



CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

24TH TO 30TH OCTOBER, 2021

**INTERNATIONAL****A 'BUBBLES OF TRUST' APPROACH****This offers a middle path between the extremes of technological sovereignty and laissez-faire globalisation**

An asymmetric globalisation favouring China allowed Beijing to attain power. It is now using that power to undermine liberal democratic values around the world. The Chinese market was never open to foreign companies in the way foreign markets are to Chinese firms. This is particularly true in the information and communications technology sector. Meanwhile, Chinese firms rode on the globalisation bandwagon to secure significant market shares in open economies. President Xi Jinping now formally requires Chinese firms to follow the political agenda of the Chinese Communist Party. But even before this, it was not possible to tell where private ownership ended and the party-state began. We are currently witnessing a global retreat from the free movement of goods, services, capital, people and ideas. But this should not be understood as a reaction to globalisation itself, but of its skewed pattern over the past four decades.

Quad's advantage

The Quad countries – Japan, India, Australia and the U.S. – have an opportunity to stop seeing engagement with China through the misleading prism of free trade and globalisation. The roots of every member's prosperity and power lie in international trade. It will be to their advantage to create a new form of economic cooperation consistent with their geopolitical interests. Indeed, without an economic programme, the Quad's geopolitical and security agenda stand on tenuous foundations. The popular backlash against China is pushing Quad governments towards policies of self-reliance. But while reorienting and de-risking global supply chains is one thing, pursuing technological sovereignty is inherently self-defeating. When it comes to critical and emerging technologies, no single country can replicate the combined genius of the world. Worse, inward-looking policies often acquire a life of their own and contribute to geopolitical marginalisation. There is a better way. A convergence of values and geopolitical interests means Quad countries are uniquely placed to envelop their economies inside bubbles of trust, starting with the technology sector. Complementarities in capabilities can power innovation and growth. The U.S. is a global leader in intellectual property, Japan in high-value manufacturing, Australia in advanced niches such as quantum computing and cyber security, and India in human capital. This configuration of values, interests and complementary capabilities offers unrivalled opportunities. The idea of 'bubbles of trust' offers a cautious middle path between the extremes of technological sovereignty and laissez-faire globalisation. Unlike trading blocs, which tend to be insular, bubbles tend to expand organically, attracting new partners that share values, interests and economic complementarities. Such expansion will be necessary, as the Quad cannot fulfil its strategic ambitions merely by holding a defensive line against authoritarian power. The Quad's Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group is well placed to develop the necessary 'bubbles of trust' framework, which could be adopted at the next Quad summit. Such a framework would allow the scope of the cooperation to be limited to information industries avoiding the long and complex negotiations typical of trade agreements. To be successful the Working Group must seek to strengthen geopolitical convergences, increase faith in each member state's judicial systems,

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deepen economic ties and boost trust in one another's citizens. There are fundamental differences between authoritarian and liberal-democratic approaches to the information age. But there is no consensus among the latter. The Quad cannot allow differences of approach on privacy, data governance and the digital economy to widen. This agenda cannot be about substituting China. Rather, the approach would allow Quad countries to manage their dependencies on China while simultaneously developing a new vision for the global economy.

COUP IN SUDAN

The military should restore the transition government and allow free elections

The move by Sudan's military to dissolve the Sovereignty Council where it shared power with civilian leaders has thrown the African country's fragile transition from dictatorship to democracy into chaos. Almost three years ago, tens of thousands of Sudanese rose against the regime of Omar al-Bashir in what they call a "revolution" that eventually led to the dictator's fall in April 2019. Ever since, the military and leaders of the civilian movement came together to form a transitional government. In their agreement, the acting Prime Minister would run the day-to-day affairs while the military chief would remain the leader of the Sovereignty Council for two years. Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the military chief, was scheduled to hand over the leadership of the transitional government to the civilian leadership in a few weeks. Instead, he disbanded the government, proclaimed himself the new leader, declared a state of emergency and imprisoned the civilian leaders, including Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. Tensions were brewing in recent weeks. Pro-military mobs had been carrying out protests demanding the government's removal amid soaring prices of essentials. Port Sudan, the country's largest port, on the Red Sea, had been blockaded by a tribal group, with help from the military, which worsened the economic situation, including acute shortages of food, currency and fuel. The civilian leadership had accused the military of exploiting the economic crisis. The overthrow of the Bashir regime and the promised democratic transition were the best hopes for Sudan to end its international isolation, heal the wounds of decades of oppression and state violence, and build a stable economic and political order in an otherwise violence-ridden Horn of Africa. Sudan had taken the steps in that direction. Last year, the U.S. removed the country, which hosted Osama bin Laden in the 1990s, from the list of state sponsors of terrorism and announced financial aid. Earlier this year, the IMF had reached a \$50 billion debt-relief agreement with the transitional government. The civilian leaders had promised that they would send Bashir to The Hague to prosecute him over allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. The country was also gearing up to organise its first free and fair elections in decades. But the power-hungry generals appear to be more concerned about protecting their interests, which they feared would be at risk had a democratic government taken full control of the country. After all, Sudan's military cannot absolve itself from whatever allegations Bashir is facing. But this time, it faces a stiff challenge from the public. The protesters who brought down Bashir are back on the streets fighting the security personnel. A violent showdown is most likely. Gen. Burhan should desist from more violence. The military should release all the arrested leaders, restore the transition government and let free elections decide the future of the country.



BREAD OR BLOOD

Rising price of baguettes is fuelling public unrest in France. As history shows, govt can't just ask people to eat cake

In the current public unrest in France over the rising price of the baguette are echoes of what happened 232 years ago. Back then, the fact that a staple had been priced out of the reach of the masses led to the French Revolution and the dramatic, bloody collapse of the ancien régime. The situation isn't quite so dire right now — the president of the French Confederation of Bakeries and Pastry Shops has said that unlike then, bread is still available, even if it's more expensive. Around the world, the unaffordability or non-availability of food has, from time to time, led to mass unrest, and even the collapse of governments. Bread riots had preceded the fall of the Bastille in 1789, which was stormed in part because the starving sans culottes were looking for grain. Similarly, in 1918 a precipitous rise in the price of rice caused riots in Japan, which led to the resignation of Prime Minister Terauchi Masatake and his cabinet. And consider how frequently that Indian pantry staple — the onion — has caused electoral convulsions: From fuelling public anger against Indira Gandhi's government in the pre-Emergency months to powering her resurgence in the 1980 general elections. Onion price rise was also one of the factors in the ousting of the BJP in the 1998 Delhi Assembly elections. France's current surge in the price of the baguette is due to bad harvests in Russia, which have led to a global rise in the price of wheat. Greater energy prices have also made ovens more expensive to operate and the heat is being felt by the nation's famous boulangeries, as well as the average consumer of the long, baton-shaped bread which is seen as an icon of French culinary heritage. As history teaches us, when people complain about basic foodstuff being unaffordable, governments can't just ask them to eat cake.

NO CHANGE

The FATF must ensure that the investigation of Pakistan comes to an effective conclusion soon

In a repetition of its decisions over the past three years, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) said that members of the 39-member grouping voted to retain Pakistan on its 'grey list' of jurisdictions under increased monitoring. The FATF, which evaluates countries on efforts to check terror financing and money laundering, also placed Turkey on the grey list and cleared Mauritius from it. The FATF found that Pakistan had cleared 30 of a total of 34 tasks assigned in two batches, and would face another review in February 2022. In particular, the FATF President, Marcus Pleyer, said that Pakistan had failed to resolve the single task that remains from the first batch, of demonstrating that effective investigations and prosecutions are being pursued against the senior leadership of United Nations-designated terror groups. From New Delhi's perspective, the most significant of these are Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) chief Masood Azhar, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) chief Hafiz Saeed, Dawood Ibrahim and other command and control chiefs of terror groups that target India, that have yet to be brought to justice for the 26/11 Mumbai attacks in 2008, the IC-814 hijacking in 1999 and several major attacks and bombings in Jammu and Kashmir. It is indeed disappointing that the increased monitoring by the FATF of Pakistan — from 2008-2009, 2012-2015, and 2018-2021 — has failed to ensure that while some of these leaders have been tried and



convicted for terror financing charges in Pakistani courts, none of them has been effectively prosecuted for violence in India. These much-delayed outcomes speak as much to Pakistan's lack of credibility on terrorism as to the FATF's own lack of effectiveness. Despite Pakistan's failure to fulfill its task list, the FATF President has made it clear that they are not considering placing Pakistan on the 'black list', as they say it "continues to cooperate". On the other hand, the FATF has also said that it will not remove Pakistan from the grey list, despite the country completing 26/27 of the original tasks it was assigned. The actions open the world body to accusations of 'politicising' the process, both from those who would like to see tough action for non-compliance by Pakistan, and from Pakistan itself, which has accused India of turning the technical process into a political one by "targeting" Pakistan. As a result, the FATF must stop kicking the proverbial can down the road. It must ensure that the investigation of Pakistan is not an open-ended process, and is brought to a credible and effective conclusion at the earliest. In light of the developments in Afghanistan, and concerns over the growth of transnational terror groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIL, as well as JeM and LeT taking advantage of the Taliban takeover to build new safe havens and financing networks, it is particularly important that the FATF keep its commitment from 2001 (when it added terror financing to its mandate) to prevent all terror groups from accessing these funding networks.

FROM PHILANTHROPY TO PRISON

The imprisonment of the activist has triggered a diplomatic row in Turkey

Turkey on Tuesday expelled the Ambassadors of 10 countries to protest their joint statement demanding the release of Osman Kavala, a 64-year-old businessman and philanthropist who has been in jail since October 2017. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan described the statement of the diplomats — representing the U.S., Germany, France, the Netherlands, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway and New Zealand — as "irresponsible". Mr. Kavala's incarceration has become an international symbol of the autocratic turn taken by the Erdogan regime as well as of the democratic resistance to it. Interestingly, although Mr. Kavala was into philanthropy, he never set out to be a dissident or activist. Born in 1957 to a family of tobacco traders, he was heir to the Kavala group of companies, which he took over after his father's death. Starting from the early 1980s, when he helped set up progressive publishing houses, Mr. Kavala went on to fund civil society groups that promoted grassroots democracy and pluralism. In 2002, he founded Anadolu Kultur, which supported radical artistic and cultural projects. A story narrated by a former New York Times journalist Stephen Kinzer reflects how Mr. Kavala is unlike the typical philanthropist in his readiness to stand by the values espoused by his altruism even when they clashed with his business interests. Some years ago, Kavala Holdings wanted to build a beachfront hotel in the town of Daylan. But environmentalists protested, arguing that the construction would harm the turtles that nested on the beach. To everyone's surprise, Mr. Kavala came down and met with the protesters. After listening to their concerns, he tried to change the design of the hotel, and when that did not work out, he simply shut down the project.

Coup attempt

Above all, it is Mr. Kavala's promotion of initiatives to bridge the divide between the Turkish/Muslim majority and non-Turkish/non-Muslim minorities, including Armenians and



Kurds, which seem to have landed him in trouble. This denotes a direct challenge to the ethno-nationalism of the Erdogan regime, which has shown little tolerance for dissenters, especially after the unsuccessful coup attempt of 2016. Mr. Erdogan reacted to the coup attempt with a massive crackdown. All government institutions, including the Army, academia and the judiciary, were purged of anyone suspected to be disloyal to Mr. Erdogan. The Turkish government accused the Gulen Movement of orchestrating the coup. It was branded a terrorist organisation and thousands of citizens with links to it were arrested. Mr. Kavala was left untouched by this mass purge of 'Gulenists', which began in July 2016. But on October 18, 2017, Turkish police picked him up for questioning. Subsequently, he was charged with attempting to overthrow the constitutional order and the government, apparently by helping to organise two very different events: the 'Gezi Park' protests against Mr. Erdogan in the summer of 2013, and the 2016 military coup. Mr. Kavala's lawyers have argued that both these charges were ludicrous. Firstly, no one had linked Mr. Kavala to the Gezi park protests in the course of the four years that separated the event from his detention. Second, it was absurd that Mr. Kavala, a known secularist and liberal, would collaborate with a conservative Islamic community such as the Gulen Movement. The Turkish Supreme Court agreed that the charges were baseless and acquitted Mr. Kavala in February 2020. But he was re-arrested on fresh charges before he could leave jail. In all, Mr. Kavala has spent more than four years in prison without ever being convicted. Not only has Turkey's judicial system been a mute spectator, it has become a tool to keep dissenters in jail on politically motivated charges. In an order that was as much an indictment of the Turkish judiciary as it was an exoneration of Mr. Kavala, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ordered his release in December 2019. Turkey is bound by the rulings of the ECHR but has so far failed to comply. The diplomats' letter and Mr. Erdogan's churlish reaction to it are the latest episode in the conflict between the two sides on the issue of human rights.

NOT A FAIRYTALE

Now that Princess Mako has married and left the royal life, she may finally be left alone

With only a small ceremony to mark the momentous occasion, Princess Mako of Japan gave up her royal status to marry a commoner, Kei Komuro, this week. During the four years of their engagement, the couple endured intense tabloid scrutiny, with Mako even being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder due to the excessive online trolling. Critics felt that Komuro was not good enough for the princess, especially after details about a financial scandal involving his mother were unearthed. In a press conference after the wedding, however, Mako said, "For me, Kei is irreplaceable — marriage was a necessary choice for us." The media frenzy that has surrounded the relationship since the engagement in 2017 has led the couple to be dubbed "Japan's Harry and Meghan". And while there are certain commonalities in the stories of both relationships, the newly-wed Komuros faced challenges of different order altogether, not least of which was the reverence in which members of the over-2,600-year-old monarchy are held even today. In some ways, Japan's imperial family has kept up with the times — for example, the protocol which dictated that royal women had to walk a few steps behind the male members of the household is now disregarded. But in many, more significant, ways, the family remains bound by the strict rules of the Imperial Household Law, one of which is that princesses (but not princes) who marry commoners will lose their royal status. Mako is not the first member of the imperial family to marry a non-blue blood. Her aunt, Sayako, married a town planner named Yoshiaki



Kuroda in 2005. But the first commoner to marry a Japanese royal was the present Empress Emerita Michiko, who, after marrying Emperor Emeritus Akihito in 1959, became a symbol of Japan's modernisation, with the public affectionately calling her "Mitcho". Having had to leave the royal household, Mako may not get that opportunity for acceptance of her choice, but she might just find more peace.

