saying it has the "potential of bringing a revolutionary change in India's healthcare facilities". The flagship digital initiative involves the creation of not just a unique health ID for every citizen, but also a digital healthcare professionals and facilities registry.

What is the unique health ID, and how does one get it?

If a person wants to be part of the ABDM, she must create a health ID, which is a randomly generated 14-digit number. The ID will be broadly used for three purposes: unique identification, authentication, and threading of the beneficiary's health records, only with their informed consent, across multiple systems and stakeholders. One can get a health ID by self-registration on the portal or by downloading the ABMD Health Records app on one's mobile. Additionally, one can also request the creation of a health ID at a participating health facility, which may include government or private hospitals, community health centres, and wellness centres of the government across India. The beneficiary will also have to set up a Personal Health Records (PHR) address for consent management, and for future sharing of health records.

What is a PHR address?

It is a simple self-declared username, which the beneficiary is required to sign into a Health Information Exchange and Consent Manager (HIE-CM). Each health ID will require linkage to a consent manager to enable sharing of health records data. An HIE-CM is an application that enables sharing and linking of personal health records for a user. At present, one can use the health ID to sign up on the HIE-CM; the National Health Authority (NHA), however, says multiple consent managers are likely to be available for patients to choose from in the near future.

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What does one need to register for a health ID?

Currently, ABDM supports health ID creation via mobile or Aadhaar. The official website states that ABDM will soon roll out features that will support health ID creation with a PAN card or a driving licence. For health ID creation through mobile or Aadhaar, the beneficiary will be asked to share details on name, year of birth, gender, address, mobile number/Aadhaar.

Is Aadhaar mandatory?

No, it is voluntary. One can use one's mobile number for registration, without Aadhaar.

Can I use my Aadhaar number if it is not linked to my mobile number?

If the beneficiary chooses the option of using her Aadhaar number, an OTP will be sent to the mobile number linked to the Aadhaar. However, if she has not linked it to her mobile, the beneficiary has to visit the nearest facility and opt for biometric authentication using Aadhaar number. After successful authentication, she will get her health ID at the participating facility.

Are personal health records secure?

The NHA says ABDM does not store any of the beneficiary health records. The records are stored with healthcare information providers as per their "retention policies", and are "shared" over the ABDM network "with encryption mechanisms" only after the beneficiary express consent.

Can I delete my health ID and exit the platform?

Yes, the NHA says ABDM, supports such a feature. Two options are available: a user can permanently delete or temporarily deactivate her health ID. On deletion, the unique health ID will be permanently deleted, along with all demographic details. The beneficiary will not be able to retrieve any information tagged to that health ID in the future, and will never be able to access ABDM applications or any health records over the ABDM network with the deleted ID. On deactivation, the beneficiary will lose access to all ABDM applications only for the period of deactivation. Until she reactivates her health ID, she will not be able to share the ID at any health facility or share health records over the ABDM network.

What facilities are available to beneficiaries?

You can access your digital health records right from admission through treatment and discharge. Second, you can access and link your personal health records with your health ID to create a longitudinal health history.

What other features will be rolled out?

Upcoming new features will enable access to verified doctors across the country. The beneficiary can create a health ID for her child, and digital health records right from birth. Third, she can add a nominee to access her health ID and view or help manage the personal health records. Also, there will be much inclusive access, with the health ID available to people who don't have phones, using assisted methods.

How do private players get associated with a government digital ID?

The NHA has launched the NDHM Sandbox: a digital architecture that allows helps private players to be part of the National Digital Health Ecosystem as health information providers or health information users. The private player sends a request to NHA to test its system with the Sandbox environment. The NHA then gives the private player a key to access the Sandbox environment and the health ID application programming interface (API). The private player then has to create a Sandbox health ID, integrate its software with the API; and register the software to test link records and process health data consent requests. Once the system is tested, the system will ask for a demo to the NHA to move forward. After a successful demo, the NHA certifies and empanels the private hospital.

Why is this initiative significant?

As the Prime Minister highlighted on Monday, the initiative has the potential to "increase the ease of living" along with "simplifying the procedures in hospitals". At present, the use of digital health ID in hospitals is currently limited to only one hospital or to a single group, and mostly concentrated in large private chains. The new initiative will bring the entire ecosystem on a single platform. For instance, if a patient is getting treated at AIIMS, Delhi, and wants to move to another hospital in a different city, and if that hospital is also on the centralised ecosystem, the patient does not have to carry physical health records or files of several years of treatment, as the medical history is readily available. The system also makes it easier to find doctors and specialists nearest to you. Currently, many patients rely on recommendations from family and friends for medical consultation, but now the new platform will tell the patient who to reach out to, and who is the nearest. Also, labs and drug stores will be easily identified for better tests using the new platform.

THE FINAL STRETCH

India's Covid vaccination drive enters a crucial phase today. Close to 100 crore vaccinations, an average of more than one crore shots every day, need to be administered in the next three months to attain the government's target of inoculating every adult Indian by the end of this year. The country has been averaging 76 lakh doses daily for about a month now, an appreciable improvement from the July average of 45 lakh doses. The project requires another ramp up in the year's last quarter. But the supply issue is nowhere as problematic as it was three months ago. The one-crore mark was, in fact, exceeded on four days in September — on September 17, more than 2.5 crore Indians received the jab. What might, however, push the project into the next year is that about 30 per cent of the adult population has not yet received a single shot. The 12-week gap between two doses of Covishield, the vaccine that has largely driven the drive, makes a spillover to early 2022 likely. The carryover was not unexpected given the scale of the project. The government must ensure that the target is not missed by much. It must undertake another equally significant task: It must find out what has kept about 30 crore Indians away from the most potent shield against the coronavirus. This could help provide crucial details about the project's reach and plug gaps. More than a quarter of the eligible population has now received both shots of the vaccine, and nearly 69 per cent have been administered one shot. These are reassuring figures at a time when epidemiologists are expressing concerns about a possible third wave, following the festive season. What is worrying, however, is that about 24 per cent of the population in the 60 plus age group — the most vulnerable — is still unvaccinated. The health ministry's data, collected during the first seven weeks of the second wave, testifies to the mitigating role of vaccines when

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the contagion was at its virulent worst. It shows that fatalities amongst unvaccinated people over 60 years of age were almost 50 times more than those in this age group who had received at least one jab. This was also the period when the country was beset by acute vaccine shortage. With supplies going northwards since the last week of June — after the Supreme Court's direction brought about a change in the Centre's distribution strategy — and state governments equipped with prior knowledge of vaccine availability, there is a case for local administrations undertaking targeted drives to protect the most vulnerable and prevent a possible third wave from turning lethal. In the past three months, local authorities have reported appreciable success in removing vaccine hesitancy. By all accounts, however, this bane of the vaccination project isn't over. The government's endeavours to collect vaccine-related data must not remain impervious to this conundrum. How many of those who haven't received even one shot are vaccine hesitant, and why? The answer to this question will help join dots, resolve some vexing problems that remain.

RAINY SEPTEMBERS POINT TO MONSOON SHIFTS

For the first time since 2010, India is poised to see three consecutive Septembers with excess rainfall. Experts say that this is a sign of a change in monsoon patterns though it is too early yet to demonstrably prove that is a lasting consequence of global warming. As of September 24, monsoon rainfall for the month is nearly 19 cm. The normal for the entire month is 17 cm, and there is still a week's worth of rainfall to come.

Spikes in rain

While September is usually the month that marks the beginning of the end, for the monsoon's four month sojourn over India, both 2020 and 2019 have seen spikes in rain. In 2019, September rain was a staggering 152% or close to 25 cm. To put that in perspective, that is close to what the country gets in August (26 cm), usually the second rainiest of the monsoon months. That year saw India get the highest monsoon rainfall since 1994. Last September's rainfall was 17.7 cm which was not too high but more than what is normal. From 2013 to 2018, September rainfall has been less than normal save for 2014, when it was 18 cm, or 1 cm above normal. From 2010–2012, the three years of extra-rainy Septembers did not do much to boost the total rainfall India received. India only got 2% more monsoon rain in 2010 and 2011, and ended up with an overall 7% deficit in 2012 (largely due to weak rains in June and July). However, both in 2019 and 2020, India received close to 10% more monsoon rain than normal. When August ended, India appeared to be dangerously close to a rainfall deficit and almost 9% short of what is normal from June–August end.

Narrowed deficit

This year, with weak August rainfall, the India Meteorological Department said that September rainfall would be stronger than usual but India would still end up with only around 96% of what's normal. However, rainfall this month has significantly narrowed the deficit from 9% at the beginning of the month to 2% at the last week of September. A rain-bearing circulation is forming in the Bay of Bengal—unusual for this time of the year—and is expected to bring significant rain over several parts of India for most of the coming week. "The most obvious reason is that the monsoon is withdrawing much later than usual," said Mahesh Palawat, Chief Meteorologist,

Skymet, a private weather forecast agency, "This means more September rainfall. But why it's staying on for longer is still to be understood."

Delayed withdrawal

The monsoon normally starts to withdraw by the 1st of September and completely exits by October. Last year, to reflect the increasingly delayed withdrawal of the monsoon, the IMD updated the beginning of the withdrawal date to September 17th. In both 2019 and 2020, the monsoon began its withdrawal in October and the same is expected this year too. "Overall global warming is increasing moisture levels during the monsoon period but this is affecting the distribution of the rain," said KJ Ramesh, former Director General, IMD, "July and August see periods of active rains and breaks. June and September because they have low base rainfall, even the slightest increase shows up big percentage gains." A study by scientists at the Central Water Commission published in Theoretical and Applied Climatology, 2018 analysed changes in monsoon patterns and concluded that the monthly variability of the summer rainfall was due to changing patterns of low pressure over the Indian landmass as well as fluctuations in moisture distribution.