VERY HOT TINY AUSTRALIAN TOWN OFFERS 'FREE' LAND: HUNDREDS OF CALLS CAME IN

From the air, the tiny outback town of Quilpie, Queensland, appears to be in the middle of nowhere. It lies on dusty land the color of rust. About 20 kangaroos sometimes take up residence on the school lawn. Summer temperatures can reach 113 degrees Fahrenheit. The nearest city is a 10-hour drive away. But Quilpie suddenly found itself the object of global desire recently when it unveiled a plan to combat a housing shortage and lure new residents by offering "free" plots of land. Officials initially had a modest vision, hoping that five new homes would be built in the town of 575 people. But in the two weeks since the word went out on Oct. 11 via local news media, Quilpie (pronounced QUIL-pee) has received more than 300 inquiries, officials said, including from as far away as Hong Kong and Europe. The flood of inquiries from home and abroad was a testament to the desperation of Australians who fear homeownership is becoming increasingly out of reach, and to the global crunch in affordable housing. "It's been quite incredible," Justin Hancock, the chief executive of the Quilpie Shire Council, who came up with the plan, said about the interest the scheme has drawn. "Some people are just calling up because they've heard 'free land.'" Yes, there is fine print: New homeowners would have to pay \$12,500 upfront for a plot — but if they built a house there and lived in it for more than six months, they would receive a refund on the land value. Mr. Hancock's idea is a merger of two forces seen the world over: the need to find cheap housing and the push by small or waning towns to expand or inject new life into their communities. Some picturesque towns and villages in Italy made international headlines by giving away dilapidated houses for a mere 1 euro in an attempt at revitalization. The city of Gary, Ind., too, sold abandoned houses for \$1 to those willing to fix them up. In Australia, two of the biggest cities — Sydney and Melbourne — are also two of the most expensive housing markets in the world. House prices have soared during the coronavirus pandemic, rising 11 times as fast as wage growth over the past year, according to an analysis from CoreLogic, a property data company. Sydney's median house price is \$1.3 million. Quilpie, which is 543 miles west of Brisbane and whose primary industries are agriculture and mining, has struggled to get homes built because of a combination of factors. Banks require higher deposits on mortgage loans in regional Australia than in the cities, and the region has had a shortage of tradespeople, according to Mr. Hancock. Mr. Hancock said he came up with the housing plan to address the shortage. While he doesn't expect all 300 inquiries to translate into plots of land sold, he estimates that 15 to 20 buyers are seriously considering the offer. Because the pandemic is not over — Queensland's borders are closed to other Australians, and international visitors are barred from entering the country — prospective buyers may need to wait a few months to visit the town. But for those thinking of moving to Quilpie, the town offers a free swimming pool, a 24-hour gym, two grocery stores and a lake. It's known for its opal mines, and the bones of some of Australia's largest dinosaurs have been unearthed on its outskirts. Cultural events happen nearly every weekend, Mr. Hancock said, including "opera in the outback," horse races and triathlons. Robina Meehan, 41, put in an offer on one of the plots even before she knew about the refund because, she said, "even \$12,500 seemed too good not to take up." There's a freedom and self-sufficiency to living in a rural town that you

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can't find in the city, Ms. Meehan said. "Here, you can drill a bore, light a fire, kill a cow to eat," she said. "Whereas, in the city, you can't do any of that. You can just plant a little garden full of lettuce."

STRIKE IN NEPAL SUPREME COURT: WHY JUDGES WANT CHIEF JUSTICE TO QUIT

The Supreme Court of Nepal has become sharply divided with judges taking the unprecedented step of boycotting their Benches on Monday, holding up hundreds of cases. Judges are calling for the resignation of Chief Justice Cholendra Shumsher Rana, accusing him of making deals with political parties, especially with Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, and even securing a ministerial berth for one of his relatives. On Tuesday, a 14 out of the 20 judges met Rana and insisted that he resign to save the dignity and credibility of the judiciary. Rana told the judges he would not resign just because they want it, but would be ready to face an "impeachment motion" in Parliament, the only way provided in the Constitution to seek the exit of a judge or CJ. When they mentioned "controversial" verdicts he had delivered, Rana said, "Let us all review the so-called verdicts given by all of us." Political parties on both the ruling and opposition sides have so far been silent on the controversy. A majority of the judges against Rana have the support of at least four retired CJs — Min Bahadur Rayamajhi, Anup Raj Sharma, Kalyan Shrestha and Sushila Karki — a group that commands considerable respect in the Supreme Court and is well connected with NGOs and international donors working in the field of judiciary.

Issues over Ministry, SC

On October 8, Deuba expanded his Council of Ministers to its full strength of 25. Gajendra Hamal, Rana's brother-in-law, was one of the 18 new inductions, and was allotted the Ministry of Industries, Commerce and Civil Supplies. Hamal was not an MP, a fact that led to speculation that his induction was part of a "deal" between Rana and Deuba. Hamal, a leader of the Nepali Congress that Deuba heads, resigned "voluntarily" three days later, but this did not close the chapter. A forum of former judges, and the four former CJs went public asking for an investigation into the episode, and also appealed to the conscience of the CJ to resign to uphold the dignity of the judiciary. The PM too has come under fire. "Along with Rana, Deuba also must be punished for the inclusion of Hamal," said former CJ Sushila Karki. Some judges have held informal meetings and warned the CJ that he was going against his earlier assurances to implement judicial reforms recommended by a committee of judges headed by Harikrishna Karki, second in line of succession. Rana had agreed to the committee's recommendation that to end the practice of the CJ exercising his discretion in allocation of cases, and to replace it with a new mechanism effective from September 1. Now, he has agreed to begin allocation through a 'gola' system (lucky draw) from October 26. This has not satisfied the judges.

Power from politics

In recent years, political parties have gone through a series of splits. Several decisions taken by the leadership have been challenged in the Supreme Court. Several cases are pending while several others have been settled by the courts, at times overruling party and government leaders.

* On July 12, a Constitution Bench headed by Rana reversed a decision of the K P Oli government dissolving the House of Representatives in May, and going for mid-term polls. The Bench not only



reinstated the dissolved House but also ordered that Deuba, who in May had submitted a list of MPs supporting him, be appointed as the new PM.

* Last year, ruling on a dispute over the symbol used by the Communist Party of Nepal, a two-member Bench not only restored the symbol to the petitioner but also ruled that the 2018 merger of the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist and Maoist Centre to form the Communist Party of Nepal was illegal, and that their pre-merger status should be restored.

Among political cases currently under consideration:

* A murder case against Speaker of the House of Representatives Agni Sapkota is before a Bench headed by CJ Rana. Sapkota, a leader of the Maoist Centre, is accused of “burying alive” a rival, Arjun Tamang, during the insurgency years.

* A corruption case involving two former Prime Ministers — Madhav Kumar Nepal and Baburam, Bhattarai, both now in Opposition — is in the final stages of hearing.

* A case filed by former PM Oli seeks the disqualification of Madhav Kumar Nepal and 13 other MPs who went against Oli during the vote of confidence.

Judges and politicians

During the monarchy, in early 2006, a full Bench of the Supreme Court declared the Royal Commission of Investigation against corruption illegal and unconstitutional. “It took only few hours for the order to be executed and leaders under trial released,” Min Bahadur Rayamajhi, the then CJ, wrote in his autobiography. There was hardly any political interference in the judiciary in those days. After the Monarchy was put under suspension along with the Constitution of 1991, political parties asked sitting judges to take oath of office afresh — widely seen as an oath of loyalty to the new regime. All of them complied. In March 2013, Chief Justice Khilraj Regmi took charge as Prime Minister for 11 months with ministers from four major parties, presenting a unique coalition between judiciary and legislature. A case was filed over this. A Bench led by Regmi’s successor, Kalyan Shrestha, sat on it until Regmi relinquished the PM’s post and retired as CJ. Today, Shrestha is a prominent face of civil society, and occasionally issues remarks along with three fellow former CJs on how to go about constitutional cases. About the ongoing controversy, senior advocate Upendra Keshari Neupande said: “Its time serious introspection and restructuring of the judiciary is done.”

DESCENT INTO CHAOS

The Myanmar junta should immediately end the violent suppression of democratic protests

The decision by ASEAN to exclude Myanmar’s military junta from its annual summit held on October 26-28 is a major setback for the Generals’ attempts to gain regional legitimacy for their brutal regime. Ever since it seized power by toppling the democratic government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February, the junta has unleashed a reign of terror claiming an estimated 1,000 lives. Ms. Suu Kyi, who had been the State Councillor for five years from 2015 heading the quasi-democratic government, has been in detention since the coup and is facing absurd charges such as “illegally

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owning walkie-talkies". Thousands of others were arrested by the military, notorious for its reprisal of democratic protests in the past. But this time, the crisis seems much worse. Months after the seizure of power, the junta, led by Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, is still struggling to restore order. If in the past the National League for Democracy (NLD), Ms. Suu Kyi's party, had upheld non-violence even in the face of repression, this time, NLD leaders have called for a "revolution". The remnants of the old regime have formed a National Unity Government, which claims to be the true representative of Myanmar. In cities, protests slid into armed fighting between pro-democracy protesters and security personnel, while in the jungles, anti-junta groups joined hands with rebels for military training. The situation was so grave that the UN Special Envoy warned this month that Myanmar had descended into a civil war. One of the regional groupings with some leverage over the junta is ASEAN. In April, Gen. Min Aung Hlaing was invited to Jakarta for emergency talks with ASEAN members. The bloc asked him to immediately end violence, start the reconciliation process and allow a regional special envoy to meet with all stakeholders, including Ms. Suu Kyi. None of these requests was met. Most recent reports suggest that the junta has been systematically torturing political prisoners. A special envoy was appointed as part of the ASEAN plan, but he was not allowed to meet Ms. Suu Kyi. Regime violence, political crises and strikes and counter-attacks by protesters have all pushed Myanmar to the brink of collapse. According to the UN, some three million people are in need of life-saving assistance because of "conflict, food insecurity, natural disasters and COVID-19". Still, the Generals do not show any signs of compromise and are not even ready to talk with the NLD. Violence might allow them to hold on to power for now, but that is not sustainable. The ASEAN snub is a reminder that continuing violence could cause regional isolation of the regime, which could worsen the crisis. The international community should continue to put pressure on the junta and urgently start a reconciliation process.

RISING TRADE, TENSIONS POINT TO INDIA'S CHINA CONUNDRUM

Trade ties boom to record levels amid persistent border crisis

India's trade with China rising to record levels in 2021 and set to cross the \$100-billion mark for the first time has underlined the challenge New Delhi faces as it looks to recalibrate relations amid a more than year-long border crisis while remaining locked in a deep commercial embrace. The two seemingly contradictory trends in relations have come into sharp focus this month when, three days after the 13th round of talks between military commanders ended in a deadlock with both sides trading accusations, New Delhi hailed "a breakthrough for the Indian pharmaceutical industry in China" with Hyderabad-based Dr. Reddy's Laboratories set for a potential windfall, becoming the first Indian pharmaceutical firm permitted to launch an anti-cancer drug in the lucrative China market.

Huge potential

Both Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla and Ambassador to China Vikram Misri this week highlighted the potential of trade ties. Mr. Misri highlighted pharmaceuticals as particularly having "huge potential yet to be realised". He said, in an interview to the Global Times in Beijing, discussions "were on-going on the boundary crisis" and "we hope that both sides can resolve this [border] issue, because it is casting a shadow on bilateral ties". Mr. Shringla also linked the border



standoff to overall relations noting in a seminar this week that “it was against the backdrop” of both sides developing “a broad-based relationship” that was “clearly predicated on ensuring that peace and tranquillity were not disturbed” that ties, including trade, took off since the normalisation of relations in 1988. Trade ties have boomed to record levels during the past year — a period which officials in New Delhi acknowledge has marked the lowest point since 1988, in the wake of the crisis along the Line of Actual Control which erupted last summer with China’s unprecedented mobilisation of troops. Figures released this month by China’s Customs showed the two-way trade after nine months reached \$90.37 billion, up 49.3% year-on-year. India’s imports from China reached \$68.4 billion, up 51.7%, a reminder of continuing dependencies on goods that India has imported in large quantities over the past two decades, such as electrical machinery and active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), as well as the emergence of new imports such as medical supplies, which India has bought more from China than any other country during the pandemic, from ventilators to PPEs. China’s global exports of medicine and medical supplies were up 108% this year, and medical supplies appear to have become the latest trade dependency. India also imports up to 70% of APIs from China, more than 90% of solar components and a large share of auto components as well. If the trading relationship has appeared to remain largely immune to the border crisis, where relations have changed dramatically are on the investment front, with curbs on Chinese companies remaining, and in the telecom sector where Chinese firms have been kept out of 5G trials. The massive inflow of Chinese funds into the tech sector has also been stopped. Chinese private equity and venture capital investments fell below \$1 billion for the first time since 2017, according to industry research firm Venture Intelligence.

Hurdles to market access

Mr. Shringla said the size of the trade deficit, which is also set for a record this year, and “a number of market access impediments including a whole host of non-tariff barriers, for most of our agricultural products and the sectors we are competitive in, such as pharmaceuticals, IT/ITES, etc”, have remained two important concerns. He also noted India was looking to reduce those imbalances through initiatives such as the Production Linked Incentives (PLI) scheme aimed at “enhancing the resilience of India’s manufacturing sector”. India’s message to China has been that business cannot be usual while peace on the border remains disturbed. Business has, however, boomed, with no signs of slowing down even as the border crisis shows no signs of easing.

**NATION****CHINA'S NEW LAND BORDER LAW AND INDIAN CONCERNS**

It makes China's borders 'sacred and inviolable'. In India, some read it as a Chinese attempt to stay put at current positions; others say it's Chinese actions that count.

On October 23, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's ceremonial but top legislative body, passed a new land law for the "protection and exploitation of the country's land border areas" which will come into effect from January 1, state media Xinhua reported. The law is not meant specifically for the border with India; however, the 3,488-km boundary remains disputed, and some experts feel it could create further hurdles in the resolution of the 17-month-long military standoff. Others think the law is just words — what has vexed ties is not domestic Chinese legislation, but their actions on the ground.

The Chinese law

According to Xinhua, it states that "the sovereignty and territorial integrity of...China are sacred and inviolable", and asks the state to "take measures to safeguard territorial integrity and land boundaries and guard against and combat any act that undermines [these]". The state can take measures "to strengthen border defence, support economic and social development as well as opening-up in border areas, improve public services and infrastructure in such areas, encourage and support people's life and work there, and promote coordination between border defence and social, economic development in border areas". In effect, this suggests a push to settle civilians in the border areas. However, the law also asks the state to follow the principles of "equality, mutual trust, and friendly consultation, handle land border related-affairs with neighbouring countries through negotiations to properly resolve disputes and longstanding border issues", Xinhua said.

China's land borders

China shares its 22,457-km land boundary with 14 countries including India, the third longest after the borders with Mongolia and Russia. Unlike the Indian border, however, China's borders with these two countries are not disputed. The only other country with which China has disputed land borders is Bhutan (477 km).

A signal to India...

The announcement of a law that makes China's borders "sacred and inviolable" at a time of prolonged ongoing discussions to resolve the standoff in eastern Ladakh signals that Beijing is likely to dig in its heels at the current positions, observers said. Lt Gen D S Hooda (ret'd), who has commanded the Northern Command, which is responsible for the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh, said the new law gives the responsibility of the border clearly to the PLA — "as opposed to us", with a lack of clarity on who among the Ministries of Home and Defence is responsible for border management. "There is a clear distinction, clear approach that PLA will do border management," Lt Gen Hooda said. "With this new law, I don't see the PLA pulling back from any other area (in Ladakh)," Lt Gen Hooda said. The PLA is now "bound to protect the integrity, sovereignty of the border", and saying "that we are going to pull out from A, B, C, D areas, will make this much more



difficult”, he said. Overall, “It will make negotiations a little more difficult, a pullout from balance areas less likely,” Lt Gen Hooda said. “Why should you want to pass a law in the midst of an ongoing standoff? You are clearly sending a message... Now that they have made...a law, how does it reconcile with an agreement tomorrow?” Going forward, the negotiations will become more difficult, Lt Gen Hooda said. “They may demand more from us, [saying] these are our laws, if you want us to negotiate, this is our bottomline,” he said.

... Or stating the obvious?

Some experts feel it is not what the law says, but what China does on the ground that matters. Gautam Bambawale, who served as India’s ambassador to China in 2017-18 and has dealt with Beijing for much longer, said the law only “states the obvious”. “Every country is in the business of protecting its territorial integrity, that’s the job of any government. The big question is what is your territory, and there we don’t agree with each other.” Bambawale said the law has no implications for the question of settling the border dispute, which the two countries have been negotiating for several decades now, “except to say that the central government of China is responsible for it, and that is true even without the law”. It is only “a whole amount of language, words, verbiage, whatever you want to call it”. The “real issue”, Bambawale said, is “what they are doing with their military, what they have done since May 2020, the way India has reacted... That is what impacts the ground situation. I don’t see it (the law) as having any great impact on negotiations, if there are any negotiations”. According to Bambawale, by their actions in eastern Ladakh last year, “the Chinese are clearly indicating that they are tired of trying to resolve the boundary or the LAC through negotiations; they’re indicating they’ll do it through use of force.”

Model border villages

China has been building “well-off” border defence villages across the LAC in all sectors. President Xi Jinping visited a village in Tibet near the border with Arunachal Pradesh in July this year. Even before the law was announced, Eastern Army Commander Lt Gen Manoj Pande, who is responsible for the 1,346-km LAC from Sikkim to Arunachal Pradesh, had said that the “dual civil and military use” of border villages is a concern for India. “According to their own policy or strategy, model villages have come up near the border. In what quantity have people settled there, that’s a different question. But for us, it is a matter of concern, how they can make dual civil and military use of these facilities and villages. And we have taken note of it in our operational planning,” Lt Gen Pande said last week. Lt Gen Hooda said China has “always been using the civil population to reinforce their claims”. He mentioned the situation in Demchok, where some “so called civilians” have pitched tents on the Indian side of the LAC, and the issue is yet to be resolved. China is trying to change the facts on the ground “not only through military but also civilian presence”, Lt Gen Hooda said. “Which means you are going to see resettlement of civil population closer to the LAC.” He added: “If you (China) start having settled population on the other side, creeping across what we (India) feel is our border, at some stage later, whenever, when you start discussing the border between the two sides, they will say we (China) have settled population in this area.” Bambawale, however, said China has been doing this anyway — even without the new law. “The law is not a necessary condition to be able to do that... In certain parts of Arunachal Pradesh, we know that. Perhaps in other areas also,” he said.

**DON'T USE NEW LAW TO JUSTIFY LAC MOVES, INDIA TELLS CHINA****'It will have no bearing on present boundary arrangements'**

China must not use its new "Land Boundary Law" to justify any actions that alter the situation at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), said India, in a strongly worded statement that expressed "concern" over the law. The Government called the law a "unilateral move", and said it could have no bearing on existing arrangements between both sides, as India and China have not resolved their boundary issues thus far. It also reaffirmed India's rejection of the China-Pakistan 1963 agreement, in which Pakistan handed over the Shaksgam Valley of Aksai Chin to China. India claims all of Jammu and Kashmir, which includes Aksai Chin, and has maintained that the agreement is "illegal and invalid". In addition, New Delhi's latest statement indicates some apprehension that Beijing could use its new law, which authorises the state to combat any attempts on its land boundaries and to strengthen border defences and infrastructure, as a "pretext" to formalise the People's Liberation Army (PLA) incursions into the LAC and building infrastructure along Indian territory since April 2020.

'Unilateral decision'

"China's unilateral decision to bring about legislation, which can have implication on our existing bilateral arrangements on border management as well as on the boundary question, is of concern to us. Such unilateral move will have no bearing on the arrangements that both sides have already reached earlier, whether it is on the boundary question or for maintaining peace along the LAC in India-China border areas," said a statement by the Ministry of External Affairs on Wednesday. "We also expect that China will avoid undertaking action under the pretext of this law, which could unilaterally alter the situation in the India-China border areas," said the statement released by the MEA, four days after the law was first reported in Chinese state media. India and Bhutan are China's only land neighbours that don't have a resolved boundary, making them more of a target for the law, experts have argued.

THE PERILS OF AN UNRESOLVED BOUNDARY

The India-China relationship is in a difficult place, with the past shadowing the present. The period from 1949 to 1962 is crucial as Jawaharlal Nehru sought, albeit unsuccessfully, to establish a workable relationship with the Chinese. Nirupama Rao, former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to China, traces the history of Tibet, the genesis of the McMahon Line, Communist China's military takeover and domination of Tibet, and the border row between India and China in her new book, *The Fractured Himalaya*. An excerpt from the book: It was to be over a year before negotiations between India and China on relations between India and Tibet opened in Beijing. These commenced on December 31, 1953. Jawaharlal Nehru's approach to frontier questions between India and China was already well-entrenched by then. Tibet had become more a 'psychological' buffer from a political one during British rule — psychological because Nehru was convinced that any military attack on India from Tibet was not feasible. For him, while the status of Tibet and Tibetan autonomy, as also Indian interests in Tibet inherited from the British were issues for discussion with China, the frontier, as his biographer S. Gopal noted, 'was firm, well-known and beyond dispute'. Loosely put, Nehru's attitude was that there was no room for



controversy over the McMahon Line: 'Our maps show that the McMahon Line is our boundary and that is our boundary — map or no map. That fact remains and we stand by that boundary, and we will not allow anybody to come across that boundary.' Gopal notes that this assertion of rights was more definite regarding the eastern sector of the boundary.

Flawed advice

The problem lay in the fact that, except for Sikkim, the border had not been demarcated — jointly with China — on the ground; the boundary in the western and middle sectors had not been defined in detail by treaty and only, as Nehru stated, by custom, usage and tradition. The McMahon Line was shown only on a map that the Chinese government had initialled in 1914 but not subsequently accepted. The Chinese would set their strategy in such a way subsequently, when the officials of the two sides met in 1960, to seek 'fresh acceptance of every stretch' of the boundary. K.M. Panikkar, without the benefit of hindsight, only had this advice to give Nehru: the issue would pose no difficulty. Could Panikkar [the first Indian Ambassador to China] have sensed the actual Chinese attitude? In retrospect, his advice to Nehru would have serious repercussions for India. As advice, it was fatally flawed. Throughout his stay in China, Panikkar took the stand that the Tibetan issue was a simple one. Leaders like Zhou Enlai, in his view, recognised the 'legitimacy' of India's trade and cultural interests in Tibet and only suggested that the political office in Lhasa, 'an office of dubious legality' in Panikkar's words, should be regularised by its transformation into an Indian Consulate-General. Other posts and institutions like the telegraph lines set up in the British era, the military escort at Yadong in the Chumbi Valley, 'were to be abolished quietly in time', and the trade agents in Tibet and their subordinate agencies brought 'within the framework of normal consulate relations'. In his seeming obsession with the big picture of two big Asian nations forging deeper understanding and cooperation, Panikkar was content to say that he left 'no outstanding issue' pending at the time of his departure. It was a strategic miscalculation which would have serious consequences. When Zhou Enlai told Panikkar in September 1951 in a 'shrouded sentence' that the question of the stabilisation of the Tibetan frontier — a matter of common interest to India, Nepal and China — could be settled by discussion between the three countries, it was assumed, in diplomatic guesswork, that stabilisation meant that there was no territorial dispute between India and China.

'Cunning' move

Many records indicate that the view of the officials in the Ministry of External Affairs was that while negotiations for an agreement between India and China on Tibet were necessary, they should also include a border settlement. There should be a quid pro quo for India's recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. A note by the Foreign Secretary, K.P.S. Menon on April 11, 1952 observed that the Chinese government's attitude was far from straightforward, and could, in fact, be termed 'cunning'. A child could see through the game, said Menon. Zhou Enlai had suggested in September 1951 that India's position in Tibet should be regularised and the 'boundary with Tibet stabilised'. India had said immediately that 'we were ready for discussions' but there had been no response from the Chinese. The latter were saying that 'they [the Chinese] have been in Tibet only for a short while and want more time to study the problem.' Menon was suspicious of Chinese irredentism, and a whispering campaign was already doing the rounds in Lhasa that not only Tibet, but Sikkim and Bhutan, and even the Darjeeling-Kalimpong area 'would soon be liberated.' This would encourage the Tibetans to lay their hands on Tawang and other disputed areas to the



south of the McMahon Line. 'The Chinese have long memories; irredentism has always played a part in the policy of the Chinese government whether imperial, Guomindang or Communist.' India was clearly inviting trouble when it was decided that the border issue would not figure in the negotiations on Tibet. Responding positively to the Chinese move for an agreement on Tibet was seen essentially as a means of reducing Chinese pressure on the border, and as 'helping' the Tibetans within a larger policy framework of coaxing the Chinese out of their isolation.

Piecemeal solution

The 'knight-administrator' (called thus because of his British knighthood and being a member of the Indian Civil Service) Sir Girija Shankar Bajpai was by now the Governor of Bombay. He continued to be in the picture regarding Tibet. He had noticed that the list of pending issues proposed for discussion with the Chinese did not include the question of the frontier with Tibet. His view, as expressed to the Foreign Secretary, was that 'This business of Sino-Indian relations over Tibet, would, in my judgement, be best handled comprehensively and not piecemeal', implying that the question of the border should not be left aside. Perhaps, as a result of Bajpai's letter, the Prime Minister in a note to the Foreign Secretary on 23 July, expressed his inclination that the frontier should be mentioned in the talks with the Chinese. Panikkar's reasons for not advancing this subject, be what they may, were appreciated but Nehru felt 'that our attempt at being clever might overreach itself' and that it was better to be absolutely straight and frank about the issue with the Chinese.

Nehru's misgivings

This was not the first time that Nehru had expressed some misgivings on the issue. In June of the same year, he had in a message to Panikkar said it 'was odd' that Zhou Enlai had made no reference to the frontier in his discussions with the Ambassador. He did not like Zhou's silence in the matter, he added, since the Indian government had made it clear in Parliament that not only the direct frontier with Tibet, but also the frontiers of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim, should remain unchanged. Panikkar's response was to state that the Chinese were aware of India's interest in the integrity of Nepal and had not raised any question about it. Neither had they objected to the PM's public statements on the issue. Panikkar said he did not want to make this a subject for further discussion. India should stick to the position that the frontier had been defined 'and there is nothing for us to discuss'. It would be legitimate 'to presume that Chou En Lai's silence on this point and his NOT having even once alluded to Sikkim or Bhutan at any time even indirectly during our conversation would mean acquiescence in, if NOT acceptance of our position.' The Prime Minister did not demur further.

NATIONAL SECURITY CANNOT BE THE BUGBEAR, SAYS COURT

'State cannot expect the judiciary to be a mute spectator'

The state cannot keep a secret from the court merely on the bogey of "national security" and expect the judiciary to remain a "mute spectator", the Supreme Court drew the line for the Government on Wednesday. The claim has to be backed by evidence to prove that the disclosure of the information sought by the court would affect national security concerns.



Court response

In its order, a Bench led by Chief Justice N.V. Ramana was responding to submissions made by Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta, for the Centre, in the Pegasus snooping case. Mr. Mehta had refused the court's repeated advice to file a detailed affidavit responding to the snooping allegations, blankly stating that "the disclosure of certain facts might affect the national security and defence of the nation". Mr. Mehta's reluctance had seen the Bench ask itself the question whether the Union of India could actually decline information to the Supreme Court. "Of course, the Union of India may decline to provide information when constitutional considerations exist, such as those pertaining to the security of the state. However, this does not mean that the state gets a free pass every time the spectre of 'national security' is raised. National security cannot be the bugbear that the judiciary shies away from, by virtue of its mere mentioning," the court clarified.

Limited review

The court accepted that judicial review in national security matters was limited. The judiciary had been circumspect while dealing with matters of national security. However, the court's delicacy did not licence the Government to call for an "omnibus prohibition" against judicial review. "The Union of India must necessarily plead and prove the facts which indicate that the information sought must be kept secret as their divulgence would affect national security concerns. They must justify the stand that they take before a court. The mere invocation of national security by the state does not render the court a mute spectator," the Supreme Court emphasised. In the Pegasus order, the court reminded the Government that the petitioners do not contend that the state should not resort to surveillance/collection of data in matters of national security. "The complaint of the petitioners is about the misuse or likely misuse of spyware in violation of the right to privacy of citizens," the court pointed out.

WHY WAS PEGASUS PANEL NEEDED, WHAT IT WILL DO NOW — AND HOW

The Supreme Court on Wednesday ordered a probe headed by former SC judge R V Raveendran to look into the allegations of unauthorised surveillance using the Israeli-built Pegasus spyware.

Terms of reference

The court has set seven terms of reference for the committee, which are essentially facts that need to be ascertained to decide the issue. These range from determining who procured Pegasus and whether the petitioners in the case were indeed targeted by use of the software, to what laws justify the use of such spyware against citizens. The court has also asked the committee to make recommendations on a legal and policy framework on cyber security to ensure the right to privacy of citizens is protected. The committee is expected to submit its report in eight weeks.

Why a committee?

Decisions in cases seeking enforcement of fundamental rights are based on facts. The task of determining these facts, when they are disputed or unknown, are often assigned to committees, which act as an agent of the court. Such committees or fact-finding teams can summon individuals, prepare ground reports, and inform the court. The government has rejected the global media



investigation into the use of Pegasus, but has not supplied any facts in the matter. The case involves technical questions, and requires extensive fact-finding for the court to determine whether fundamental rights were violated, and to pass suitable orders. The Centre's refusal to file an additional affidavit means the court will require more assistance from the committee. Once the committee answers the fact-based questions, the court will examine questions such as: If the government indeed used Pegasus, can it be justified under law? If not, what relief must be granted to the petitioners?

Will government respond?

The government had argued that since matters of national security were involved, it would not file any further affidavit in the case, but it would be willing to disclose all information before a committee of technical experts. However, the government had sought to appoint the technical committee itself — which the court has not allowed, saying “such a course of action would violate the settled judicial principle against bias, i.e., that ‘justice must not only be done, but also be seen to be done.’” Justice Raveendran's committee could now seek the government's response afresh. However, probe committees set up by courts into government excesses — such as extra-judicial killings — are often faced by a lack of cooperation from the government. Committees, therefore, often engage with other parties and stakeholders; the Justice Raveendran panel has been empowered to “take the assistance of any serving or retired officer(s), legal expert(s) or technical expert(s)”.

The West Bengal panel

In July, the West Bengal government set up a Commission of Inquiry comprising former Supreme Court Justice Madan B Lokur and former Calcutta High Court Justice Jyotirmay Bhattacharya to look into the same allegations. Although the Supreme Court has not stayed this probe, the West Bengal government has told the court that it would voluntarily pause it, and that “nothing will happen” till the SC hears the batch of PILs on Pegasus.

CJI STRESSES ON JUDICIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

He urges Law Minister to ensure that plan for NJIAI is taken up in Parliament

Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana on Saturday urged Union Minister of Law and Justice Kiren Rijiju to ensure that the proposal to create National Judicial Infrastructure Authority of India (NJIAI) with statutory backing is taken up in the upcoming winter session of Parliament. The CJI was present along with Mr. Rijiju, Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray and judges of the Supreme Court to inaugurate the B and C wings of the High Court Annexe Building at Aurangabad. Chief Justice Ramana again stressed on the need for NJIAI and said, “Good judicial infrastructure for courts in India has always been an afterthought. It is because of this mindset that courts in India still operate from dilapidated structures, making it difficult to effectively perform their function.” He said judicial infrastructure is important for improving access to justice and to meet the growing demands of the public that is more aware of its rights and is developing economically, socially and culturally. It is baffling to note that the maintenance of judicial infrastructure is still being carried out in an ad-hoc and unplanned manner, he said. Mr. Ramana went on to present hard facts and said, “The total sanctioned strength of judicial officers in the country is 24,280 and



the number of court halls available is 20,143 (including 620 rented halls); 26% of court complexes do not have separate ladies' toilets and 16% do not have gents' toilets; only 54% of court complexes have purified drinking water facility; only 5% of court complexes have basic medical facilities; only 32% of court rooms have separate record rooms; only 51% of court complexes have a library; only 27% of courtrooms have computer placed on the Judge's dais with video-conferencing facility. According to international research published in 2018, failure to deliver timely justice cost the country as much as 9% of annual GDP."