NO MORE PUDDLING

Indian agriculture's major challenge in the initial decades after Independence was to increase crop production and yields at any cost. Today, it's about boosting farm incomes, while simultaneously ensuring production that is cost-competitive, resource-use efficient and climate-smart. The release of a new herbicide-tolerant rice variety by the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI) that can be directly sown, instead of requiring transplantation, is therefore welcome. Farmers transplant and grow paddy in flooded fields mainly to control weeds, which cannot emerge under water that acts as a natural herbicide. The IARI variety contains a mutated gene making the paddy plant "tolerant" to Imazethapyr, a herbicide effective against a wide range of weeds. This chemical when now sprayed will kill only the weeds, while the paddy can be cultivated without any nursery preparation, transplanting, puddling and flooding. Farmers would save about 30 per cent water, Rs 3,000-per-acre labour costs and 10-15 days' time from direct seeding, compared to conventional transplantation. The IARI variety — there's a need for many more of these — highlights the importance of investing in public agricultural research. The first challenge that India confronted, of feeding its population and achieving a modicum of grain self-sufficiency, couldn't have been met without the high-yielding semi-dwarf varieties bred during the 1960s and 1970s. The same goes for today's challenges, especially from climate change. Average temperatures are rising, winters are getting shorter and the number of rainy days is falling even with overall "normal" monsoons. Growing crops and rearing animals under such circumstances — of extreme hot and cold or prolonged dry weather and intense downpours — is becoming increasingly tough, with farmers also facing problems of depleting water-tables, soaring energy costs and emergence of new pests and diseases. Coping with these stresses requires new breeding approaches (including gene modification and editing) and low-input, high-output agriculture technologies. All this also means putting farm research on centre stage just like during the Green Revolution. Agriculture and climate change are too important to be left only to generalist bureaucrats, economists and activists. Research, unlike subsidies and welfare schemes, may not yield political dividends or pay in the short run. But the returns from farm research — IARI

varieties alone account for over 95 per cent of India's Rs 32,000-crore annual basmati rice exports and nearly half of its total wheat area — are more sustainable.

TAP TWICE FOR SRK

Bring the middle and index fingers of your right hand together and tap the left side of your chest twice. You've just said "Shah Rukh Khan" in the Indian Sign Language (ISL). The actor's name is among this year's inclusions in the ISL dictionary, a signal honour and — to many fans — a slightly puzzling one given that SRK already has one physical gesture that is so universally identified with him that it's even been the subject of parodies by comedians and other actors, not to mention Khan himself — even the Assam Police had jumped in last year with a poster that showed SRK performing this gesture in order to illustrate the pandemic's social distancing protocol. We are, obviously, referring to the actor's signature arms-wide-open pose, with a slight bend in the right knee and a come-hither smile (he was masked in the Assam Police poster, but the smile may be taken as read). As would be evident to anyone who's watched his films, not one of them is complete without the actor striking this pose, usually in a song. And if it has been synonymous with Khan for over two decades, surely it's good enough for inclusion in the ISL dictionary? To that, one could argue that there is no debate about the appeal of the signature SRK pose: Those wide open arms coupled with the dimpled smile are an invitation to romance and excitement like no other. But the gesture itself, in all its grandiosity, is one that belongs to the language of the silver screen, capturing in one sweeping move the movie star we love, who brings his irresistible charm to even the deadest of cinematic duds. For an everyday language such as the ISL, what is needed is a smaller, more intimate gesture of what SRK means, especially to his fans. Two taps on the heart? What could be more appropriate than that to say, "Shah Rukh Khan, Bollywood's King of Romance"?

BP, CHOLESTEROL CONTROL KEY FOR TYPE 1 DIABETICS

Good control of not only blood sugar but also blood pressure and cholesterol is essential for survival and a good quality of life among Type 1 diabetics (T1D), according to a pan-India study of long-term survivors with the condition. A first-of-its kind report of long-term survivors of T1D from India, a multi-centric study was published in the peer-reviewed journal Diabetes Technology and Therapeutics. Comparing survivors for over 40 years with people who did not survive up to 40 years, the researchers found that "survivors had better glycemic and blood pressure control, more favourable lipid profiles and lower prevalence of complications compared to non-survivors". However, they said "there could be other protective factors as well, which merit further studies". The survivors also had better height and weight parameters compared to the other group. Individuals with T1D have increased morbidity and excess premature mortality compared to those without diabetes and their life expectancy is reduced by an estimated 15-20 years, even with the life-saving insulin to their assistance. However, long-term survival with T1D is possible and 40% of European individuals with T1D are reported to survive for more than 40 years with life expectancy now extending almost up to 70 years, the paper added. In fact, two patients in the study have lived over 70 years with T1D, said V. Mohan, of Dr. Mohan's Diabetes Specialties Centre (DMDSC), and lead author. A total of 127 participants with T1D were included in the study which comprised 76 survivors of over 40 years duration and 51 non-survivors. Of the 76 survivors, 59 were from DMDSC, the coordinating centre in Chennai, and 17 from other participating centres (5 from the Madras Medical College, Chennai; 5 from Ahmedabad, 3 from

Delhi, 2 from Kolkata and 1 each from Mumbai and Nagpur). Among the 76 T1D survivors, 58 individuals had survived 40-49 years with diabetes, 12 individuals 50-59 years and 6 individuals, over 60 years with diabetes.

Lower life expectancy

India is home to more than 95,000 children with T1D, reported to be the highest in the world, according to the 9th International Diabetes Federation Atlas, the study points out, but most reports on long-term survival were from the U.S. and Europe and none from India. Given that life expectancy in India is in general lower, the subject definitely needs attention, the authors argued. While the study showed a significant differentiation in blood glucose, blood pressure and cholesterol levels determining better survival and quality of life, Dr. Mohan said it was interesting that many of the long-term survivors in the study were not prescribed intensive insulin therapy in the first 10 years or so after diagnosis, and they still seemed to be protected from complications. This definitely calls for more studies, he added.

COMING SOON, A PROJECT TO SECURE INDIA'S ELEPHANT CORRIDORS

As instances of human-elephant conflict rise, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change has embarked on a massive project to identify and secure elephant corridors in the country. The corridors could also be notified in order to give legal protection to the movement of elephants. According to Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav, the Ministry has "recently initiated the verification exercise of elephant corridors and is also working on mapping land use and land cover of elephant reserves in the country using GIS technology which will also aid conservation". Experts said elephant corridors have been changing over the years. Eighty-eight corridors were identified jointly by the Ministry and Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), and published in 2005. In 2015, a second round of identification took place — and when published two years later, the number of corridors had gone up to 101. "The number of corridors increased because of fragmentation of existing corridors. Elephants were finding new routes for their journeys. Over the last decade, seven corridors have disappeared because of fragmentation and impaired animal movement — they are no longer being used by elephants. If these could be included, there would be 108 corridors now," Dr Sandeep Kumar Tiwari, Deputy Chief of Conservation at WTI, said. Dr Tiwari, who is on a committee that was set up by the Ministry earlier this year to look into the issue of elephant corridors, said fragmentation could take place either due to linear infrastructure such as roads and railways, or a change of land use, including the development of plantations or agricultural patches. Dr Prajna Panda of the Ministry's Project Elephant said the lists of elephant corridors prepared by the central and state governments do not match. "So we are going back to the drawing board to match the Ministry and state lists, and come out with a comprehensive list of corridors," she said. "Earlier this year, the Ministry for the first time laid down parameters on what exactly an elephant corridor is, and how they are to be identified. This will eliminate the confusion around identification and subsequent preservation. The identification of the corridors, as well as checking land-use patterns in these corridors, will help us formulate policies and prioritise action on how the corridors need to be conserved," Dr Panda added. The corridor identification process will be undertaken in four elephant-rich regions: North West, North East, East-Central, and South. The Ministry will launch an awareness campaign among forest officials and other stakeholders in UP and Uttarakhand (North West region) on Friday. Similar campaigns

will be held in other regions as well, before a final identification process is kicked off on October 18.

DRONES USED TO SPREAD SEED BALLS FOR REFORESTATION

A city-based technology start-up has come up with the innovative idea of an aerial seeding campaign as a solution for the reforestation challenge. Marut Drones, which had earlier deployed drones successfully in agricultural operations and for delivery of vaccines, is now using them for greening large swathes of denuded forest lands through its "Hara Bhara" initiative. Film actor Rana Daggubati flagged off the first 'seedcopter'— a drone with seed balls — on Friday, kicking off the campaign in Telangana. The first payload of 1.5 lakh seed balls was delivered in the KBR National Park in the city. "Loss of vegetation occurs in vast tracts of forest areas every year due to fire and other causes. Our aim is to accelerate the target of 33% green cover throughout the country by dispersal of seed balls in inaccessible forest areas, using drones," explained Prem Kumar Vislawath, founder and chief innovator, Marut Drones. The seed balls contain a variety of seeds rolled within a ball of clay, together with organic manure and fertilizer. The balls, after being dispersed in a barren area, are expected to dissolve when it rains, and result in germination of the seeds. Marut Drones has engaged the services of local people, self help groups and NGOs in the preparation of seed balls, and identified the locations for dispersal with the help of the Forest Department.

Growth monitoring

"We have been given 12,000 hectares of forest land in 12 districts by the Forest Department, where we aim to fire a total of 50 lakh seed balls. We will monitor their growth for the coming 10 years, and record the change in greenery annually through satellite monitoring," Mr. Vislawath said. Depending on the success rate in Telangana, he wishes to replicate the experiment throughout the country to achieve the desired levels of forest cover. "We wish to plant 1 billion trees in the country by 2030 through drones," he said. The entire operation is being done on pro bono basis, with no funding from government. Permissions for the use of drone technology have been obtained.

ZSI SIGNS MOU WITH NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM LONDON

The Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) has signed an MoU with the Natural History Museum (NHM) London to work together to collect, study and conserve faunal specimens for science and to create and exchange associated data and images. The MoU will be for five years, the ZSI said in a statement on Saturday. The MoU was signed on a virtual platform on September 24 between Dr Dhriti Banerjee, Director of ZSI and Dr Douglas Gurr, Director, Natural History Museum London, the statement said. The ZSI Director said that this MoU was long overdue and the NHM, London and ZSI, Kolkata are going to be mutually benefited on the faunal diversity research through scientific exchange between the two great institutions and long standing relationship. She said that ZSI is the umbrella institute for Biodiversity studies in India. "We have our headquarters in Kolkata and we have 16 Regional Centres instituted to cater to the faunal diversity of the various biogeographic areas of India. We have around 5 million animal collection holding, 20,000 type collections and around 450 scientists and scientific staff towards curatorial and research on the

vast animal collections present in ZSI," she said. Gurr while thanking the Government of India for agreeing into this MoU with them expressed his gratitude to ZSI and said that ZSI and NHM, London look forward for joint research activities by both since they share a joint passion on natural history collections and accelerate towards better science. "This collaboration will not only benefit both institutions, the millions of vital collections present in NHM, London and ZSI including type materials are important nationally and across the world for understanding and conserving the biodiversity, curing natural resource loss and sustainable management of bio-resources as well as impact of climate change," he said.

PUNJAB CM'S SEAT: SIKH HISTORY, CURRENT POLITICS

Punjab Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi represents the Assembly constituency of Chamkaur Sahib, which is of significance in Sikh history as well as contemporary politics — it was in the news recently when the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) gave it to the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) amidst opposition from leaders in Punjab. Historically, this was where that Guru Gobind Singh lost two of his elder sons in a battle with the coalition forces of Mughals and the hill rajas.