WHAT IS 'CONSCIOUS POSSESSION' OF DRUGS?

How does the NDPS Act treat drug offences? Is punishment proportionate to quantity?

A special court in Mumbai denied bail to Aryan Khan, son of Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan, though the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) did not find any drugs on him during his arrest on October 3 after a raid on a cruise ship off Mumbai. The arrest of Aryan, along with several others, has highlighted the stiff nature of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985, and the nuances that go into the detection and seizure of narcotics, and how the matter is investigated and prosecuted.

Why was Aryan Khan denied bail?

The court rejected his bail application on the ground that he had "conscious possession" of drugs. He has been accused under the same Sections of the NDPS Act as his friend Arbaaz Merchant and model Munmun Dhamecha, on whom six grams and five grams of hashish, respectively, were allegedly found. The court presumed that Aryan had "intention, motive, knowledge" of the contraband said to be found on Merchant and Dhamecha. This means the onus is now on him to prove otherwise. Besides "conscious possession", the 23-year-old is accused of consumption, attempt to commit offences under the Act, abetment/conspiracy and offences under Section 8(c).

What does the law say?

Section 35 of the Act recognises the 'presumption of culpable mental state'. Possession need not be physical and could be 'constructive'. The Supreme Court defines the word 'conscious' as "awareness of a particular fact" — a state of mind which is deliberate or intended. That is, a person can still have power and control over the article in question, while another to whom physical possession is given holds it, subject to that power or control. An illustration of 'conscious possession' is if a person keeps his gun in his mother's flat, which is safer than his own home, he must be considered to be in possession of the firearm. The liability is on the accused to dispel the court's presumption of his culpable mental state. Section 54 also allows for a similar presumption in the possession of illicit articles.

What quantity of drugs will attract penal provisions?

The NDPS Act treats drug offences very seriously and penalties are stiff. Penalties depend on the quantity of drugs involved. The Centre has notified the small and commercial quantities for each drug. For hashish, the commercial quantity is 1 kg. A small quantity of cocaine is two grams and commercial quantity is 100 grams; heroin is five grams and 250 grams respectively. For methamphetamine, the corresponding figures are two grams and 50 grams; and for MDMA, 0.5



gram and 10 grams. Abetment and criminal conspiracy and even an attempt to commit an offence under the Act attracts the same punishment as the offence itself. Preparation to commit an offence attracts half the penalty. Repeat offences attract one-and-a-half times the penalty and in some cases even the death penalty. Consumption of drugs like cocaine, morphine and heroin attracts rigorous imprisonment up to one year or a fine up to ₹20,000 or both. For other drugs, the punishment is imprisonment up to six months or a fine up to ₹10,000 or both. Addicts volunteering for treatment enjoy immunity from prosecution. Production, manufacture, possession, sale, purchase, transport, import inter-State, export inter-State or use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances in small quantities involve rigorous imprisonment up to six months or a fine up to ₹10,000 or both. More than small quantity but less than commercial quantity involves rigorous imprisonment up to 10 years and a fine up to ₹1 lakh. Those activities involving commercial quantity of drugs attract rigorous imprisonment of 10-20 years and a fine of ₹1 lakh-₹2 lakh.

What is the Centre's role in implementing this law?

This law has "stringent" provisions for the control and regulation of operations relating to narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. These include forfeiture of property derived from, or used in, illicit traffic. The law has been made in adherence to international conventions, including those of the United Nations, on narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. Human rights advocates have criticised the NDPS Act as a severe law which leans towards incarceration rather than bail. Section 37(1) mandates that an accused person should not be granted bail unless the court has reasonable grounds to believe that he is not guilty and that he is not "likely to commit any offence while on bail". The provision is on the same terms as anti-terror laws.

What is the NCB's role?

One of the Directive Principles in the Constitution (Article 47) directs the state to act against narcotic activities injurious to health. The NDPS Act mandates the formation of a central authority to exercise its powers and functions under the statute. The government constituted the NCB on March 17, 1986, to coordinate with other departments and ministries to fight illicit traffic in drugs and drug abuse.

IN ALLEGATIONS AGAINST WANKHEDE, QUESTIONS OF RELIGION, CONVERSION, IN ELIGIBILITY FOR SC QUOTA

Maharashtra Minister Nawab Malik has alleged that Sameer Wankhede, Mumbai Zonal Director of the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), who is in charge of the case against Shah Rukh Khan's son Aryan, benefitted from the reservation for Scheduled Castes (SCs) despite being Muslim and ineligible for the quota. If the allegations are proven, Wankhede could lose his job. The list of officers on the website of the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT), which allots services to those who clear the Civil Services Examination (CSE), shows Wankhede was ranked 561st in CSE 2007. He was selected as a candidate from the SC category, and became an officer of the 2008 batch of the Indian Revenue Service (Customs and Indirect Taxes).



What is Sameer Wankhede accused of?

Malik has alleged that Dnyandev Kachru Wankhede, father of Sameer Wankhede, was an SC who converted to Islam before marrying Sameer's mother, Zaheeda Begum. Sameer was born in 1979, and Malik has released the birth certificate which records his father's name as Dawood K Wankhede. Malik has claimed that Sameer was raised as a Muslim, and has released the purported nikahnama — the document on which two Muslim partners entering into a civil union must sign to legalise their marriage — dated December 7, 2006, which shows his name as Sameer Dawood Wankhede. Malik has alleged that Sameer, a Muslim, was selected in the CSE under the SC quota to which he was not entitled.

What are the rules of religion in eligibility for the SC quota?

There is a 15 per cent quota for SCs in government jobs. But Hindu SCs who convert to Islam lose their SC status, and are no longer eligible for the quota. A brochure on the DoPT site lays down the position on SC status and conversions: "A person shall be held to be a member of a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe if he belongs to a caste, or a tribe which has been declared as such... "No person who professes a religion different from the Hindu or the Sikh religion shall be deemed to be a member of the Scheduled Castes..." (On STs, see later) Further, "A person belonging to a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe will continue to be deemed as such irrespective of his/her marriage to a non-Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe." However, "A convert or re-convert to Hinduism and Sikhism shall be accepted as a member of Scheduled Caste if he has been received back and accepted as a member of the concerned Scheduled Caste." The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, which lays down that no person professing a religion different from the Hindu or Sikh or Buddhist religion can be deemed to be a member of an SC, has been amended several times. The original order under which only Hindus were classified as SCs, was amended to include Sikhs in 1956, and Buddhists in 1990. No such religion-based bar, however, operates for STs and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The brochure on the DoPT site says, "The rights of a person belonging to a Scheduled Tribe are independent of his/her religious faith."

Is the exclusion of Muslims and Christians discriminatory?

Petitions have been filed in the Supreme Court seeking the inclusion of Muslims and Christians in the SC category. In 2004, the Centre for Public Interest Litigation challenged the legality of the provision by which people professing and converting to religions other than Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism were deprived of reservation benefits. In 2008, the National Commission on Minorities concluded that there was a case for inclusion Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims in the SC category. In January 2020, the SC agreed to examine a plea by the National Council of Dalit Christians to make the government's affirmative action programmes religion-neutral. The plea is pending before the court.

In inter-caste marriages, can mother's caste be the caste of the couple's child?

The child carries the caste of the father, and caste certificates are issued on this basis. However, courts have taken note of the surroundings in which the child was brought up. In Rameshbhai Dabhai Naika vs State of Gujarat & Ors (2012), the Supreme Court ruled: "In an inter-caste marriage or a marriage between a tribal and a non-tribal there may be a presumption that the child has the caste of the father. This presumption may be stronger in the case where in the inter-



caste marriage or a marriage between a tribal and a non-tribal the husband belongs to a forward caste. But by no means the presumption is conclusive or irrebuttable and it is open to the child of such marriage to lead evidence to show that he/she was brought up by the mother who belonged to the Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe.” In 2006, then Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment Meira Kumar proposed that children born of inter-caste marriages should get SC status if either parent belongs to a Scheduled Caste. A proposal was to be placed before the Cabinet in April 2008, but was withdrawn at the last minute. There was resistance to the suggestion from many quarters, including the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC).

What can happen if a caste certificate is found to be false?

A DoPT circular of May 19, 1993 says: “Wherever it is found that a Government servant, who was not qualified or eligible in terms of the recruitment rules etc... or had furnished false information or produced a false certificate in order to secure appointment, he should not be retained in service... “If he/she has become a permanent Government Servant... if the charges are proved, the Government servant should be removed or dismissed from service.” Sameer Wankhede may face an inquiry, and may even be dismissed if his SC certificate is found to be false. However, the matter is currently very politicised, and clarity is required on several questions — for example:

- * whether his father was a Muslim when Sameer was issued his certificate;
- * whether his father converted to Islam to marry and then re-converted — and if so, when;
- * whether Sameer changed his religion to Hinduism just to receive an SC certificate.

SILLY POINT

Support for the national cricket team or its players is no litmus test for patriotism

People who allegedly celebrated the victory of Pakistan against India in a T20 cricket World Cup match on October 24 are facing the brunt of the state. All of them are Muslims. In Rajasthan, a young schoolteacher has been terminated by a private school and the police have charged her under IPC Section 153B for ‘imputations, assertions prejudicial to national integration’. In Jammu and Kashmir, the police have registered two cases against unknown persons under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and other sections. In Uttar Pradesh, three students from J&K have been charged under IPC Sections 153A (promoting enmity between groups), 505 (creating or publishing content to promote enmity) and, later, Section 124A, sedition. The wisdom, propriety or acceptability of celebrating Pakistan’s victory is beside the point. From moral, tactical, and practical perspectives, this sweeping policing is unwise. No democracy, least of all a country of India’s size and diversity, can demand unyielding uniformity and conformity from its population, on all questions and at all times. It is unlikely that any of these charges will stand judicial scrutiny, but that only makes this spectacle a ridiculous distraction for the stretched law enforcement system. Far from enforcing national integration as the purported aim of this heavy-handed police action is, it will only brew more resentment and social disharmony apart from derailing young lives. An unremitting loyalty test of citizens can be a self-defeating pursuit for a country like India that has global ambitions. People of Indian origin live around the world, with split loyalties. There are U.S. citizens who chant victory for India at gatherings in their home



countries addressed by the Indian Prime Minister, and there are British and Australian citizens who boo their own country in favour of India during sporting events. Sports teams around the world have members of foreign origin. Infusion of toxic hyper-nationalism in sports is bad in such a world; more so for India. While the BJP has been championing this link between cricket and nationalism, other parties are not far behind as the incident in Rajasthan, a Congress-ruled State, shows. AAP in Delhi was one step ahead and questioning the Narendra Modi government for allowing the cricket match with Pakistan. Had all this been on account of an unspoken link between cheering for the national cricket team and support for a united India, the police would have also charged those who mercilessly trolled Mohammed Shami, a Muslim in the Indian cricket team. True, it would have been wonderful for the Indian cricket team to enjoy the unqualified support of the entire nation, but, surely, there is no reason to charge those who support another team with sedition. The Indian state looks silly now, and the whole episode bodes ill for cricket, and the country.

RIGHT WING ACTIVISTS ATTACK WEB SERIES SET IN BHOPAL

Filmmaker Prakash Jha allegedly faced an ink attack and at least three members of his production unit were beaten up when they were shooting for the upcoming web series — Ashram 3 — in Bhopal on Sunday evening. Tension gripped Bhopal's Old Jail when Bajrang Dal activists entered the premises where the shooting was under way. The activists raised slogans against Mr. Jha and Bobby Deol, the lead actor of the web series, assaulted some members of the crew and damaged vehicles of the production unit. According to unconfirmed sources, the attack was led by Bajrang Dal office-bearer Sushil S. Speaking to the media outside the jail after the incident, Mr. Sushil said, "Ink has been thrown on Prakash Jha, whose web series Ashram is hurting Hindu sentiments. We want Prakash Jha to change the name of the web series." The Old Jail is located in Arera Hills, considered to be a highly secured area where the State secretariat, Assembly complex, District Court and BSNL Telephone Exchange are located. "DIG, Bhopal, Irshad Wali is personally monitoring the situation," an official said. The police is yet to receive a complaint from Mr. Jha and his team.

A WORLD MINUS ADS

Social media outrage against brand campaigns is fuelled by intolerance to progressive values

In a land of matchless diversity, where 138 crore people live, it is perhaps not surprising that social conflicts run along several lines including caste, class, gender, language and religion. Deepening fault lines touch every part of life, and advertising, which at a basic level nudges a consumer to make a purchasing decision but also does social messaging, is learning it the hard way. With the start of the festival season, at least two companies, Fabindia and Dabur, have had to pull out ads days after the launch for "offending sentiments" and huge social media outrage. In the case of Fabindia, people protested against the use of the words "Jashn-e-riwaaz" for a new collection of clothes ahead of Deepavali. The brand later clarified that all its products in "Jashn-e-riwaaz" are "a celebration of Indian traditions" and that its Deepavali collection was yet to be launched. Yet it chose to withdraw the ad. BJP MP Tejasvi Surya led the campaign against Fabindia calling for an economic boycott; a hashtag #NoBindiNoBusiness also did the rounds, in protest

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against the models in the ad without bindis. Dabur's Fem brand had to pull out a Karwa Chauth ad which showed a same-sex couple observing the rituals. A Ceat ad featuring Aamir Khan asking people not to burst crackers on the roads too upset the right wing which said it should have also addressed the "problem of blocking roads" for namaz. While advertisements which do not stick to the script can be a breath of fresh air, there are some which miss the mark completely with the messaging. So, if Shah Rukh Khan's latest Cadbury ad urging people to buy from small kirana shops this Deepavali is making the right noises, Kent RO's atta and bread maker ad last year and its tone-deaf portrayal of house-helpers was decried. Tanishq, a jewellery brand co-owned by the Tatas, had to withdraw an ad last year that showed a Muslim family organising Hindu baby shower rituals for their Hindu daughter-in-law. It got vitriolic comments with some accusing the Tatas of promoting "Love Jihad". Congress MP Shashi Tharoor and others were aghast that a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity could irk a section of people. They cried foul that nuance was getting lost in the cacophony of perceived hurt sentiments. If advertising is about selling a product, no company will willingly put out a campaign that may hurt its brand. The messaging must be sensitive, and that comes when a marketing team has its ear to the ground. It is nothing unusual for some ad campaigns to fail. But, worryingly, many brands have had to withdraw their campaign material after manufactured social media outrage that was fed by intolerance of progressive values and religious bigotry of the worst order.

A REGION OF RISING INTOLERANCE

It is time for South Asia's political leadership to form a united front against all forms of religious extremism

This month, Durga Puja pavilions, Hindu temples and homes were attacked in Bangladesh. These attacks followed rumours that the Koran had been desecrated at a pandal. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's administration assured the Hindus of security and deployed additional security forces in districts which had witnessed attacks. A few hours after the Prime Minister's assurance, an ISKCON temple was attacked. At least five people have been killed in these attacks.