What was the recent political row about?

Following the SAD move giving the reserved seats of Chamkaur Sahib and Fatehgarh Sahib to the BSP in June, many including Congress MP Ravneet Bittu had slammed the SAD for giving away two seats of such religious importance. The SAD retaliated by accusing Bittu of being casteist, and also complained to the Punjab State Commission for Scheduled Castes, following which Bittu apologised. Within the SAD, a senior leader quit in protest. With the new CM representing it, Chamkaur Sahib and its history are again in focus.

What is this history?

The coalition forces of Mughals and hill rajas led by Wazir Khan, the Nawab of Sirhind, had laid siege to Anandpur Sahib in the hope of capturing Guru Gobind Singh in May 1704. After seven months of fighting and heavy losses, the coalition forces offered a safe passage to the Guru and his followers. The heads of the coalition pledged they would not harm the Guru, his family, or his soldiers. Col Jaibans Singh, a military historian, writes that the peace treaty was sent in the name of Emperor Aurangzeb himself. But when Gobind Singh and his followers stepped out of the Anandpur Sahib fort on the night of December 20, they were attacked. They fled towards Ropar and the swollen Sarsa river. It was while crossing the river on their horses that Gobind Singh was separated from his mother Mata Gujri who was with their two younger sons.

What happened at Chamkaur Sahib?

Amarjit Singh, director of Guru Granth Sahib Studies at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, said the Guru, accompanied by panj piaras (the five Sikhs he had initially baptised), his elder sons Ajit Singh (18) and Jujhar Singh (14), and around 40 soldiers, regrouped in a fortress-like two-storey house, with high compound walls made of mud. They were surrounded by an army commandeered by Wazir Khan and Sher Mohammed Khan, the younger brother of Malerkotla's chieftain. The Guru sent out soldiers in small squads for hand-to-hand combat. Two such attacks were led by his sons, both of whom died fighting. Three of the panj piaras — Mohkam Singh,

Himmat Singh and Sahib Singh — too died fighting. Bir Devinder Singh, former Deputy Speaker of the Punjab Assembly and a keen student of history, said Guru Gobind Singh gave an account of the battle in Zafarnama, his letter to Aurangzeb.

How did the battle conclude?

When very few soldiers were left, they decided the Guru should leave so that he could carry on his mission. "It was at the Chamkaur ki garhi (fort) on December 22 that panj piaras issued an edict (hukumnama) ordering the Guru to leave. This was the first edict issued by panj piaras after the formation of the Khalsa on April 13, 1699. They told the Guru, 'You can get many like us, but we won't be able to get the like of you'," says Bir Devinder. Before leaving, the Guru gave his attire and distinguishing kalgi to Sangat Singh, a Mazhabi Sikh who resembled him. Three other soldiers too left the fort, and went in separate directions. The following day, the enemy forced their way inside to find only two soldiers who fought till their last breath. Five days later, Guru Gobind Singh's two younger sons, aged nine and seven, were bricked alive for refusing to convert.

How is the battle remembered?

Col Jaibans Singh writes that the battle infused the peasantry with military zeal. Every year, a shaheedi jor mela, marked by prayers and langar, is held to commemorate the martyrdom of Guru Gobind Singh's young sons and his soldiers.

KAMLA BHASIN: FEMINIST, POET, SECULARIST

A feminist. A regular, diminutive figure at several protests in Delhi. An occasional appearance at music concerts, if time allowed her. A song writer whose songs have been a source of inspiration, sung across borders that divide. A poet whose verses are adrenalin shots for women. A secularist to the core. Call her a force of nature, if you will. In her 75 years, Kamla Bhasin was more than just a friendly, smiling face. She represented and touched women struggling for a toehold in public places denied to them, moving on in her later years to question the state and governments for their inability to put an equitable system in place. Quiet, firm and unrelenting, her passing away on Saturday found an outlet on Twitter where women acknowledged, in 147 characters, the debt they owed to her.

'Learning is key'

"You may go into a village with an idea or a plan. But only if you're willing to learn and be educated by the people you are there to serve, will you make progress. When you're willing to listen to them, you will begin to see their reality, how caste and class operate, and how inequitable society is," she had shared in the course of an interview. A developmental sociologist and author, she embraced feminism in the course of her journey across rural Rajasthan, after she returned from Germany in the 1970s. Bhasin's travels through the countryside opened her eyes to the real world far removed from Delhi offices. The founder of women's organisation Jagori, her energies were initially focussed on smashing the patriarchy responsible for the dismal state of women. Graduating further, she placed gender in systems and structures which abled gender imbalance, and moved a full circle to question the state and elected governments for perpetuating inequalities. The 1990s reform saw Bhasin connecting the dots between gender disparity and an

unrelenting system, which often found an expression in songs that became popular. People could relate to the home-spun quality of her verses, shorn of highfalutin words.

Everyone's loss

She took on multinational soft drinks manufacturers that drained out water from lakes, depriving people from accessing potable water — all of this found an expression in ditties penned by Bhasin. Making time in her life for women, and acknowledging the contribution of men who have furthered the cause of equality, embracing secularism as the life-breath of democracy, Bhasin will be certainly missed by half the population that makes up India's numbers. The other half, too, will feel her absence.

BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

GOVT.-INDUSTRY PANEL DRIVES POLICY TO REVIVE MANUFACTURING

A meeting between industry captains and Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal soon after the national lockdown was announced in 2020, has led to the setting up of the Steering Committee for Local Value Addition, Manufacturing and Exports, or SCALE, aimed at navigating Indian manufacturing away from the import-dependence pitfalls exposed by the pandemic. Noting that many of them had more time on their hands due to the lockdown, Mr. Goyal had suggested that the CEOs put on their thinking hats and come up with ideas to tap the global sentiment against China and strengthen Indian manufacturing. The Minister asked Pawan Goenka, the Mahindra group's managing director till April 2021, to drive this introspection. The group is now working on such ideas for 17 sectors — from toys, textiles, furniture and e-cycles to drones and even fisheries. The SCALE includes the top brass from the industry bodies CII, FICCI and Assocham and three representatives from government, with member secretary Manmeet Kaur Nanda from the Department of Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), and three industry honchos, including JSW Steel joint managing director and group CFO Seshagiri Rao MVS, and Salil Singhal, chairman emeritus, PI Industries. India has seen multiple similar committees over the past two decades to enhance the share of manufacturing in the economy, with recommendations either gathering dust, scuttled by inter-ministerial and intra-industry crossfire, or leading to botched policies like the non-starter National Manufacturing Investment Zones (NMIZ). The SCALE group is different for a few reasons. First, it has no deadlines and drafts and no voluminous reports — all its proposals are laid out in a presentation at best. Second, it doesn't just gather up ideas from various sectoral players and splash them together for the government to consider, as usual industry representations tend to be. Third, it follows a rigorous process of consultations to align different factions of industry with varying agendas at multiple levels and tries to nudge an alignment of interests where differences seem intractable, before it takes up the relevant issues with the government. "Generally, industry bodies come to government and say, 'Give me this, Give me that'," Dr. Goenka told The Hindu. "My first sentence to them in SCALE interactions is, "It should be 'I am going to do this, and this is the help I need.' And if you don't have an 'I am going to do this', then let's not even talk," he said.

Industry commitment

Consequently, none of its presentations have had policy suggestions without an equal commitment from the industry, in terms of investments and job creation, if those suggestions were accepted. In fact, in the case of air conditioners, one of the first sectors it began working on, the industry players actually gave a letter of commitment to Mr. Goyal that they will invest more and take domestic value-addition to 80% from the present 20% in five years, even before the government notified the PLI scheme for the sector. "This was signed off by the industry and is almost a contract," Dr. Goenka said, adding that air conditioners , was considered a sunset sector with no scope for a change in status quo. The panel's ideas for other uninteresting sectors, including fisheries and TVs, are also at advanced stages of deliberations within the government.

PICTURING LABOUR

On Monday, the Ministry of Labour and Employment released the findings of the new Quarterly Employment Survey (QES) for the first quarter of the ongoing financial year. As most labour market data in India comes with a considerable lag, making it too late for any meaningful input in policymaking, the new survey is a welcome step towards filling the information void that surrounds the labour market. Regularly available, high quality, credible labour market data forms a valuable input. It provides policymakers not only a sense of the extent of labour market distress during periods of economic upheaval, but also an understanding of the effectiveness of government policies. The quarterly survey provides data on employment in nine non-farm sectors of the economy — namely manufacturing, construction, trade, transport, education, health, accommodation and restaurants, information technology/business process outsourcing and financial services. These nine sectors account for roughly 85 per cent of total employment in units employing 10 or more workers. According to this survey, organised sector employment stood at 3.08 crore during April-June 2021, up from 2.37 crore in 2013-14. This translates to an annual growth rate of just 3.3 per cent. While most sectors saw a rise in employment during this period, employment in trade, and accommodation and restaurants — sectors that are more likely to have been hit by the pandemic — was down by 25 per cent and 13 per cent respectively. In fact, as per the survey, employment actually fell in 27 per cent of the establishments due to the pandemic. However, the survey also says, during the period of the national lockdown last year (March 25-June 30, 2020), 81 per cent of workers received full wages, 16 per cent received reduced wages, while 3 per cent were denied wages. How this demand-side snapshot provided by an establishment-based survey reconciles with supply-side data from household surveys remains to be seen. As the QES covers only establishments with at least 10 workers, it provides data essentially on the formal economy. Considering that informal workers (with no written contracts, and benefits) account for roughly 90 per cent of the labour force in India, the QES thus provides only a partial glimpse of the labour market. Only when data on the unorganised sector (establishments employing nine or less workers) is captured — this forms the second part of the framework of the labour bureau's establishment-based surveys — will a more comprehensive picture of the labour market emerge.

SPENDS LAGGING, FINMIN ASKS MINISTRIES TO STEP UP CAPEX

The Finance Ministry has suggested other Ministries and departments to push up capital expenditure in the remaining two-quarters of the current fiscal, as government capex in the April-July period lagged the expansion outlined in Budget 2021-22. As against a Budget Estimate of Rs 5.54 lakh crore of capex for the entire year, growth of around 35 per cent over the previous year, actual capex in April-July was Rs 1.28 lakh crore, growth of about 15 per cent. The Finance Ministry held a meeting with key officials of other Ministries and departments last week and discussed the need to step up spending on infrastructure projects. *Last Friday, the government removed spending curbs on all Ministries/departments as revenue position improved.* "Spending on infrastructure is key to sustain recovery and to push growth. The government has been conscious of long-term investments. Even till July, capex has risen vis-a-vis last year but certainly we want projects under the National Infrastructure Pipeline to be given priority," a government official said. The Finance Ministry has reviewed the capex progress and discussed plans to speed up infra spends in

meetings with Ministries, the official said. In the current fiscal year till July, for which the latest data is available with the Controller General of Accounts (CGA), government capital expenditure was at Rs 1,28,428 crore or 23.2 per cent of the 2021-22 Budget Estimates, lower than 27.1 per cent during the same period last year. For the full year, the Centre will be providing another Rs 2 lakh crore to states and autonomous bodies for their capital expenditure, as per Budget documents.

WHY HAS THE CENTRE REMOVED SPENDING CURBS ON MINISTRIES?

With the government revenues picking up as the economic recovery gains strength, the Finance Ministry on Friday removed the expenditure curbs that were imposed on various ministries for the July-September quarter. As a cash management exercise, the government had earlier asked various ministries and departments (in category B) to "restrict the overall expenditure within 20 per cent of BE 2020-21 in Quarter 2 (July to September 2021)". This restriction has been withdrawn.

What's the change now?

The government did not impose any spending restrictions on the ministries of health, rural development, railways, agriculture, MSME (micro, small and medium enterprises) — the ministries and department in the Category A specified by the finance ministry. Expenditure curbs were imposed on demands/appropriations related to ministries and departments such as civil aviation, home, labour, mines, power, telecom and post, consumer affairs, fisheries, revenue, economic affairs, financial services and heavy industries, among others, in Category B. *The government has now removed the restriction on limiting the expenditure to 20 per cent of Budget Estimates 2020-21 in the July-September quarter.* Ministries and departments are now permitted to spend as per their approved monthly and quarterly expenditure plan.

Why have curbs been removed?

The curbs have been removed as government tax revenues picked up. Gross Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections in August (for sales in July) crossed the Rs 1 lakh crore mark. The August collections at Rs 1,12,020 crore were 29.6 per cent higher than in August 2020. In the last 11 months, GST collections have consistently remained over Rs 1 lakh crore, except in June (for sales in May). The second wave was also the most brutal in April-May. The gross Direct Taxes collections for the FY 2021-22 were at Rs 6,45,679 crore compared to Rs 4,39,242 crore (as on September 22) in the corresponding period of the preceding financial year, a growth of 47 per cent. The Gross collection (as on September 22) in FY 2021-22 has registered a growth of 16.75 per cent over FY 2019-20 when the gross collection was Rs. 5,53,063 crore.

What will be the impact?

As economic recovery picks up, the government has a better handle on its finances and revenues. Plus spending by the government, especially capital expenditure, is needed to sustain the recovery. For instance, industrial output rose by 11.5 per cent in July 2021 as against a 10.5 per cent contraction in July 2020, led by sharp expansion in the mining sector and growth recorded by the electricity and manufacturing sectors. The July data show industrial output at near pre-pandemic levels.

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GST PANELS CONSTITUTED: FOCUS ON TAX SLAB REVIEW, DATA ANALYTICS TO SHORE UP REVENUE

A "review" of the current rate slab structure of Goods and Services Tax (GST) has been explicitly incorporated in the Terms of Reference (ToR) of the two ministerial panels formed for spelling out a blueprint for GST reforms. The panels' brief incorporates an overarching mandate: an evaluation of "special rates" within the tax structure, rationalisation measures that include "a merger of tax rate slabs for simplifying the rate structure", alongside a review of instances of inverted duty structure and an identification of potential sources of evasion to shore up revenues. *The Finance Ministry has constituted a seven-member Group of Ministers (GoM) under Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj S Bommai for "rate rationalisation" and another eight-member GoM under Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar for "GST system reforms",* orders issued on September 24 stated. Incidentally, the mandate announced for the GoMs after the GST Council meeting on September 17 did not include a review of tax slabs. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had then said the ToR would relate to correction of inversion and rate rationalisation. The Indian Express had reported on Saturday that amid concerns of revenue buoyancy under GST, the GoMs will reassess the current tax slabs including a possible merger of some tax slabs. *The ToR for the GoM on rate rationalisation stated that it shall review inverted duty structure other than where the Council has already taken a decision to correct the inverted structure and recommend suitable rates to eliminate it so as to minimise instances of refunds due to inverted structure, and review the current tax slab rates and recommend changes needed to garner required resources.* It shall also "review the current rate slab structure of GST, including special rates, and recommend rationalisation measures, including merger of tax rate slabs, required for a simpler rate structure in GST". "The GoM may suggest changes that may be implemented immediately and the roadmap for implementation for the changes that should be implemented in the short and medium term," the order said. The Group may submit an interim report for such immediate measures as it may deem fit and will have to submit its report in two months, it added. Members of the GoM on rate rationalisation include Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Tarkishore Prasad; Goa's Minister for Transport and Panchayati Raj, Housing, Protocol and Legislative Affairs Mauvin Godinho; Kerala Finance Minister KN Balagopal; Rajasthan's Minister for Local Self Government, Urban Development and Housing, Law and Legal Affairs Shanti Kumar Dhariwal; Uttar Pradesh Finance Minister Suresh Kumar Khanna and West Bengal Finance Minister Amit Mitra. *The other GoM on GST system reforms will review IT tools and interface available with tax officers and suggest measures to make the system more efficient and effective, identify potential sources of evasion, identify possible use of data analysis towards better compliance and revenue augmentation and suggest use of such data analysis and identify mechanisms for better coordination between Central and State tax administration.* This GoM will give its recommendation to the Council from time to time and will review the implementation of reform measures approved by the Council, the order said. Members of this GoM include Delhi Deputy CM Manish Sisodia, Haryana Deputy CM Dushyant Chautala, Andhra Pradesh Finance Minister Buggana Rajendranath, Assam Finance Minister Ajanta Neog, Chhattisgarh Commercial Taxes Minister TS Singh Deo, Odisha Finance and Excise Minister Niranajan Pujari and Tamil Nadu Finance Minister Palanivel Thiaga Rajan.

NEW MONEY: CENTRAL BANKS LAY OUT OPERATING MANUAL FOR DIGITAL CASH

A group of central banks sketched out a potential operating manual for digital cash on Thursday as they aim to strike a balance between keeping up with cryptocurrencies and concerns that the new technology could upend commercial lenders. Worried that the explosion of bitcoin and its ilk could weaken their control of money, policymakers from Beijing to Washington are exploring central bank digital currencies, known as CBDCs. And while a widely-used digital dollar or euro may still be years away, work by central banks is gathering pace as consumers increasingly ditch coins and notes in favour of digital payments on debit or credit cards and mobile phones. The seven central banks - including those in the United States, Britain and the ECB in the euro zone, but not China - said publicly-used "retail" CBDC must harness both public and private players to mesh with existing payment systems. The tech should be useable with existing domestic payments systems, with strategies for adoption tailored to on-the-ground economic conditions, said the central banks, working alongside the Bank for International Settlements. The existing financial system must be given time to adjust to the introduction of CBDC, they said, flagging risks of what could amount to slow-motion bank runs if commercial bank customers suddenly shifted savings to the new tech. "Regardless of the design, developing and running a CBDC system would be a major undertaking for a central bank," they said, stressing the involvement of private operators must be closely monitored to ensure public trust in the tech.

STATUS QUO ON PETROL

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council last week decided to let petrol and diesel remain out of the ambit of the GST, at least for now. The discussion on including the domestic fuels under the GST was taken up by the Council after a nudge by the Kerala High Court, but members of the Council chose to opt for the status quo.

Why is there a demand to bring petrol and diesel under the GST?

The climbing cost of petrol and diesel has increased pressure on the government to reduce taxes on the fuels in order to rein in their pump prices. The price of petrol has risen above the ₹100-mark in major cities across the country. The government has blamed rising international crude oil prices for the increase in domestic fuel prices. *India imports more than 80% of its oil supplies and the price of crude oil in the international market does have a significant impact on domestic fuel prices.* However, high taxes are also seen as a major reason for the rise in fuel prices. *It should be noted that more than half of the money paid by the consumer to purchase fuels goes towards some tax or the other.* Even when international crude oil prices decline, the government has tended not to let domestic fuel prices drop. Instead, it has in the past raised taxes to capture the windfall gains that could accrue to oil companies. For instance, even though the prices of international crude oil futures dropped to less than $20 a barrel in April last year due to the huge drop in demand during the global COVID-19 lockdown, the domestic retail price of petrol and diesel continued to stay high. The government says it increased taxes on fuels to compensate for the loss of other revenues. Opposition parties and even the RBI have urged the government to slash taxes to make fuels not only more affordable for the consumer but also to lessen the second-order inflationary impacts since diesel is the main fuel used by road freight operators, and its high price pushes up transport costs.

Why are Central and State governments reluctant?

Petrol and diesel are two of the most highly taxed goods in the country and bring in huge revenues to both the Central and State governments. Fuel taxes were projected to contribute almost ₹6 lakh crore to the Central and State exchequers combined in 2020-21, and bringing domestic fuels under the GST would effectively mean reducing taxes on them. The highest tax slab under the GST is 28%, while the fuels such as petrol and diesel are taxed at more than 100% currently. So both the Centre and the States are reluctant to lower taxes. The States, in particular, are wary of losing even more of their already curtailed independent power to raise tax revenue by allowing petrol and diesel to be brought under the ambit of the GST since it would make them further dependent on the Centre to receive their share of the taxes. At the moment, the States can independently impose a value added tax on petrol and diesel. The Centre and the States have also justified their decision to tax fuels heavily by saying that the revenue collected helps them fund social programmes. Critics of the government's policy of imposing high fuel taxes, however, argue that high taxes are a drag on the economy. If taxes are reduced, not only would more petrol and diesel be consumed but the money saved by motorists on this count could likely be diverted to other parts of consumption spending, thus boosting economic growth. And if the increment to overall economic output is greater than the revenue foregone through a reduction in the tax rates, the governments could end up actually collecting more revenue than under the current high fuel tax regime.

What lies ahead?

Since the revenues of both the Centre and the States will be heavily affected by a lower tax on petrol and diesel, it is unlikely that these fuels will be brought under the ambit of the GST any time soon. Even if these fuels are brought under the GST, there is likely to be a steep rate imposed on them to prevent any loss in tax revenues. So the real question is not whether the Centre and the States are willing to bring fuels under the GST but whether they truly wish to reduce taxes on fuels. *It should be noted that the share of the final price of petrol that goes towards taxes has increased from approximately 30% in 2014 to about 60% now.* So, a scenario in which there is no further increase in fuel taxes may be the best that consumers can hope for.