A legacy of conflict

Religious tension is not new in the Indian subcontinent. Conflicts often break out among different religious groups, and minorities are targeted. The 1992 Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya caused riots which led to the deaths of about 2,000 people. The 1993 Bombay bombings, the 2019 Easter attacks in Colombo, and the frequent terror attacks in Pakistan over the past decade are other examples. In the case of Bangladesh, where Hindus make up about 9% of the population and Muslims 90%, attacks against the Hindu minority are either retaliations to acts committed in the name of religion within the country or neighbouring India, or due to the extremist views of some Muslims. For instance, the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya instigated a violent response in Bangladesh and mobs started demolishing multiple Hindu temples. Faith-based conflicts take place both within and among countries. The India-Pakistan rivalry extends from the religious and political fields to sports — cricket matches between the two teams see a bigger audience than usual. The separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 was an example of how culture too plays a pivotal role in separating or uniting a country. In the recent past, right-wing parties have been ruling the subcontinent, gaining the support of the dominant religious population and



undermining religious minorities. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India and Tehrek-e-Insaaf (PTI) in Pakistan are examples. The controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act passed in Indian Parliament in 2019 was a faith-based test of citizenship and instigated rallies and protests across the subcontinent. Ms. Hasina called the law “unnecessary”. The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan was supported by PTI leader and Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan. The subcontinent is evolving towards a polarisation of Hindus and Muslims.

Varying responses

In Bangladesh, what is appreciable is that the government takes strict action against religious extremist groups and also promotes the celebration of festivals of all religions by ensuring security at religious sites on festival days. Muslims visit Hindu temples on Durga Puja or celebrate Holi and invite Hindus on Eid. Bangladesh has developed a strong anti-terrorism wing from its security forces to tackle religious extremist attacks. The anti-terrorism unit has prevented countless planned attacks and jailed numerous extremist groups. Some have been sentenced to death, including those involved in the attack of the local café Holey Artisan in July 2016. Bangladesh has not only cracked down on terror groups since the café attack but also prevented gatherings of religious protesters to prevent violence. For example, a recent gathering of Muslim extremist groups in protest against France’s anti-Islamic laws was disrupted by law enforcers. In India, on the other hand, the government came under criticism first for not taking prompt action against cow vigilantes who were attacking poor Muslims and then for enacting the CAA. Protests against the law broke out across the nation and the administration responded to them with divisive rhetoric and heavy-handedness. Unfortunately, the South Asian political leadership is bereft of a vision and the courage needed to rise to the occasion and stand together to send an unequivocal message of zero tolerance against all forms of religious extremism and bigotry. When religion becomes a tool for achieving political mileage, the resulting flames of hatred and intolerance quickly spread. This has the potential of becoming a wildfire that devours everything that comes along the way. Such fire and fury can only hurt this region’s socioeconomic aspirations. The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan is a wake-up call to South Asia’s political leadership to form a united front against all forms of religious dogma and extremism. Seventy-five years after Partition, harmony, religious coexistence and tolerance are all under threat. Can the region afford such myopia when there are so many burning issues to resolve such as poverty alleviation, climate change and food security?

NOT AT HOME IN J&K

Amit Shah’s first visit to J&K since abrogation of Article 370 pointed to persisting disconnect

On his first visit to Jammu & Kashmir after the abolition of the state’s special status and its bifurcation into two Union territories, Union Home Minister Amit Shah packed in several “outreach” events. But these events, and the visit, on the whole, have raised more questions about the government’s long-term plan for the former state. Throughout the three days, it was the extent of a seeming disconnect that was on show. “I have come here to forge a friendship with the youth of Kashmir. Join hands with Modiji and the government of India and become partners in the journey to take Kashmir forward,” said Shah. But friendship can hardly be forged or forced in a



climate where the state wields repressive laws and mass arrests, and takes away the people's right to the internet. Shah asked those whose "partnership" he sought to swallow the deprivations and the heavyhanded exercise of state power as "bitter pills" that had saved lives. But the slapping of cases under the draconian UAPA on students in a medical college for allegedly waving Pakistan flags after its cricket victory is yet another example of a response from the ruling establishment that is only likely to deepen the cynicism on the ground. The several security reviews that Shah presided over during the visit were testimony to the challenges in Kashmir, belying his and other ministers' assertions that "terrorism ended" on August 5, 2019. Stone-pelting may have disappeared and there may be fewer "encounters" now, but militants continue to be recruited, and have changed their methods. The civilian killings in the Valley this month by pistol-wielding "hybrid" militants and the long stand by militants in the border district of Poonch in Jammu are indicators that can be ignored only at the nation's peril. The Home Minister also fell back on the "three families looted and brought ruin to J&K" trope. But the question is: Why were those very same families and the parties associated with them considered so important that none other than the Prime Minister invited them to Delhi for talks in June? Even if it was for the limited purpose of getting their assent for the ongoing delimitation exercise, it was an admission that without them, there can be no viable political process in the state. The plan to replace them with new or specially reared politicians and parties has not made headway — the elected members of the district development councils are confined to hotel rooms for their own security. The absence of mainstream politicians and political parties from J&K's public life has been acutely felt after August 5, 2019. There is no alternative to holding elections without delay. But if this exercise is to have legitimacy, it will need to involve everyone, including the "three families". And first, the government needs to be transparent about the rationale for its chronology of "elections first, then statehood".

IN INDIA, THE STEADY SUBVERSION OF EQUALITY (SEEMA CHISHTI - A JOURNALIST)

The sharp turns away from democracy seen recently in the country must jolt citizens into stopping the descent

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has loudly reiterated India's embrace of democracy internationally, hailed its 'diversity' when abroad and is seeking India's relevance as an ally of the West on 'democratic values'. Therefore, it is imperative to measure the distance between today's India and democratic values. The central edifice of a democracy, or what makes it a revolutionary idea, is equality, or that it accords an equal status to all its people. But the E-word is in rapid remission. A commitment to all being equal as a desired ideal — even if not fully realised in reality — accorded India its sheen and power in the past. India now, from being a truly remarkable case of composite nationalism, appears happy to huddle in that corner of the room which many of its neighbours occupy.

Faith as differentiator

The promise of the far-sighted Indian Constitution was of equal rights to all. If any benefit was accorded to smaller groups, religious or linguistic minorities or Dalits, it was in order to achieve substantive equality. This cut across all markers of identity — colour, race, language, faith, caste, region or food. But faith seems to have increasingly emerged as a visible differentiator between



citizens. It must be recognised that laws — and not just the spirit — are in the process of being rewritten in India. First and foremost, the basis of citizenship under the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019, allowing for non-Muslims from three countries to fast-track their citizenship, was the most serious push to introduce religion into citizenship. Second in terms of marital choices, laws in the country in States where the national ruling party holds sway have drawn harsh attention on inter-faith couples. Imaginary fears of a 'love-jihad', the basis for new legislations have meant that inter-faith marriages are seen as crimes unless proven otherwise. The Gujarat law criminalising inter-faith marriages has been called out by the Gujarat High Court, but the ordinance introduced in Uttar Pradesh (Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020), which is now a law, till July, saw 63 FIRs filed against it, and 80 people arrested among 162 people who were booked, the majority being Muslim. A similar law in Madhya Pradesh has a similar trajectory, and a differential impact on Muslims, emphasising the rapid unspooling of the E-word. In terms of personal law, only Muslim men divorcing their wives through the triple talaq, now outlawed by the Supreme Court, is deemed a criminal act; not so for men of other faiths.

Drastic changes

Third, food has been criminalised. Stringent laws on cattle end up penalising those who have a certain diet, namely beef. The mood in the country created and abetted by people close to the powers that be, has led to lynchings. IndiaSpend has recorded bovine-related hate violence since 2010 and concluded that 98% of these attacks occurred post-May 2014, after the Bharatiya Janata Party assumed office. State governments and the Union government have mostly ignored the Supreme Court's directions in 2018 to set up fast track courts, advice to take steps to stop hate messages on social media, or compensation to victims, or bringing in an anti-mob lynching law. Fourth, consider the Gujarat Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property and Provision for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from Premises in Disturbed Areas Act, popularly known as the Disturbed Areas Act, which circumscribes where one can reside. Brought in an atmosphere where there was communal rioting and forced displacement, to ostensibly protect communities from distress sales, the twist accorded to it over the years firmly makes the forced separation of communities evident. Vijay Rupani, till recently the Chief Minister of Gujarat, said in an interview on July 27, 2019; "A Hindu selling property to a Muslim is not okay. A Muslim selling property to a Hindu is also not okay." He added, "We have set this rule in areas where there have been riots to tell them (Muslims) that they must buy property in their own areas."

Hostile environment

That the environment in even the informal sector where minorities sought refuge in vocations to battle the prejudices of the formal sector is now curdling, is clear from recent studies on the subject. The linkages between those wielding extraordinary power in high offices with those making vicious noise on social media, and with the violent mobs on the ground trying to shut down Muslim businesses — or attack vegetable sellers or bangle sellers to prevent them to operate — are becoming more explicit by the day. It is old hat to say that several purveyors of hate are "proud to be followed by the Prime Minister" on social media. But even that is just the tip of the iceberg. Those in power actively support and reward those who head mobs, raise slogans or demonstrate hate enough to shut down cities and regular life. Ministers garland them and the anti-minority hate spewed by them is a CV building exercise for better political prospects within the ruling party.



The Member of Parliament representing Bhopal, Pragma Thakur, a public defender of the Mahatma's assassin, is only one of the many who exemplify the career path available to those who sharply denounce amity or calls for harmony. Scholars like Thomas Blom Hansen and Paul Brass have unhesitatingly pointed to the role of violence that has historically been acceptable in Indian society and politics. The stark difference between now and a few decades ago is a difference in top leaders being silent at important moments when mob violence is reported prominently. Dissenters are sought to be marked out "by their clothes" as the Prime Minister said infamously in December 2019 about those protesting the discriminatory citizenship laws. Far from discouraging those indulging in hate speech, they are given a place in the party hierarchy. The line was drawn simply but sharply by no less a person than Sardar Patel on September 11, 1948 when the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was banned after the Mahatma's assassination. Patel wrote to the RSS chief M.S. Golwalkar, that he had no problem with the Sangh indulging in activities organising or benefiting Hindus, but had a problem with actions that were aimed at solely spreading anti-Muslim hate — "All their speeches were full of communal poison. It was not necessary to spread poison in order to enthrone the Hindus and organize for their protection."

Exclusive entitlement

There was clearly a sentiment in Indian society and politics that wanted a country in the mirror image of Pakistan, as one for a Hindu majority. This view did not want to better the lives of Hindus. This was about claiming that those adhering to one religion have exclusive entitlement to Indianhood. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, an organisation very much in the family of the ruling party, rubbishes the idea of the mosaic that India is, when its secretary-general, Milind Parande said on September 7, 2021, that "the very idea of Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb (term used to denote the coming together fusion of Hindu and Muslim cultures in the country), is irrelevant. What exists is one culture, and the rest can simply merge into it. The Hindu cause must be prime." Statements like these to denigrate the idea of India as a shared palette are never denounced by those in power. In fact, increasingly, there is little to distinguish these from statements of those in power and wielding authority representing the Indian state. The seriousness of what is afoot must be acknowledged.

The backbone

Scholars like Christophe Jaffrelot have pointed out that there will not be a seamless transition to an "ethnic democracy". There is no smooth path towards a 'Category two' or diminished citizenship status for large numbers of people who deviate from a prescribed cultural path. The Indian nation is one formed on the promise of shared and participatory kinship, which recognised Indian nationalism as being distinct from the faith you practised at home. Prioritising any one identity will have disastrous consequences and history provides enough evidence of this. Rwanda, South Africa or Germany are reminders that the E-word is as much a pragmatic consideration as it is a normative ideal. India was proud of its hallowed constitutional precepts. More so as it was in a region which has seen a precipitous slide; Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Myanmar prioritised one ethnicity/religion and defined belonging and nationhood in the narrowest sense possible. But differences between them and India are fast fading and not merely due to hotheads or mobs on the street. The formal ruling establishment, with its silences, utterances and formalising of new laws and norms, is indistinguishable with the ideas guiding mobs. The mobs read together with actions of the Union government and that of State governments mark a sharp



turn away from the democracy India claims it is. That must jolt us into recognising the distance we have already travelled down the wrong path. That may be the first step to try to wrest the descent into the darkness of an apartheid state.

UIDAI SEEKS INDEMNITY FROM DATA BILL

It was implementation of Aadhaar that first triggered the data privacy debate

The Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) has asked for exemption from the Personal Data Protection (PDP) Law. In an interaction with the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Data Protection Bill 2019 on Thursday at its office in Bengaluru, UIDAI functionaries said the authority is already being governed by the Aadhaar Act and there cannot be duplicity of laws. Ironically, it was making Aadhaar compulsory for many key services including the banks that first triggered the data privacy debate. The genesis of this Bill lies in the report prepared by a Committee of Experts headed by Justice B.N. Srikrishna. The committee was constituted by the government in the course of hearings before the Supreme Court in the right to privacy case (Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India). The Personal Data Protection (PDP) Bill 2019 has a contentious section 35, which invokes “sovereignty and integrity of India,” “public order”, “friendly relations with foreign states” and “security of the state” to give powers to the Central government to suspend all or any of the provisions of this Act for government agencies. The UIDAI during the interaction with the Joint Parliamentary Committee, sources said, demanded that it should get a blanket exemption from the act under this section. It further argued that it already is being governed by the Aadhaar Act and the PDP bill could be counter productive. The 2019 Bill already has clauses which are open to interpretation. As Prasanth Sugathan, Legal Director, Software Freedom Law Centre pointed out, “Section 12 of 2019 Bill gives UIDAI some leeway from the rigours of the Bill as it enables for processing data for provision of a service or benefit to the data principal. However, even then prior notice has to be given.” Sources indicate that UIDAI might not be the only one to seek exemption. “Our fear is that the Bill, if implemented in the present form, may create two distinct ecosystems. One with the government agencies who will be completely out of the ambit of the law, giving them complete freedom to deal with the personal data. And the second will be private data fiduciaries who will have to deal with every letter in the law,” one of the members said. The committee is on a tour to meet various data fiduciaries for a last round of discussion on “operational issues” in the implementation of the law. The panel which has already got five extensions has to submit its report at the upcoming session of Parliament.

VINOD RAI APOLOGISES TO SANJAY NIRUPAM

Allegation in spectrum allocation case

Seven years after he alleged that Congress leader and former MP Sanjay Nirupam had pressured him in connection with the 2G spectrum allocation case, former Comptroller and Auditor-General (CAG) Vinod Rai has tendered an “unconditional apology” to Mr. Nirupam. In 2014, Mr. Rai, in the course of interviews to the media, named Mr. Nirupam as one of the MPs who reportedly pressured him to keep former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s name out of his report on the 2G spectrum allocation case. The interviews were broadcast and published at the time of the release of Mr. Rai’s 2014 book, Not Just an Accountant: The Diary of the Nation’s Conscience Keeper. In a



video statement, Mr. Nirupam, commenting on Mr. Rai's unconditional apology, remarked that it was a "golden day". In the affidavit (notarised on October 23), Mr. Rai said he had made certain statements against Mr. Nirupam in September 2014 in media interviews aired on the Times Now news channel, and published in media publications, including news papers such as The Times of India and The Indian Express, subsequent to the launch of his book. "I have realised that in answers to questions posed to me by the interviewers, I had inadvertently and wrongly mentioned the name of Shri Sanjay Nirupam as one of the MPs, who pressurised me to keep the then Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh's name out of the CAG report on the 2G spectrum allocation during the meetings in the PAC (Public Accounts Committee) or the sidelines of the JPC (Joint Parliamentary Committee) etc," Mr. Rai stated in the affidavit, adding that the statements televised and published were "factually incorrect".