DISMANTLING THE ORDNANCE FACTORY BOARD

The Ordnance Factory Board (OFB), the first of whose industrial establishments was set up in 1801, will cease to exist from October 1, and the assets, staff, and operations of its 41 ordnance factories will be transferred to seven defence public sector units (DPSUs). Also in the OFB tent are nine training institutes, three regional marketing centres, and five regional controllers of safety. *The government has gone through with the corporatisation in the face of strong opposition from workers' federations, including the one affiliated to the RSS.* A large chunk of the weapons, ammunition, and supplies used by the armed forces, and paramilitary and police forces, come from OFB-run factories. Their products include civilian and military-grade arms and ammunition, explosives, propellants, and chemicals for missile systems, military vehicles, armoured vehicles, optical and electronic devices, parachutes, support equipment, troop clothing, and general store items for the armed forces.

For-against corporatisation

The restructuring of the Kolkata-headquartered OFB into corporate entities was recommended in one or the other form by at least three expert committees on defence reforms set up in the last two decades — the TKS Nair Committee (2000), Vijay Kelkar Committee (2005), and Vice Admiral Raman Puri Committee (2015). A fourth committee, constituted by former Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar and chaired by Lt Gen D B Shekatkar, did not suggest corporatisation, but recommended regular audits of all ordnance units considering past performance. *The central argument has been that corporatisation, which will bring these entities under the purview of The Companies Act, would lead to improvements in efficiency, make products cost-competitive, and enhance their quality. It has been argued that OFB's monopoly has led to innovation drying up, apart from low productivity, high costs of production, and lack of flexibility at the higher managerial levels. Functioning directly under the Ministry of Defence, the OFB and its factories could not retain profits, and thus had no incentive to work towards increasing them, many have argued.* Discussions on restructuring with workers' federations had failed to produce results on several occasions previously. *Employees argued that corporatisation was a "move towards privatisation".* They expressed fears of job losses, and said a corporate entity would not be able to survive the unique market environment of defence products with its unstable demand-supply dynamics. The federations have insisted the factories have been innovative, and have repeatedly proven their worth as a "war reserve". Many OFB products are exported, they have argued.

Ordinance about ordnance

Corporatisation was listed as one of the 167 "transformative ideas" to be implemented in the first 100 days of the second Narendra Modi government in 2019. In May 2020, giving details of the fourth tranche of the Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the decision to corporatise OFB for "improving autonomy, accountability and efficiency in ordnance suppliers". *On September 10 last year, the government appointed a consortium led by KPMG Advisory Services as a strategy and implementation consultant for the proposed corporatisation.* The following day, an Empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM) for Corporatisation was formed with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh as chairman "to oversee and guide the entire process, including transition support and redeployment plan of employees while safeguarding their wages and retirement benefits". In October 2020, the government declared a proposed strike by workers' federations "invalid and illegal". Following talks between the three federations and ministry officials, the workers deferred their plan for an indefinite strike. But as no reconciliation could be reached, *the government announced this June that the OFB would be split into seven DPSUs.* With the federations adamant, the government brought an *Essential Defence Services Ordinance (EDSO)* at the end of July, which aimed primarily to stop workers of ordnance factories from going on strike.

Protests from workers

The almost 75,000 workers at the 41 factories and their allied units are mainly affiliated to three federations: the All India Defence Employees' Federation (AIDEF), a federation of Left unions; the Indian National Defence Workers' Federation (INDWF), affiliated to the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) of the Congress; and the Bharatiya Pratiraksha Mazdoor Sangh (BPMS), which is the part of the RSS's Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS). *From the time the government first*

proposed corporatisation in 2019, the three federations had formed an unlikely joint front. In one of their first representations to the defence minister in 2019, they said that converting the ordnance factories into a corporation was commercially unviable, and that "the experience of the past two decades is that corporatisation is a route to privatisation". *The federations described the government's decision of June 2021 as "good news for private corporations and foreign arms manufacturers".* In mid-July, however, the Congress's INDWF said they would no longer oppose the corporatisation because the defence minister had promised that workers' rights would be protected. The BPMS of the RSS and AIDEF of the Left refused to step back.

Seven successor DPSUs

The government has said that the OFB will be split into seven PSUs: Munitions India Ltd, Armoured Vehicles Nigam Ltd, Advanced Weapons and Equipment India Ltd, Troop Comforts Ltd, Yantra India Ltd, India Optel Ltd, and Gliders India Ltd. Each of these PSUs will run clusters of ordnance factories involved in manufacturing similar categories of products. Training and marketing establishments that have been part of the OFB will also be divided among the seven PSUs, officials have said. On August 2, Minister of State for Defence Ajay Bhatt told Rajya Sabha in a written reply: "The employees…shall continue to be subjected to all rules and regulations as are applicable to the Central Government servants. Their pay scales, allowances, leave, medical facilities, career progression and other service conditions will also continue to be governed by the extant rules, regulations and orders, as are applicable to the Central Government servants. The pension liabilities of the retirees and existing employees will continue to be borne by the government." The BPMS and AIDEF have said October 1 will be marked as a Black Day. The report of a referendum, which shows the majority of workers are opposed to corporatisation, would be submitted to the defence minister, the federations have said. A petition in the Supreme Court against the law banning strikes is also in the works. Their fight will continue, even as the requirements of the armed forces are not allowed to suffer, the workers' bodies have said. *According to the federations, the recent order worth Rs 7,523 crore to Heavy Vehicles Factory (HVF), Chennai for 118 units of the Main Battle Tank Arjun's Mark-1A variant for the Army, is testimony to the reliability of the ordnance factories.*

WHY CARTELS CAN BE EVEN WORSE THAN MONOPOLIES

The Competition Commission of India found that three beer companies — United Breweries Ltd (UBL), Carlsberg India Pvt Ltd (CIPL) and Anheuser Busch InBev India — had colluded to fix beer prices for a full decade — between 2009 and 2018. As a result, the CCI slapped a penalty of Rs 873 crore on the companies as well as the All India Brewers Association (AIBA) and 11 individuals for cartelisation in the sale and supply of beer in 10 states and Union Territories. However, *for helping out the investigations, the CCI gave differing levels of relief to the companies. In particular, Anheuser Busch InBev India — which serves global brands such as Budweiser and Corona as well as local brews such as Haywards and Knockout — received a 100% relief from the penalty because its officials helped the CCI investigation into the functioning of the cartel.* Oddly enough, *the companies blamed government rules, which require them to seek approvals from state authorities for any price revisions, as the main reason for forming a cartel.*

What is a cartel?

Cartels can be difficult to define. According to CCI, a "Cartel includes an association of producers, sellers, distributors, traders or service providers who, by agreement amongst themselves, limit, control or attempt to control the production, distribution, sale or price of, or, trade in goods or provision of services". The International Competition Network, which is a global body dedicated to enforcing competition law, has a simpler definition. The three common components of a cartel are:

- an agreement;
- between competitors;
- to restrict competition.

"The agreement that forms a cartel need not be formal or written. Cartels almost invariably involve secret conspiracies. The term competitors most often refers to companies at the same level of the economy (manufacturers, distributors, or retailers) in direct competition with each other to sell goods or provide services. The aspect of a restriction on competition distinguishes conduct that targets open competition from benign, ordinary course of business agreements between firms," it states.

How do cartels work?

According to ICN, four categories of conduct are commonly identified across jurisdictions (countries). These are:

- price-fixing;
- output restrictions;
- market allocation and
- bid-rigging

"In sum," writes Bruce Wardhaugh in his book titled Cartels, Markets and Crime, "participants in hard-core cartels agree to insulate themselves from the rigours of a competitive marketplace, substituting cooperation for competition".

How do cartels hurt?

While it may be difficult to accurately quantify the ill-effects of cartels, they not only directly hurt the consumers but also, indirectly, undermine overall economic efficiency and innovations. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "A successful cartel raises the price above the competitive level and reduces output. Consumers choose either not to pay the higher price for some or all of the cartelised product that they desire, thus forgoing the product, or they pay the cartel price and thereby unknowingly transfer wealth to the cartel operators". *In other words, by artificially holding back the supply or raising prices in a coordinated manner, companies either force some consumers out of the market by making the commodity (say,*

beer) more scarce or by earning profits that free competition would not have allowed. "Further, a cartel shelters its members from full exposure to market forces, reducing pressures on them to control costs and to innovate. All of these effects adversely affect efficiency in a market economy," states an OECD policy brief.

How might cartels be worse than monopolies?

It is generally well understood that monopolies are bad for both individual consumer interest as well as the society at large. That's because a monopolist completely dominates the concerned market and, more often than not, abuses this dominance either in the form of charging higher than warranted prices or by providing lower than the warranted quality of the good or service in question. However, in his book, Bruce Wardhaugh explains how cartels could extract a higher social cost than even monopolies."...Monopolies are a source of social loss through two sorts of productive inefficiencies. The first sort, reduced product innovation, is a greater problem with cartels than monopolies," he writes. Here's the intuition. "...due to the explicit agreement of non-competition and profit guarantees among cartels, any incentive to improve one's product is removed." In other words, *unlike a monopolist, who may be forced to undertake product innovation — lest some new firm figures out a more efficient way of providing the good/service — members of a cartel sit pretty because they know that while none of them may be individually dominant in the market, by synching their pricing or productive actions they not only act as a monopolist but also rule out the possibility of allowing some new firm from upstaging the whole arrangement.* "Further," he writes, "given that innovation would require the expenditure of research and development costs (which would be unnecessary due to a cartel-wide agreed 'stand-still' on innovation), such investment would not be undertaken. Since *the monopolist, unlike the cartelist, must be concerned with other firms developing goods which may be less expensive substitutes for its goods, the monopolist may have greater incentive for research and development expenditure.* Thus, these social costs of reduced product innovation may be greater with cartels." In other words, apart from the whole issue of charging higher prices, *cartels (as against monopolists) neither have any incentive to invest in research aimed at improving their product nor do they see any reason why they should boost investments towards making the methods of production more efficient.* The end result is that both the individual consumer as well as the society at large suffers.

How to stop the spread of cartelisation?

Cartels are not easy to detect and identify. As such, experts often suggest providing a strong deterrence to those cartels that are found guilty of being one. Typically this takes the form of a monetary penalty that exceeds the gains amassed by the cartel. "If, for example, the chances that any given cartel would be discovered and punished were one in three, then a fine that would provide *an adequate deterrent would have to be three times the actual gain realised by the cartel. Some believe that as few as one in six or seven cartels are detected and prosecuted, implying a multiple of at least six,"* states the OECD document. However, it must also be pointed out that it is not always easy to ascertain the exact gains from cartelisation. In fact, the threat of stringent penalties can be used in conjunction with providing leniency — as was done in the beer case when Anheuser Busch InBev India was provided with 100% relief from the CCI penalty — in order to incentivise whistleblowers exposing cartels and their functions.

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THE DGCA'S CRACKDOWN ON DRUG USE BY AVIATION WORKERS

Starting January 31, flight crew members and air traffic controllers in India will be tested for psychoactive substances such as cannabis and cocaine, as per new rules notified by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA).

Why has the DGCA brought in the new rules?

In its order, the aviation safety regulator noted that the worldwide spread of use of psychoactive substances, their general availability, and the increasing number of addicted users was a "serious concern to aviation safety". Last year, just before the Covid-19 pandemic hit India, the DGCA had issued draft rules where it proposed to set up diagnostic infrastructure to conduct the tests. However, the regulator came out with another set of draft rules a few weeks ago, in which it left the responsibility of conducting the tests to the airlines and the air traffic services provider on the lines of breath alcohol testing. In India, the Airports Authority of India (AAI) is responsible for air traffic services.

What are the rules?

Scheduled commercial airlines and air navigation service providers will have to carry out random drug-testing of at least 10% of the flight crew members and air traffic controllers employed by them every year, according to the rules. Commercial aircraft operators, maintenance and repair organisations, flying training organisations, and air navigation service providers will have to carry out drug tests before employing any person or admitting a trainee pilot. These organisations will also have to test, at the first available opportunity, *all those aviation personnel who have refused a drug test to a foreign regulator during flight operations to that country.* Aviation workers will be tested for psychoactive substances such as amphetamine, cannabis, cocaine, opiates, barbiturates, and benzodiazepine. Any positive test will have to be reported to the DGCA within 24 hours.

What happens if a person is found positive in a drug test?

According to the rules: "Such employees shall be subjected to rehabilitation process by the organisation before return to active duty. Number of such cases shall be reported to DGCA on a six-month basis." In case the report of a drug test is "non-negative", the employee will be immediately removed from duty till a confirmatory report is received. If the confirmatory test — which is being done for the first time — is also positive, then the employee will be referred to a de-addiction centre by the organisation for a de-addiction-and-rehabilitation programme. "Such an employee shall return to active duties after again having undergone the tests for the consumption of the psychoactive substance with a negative test report. In addition, a fitness certificate by the medical in-charge of the concerned organisation shall be required," the rules say.

A TECHNOCRAT'S PUSH FOR INDIAN MANUFACTURING

Before the pandemic started, the major players in India's room air conditioner market had no plans to invest in larger manufacturing operations, relying instead on convenient imports for over 80% of ACs. Over the past week, despite COVID-19 denting AC sales, global brands like Hitachi as well as domestic majors like Voltas, have announced investments of about ₹5,000 crore to reverse

the reliance on imported parts from 80% to 20% over the next five years. The seeds for this about-turn, driven partly by a Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme, were sown from a third-floor corner office of an auto major in Worli, Mumbai. Pawan Goenka, the Mahindra group's managing director till this April, is driving an unusual public-private partnership that is informing and helping finetune policy changes leading to outcomes on the ground already in sectors like air conditioners. For instance, when domestic and global AC players conveyed that India's ₹25,000-crore AC market didn't necessitate larger manufacturing investments to replace established import supply chains, Mr. Goenka tapped his deal-making skills to arrive at an attractive formulation. His solution: convince the MNC to make more compressors in India by getting the domestic player to buy from them instead of importing, thus adding up volumes that justify fresh investments and repeat this idea for various AC components with both domestic and foreign players stepping up to invest for each. Over the 18 months, Mr. Goenka has been spending two days a week deep-diving into sectors like ACs to recommend practical strategies and policy tweaks — to scale up manufacturing, boost exports, reduce import dependence and expand domestic demand.

LIFE & SCIENCE

THIS MAY BE THE FIRST PLANET FOUND ORBITING 3 STARS AT ONCE

GW Ori is a star system 1,300 light years from Earth in the constellation of Orion. It is surrounded by a huge disk of dust and gas, a common feature of young star systems that are forming planets. But fascinatingly, it is a system with not one star, but three. As if that were not intriguing enough, GW Ori's disk is split in two, almost like Saturn's rings if they had a massive gap in between. And to make it even more bizarre, the outer ring is tilted at about 38 degrees. Scientists have been trying to explain what is going on there. Some hypothesized that the gap in the disk could be the result of one or more planets forming in the system. If so, this would be the first known planet that orbits three stars at once, also known as a circumtriple planet. Now the GW Ori system has been modeled in greater detail, and researchers say a planet — a gassy world as massive as Jupiter — is the best explanation for the gap in the dust cloud. Although the planet itself cannot be seen, astronomers may be witnessing it carve out its orbit in its first million years of its existence. A paper on the finding was published in September in the Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society. The scientists say it disproves an alternative explanation — that the gravitational torque of the stars cleared the space in the disk. Their paper suggests there is not enough turbulence in the disk, known as its viscosity, for this explanation to suffice.

MARTIAN MYSTERY

Water is essential for life, on Earth and other planets but Mars has no liquid water on its surface today. New research from Washington University in St. Louis suggests a fundamental reason: Mars may be just too small to hold on to large amounts of water. The study (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences) used stable isotopes of the element potassium to estimate the presence, distribution and abundance of volatile elements on different planetary bodies. Potassium is a moderately volatile element, but the scientists decided to use it as a tracer for more volatile compounds, such as water. They measured the potassium isotope compositions of 20 previously confirmed Martian meteorites and determined that Mars lost more potassium and other volatiles than Earth during its formation. The researchers found a well-defined correlation between body size and potassium isotopic composition. The finding of the correlation of potassium isotopic compositions with planet gravity is a novel discovery with important quantitative implications for when and how the differentiated planets received and lost their volatiles, Dr. Katharina Lodders from Washington University and a coauthor of the study said in a release.

INDIGENOUS MEMORY TECHNOLOGY MOVES FROM LAB TO FAB

IIT Bombay researchers have developed a "memory technology" that can, in principle, revolutionise Indian industry and the many applications that need semiconductor chips, such as in the defence sector, automobiles and future aspirations in cell phone manufacturing. Hard disks, flash memory, etc, are examples of memory technology. There is also another form of memory called the *one-time programmable memory (OTP)* where the memory is written once, stored for a lifetime, and retrieved and used many times. This finds varied uses, one of which is in correcting faulty chips that have been mass produced for specific applications.

Correcting offsets

For instance, think of a chip that helps read off the temperature. Due to a manufacturing defect, the chip may read 100 degree Celsius as 101 degree Celsius. This "offset" of 1 degree may be corrected by storing the error correction parameter in the OTP memory. This is done uniquely for each chip and once stored, the memory corrects the chip's output for its lifetime. "OTP memories are also used for other purposes, mainly three: *chip identity, secure information storage and chip calibration for error correction*," says Udayan Ganguly, professor at IIT Bombay, who holds the patents for the invention along with A. Lele, S. Sadana and P. Kumbhare.

Storing values

To store the correction value, the researchers used eight memory cells, each of which would store one "bit" (that is a value of zero or one).

Thus, the OTP memory remembers either the "0" state or "1" state through its lifetime. The group, in collaboration with the Semi-Conductor Laboratory, Mohali, Punjab (SCL), has successfully demonstrated CMOS 180-nanometre–based, production-ready, eight-bit memory technology, according to a press release from the office of the Principal Scientific Adviser to Government of India.

Better process

There exist other methods of achieving OTP memories than described above. However, these demand challenging engineering techniques and also require high voltage, which comes with a large area penalty. "In contrast, we use a dedicated insulator material which is specially engineered silicon dioxide at 2.5-nanometre thickness to breakdown at 3.3 volt without any special structures along with a standard transistor. Thus, the transistor is not disturbed, and no special high voltage generation is needed," says Prof. Ganguly, pointing out the attractive features of the technology.

First customer

Semi-Conductor Lab (SCL), Punjab, is the first customer to try and use this technology for internal purposes. Apart from collaborating with SCL, the team at IIT Bombay partnered with IIT Delhi, SETS Chennai and Defence Research and Development Organization for hardware encryption. "The concept came out of a PhD Thesis in IIT Bombay… This is the first indigenous 180-nanometre memory technology to have successfully graduated from lab to fab in 2021. It has taken six years in the process of translating research to manufacturing," says Prof. Ganguly.

USB-C FOR ALL: WHY EU WANTS SAME PORT ACROSS ELECTRONIC DEVICES

The European Commission has proposed a plan to harmonise charging ports and fast charging technology for electronic devices — something that could force OEMs to adopt a single technology for most of their devices. The executive arm of the European Union (EU) has proposed that USB Type-C will be the common port, and this move is expected to hit iPhone maker Apple the most given that it uses its proprietary Lightening connector for iPhones and most iPads.

What exactly is the proposal?

The European Commission has proposed USB-C to be the common charging port to allow consumers to charge their devices with the same USB-C charger, regardless of the device brand. It is also unbundling the sale of charger from the sale of electronic device to limit the number of "unwanted chargers" purchased or left unused. Once the proposal is through, original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) will have to provide the common standardised port for devices such as smartphones, tablets, cameras, headphones, portable speakers and handheld video-game consoles. The proposal, however, only covers wired chargers and excludes wireless charging from its ambit, meaning that only if a device uses a cable to be charged will it need to have a USB-C port. In case the device is only to be charged wirelessly, there is no compulsion to have a USB-C port in the device. Moreover, the proposal to harmonise fast charging technology could address the concern with USB-C chargers, where a number of users have experienced their devices going kaput because of mismatch in the input power being provided and the output power that the devices can handle.

Why has the EU brought in this proposal?

The European Commission has said that on average, consumers in the EU own around three mobile phone chargers, of which they use two on a regular basis. Despite this, 38 per cent of consumers have reported having experienced problems at least once that they could not charge their mobile phone because available chargers were incompatible. It added that consumers spend approximately €2.4 billion annually on standalone chargers that do not come with electronic devices. In addition, disposed of and unused chargers are estimated to pile up to 11,000 tonnes of e-waste every year. Margrethe Vestager, Executive Vice-President for a Europe fit for the Digital Age, said: "European consumers were frustrated long enough about incompatible chargers piling up in their drawers. We gave industry plenty of time to come up with their own solutions, now time is ripe for legislative action for a common charger. This is an important win for our consumers and environment, and in line with our green and digital ambitions."