UPDATED NPR FORM APPEARS TO RETAIN CONTENTIOUS QUESTIONS

14 parameters include mother tongue, place of birth of parents, last residence

The latest form of the National Population Register (NPR) appears to have retained contentious questions such as "mother tongue, place of birth of father and mother and last place of residence", according to a document compiled by a committee under the Registrar-General of India and shared with the District Census officers. Though the NPR was first compiled in 2010 and updated in 2015, the new questions were part of a trial exercise involving 30 lakh respondents in September 2019. The exercise has been opposed by some States and citizen groups as the NPR is the first step toward compilation of the National Register of Indian Citizens (NRC) according to Citizenship Rules, 2003. "Along with Census 2021, the database of NPR collected in 2010 and updated in 2015 would be further updated in the first phase of census. The NPR schedule to be used in Census 2021 is given at Annexure X," the document says. So far, the Government has not officially released the NPR schedule. According to the Annexure: "National Population Register 2020", the respondent will have to specify the "name of State and district" if the place of birth of father and mother is in India and mention the country's name if not born here. The form will collect details on 14 parameters of all family members. The sub-heads include passport number, relationship to head of the family, whether divorced/widowed or separated, mother tongue, if non-worker, cultivator, labourer, government employee, daily wage earner among others. The form also has a column on Aadhaar, mobile phone, voter ID and driver's licence number, which are to be provided if available with the respondent. The document says that the objective of the NPR is to create a comprehensive identity database of every usual resident in the country and it is "mandatory for every usual resident of India to register in the NPR." While similar data is collected through Census, according to Section 15 of the Census Act, 1948, all individual level information collected in Census are confidential and "only aggregated data are released at various administrative levels." The Home Ministry said earlier that data collected under NPR are shared with States and used by Central government for various welfare schemes at individual level. The NPR already has an electronic database of more than 119 crore residents. Along with Census, NPR will also be updated digitally for the first time. A mobile application for enumerators has been developed where the existing database will be uploaded. Respondents can also self enumerate. The schedule or the form generated through an online system on August 18, is part of a handbook that has been shared with all States.



CENTRE WANTS TO KEEP BIRTH, DEATH DATABASE

Keen to be parallel repository of data, along with States

The Centre has proposed amendments to a 1969 law that will enable it to “maintain the database of registered births and deaths at the national level”. The database may be used to update the Population Register and the electoral register, and Aadhaar, ration card, passport and driving licence databases, says the proposed amendment to the Registration of Births and Deaths Act (RBD), 1969. Presently, the registration of births and deaths is done by the local registrar appointed by the States. It is proposed that the Chief Registrar (appointed by the States) would maintain a unified database at the State level and integrate it with the data at the “national level,” maintained by the Registrar General of India (RGI). The amendments will imply that the Centre will be a parallel repository of data. States send annual statistical reports to the RGI. The amendments have been proposed by the RGI, which works under the Union Home Ministry. A new Section 3 A is proposed to be inserted in the Act, which says, “The Registrar General, India shall maintain the database of registered births and deaths at the national level, that may be used, with the approval of the Central government, to update the Population Register prepared under the Citizenship Act, 1955; electoral registers or electoral rolls prepared under the Representation of the People Act, 1951; Aadhaar database prepared under the Aadhaar Act, 2016; ration card database prepared under the National Food Security Act, 2013; passport database prepared under the Passport Act; and the driving licence database under the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act, 2019, and other databases at the national level subject to proviso of Section 17 (1) of the RBD Act, 1969.” If the amendments are implemented, the Centre could use the data to update the National Population Register. The NPR already has a database of 119 crore residents and under the Citizenship Rules, 2003, it is the first step towards the creation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

END THE IMPASSE

A solution is needed for core issues concerning farmers, and not merely for road blocks

The time may have come for a more concerted effort by the Government and the protesting farmers to find a solution to the prolonged impasse over the three agriculture-related laws enacted last year. The Supreme Court has emphasised that public roads cannot be blocked indefinitely by protesters. In an observation in the context of more petitions from members of the public, complaining that their right of free movement has been curtailed by the ongoing protests by farmers, the Court has said a solution has to be found, that roads cannot be blocked for long and there is no reason for it to lay down the law again and again. The reference was to last year’s judgment on the Shaheen Bagh protest against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, wherein it was held that public ways and public spaces cannot be blocked indefinitely even during a peaceful protest. The observation can be seen either as a disapproval of the tactic of holding interminable protests or as an implicit criticism of the Government for being unable to find a solution to the farmers’ grievances. Even while denying that they are responsible for the hardship faced by the public, and blaming the police for the blockade, the farmers say they should be allowed to continue their agitation at the Ramlila Maidan. However, the Government will have none of it, recalling the unsavoury incidents that took place on Republic Day when the protest rolled into the Capital. The

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conflict between the two competing rights — freedom to protest and the right to free movement of the public — is not the only aspect that requires immediate attention. There seems to be no attempt to break the deadlock on the core issue, with the farmers demanding an outright repeal of the laws and statutory validation for the claim that the MSP regime will not come to an end. Late last year, the protesting farmers and Union Ministers did come to a partial agreement on decriminalising stubble-burning and safeguarding power subsidies, but the two core demands have not seen any breakthrough. It is not out of place to recall that an expert committee constituted by the Court has submitted its report, but nothing has been heard about it after that. To an extent, the fact that the Court has not taken it up again or made the report public may be a factor in the continuing impasse. An expedited hearing that involves further review of the panel's recommendations, or any such similar initiative from the Government, is needed to arrive at a solution. The objective must not be merely to resolve the incidental issue of blocked roads, but to reconcile or eliminate the deep differences over what the Government sees as necessary reforms in the farm sector. Any reform that seeks to eliminate distortions in the sector must also win the confidence of farmers, the principal stakeholders.

SUICIDES AMONG FARM WORKERS ROSE 18% IN 2020

Deaths among landowning farmers dropped slightly: NCRB

The number of agricultural labourers who died by suicide in 2020 was 18% higher than the previous year, according to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report released on Thursday. However, suicides among landowning farmers dropped slightly during the pandemic year. The farm sector was one of the few bright spots in the Indian economy last year, recording growth on the back of a healthy monsoon and the continuation of agricultural activities during a lockdown that crippled other sectors. However, landless agricultural labourers, who did not benefit from income support schemes such as PM Kisan, may have faced higher levels of distress during the pandemic. The NCRB report does not include any indication of the specific causes of suicide among the farm community. Overall, 10,677 people engaged in the farm sector died by suicide in 2020. This is slightly higher than the 10,281 who died in 2019. Most of these deaths were among those whose primary work and main source of income comes from labour activities in agriculture or horticulture. In 2020, a total of 5,098 of these labourers died by suicide, an 18% rise from the 4,324 who died last year. However, among farmers who cultivate their own land, with or without the help of other workers, the number of suicides dropped 3.7% from 5,129 to 4,940. Among tenant farmers who cultivate leased land, there was a 23% drop in suicides from 828 to 639. The worst among the States continues to be Maharashtra, with 4,006 suicides in the farm sector, including a 15% increase in farm worker suicides. Other States with a poor record include Karnataka (2016), Andhra Pradesh (889) and Madhya Pradesh (735). Karnataka saw a dismal 43% increase in the number of farm worker suicides in 2020.

GETTING THE FOCUS BACK ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The home environment and stimulation children receive within the household can be important contributory factors



Early Childhood Education (ECE) is crucial to the overall development of children, with impacts on their learning and even earning capabilities throughout their lifetimes. Despite the importance of ECE, little has been said about the continuance of ECE delivery during the COVID-19 school closures, reminiscent of its status quo even prior to the novel coronavirus pandemic. Those attending preschool are primarily enrolled in the nearly 14 lakh anganwadis spread across the country where ECE continues to suffer from low attendance and instructional time amid prioritisation of other early childhood development services in the anganwadi system (<https://bit.ly/3G2lF3W>). Where ECE has continued during COVID-19 pre-school closures, access has reduced and the priority for ECE is low within households. In a recent study by the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy (<https://bit.ly/3DXG88i>), 45% of the 650+ households surveyed in urban Maharashtra reported that they prioritise their older child's education over ECE. A crucial factor for households to be able to prioritise ECE is active parental engagement in their child's education, especially for children in the age group of three to six years who spend a majority of their time within the household and rely greatly on parental assistance in the learning process. The overall development of a child in the early stages edicts a conducive home environment and parental involvement in addition to equitable access to the schooling system. As such, the home environment and stimulation children receive within the household can contribute to their overall development. For example, studies have found that the act of making conversation with your child in the early years has significant gains on language skills they develop (<https://bit.ly/3Bzn1d6>).

Role of parental engagement

Enabling parental engagement in ECE requires an understanding of barriers that usually prevent parents from meaningfully engaging in their child's education. The socio-economic background of households determines access to preschools and the ability to invest in ECE. Worryingly, the lack of priority for ECE often means that households choose to forgo investing in ECE altogether. The pandemic has highlighted the glaring digital divide in the country, even in an urban context. Unless the state vows to provide devices and Internet access to all children, it is clear that complete reliance on technology is not an option. Even for those who are able to overcome the initial barrier of access, the ability to engage in ECE at home remains dependent on time and ability. Households that have limited means have little time to invest in educational activities in the home. In the study mentioned above, with low-income households engaged in ECE in urban Maharashtra during COVID-19, we find that job and income losses led to further de-prioritisation of education, and the need to invest in educational and digital resources for its continuance during school closures. Even among households that are able to create the time for education, many parents lack the self-efficacy to support their child's learning. Most parents lack knowledge of effective methods to facilitate learning within the home, and appropriate means of using technology for education. Parents in low-income households are additionally less likely to be able to access support to learn such methods. COVID-19 school closures made engagement of parents in their child's education a further necessity.

Overcoming barriers

Crossing these barriers will become crucial as we move towards achieving universal and equitable ECE, as envisioned in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Some of these are harder to address, such as internalising the importance of ECE among parents. This shift of mindset requires prolonged and committed state action, which at present does not reflect any such urgency. Other



barriers, however, are easier to address if we operationalise support of the state, schools and teachers towards the goal of enabling parental engagement at home. The pandemic has created an opportunity where parents and teachers have increasingly recognised the crucial role of parents as partners in their child's education. As we slowly move towards the reopening of schools for younger grades, we should not lose sight of this. In the same study we conducted in urban Maharashtra, we studied two ECE programmes — the E-paatshala programme in Balwadis run by Rocket Learning, and Akanksha schools in Mumbai and Pune. For those who were able to access the programmes, we found that those participating in these programmes showed higher engagement levels associated with the alleviation of some of the barriers discussed above. What might have worked for E-paatshala was its design to use only materials available at home for educational activities. This minimised the need for parents to purchase any additional resources and ensured that it was relevant to the child's environment and experiences. We found that programmes that were supporting parents' financially — through provision of rations and devices for education — resulted in higher parental engagement in ECE. The study also highlighted that a more decentralised approach of identifying and alleviating these barriers to ECE, through teachers and school systems as the forerunners, goes a long way. Being the first point of contact with both the child and the parents, teachers are the most equipped to effectively engage with parents, address their challenges, and design adaptable and innovative modes of teaching and learning.

Empower households

We must leverage the present opportunity of heightened parental engagement in children's education. Efforts must be taken to empower households with time and resources so that they have the ability to prioritise ECE and are not forced to choose between their children's education. The provision of non-educational support to low-income households to alleviate income and food insecurities might be just as crucial in aiding parents to invest in education. Second, we must collect information about teachers' experiences (on suitable modes of engagement with parents and children, delivery logistics, constraints of parents, etc.) and on innovations they have developed to increase parental engagement during school closures. We need to ask what has been done to alleviate constraints, and how can these be operationalised to reach more households? While teachers should remain at the centre of this effort we must also make sure they are not further overburdened, by providing adequate resources and institutional support.

PREPARING FOR OUTBREAKS

The Ayushman Bharat Health Infrastructure Mission aims to build a robust public health infrastructure

COVID-19 overburdened the country's health system and services. The early months of the outbreak were particularly taxing for the States with weaker health systems. The inability of the private sector to share the burden drove the point home that healthcare services cannot be left to independent forces.

Aims of ABHIM

The Pradhan Mantri Ayushman Bharat Health Infrastructure Mission (ABHIM) is another addition to the arsenal we have to prepare for such outbreaks in the future. This was launched with an

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



outlay of ₹64,180 crore over a period of five years. In addition to the National Health Mission, this scheme will work towards strengthening public health institutions and governance capacities for wide-ranging diagnostics and treatment, including critical care services. The latter goal would be met with the establishment of critical care hospital blocks in 12 central institutions such as the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, and in government medical colleges and district hospitals in 602 districts. The importance of laboratories and their lack of readiness during an outbreak in terms of having a robust surveillance system and diagnostic interface has never been more pronounced than in recent times. The government will be establishing integrated district public health labs in 730 districts to provide comprehensive laboratory services. The current labs for different programmes shall be integrated to deliver clinical, public health surveillance and diagnostic services for predicting outbreaks, epidemics, and more. ABHIM will focus on supporting research on COVID-19 and other infectious diseases, including biomedical research to generate evidence to inform short-term and medium-term responses to such pandemics. The government also aims to develop a core capacity to deliver the 'one health' approach to prevent, detect, and respond to infectious disease outbreaks in humans and animals. The plan to achieve that bio-security preparedness and pandemic research strengthening would be realised via four regional National Institutes for Virology, the regional research platform for the World Health Organization Southeast Asia Region, and nine Biosafety Level III laboratories.

Boosting surveillance

In India's endeavour to keep ahead of the infectious organisms that bring our life to a halt, expanding and building an IT-enabled disease surveillance system is on the cards too. A network of surveillance labs will be developed at the block, district, regional and national levels for detecting, investigating, preventing, and combating health emergencies and outbreaks. Surveillance will get a huge boost with 20 metropolitan surveillance units, five regional National Centre for Disease Control branches, and an integrated health promotion platform in all the States. The points of entry will be reinforced with 17 new points of entry health units upgrading 33 existing units. The upgraded and intensified system of surveillance will be in addition to a state-of-the-art national digital health ecosystem for IT-enabled healthcare service delivery, for managing the core digital health data and for ensuring national portability in the provision of health services through a secure system of electronic health records. This will be based on international standards and easily accessible to citizens. A major highlight of the current pandemic has been the requirement of local capacities in urban areas. The services from the existing urban primary health centres will be expanded to smaller units – Ayushman Bharat Urban Health and Wellness Centres and polyclinics or specialist clinics. The urban primary health centres will be established closer to the community to meet the needs of the urban population and polyclinics will guarantee care through improved access to expanded high-quality services and establish referral linkages.

INDIA SEEKS VACCINE LOANS FROM ADB, AIIB

The Government of India has applied for loans from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to procure as many as 667 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines. The Manila-based ADB, in which the U.S. and Japan are the biggest shareholders, and the Beijing-based AIIB, where China and India are the biggest shareholders, are in the process of



considering the loans. The ADB is expected to lend \$1.5 billion and the AIIB around \$500 million for the vaccine purchase by the Government of India, which has been made under the ADB's Asia Pacific Vaccine Access Facility (APVAX) initiative. The 667 million doses will, however, have to be vaccines qualified by the World Health Organization (WHO). Covishield is among those vaccines but Covaxin is still awaiting the green light with a final assessment scheduled for November 3. Launched in December 2020, APVAX offers "rapid and equitable support to its developing member countries as they procure and deliver effective and safe COVID-19 vaccines". According to the ADB, for a vaccine to be eligible for financing, it must "be procured via COVAX [the global vaccine access initiative], prequalified by WHO, or authorised by a Stringent Regulatory Authority", which, according to the WHO, does not include India's health authorities. The Beijing-headquartered AIIB will co-finance the vaccine procurement. The bank said that this week, a number of loans were being considered for projects in India, including another loan for the next phase of the Chennai Metro rail system.

DECISION ON BOOSTER DOSES MUST BE EVIDENCE-BASED

India-based data are needed that reveal whether the vaccines continue to protect against hospitalisations and death

The SARS-CoV-2 vaccination programme in India began on 16 January, this year. It has been close to eight months since the time individuals who were vaccinated early on received the second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. This set includes healthcare and other frontline workers, followed by high-risk individuals, including the elderly. Countries such as the U.K., Israel, and the U.S. have started administering booster doses of vaccines, and this has led to the question of whether India should start considering booster doses as well.

Three criteria

For booster doses to be recommended as a policy decision, three criteria need to be met. First, it should be clear that the immunity offered by a vaccine wanes with time, and this results in an increase in the probability of breakthrough infections. Second, for a disease that runs a mild course in a majority of individuals, it should be evident that the lowered efficacy of vaccines with the passage of time is true not only for infection, but also for moderate-to-severe disease necessitating hospitalisation and/or causing death. Third, it is important to prove that the administration of a booster dose reduces the probability of such severe disease, thereby saving lives and reducing the burden on healthcare. Studies from Israel and the U.S. suggested that the incidence of breakthrough infections increased progressively with the passage of time from the second dose of mRNA vaccines. The study from Israel found this to be true for severe infections as well, with the finding that individuals above the age of 60 were especially vulnerable. A report which analysed the effectiveness of the AstraZeneca Vaxzevria vaccine (which goes by the name of Covishield in India) by Public Health England, found an increased incidence of breakthrough infections after 20 weeks post-vaccination. The effectiveness against hospitalisation and death, though lower, was largely preserved, suggesting that the vaccine continued to be protective against these outcomes. Similar to the mRNA vaccine results, a greater waning of immunity was observed among individuals who were above the age of 65 years and among individuals with underlying medical conditions. While the loss of effectiveness of vaccines against hospitalisations



and death are not universally convincing, the data in favour of that being the case for the immunocompromised and the elderly seem consistent. What is lacking is a biomarker of either cellular and/or antibody mediated immunity which correlates with protection, especially as the former may have an important role to play in long-term protection.

Protective doses

Will the addition of a booster protect against such breakthrough infections, including those that are severe? The results of a study from Israel, although debated for its methodology, seem to suggest that boosters are protective, when given at least 5 months after the initial 2 doses. Whether the same holds true for non-mRNA vaccines is not known. Data from the COV-BOOST trial suggested that an mRNA vaccine resulted in a stronger booster effect no matter what the primary vaccine was, and this was used to guide the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) recommendations in the U.K.. If India decides to recommend boosters, this data needs to be considered to decide the choice of booster recommended. The biggest argument against booster doses is that of vaccine equity. It is a known fact that even a single dose of a vaccine protects against hospitalisation and death. In a world in which vaccine shortages have resulted in so many people being left unvaccinated, is it fair to deprive some of protection against hospitalisation and death, while protecting others from an infection that is likely to be mild?

Difficult questions

Even within a country, there are a few difficult questions to be answered. When a common vaccine is used for all age groups, should the first dose of the vaccine for a 15-year old be prioritised over a booster dose for a 65-year old? Or should we prioritise arresting transmission by targeting universal vaccination, as transmission has the potential of selecting newer variants? Should we wait for such newer variants and target specific boosters against them, as is the strategy for an influenza vaccine? Should preventing infections, even mild, among healthcare workers be a priority, considering that they are in close contact with immunosuppressed individuals on a daily basis? We need data from India to know whether both the available vaccines continue to protect against hospitalisations and death, and whether this is true across all risk groups. In the absence of such data, the extrapolation from studies across the world would suggest that those with immunosuppressive conditions and the elderly might benefit from a booster dose, as has been suggested by the World Health Organization. For the other trade-offs, models that simulate transmission across groups (for example, in schools), hospitalisation rates with varying losses of vaccine effectiveness, and the likely protective effects of boosters in altering such burdens on the healthcare system will be useful to make informed decisions. Duncan McLaren once stated that "Famine is not caused by a shortage of food; it is caused by a shortage of justice". Similarly, while many parts of the world wait with eager anticipation for individuals to receive their first dose, it is key that if we recommend booster doses of vaccines, we do it in a way that is just and based on sound scientific principles.

MISSING THE SHOT

Evidence of people not completing vaccine regimen is worrying. Govts must step up awareness



In its final phase, India's Covid vaccination project is wrestling with a new challenge. About 10.4 crore people, more than a tenth of those who have taken the first shot, have skipped their appointment with the second dose. Experts believe that vaccine hesitancy, misplaced fears of side effects or complacency fostered by the incorrect belief that a single dose provides a strong shield against the virus could be the reasons for this omission — a serious one given that it's now well-established that the vaccines offer optimum immunity only after the second jab is administered and a growing body of scholarly literature testifies to the indispensability of complete inoculation for herd immunity. Governments at every level must, therefore, make renewed efforts to convince people to complete the regimen. The first dose of the vaccine prepares the immune system to fight the virus and the second dose cements the protection. Several countries have had to carry extensive information campaigns to get this Covid-vaccination precept through to the general public. States in the US, for example, have run TV, radio and digital ads and officials have used social media to convey the importance of the second dose. Indian officials, healthcare professionals and frontline workers, who have so far done a commendable job in combating vaccine hesitancy, must now scale up their public awareness endeavours to tackle the new challenge. However, going by the experience from other parts of the world, such drives may not be enough. Countries, where a substantial section of the population has received at least one jab, are now resorting to disincentives for those opting out of inoculation. Canada, for instance, has asked federal government employees to declare their full vaccination by Friday. Passengers above 12 in the country must show their vaccination status on trains, domestic airlines and marine transport. A swab test is mandatory for people who are not fully inoculated for inter-state travel in several parts of India as well. But these norms are not always implemented with the stringency required to have the desired effect. Last week, the day after India reached the milestone of 100-crore shots, Prime Minister Narendra Modi concluded his congratulatory speech on a note of caution. The virus continues to be amongst us, he said. It's a measure of the PM's social capital that such cautionary messages have struck a chord with the people at critical times during the pandemic. If need be, he shouldn't desist from using this goodwill to impress on the people the importance of the second dose — for their own protection and that of their acquaintances and country people.

VACCINES FOR CHILDREN

Will the 2-18 age group in India get jabs for COVID-19 soon? What will the final approval depend on?

The Subject Expert Committee, which is advising the Drugs Controller-General of India (DCGI), has recommended that it grant emergency use authorisation (EUA) for Covaxin among children aged 2-18. The final approval for the vaccine for children aged 2-18 is under expert opinion and evaluation. The DCGI will hold discussions with the Health Minister, the Prime Minister's Office, and Bharat Biotech before granting EUA to Covaxin, according to reports. Earlier, the DCGI had granted EUA for Zydus Cadila vaccine candidate ZyCoV-D for use in children.

Is Covaxin for children different than the dose for adults?

The Covaxin that will be rolled out for children in India is of the same product and presentation as the adult vaccine, according to sources in the company that makes the vaccine, the Hyderabad-



based Bharat Biotech. The company got the green light to conduct trials among children in May. Subsequently, they tested the adult version of Covaxin on 525 children, in two doses 28 days apart. Interim data from the trials, submitted by October, suggested that safety and immunogenicity were studied, and it was found to be safe among children. A longer follow-up will also be done among study participants. Data from Covaxin is not available publicly.

Is there a need for a separate vaccine for children?

Children, experts argue, need their own regimen of care and treatment including vaccinations. While most vaccines cater to children, it is also necessary to calibrate vaccines for specific use in children when they have first been developed for the adult population, as in the case of COVID-19. It is not simply a case of sizing down an adult dosage for children, experts argue. Working on vaccine or drug regimens with children is very challenging. Children have distinct developmental and physiological differences from adults, and as they grow, they tend to have changing needs. The World Health Organization (WHO), therefore, recommends that clinical trials in children are necessary to develop age-specific, empirically verified therapies, and interventions to determine the best possible treatments for them. Dr. Moshe Arditi, academic director of the Division of Pediatric Infectious Diseases Allergy and Immunology at Cedars-Sinai, says on the Cedars Sinai website: "Their bodies work differently, and they undergo changes as they grow from infancy toward adolescence and adulthood." He further explains that as children grow and change, their immune systems do, too. A 6-year-old is not the same as a 16-year-old. To account for these differences, researchers do "age de-escalation" studies with participants placed in different groups. For example, 6-to-12-year-olds, 2-to-6-year-olds and 6-months-to-2-year-olds. Doses start at the lowest safest level and researchers increase them in different groups to determine whether a larger dose is more effective or whether a lower dose provides a complete response. "It's a bit like the Goldilocks effect."

Do children need COVID-19 vaccination?

Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, commenting on the value of COVID-19 vaccines for children, says that considering that children under the age of 18 form a large proportion of the population (32% globally), ensuring protection for them is a move towards pandemic control. Protection is urgently needed when the disease risk is high, it says. However, for children, it adds, there is a relatively low risk of disease. Although they account for one in nine SARS-CoV-2 infections, they constitute only 2% of all hospitalisations. Most infections in children are mild and they recover fully. Serious illness is rare, but well-described; this includes the inflammatory and potentially deadly condition, Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children. Recently, speaking at a seminar, Soumya Swaminathan, Chief Scientist, WHO, said, "Children have the same percentage of antibody exposure that adults have. We had shut schools saying children should not be exposed to the virus, but there has been community exposure since they have been doing other activities. Children have been going to malls, they have been playing outside, and are around their family." However, making a case for reopening schools is vastly different from children getting a COVID-19 vaccine, while one discusses the continuation of life as it is lived, the other is a deeply ethical question. The Gavi paper says evoking the ethical principle of distributive justice that the benefits and burdens should be distributed among society's members in a just manner makes the case that children should be included in COVID-19 vaccine trials.



What is next?

The DCGI will have to approve the vaccine before it can be administered to children and decide whether the safety and immunogenicity data among the 500-odd cohort suffices for EUA.

GAP BETWEEN FIRST, SECOND DOSES IS THE STARKEST IN INDIA

Experts point to long gap between Covishield shots

India has delivered over a billion vaccine doses, making it the second-highest dispenser of COVID-19 vaccines globally but the gap between the proportion of population that has got at least one dose and that which got two doses is widest in India. According to the Bloomberg Tracker mapping vaccination trends globally, 82% of China's population has got at least one dose and 76% two doses — a ratio of 1.1. In the United States, this ratio is 1.15 (66.2% with at least one dose and 57.3% fully dosed). For the European Union, this works out to 1.04 (69% with at least one dose and 66% with two doses). In India, however, this gap is more than twice at 2.4 (51% with at least one dose and just 21.9% with two doses). The key reason for this, according to experts, is the gap between two doses of Covishield — which comprises 88% of the administered vaccines in India. The spacing of 12-16 weeks is among the longest compared to several countries in the world. On Saturday, Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan, following a meeting with representatives from States, urged them to “speed up vaccination.” “Highlighting the sizeable number of eligible beneficiaries who have not received their second dose of vaccine, the Union Health Secretary urged the States and UTs to focus on those beneficiaries who are waiting for their second dose after their interval period has been over,” a statement from the Union Health Ministry noted. So, far 71.24 crore first doses — covering 76% of the eligible population — and 30.06 crore second doses — covering 32.0% of the eligible population — have been administered, the Health Ministry noted. This works out to about 40 crore people having got only one shot and 30 crore being fully vaccinated. However a perusal of vaccination data shows that after September 17, when the country recorded an all-time high of 2.5 crore vaccinations on a single day, there has been a steady decline. For over a month, the number of vaccines administered weekly has fallen from 6.6 crore in the week September 11-17 to 4.2 crore in the first week of October and 3.6 crore in the week of October 16-22. However, during this same period there has been a rise in the second doses administered. In fact, for the first time since May 8-14, the weekly number of second doses exceeded first doses. There were 2.1 crore second doses administered in the last week compared to 1.5 crore first doses. “It can be that there's a proportion of the population that wants the vaccine but cannot access it. So special efforts have to be made to ensure that. We've also seen a large spike in first doses since July following the second wave and improved availability and factoring the 12-16 week gap, this is when we would see a rise in second dose numbers,” public health expert and epidemiologist Chandrakant Lahariya said.

SAFETY FIRST

T.N. must assure Kerala that all instruments for monitoring the dam's safety are in place

The Supreme Court's direction on Monday to the supervisory committee for the Mullaperiyar dam on the issue of the maximum water level has revived the controversy surrounding the dam.



Located in Kerala, the water body is operated and maintained by Tamil Nadu to meet the water requirements of five of its southern districts. The order was issued while hearing a petition raising apprehensions about the supervision of water levels of the reservoir, especially during the rainy season; Kerala has also been experiencing unusually heavy spells of rain. During October 18-25, the dam too received a substantial inflow. Despite the Court's nod in 2014 to store water up to 142 ft, Tamil Nadu has been careful in drawing as much water as possible so that the level does not reach the permissible level ordinarily. A few days ago, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan wrote to his Tamil Nadu counterpart, M.K. Stalin, referring to the heavy rainfall in the catchment and emphasising the "urgent need for the gradual release of water". His letter should be viewed more as a note of caution than anything else. During a debate in the Assembly on Monday, Mr. Vijayan categorically stated that there was no threat to the dam and was also appreciative of the Tamil Nadu authorities, who, he noted, were "highly empathetic" to Kerala's demands. With camaraderie prevailing between the two States, Mr. Stalin and Mr. Vijayan would do well to send out a strong message that there is no room for passion and chauvinism on a technical and complex subject such as the operation and maintenance of Mullaperiyar. As the issue of dam safety is a recurrent one, it would be in the interests of all stakeholders that the remaining works to strengthen the dam are done at the earliest, for which the approval of the Kerala and Central governments is required. Some sections in Kerala may argue that the completion of the works will only make the case of Tamil Nadu stronger in the context of its long-standing demand of raising the water level to the original 152 ft. But, what needs to be kept in mind is that the works are meant to strengthen the dam. It has been suggested that Kerala give its permission — a prerequisite for Tamil Nadu to get the Centre's clearances — while stating that this will not be prejudicial to its position on the issue. Tamil Nadu too should ensure that all the instruments for monitoring the safety and health of the dam are installed and are functioning properly. As there are sufficient scientific and technological tools to respond effectively to any legitimate and genuine concern, every player should adopt a rational approach while deciding on the storage levels and safety aspects of the dam.