How does the USB-C port stack up against Apple's Lightening connector?

The Lightening connector was introduced in 2012, two years before the USB-C standards were finalised and at the time, the other primary means of device charging was the microUSB port, which was significantly inferior to the Lightening connector in terms of durability, power and ease of use. Some of these concerns with the microUSB were addressed in the USB-C connectors when they were introduced in 2014. However, the Lightening connectors continued to have some durability advantages over the USB-C cable. For instance, the connector tabs on the Lightening chargers were placed on the cable itself, instead of being placed on the device. Because of this, in case of any malfunction of the connector tab, the consumer would simply need to replace the cable. In case of the USB-C protocol, the connector tabs are provided in the device ports, meaning any malfunction of these tabs would require replacement of the port. Also, Lightening connectors are slimmer than USB-C connectors allowing Apple to build significantly slimmer devices. The USB-C port also carries some advantages to it, one of which is its ability to handle higher power. The Lightening cable is known to have handled up to 18 W of power output, but since there are only a limited number of devices that use the Lightening cable to get charged, the output handling is restricted by what the devices can handle, as opposed to what the cable itself can. USB-C, on the

other hand, is designed to handle up to 100 W of power output, making it more ubiquitous for the entire device ecosystem, including heavier products such as laptops.

What could be the impact of the proposal?

The European Commission's proposal will now need to be adopted by the European Parliament and the European Council by ordinary legislative procedure, and a transition period of 24 months from the date of adoption will give the industry time to adapt before the entry into application. According to Reuters, Apple said in a statement that it disagreed with the proposal. "We remain concerned that strict regulation mandating just one type of connector stifles innovation rather than encouraging it, which in turn will harm consumers in Europe and around the world," an Apple spokesperson told the news agency. However, if passed, the new rules could force Apple to introduce USB-C ports on its devices. Given the value that Apple derives from uniformity in its production lines for markets across the globe, this could potentially result in Apple devices being changed for other jurisdictions as well. It is noteworthy though that over the years Apple itself has been moving away from the Lightening cable. It has already introduced MacBooks and iPads that use USB-C charging ports. Also, it is rumoured that Apple has been working on a port-less iPhone that would be exclusively charged using a wireless charger.

IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Until the beginning of the publication of the United Nations World Happiness Report in 2012, happiness was not considered an objective of governance. But it has now emerged as a new measure of the quality of governance. The connection between law, governance and happiness has been gaining considerable attention over the years. This is because the report has shown time and again that countries with a higher GDP and higher per capita income are not necessarily the happiest.

Dismal performance

The United Nations World Happiness Report of 2021 ranks India 139 out of 149 countries. Happiness was measured by also taking into consideration the effects of COVID-19 on the people and their evaluation of the performance of governance systems. The report shows that COVID-19-induced social distancing had a severe impact on happiness as sharing and community life were hugely affected during the pandemic. India's dismal performance on happiness is crucial if we look at governance and the law. Happiness has never been considered an explicit goal of public policy in India. The trust and confidence enjoyed by public institutions are quite pertinent in the happiness score sheet. Guarantees of rights, participation, dignity, and social justice are crucial in the determination of happiness in a society like India. We tend to limit the role of law to a mere sanctioning instrumentality which satisfies the retributive instincts of people. However, the law is capable of creating many positive obligations, which may lead to a collective conscience, care and cooperation. It is capable of making people feel that they have a role in resolving their problems through distributive justice. "To feel that your lost wallet would be returned if found by a police officer, by a neighbour, or a stranger, was considered to be a measure of happiness than income, unemployment, and major health risks," the report states. Law ought to bring happiness to the lives of people. The great degree of unhappiness in Indian society has a lot to do with the way the law and its institutions operate. People live in pain and anguish as their legitimate

grievances remain unaddressed by the legal system. It is erroneous to believe that every case that is decided by the courts brings happiness to the people. According to the World Justice Report, as many as 40% of people live outside the protection of law in the world. More than 5 billion people fall into this 'justice gap'. India's share is very big in these figures. The estimated figure of 3.5 crore pending cases in various courts of the country is not merely a number as all those connected with these cases are in a state of anxiety. They are certainly not happy people. Typically, the criminal justice system for these people is a source of unhappiness. India's rule of law rank was 69 as per the World Justice report 2021. It has a chilling effect on the right to life, liberty, economic justice, dignity and national integration. Justice in India hardly seems to espouse the goal of happiness in society. Criminal justice drastically impacts the lives of people. It is capable of providing safety but it also leads to fear, stigma and repression. People are rarely satisfied with the police and courts in this country.

Lower crime rates, happier societies

The data suggest that happy countries have lower crime rates. Crime and its resultant suffering are a major source of unhappiness. For instance, in Finland, Denmark, the Philippines, South Africa, India and Sri Lanka, at least one of the four crime variables share an inverse relation with the happiness score of the nation. It means that individuals living in nations with high crime rates are less happy and satisfied than individuals living in nations with comparatively lower crime rates. Countries scoring high on the Rule of Law Index also score well on the index of happiness. Second, in the report, happiness levels were significantly determined by various socio-demographic factors like health, education, crime rate, criminal victimisation and fear of crime. Nations are now responding to the happiness index. The United Arab Emirates was the first country in the world to have set up a Ministry of Happiness. The Ministry monitors the impact of policies through a happiness meter and takes measures to ensure a better life. Bhutan introduced Gross National Happiness as a measure of good governance. Rothstein and Uslaner (2005) say that honest and effective governments can create more socio-economic equality. This leads a greater number of people reposing trust in their government, which is an important condition for happiness.

THE BURDEN OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON CHILDREN BORN TODAY

In a study published in the journal Science, researchers have found that children born today will be hit much harder by extreme climate events than today's adults. During his or her lifetime, a child born in 2021 is likely to experience on average twice as many wildfires, two to three times more droughts, almost three times more river floods and crop failures and about seven times more heat waves compared to a person who is, say, 60 years old today, the researchers have found. The study is based on data from the Inter-sectoral Impact Model Intercomparison Project (ISIMIP). This is a community-driven climate-impacts modelling initiative that assess the differential impacts of climate change. The ISIMIP data were used alongside country-scale, life-expectancy data, population data and temperature trajectories from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). A press release issued by the Postdam Institute for Climate Impact Research said that under a scenario of current "insufficient" climate policies, dangerous extreme heatwave events, which affect about 15% of the global land area today, could treble to 46% by the end of this century. However, if countries are able to follow through with their climate policies as

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decided under the Paris Climate Agreement, this effect could be limited to 22%, which is just seven percentage points more than the global land area that is affected today. The release quoted lead author of the study, Wim Thiery from Vrije Universiteit Brussel, as saying: "We even have strong reasons to think that our calculations underestimate the actual increases that young people will face." In terms of experiencing droughts, heatwaves, river floods and crop failures, people under the age of 40 today will live what the researchers call "an unprecedented life". The release quoted Postdam Institute for Climate Impact Research scientist Katja Frieler, who is coordinating ISIMIP and is a co-author of the study, as saying: "The good news: we can indeed take much of the climate burden from our childrens' shoulders if we limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius by phasing out fossil fuel use. If we increase climate protection from current emission reduction pledges and get in line with a 1.5-degree target, we will reduce young people's potential exposure to extreme events on average by 24% globally. For North America it's minus 26%, for Europe and Central Asia minus 28%, and in the Middle East and North Africa even minus 39%. This is a huge opportunity."

PROPORTION OF ALL CANCER CASES HIGHER IN MEN

The proportion of all cancer cases was higher in men (52.4%) than women (47.4%), noted the Indian Council of Medical Research's (ICMR) 'Clinicopathological Profile of Cancers in India: A Report of the Hospital Based Cancer Registries, 2021' released on Sunday. In women, gynaecological cancers, including breast cancer, comprised over half of all cancers. Childhood (0-14 years) cancers constitute 7.9% of all cancers. The report said that cancers of the head and neck region accounted for nearly one third (31.2%) of the cancers among men. The highest proportion of cancer from all sites was reported in the 45 to 64 years age group, except for prostate cancer in men, which was higher in those over 65 years. A total of 13,32,207 cancer cases were registered from 96 hospitals under the National Cancer Registry Programme (NCRP) during 2012-19. Of these, 6,10,084 cases were included for analysis, based on the completeness and quality of data.

Site-specific cancer

The report further states that out of the 6,10,084 cancers, 3,19,098 (52.4%) cancers were reported in men, and 2,90,986 (47.6%) in women. Cancers in sites associated with tobacco use comprised 48.7% of cancers among men and 16.5% among women. "The relative proportion of site-specific cancers was higher in men than women, except for thyroid cancer (2.5% in women versus 1% in men) and gallbladder cancer (3.7% in women versus 2.2 % in men)," the report said. The report stated that over one-third of patients with cancers of the tongue, larynx, thyroid, corpus uteri, kidney, bladder and retinoblastoma had localised disease at the time of presentation. "Chemotherapy was the most typical treatment modality for many cancers regardless of the clinical extent of disease at presentation, including cancers of the liver, gallbladder, stomach, lung and childhood cancers. Regardless of the organ site and clinical extent, most cancer patients were initiated on cancer-directed treatment within 8 to 30 days of diagnosis," stated the report.

M-RNA VACCINE MANUFACTURERS LOATH TO SHARE KNOW-HOW

While many low- and middle-income countries have received by far insufficient supply of vital COVID-19 vaccines so far, vaccine inequity has been most striking in Africa. Of the nearly 6 billion doses

administered globally, only 2% have been in Africa. And less than 3.5% of people in Africa have been fully vaccinated till date. In contrast, 54% of the total population in the U.S. is fully vaccinated. After approving booster shots for the immunocompromised people, on September 22, the U.S. FDA greenlighted booster shots for people older than 65 years, adults between 18 and 64 years who are at high risk of severe disease and those at high risk of getting infected and at high risk of serious complications of COVID-19 including severe disease.

Facilitating manufacture

With attempts by the African Union to buy vaccines being unsuccessful, the continent has to wait for donations. It is to correct this anomaly and ensure that low- and middle-income countries can have easy access to vaccines to fight the pandemic that, in April, the WHO and COVAX wanted these countries to produce COVID-19 vaccines themselves. For this, the global health body is facilitating the establishment of technology transfer hubs to transfer necessary technology to manufacture COVID-19 vaccines and provide training to interested manufacturers in these countries. *The initial focus has been on developing vaccines using the mRNA vaccine platform and expanding to other technologies in the future.* According to Dr. Gagandeep Kang, Professor of Microbiology at CMC Vellore, the reason why WHO zeroed in on mRNA vaccines is that such vaccines have been found to be extremely efficacious in protecting against COVID-19, and protection is maintained to a large degree against variants. Second, *the technology needed to manufacture mRNA vaccines is very flexible and allows relatively rapid adaptation of the vaccine to variants*, if needed. Third, *such vaccines can be produced by manufacturers of medicines and medical active substances, and finally, the availability of several technical features that are free of Intellectual Property Rights in many countries of the world.* Dr Kang is also the vice-chair of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovation (CEPI) which the is part of COVAX that is identifying technology partners for the hub. The WHO, a South African consortium — Biovac, Afrigen Biologics and Vaccines, a network of universities and the Africa CDC — and COVAX partners are working to set-up the first technology transfer hub in South Africa. The assumption is that companies such as Pfizer and Moderna will show a "willingness to transfer technologies". *As early as October last year, Moderna announced that it will not enforce patents related to its mRNA vaccine during the course of the pandemic.*

Promises unkept

However, according to an exclusive Reuters report, the promise made last year by Moderna is not translating into reality as the company is yet to reach a deal to transfer the technology to the South African hub. The New York Times quoted Dr. Martin Friede, a WHO official and Charles Gore, who runs a United Nations-backed nonprofit organisation, Medicines Patent Pool as saying that they have had "trouble getting Moderna to the negotiating table". "We would love to get a discussion with Moderna, about a license to their intellectual property — this would make life so much simpler, but for the moment all attempts have resulted in no reply," Dr. Friede told The New York Times. It also reported a Moderna spokeswoman saying that the company was "willing to license its intellectual property for COVID-19 vaccines to others for the post pandemic period." *In effect, contrary to the promise made last year, the company is unwilling to license its mRNA vaccine IP during the pandemic and transfer technology to the South African hub.* Vaccination is one sure way to protect people from severe disease and death and end the pandemic.

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Research funded

Incidentally, unlike Pfizer that did not take any funding from the U.S. government to develop its vaccine, Moderna was given $1 billion as part of *Operation Warp Speed* to specifically fund its research efforts. Moderna's vaccine was in part developed by National Institutes of Health. Dr. Lawrence Gostin, faculty director of the O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law and Georgetown University Law Center tweeted on September 22: *"LMIC companies are ready & able to produce mRNA vaccines, but Pfizer-BioNTech & Moderna are refusing to share technology & know-how. LMICs are fed-up with going hat-in-hand to rich countries for donations, which never come in time or at the scale needed."* He then added: "Biden can legally compel mRNA manufacturers to sign technology transfer contracts in exchange for reasonable compensation. The DPA [Defense Production Act of 1950] confers vast powers to act for the national defense. The DPA specifically includes "emergency preparedness." Under pressure from U.S. President Joe Biden to enter into joint ventures to contract manufacture the vaccines in low- and middle-income countries, Pfizer took an easy route. It entered into an agreement with the U.S. to sell an "additional 500 million doses at a not-for-profit price for donation to low- and lower-middle-income countries and the organisations that support them", according to a Pfizer release. The company had agreed to sell the first lot of 500 million doses in June. However, deliveries of the initial 500 million doses began only in August 2021 and only 300 million are expected to be shipped this year. The total one billion doses are expected to be delivered only by next September. In July, *Pfizer signed a deal with South Africa's Biovac Institute to help manufacture around 100 million doses annually of the mRNA vaccine for distribution exclusively to 55 member States of the African Union. However, as per the Pfizer press release, the drug substance will be manufactured in Europe and shipped to Biovac.* Clearly, the agreement is for "fill and finish" of the vaccine, which does not require technology transfer. Also, manufacturing of finished doses will commence only next year.

Reaching targets

Even as President Biden wants 70% of the global population to be vaccinated by September next year, much of the low- and middle-income countries may not come anywhere close to the target unless companies freely share their technology and know-how. "I see no reason why only one or two companies should be considered when there are several companies that work on mRNA products," Dr. Kang says. "Moderna is not the only company with the technology to transfer — it was just potentially the easiest. I have no idea why Moderna is not willing to participate given that they have set up contract manufacturing on other continents. However, WHO and COVAX have other potential partners with whom engagement is being explored."

UP IN SMOKE

Spare a thought for the smokers. Last year, at the height of the first wave of the pandemic, researchers — first in France, later in China and India — published studies that seemed to indicate smokers were at less risk of contracting Covid, and when they did, experienced less severe symptoms. In France, there was reportedly a rush on tobacconists by non-smokers hoping to get a little extra protection. For smokers everywhere, here, at last, was a justification — as much for themselves as for those they have been shunned by for the smell and cloud of carcinogens they spread — to take another drag. Now, unfortunately, they have been robbed of the only silver lining

that pierced the haze and the tar all too briefly. A recent study in England has collated observational and genetic data on Covid-19 and tobacco use and found that compared to those who had never smoked, smokers were about 80 per cent more likely to be hospitalised after contracting the virus. A section of scientists has questioned the earlier studies, claiming that some of the researchers had ties to the tobacco industry. Not surprisingly, the disappointment among tobacco addicts is palpable. Unlike other substances — alcohol, marijuana and more notorious narcotics — smoking doesn't really get you high. The social cost for the addiction is hardly commensurate to the pleasure — train and plane journeys have you jonesing, you're shunned to dark corners outside bars and sometimes, even from your own homes to service the need without bothering others. All this, while it burns a huge hole in your pocket and you slowly but surely watch your health deteriorate. From France, the birthplace of existentialism, there was hope that smoking had a purpose. From England, the birthplace of utilitarianism, that hope has been taken away.

WHY INSTAGRAM IS UNDER THE LENS FOR ITS 'NEGATIVE IMPACT' ON GIRLS

Facebook is pausing its move to launch an 'Instagram Kids' app following scrutiny from lawmakers and other groups over how it impacts teen girls and their mental health. Facebook's Global Head of Safety Antigone Davis is slated to appear before the US Senate Commerce Subcommittee Thursday on the issue of protecting kids online and the mental harm that teens face on the platform based on a recent report by The Wall Street Journal. But, how does Instagram get connected to the mental health of teens, and is the negative impact only limited to the young? IndianExpress.com explains.

What did the WSJ report reveal about Instagram and its impact on teens?

The WSJ report is based on Facebook's own internal research, which showed that Instagram was negatively impacting teenage audiences. In the case of teenage girls, the app likely contributed to worsening body image issues. The report references one slide from Instagram's research, which showed that the app made body image issues worse for one in three teen girls, who were surveyed. Another slide said teens blamed the app for increasing anxiety and depression across groups. Around 13 per cent of British and 6 per cent American teen users, who were part of the study, reported suicidal thoughts and linked them to Instagram, according to the report. Further, a majority of Instagram users who said they felt 'unattractive' found that the feelings began on the app. The report also spoke to several teenage girls who pointed out how using the app made their body-image issues worse, and in some cases led to eating disorders.

What is Facebook's defense?

In a detailed response disputing WSJ's claims, Facebook Vice-President and Head of Research Pratiti Raychoudhury accused the publication of cherry-picking facts. "Our internal research is part of our effort to minimize the bad on our platforms and maximize the good. We invest in this research to proactively identify where we can improve — which is why the worst possible results are highlighted in the internal slides," she wrote. Regarding body issues in girls and that the app was toxic for girls, she wrote that their research showed that "on 11 of 12 well-being issues, teenage girls who said they struggled with those difficult issues also said that Instagram made them better rather than worse." Facebook's claim is that "using Instagram helps" teenagers when

they are struggling with issues they "have always faced". The company also made public the slide that was referred to by the WSJ report, adding that it was only on the issue of body image that "teen girls who reported struggling with the issue said Instagram made it worse as compared to the other 11 areas." It said on other issues such as loneliness, sadness, etc the app made girls feel better. Facebook claims that some aspects of the research, such as "teens blame Instagram for increases in the rate of anxiety and depression" were based on inputs from only 40 teens. Given the app has more than a billion users, it says that the responses of 40 users are not representative. It should be noted that Facebook has not publicly released all the data around its research on the app and its impact on teenage audiences.

So, why is Instagram stopping the Kids app?

In a separate post, Instagram head Adam Mosseri wrote that while they believe an Instagram for Kids is the right thing to do, they are pausing the work. "We'll use this time to work with parents, experts, and policymakers to demonstrate the value, and need for this product. We'll continue to build opt-in parental supervision tools for teens," he added. Instagram for Kids is supposed to be an app for children under the age of 13. Currently, the age limit to be on Instagram is 13. Mosseri also wrote that "kids are getting phones younger and younger, misrepresenting their age, and downloading apps that are meant for those 13 or older," which is why they wanted to launch an app for them. In their view, the kids' version of Instagram would give parents more control and supervision compared to the regular app. He says this should not be seen as "an acknowledgement that the project is a bad idea." Instagram for kids will be aimed at children between 10-12 years and will require parental permission to join. Further, "it won't have ads, and it will have age-appropriate content and features. Parents can supervise the time their children spend on the app and oversee who can message them, who can follow them, and who they can follow," he explained.

But why is Instagram being singled out for 'negative' mental health? Isn't all social media doing this to users?

While it is true that studies have shown that social media, in general, is fueling anxiety and depression in users across age groups, Instagram needs special focus. The addictive nature of Instagram, its emphasis on 'best moments', filters that enhance skin tone or lighten the eyes, and the dominance of influencers who promote a glamorous lifestyle, can create a toxic environment. And for teens who might be struggling with self-worth, this can be a potent combination. As one of the researchers told WSJ that 'Instagram is like a drug' and it needs to be studied. In fact, when it comes to body image issues, the impact is not just limited to teenage girls. Even adult women have suffered from body image problems due to Instagram. The app was slammed by the UK's National Health Service (NHS), which wrote a scathing letter in May this year. The health agency called out the app for not doing enough to crack down on the promotions of 'Apetamin', a weight gain drug being peddled by many influencers on the platform. Apetamin, which has serious side effects including liver failure, is often used by women who desire a more curvaceous figure. While Instagram said in response that it took "down accounts that sell and advertise Apetamin", it is not too hard to find others doing the same thing using search functions on the app. While Instagram is trying to fix some of its problems, there's no doubt it is the place where everyone wants to maintain an image. And for teens–who might already be struggling– the pressures of the platform can make living up to these 'ideal' images a lot harder. This is exactly why the US Senate is questioning Facebook executives this week.

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