RE-EVALUATING THE NEO-BUDDHIST MOVEMENT

The advancement of Hindutva offers residual space to symbols of Buddhism and downplays its revolutionary potential

Till October 14, 1956, the followers of Buddhism in India were an insignificant mass. And as a religion, it was one that was on the verge of extinction. On this date, Babasaheb Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in a grand ceremony at Nagpur, Maharashtra, and offered it to millions of his followers. Significant sections among the erstwhile untouchable castes divorced the degraded untouchable caste identity to find solace in the teachings of the Buddha.

Ambedkar's impact

A few days ago, on October 20, 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated Kushinagar International Airport in Uttar Pradesh, which will help connect important Buddhist pilgrimage sites. Kushinagar is an important Buddhist pilgrim destination. The Prime Minister heralded the Buddhist sites and the Buddha's teachings as the marker of India's ancient civilisational heritage. However, he never acknowledged Ambedkar's contribution in revitalising the Buddhist faith.



Buddhism's affiliation with the Dalit emancipatory movement is largely neglected, and often, its ornamental spiritual side is what is presented instead. According to the last national population census, the Buddhists are one of the smallest minorities (0.7% of the total population) in India. Interestingly a majority of them are converted Dalits from Maharashtra. Within the conventional Hindu social order, the untouchables were reduced to a sub-human category and treated with hatred and subject to prejudices. Though there were impactful social reforms to correct historic wrongs, the general social psyche of the dominant caste Hindus towards the lowest rung remained pervasive. It is with the arrival of Ambedkar on the national political stage that Dalits realised their self-potential and launched a struggle, claiming an equitable share in the modern institutions of power. Embracing Buddhism is heralded as the intellectual choice of Dalits that connects them to a robust historic past while also making them ready to enjoy constitutional rights as secular citizens.

A force in Maharashtra

Important cities in Maharashtra such as Mumbai, Aurangabad and Nagpur have witnessed the rise of powerful Dalit movements, social events and modern monuments. Deeksha Bhoomi in Nagpur, the place where Ambedkar embraced Buddhism, has emerged as a monumental heritage site, attracting millions of visitors every year. Here, Buddhism was resurrected not only as a part of India's cultural and civilisational heritage but also as a tool to escape the caste hierarchical cultural hegemony and social hostility. In the post-Ambedkar period, it is urban Buddhists — because of their educational achievements and newly gained middle class status — who have offered vital leadership to Dalit politics and organised various social and cultural struggles. Importantly, it is the creative application of the neo-Buddhist identity and ideology that has structured the Dalit movement as an autonomous political force in Maharashtra. A serious debate between neo-Buddhists and Marxist-Socialists erupted during the heightened period of activism by the Dalit Panthers' in Bombay. Namdeo Dhasal, a maverick revolutionary poet, offered a militant political alternative, suggesting that 'Dalit' is a revolutionary collective of all oppressed communities and that they shall contest caste atrocities and state violence by radical violent means. Dhasal was influenced by the Maoist-Naxalbari movements and wanted that Dalits should build close solidarities with the Communist working-class movement. Raja Dhale, another founding member of the Dalit Panthers' movement, criticised such a 'Leftist turn' of the Dalit movement. As an alternative to Dhasal's 'Marxist Manifesto', he offered a Buddhist perspective, suggesting that the social justice movement must be based upon a primacy to Ambedkarite liberal principles and making a break from the ideas of a violent class struggle. Conversion to Buddhism helped the community appreciate the constitutional values of secularism and social justice substantively and develop a critical distance from the ideologies that legitimise any brutal usage of violence. Dhale visualised the neo-Buddhist movement not as a sectarian project for the emancipation of untouchables only but visualised it as a revolutionary project that would enlighten the wider Bahujan mass. Second, conversion to Buddhism also helped Dalits to find a robust meaning about their cultural past. They reinvented the Buddhist cultural symbols (by building monuments, viharas and religious sites), rituals and practices (by celebrating Buddhist festivals) as the proud markers of their new social identity. Buddhist cultural assertions and claims over public spaces became the symbols of their rejection against Hindu cultural hegemony and its social tentacles. Such assertiveness often put them in opposition with right-wing ideologies.



Niche ideological space

In Mumbai, under Bal Thackeray's leadership, the Shiv Sena responded to the neo-Buddhist social activism with street violence and riots. In the early 1990s, the neo-Buddhists launched a mass movement to liberate the Bodhgaya temple from the control of Brahmin priests and also raised legal claim over the controversial site of the Babri Masjid, thus putting Hindutva politics into conundrum — on how to deal with the neo-Buddhists' demands. Though the Bharatiya Janata Party regime at the centre appears more accommodative to Dalit cultural and religious symbols and avoided much skirmish on this front, it is difficult for the right wing to attract neo-Buddhists under the Hindutva project. As an ideological force, neo-Buddhists offer an alternative reading of history and imagine Buddhism as the chief challenger to Brahmanical Hindu traditions, caste order and orthodox ritualism. Buddhists thus stand distinct from the militant Hindutva hegemony and wish to retain their own autonomy in sociocultural spaces. Non-allegiance with the Left militancy and later its opposition to Hindutva politics have created a niche ideological space for Dalits especially amongst neo-Buddhists. However, as a political force, they have failed to provide any significant challenge to the dominant caste and class elites and failed to mobilise other marginalised communities under their social or political programmes. In recent times, neo-Buddhism has generated a passive communitarian exclusivity that often engages with ritualistic and spiritual endeavours rather than building impressive struggles for social justice or to gain political power.

A democratic dialogue

The revolutionary promises made during Ambedkar's historic Buddhist conversion would be fulfilled only if the polity is sensitive towards secularism and social justice. The current advancement of Hindutva is coercive and hegemonic as it offers residual space to Buddhist symbols and keeps a distance from its revolutionary anti-caste struggles. Though it is vital to protect the autonomous cultural space that the neo-Buddhist intellectual class has developed, it is equally important to build a unified people's movement to protect the merits of India's constitutional democracy. It is only by initiating democratic dialogue with other marginalised and struggling communities that neo-Buddhists can revitalise Ambedkar's transformative project.

A FESTERING CRISIS IN THE PALK STRAIT

A moratorium on bottom trawling and support to the fishermen is a good first step towards a solution

Rajkiran, 30, from Tamil Nadu's coastal Pudukkottai district, is the fifth Indian fisherman to lose his life in the Palk Strait this year, after Samson Darwin, A. Mesiya, V. Nagaraj and S. Senthil Kumar from Ramanathapuram, who died in January. The boat that Rajkiran was on, with two others, sank late on October 18 after reportedly colliding with a Sri Lankan Navy patrol vessel. The two other fishermen were remanded in Sri Lanka until November 1, while Rajkiran was reported "missing", until his body was recovered by the Navy a few days after the incident. Tamil Nadu fishermen's associations have accused the Sri Lankan Navy of brutally attacking Rajkiran, while Sri Lanka has denied the allegations. In both instances this year, what we know is that the fishermen died while trying to earn a living. In both cases, they reportedly crossed the International Maritime Boundary Line, an invisible demarcation between India and Sri Lanka. They were intercepted in Sri Lanka

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waters by the Sri Lankan Navy for “illegal fishing”, following which some of them returned dead. New Delhi conveyed a “strong protest” to Colombo after the death of the four fishermen in January, allegedly at the hands of the Sri Lankan Navy. But there is no sign of a full inquiry since, let alone a credible one. The distressing incidents are neither peculiar to this year, nor inevitable.

Unresolved conflict

The fishermen’s deaths serve as a stark reminder of the unresolved fisheries conflict festering in the barely 30-mile-wide (at its narrowest point) Palk Strait. The problem has existed for more than a decade now, from the time Sri Lanka’s 30 year-long civil war ended in 2009. That was when the island’s northern Tamil fishermen, who were displaced and barred access to the sea, began returning to their old homes, with hopes of reviving their livelihoods and resurrecting their lives. Their return, however, marked the beginning of a new tension with Tamil fishermen on the other side of the sea. This has posed a serious threat to their livelihoods, fishing gear, and the marine resources they rely on. In Tamil Nadu, daily wage fishermen are only too aware of the risks that come with working on mechanised fishing vessels used for ‘bottom trawling’. Their wage depends on the catch they bring back. Using the bottom trawling fishing method, they drag large fishing nets along the seabed, scooping out a huge quantity of prawns, small fishes and virtually everything else at one go. The practice, deemed destructive the world over, has ensured sizeable profits for their employers — the vessel owners — and a small income for the fishermen taking the highest risk. Incessant bottom trawling along the coast of Tamil Nadu over the years has meant that the fishermen are drawn to the relatively resource-rich Sri Lankan waters. This pushes them into a cycle of arrest, remand, release, or in some unfortunate cases, violence or death at sea. The Sri Lankan state’s response to the problem has been largely a military and legal one, tasking its Navy with patrolling the seas and arresting “encroachers”, banning trawling, and levying stiff fines on foreign vessels engaged in illegal fishing in its territorial waters. Little support has been extended to war-affected, artisanal fishermen in the Northern Province by way of infrastructure or equipment. Despite accumulating big losses, the fishermen received no assistance even during pandemic-induced lockdown months. The hefty penalty on foreign vessels proved a deterrent, at least temporarily. But over the last few months, northern fishermen have sighted Indian trawlers frequently, especially when the Sri Lankan Navy relaxed its patrol, fearing import of COVID-19 infections.

Urgent solution

India and Sri Lanka have held many rounds of bilateral talks in the last decade between government officials as well as fisher leaders. The outcomes have mostly ranged from deadlocks, with Tamil Nadu refusing to give up bottom trawling, to template responses from the governments, with India seeking a “humanitarian response” from Sri Lanka. The closest that the two countries came to reaching a solution was in November 2016, following a meeting in New Delhi led by the Foreign and Fisheries Ministers from both sides, with other key interlocutors. A Joint Working Group was constituted to first and foremost, expedite “the transition towards ending the practice of bottom trawling at the earliest”. The Indian government’s attempt to divert fishermen to deep sea fishing has not taken off as was envisaged, even as profit-hungry boat owners in Tamil Nadu stubbornly defend their trawler trade. Meanwhile, Tamil Nadu fishermen continue to allege that the Sri Lankan Navy is unleashing violence on them; Sri Lanka denies this. Five years since, we are at a rather low point in the fisheries conflict, with a rising human cost.



Meanwhile, this could be the biggest test yet to the solidarity that Tamil Nadu continues to express with Sri Lankan Tamils who bore the brunt of the civil war and still await justice and a political solution. By now, it is evident that bottom trawling has maximised not only the profits made by vessel owners in Tamil Nadu, but also the risk faced by poor, daily wage fishermen employed from the coastal districts. The rich owners and those employed by them for a meagre wage ought not to be clumped together simply as “Tamil Nadu fishermen”, without recognising that their interests and risks differ enormously. It is equally well known that the relentless trawling by Indian vessels has caused huge losses to northern Sri Lankan fishermen. Their catch has fallen drastically and they count vanishing varieties of fish. They are dejected as their persisting calls to end bottom trawling have not been heeded by their counterparts in Tamil Nadu, or “brothers” as they repeatedly call them. For politicians and activists in Tamil Nadu, the death of fishermen is understandably the most outrageous, emotive dimension of this complex problem — especially since no past case has been probed or perpetrator held accountable. All the same, seeing the conflict merely through the prism of Tamil Nadu fishermen and the Sri Lankan Navy may not yield a solution to the problem, although that might keep its most deplorable symptom in focus. At the heart of the conflict is a tale of competing livelihoods in a narrow stretch of the sea, amid a looming environmental threat, and a glaring asymmetry of power — be it in numbers, equipment, or political backing — between two Tamil-speaking fishing communities. The growing trust deficit between them does not augur well for the prospect of a solution. India and Sri Lanka must urgently refocus their energies to address this crisis. As the first step, Tamil Nadu must consider a moratorium on bottom trawling in the Palk Strait. Such a move must be accompanied by both New Delhi and Colombo substantially supporting their respective fishing communities to cope with the suspension of trawling on the Tamil Nadu side and the devastating impact of the pandemic on both sides. The time must be used for evolving a lasting solution. Strong bilateral ties are not only about shared religious or cultural heritage, but also about sharing resources responsibly, in ways that the lives and livelihoods of our peoples can be protected.

A REMINDER THAT INDIA STILL TRAILS IN THE HUNGER FIGHT

The Global Hunger Report (GHR) has once again made headlines in India for the country's poor ranking in terms of the Global Hunger Index (GHI). The report ranks India at 101 out of 116 countries, with the country falling in the category of having a ‘serious’ hunger situation. The ranks are not comparable across years because of various methodological issues and so it is wrong to say that India's standing has fallen from 94 (out of 107) in 2020. However, it is true that year after year, India ranks at the lower end — below a number of other countries that are poorer in terms of per capita incomes. This in itself is cause for concern.

The indicators

The Government of India, through a press release, refuted the GHI, claiming that it is ‘devoid of ground reality’ and based on ‘unscientific’ methodology. The GHI is ‘based on four indicators — percentage of undernourished in the population (PoU); percentage of children under five years who suffer from wasting (low weight-for-height); percentage of children under five years who suffer from stunting (low height-for-age), and percentage of children who die before the age of five (child mortality)’. The first and the last indicators have a weight of one-third each and the two

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child malnutrition indicators account for one-sixth weightage each in the final GHI, where each indicator is standardised based on thresholds set slightly above the highest country-level values. Looking at each of these indicators separately, India shows a worsening in PoU and childhood wasting in comparison with 2012. It is the PoU figure of 15.3% for 2018-20 that the Government is contesting.

From official data sources

The Government's objection to the methodology, that "They have based their assessment on the results of a 'four question' opinion poll, which was conducted telephonically by Gallup", is not based on facts. The report is not based on the Gallup poll; rather, it is on the PoU data that the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) puts out regularly (as has also been clarified by the publishing agencies). PoU, according to the FAO, 'is an estimate of the proportion of the population whose habitual food consumption is insufficient to provide the dietary energy levels that are required to maintain a normal active and healthy life'. PoU is estimated taking into account a number of factors such as food availability, food consumption patterns, income levels and distribution, population structure, etc. All the data used are from official data sources of respective national governments. In the absence of food consumption data in most countries, this indicator is an estimate based on a modelling exercise using available data; therefore, there is some margin of error. Most of the criticism of the FAO's PoU data has been about how it underestimates hunger rather than over. Therefore, while there is scope for a valid discussion on the GHI methodology and its limitations, this objection by the Government is not warranted.

Slow rate of progress

The main message that the GHR gives is to once again remind us that India has not been very successful in tackling the issue of hunger and that the rate of progress is very slow. Comparable values of the index have been given in the report for four years, i.e., 2000, 2006, 2012 and 2021. While the GHI improved from 37.4 to 28.8 during 2006-12, the improvement is only from 28.8 to 27.5 between 2012-21. The PoU data show that the proportion of undernourished population showed a declining trend up to 2016-18 when it reached the lowest level of 13.8%, after which there is an increase to 14% for 2017-19 and 15.3% for 2018-20. Other data also broadly validate these findings. The partial results of the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-20) also show that stunting and wasting indicators have stagnated or declined for most States for which data is available. The leaked report of the consumption expenditure survey (2017-18) also showed that rural consumption had fallen between 2012-18 and urban consumption showed a very slight increase.

A period before the pandemic

It must also be remembered that all the data are for the period before the COVID-19 pandemic. There were many indications based on nationally representative data — such as from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy and various field surveys conducted by research organisations, academics and civil society groups — that the situation of food insecurity at the end of the year 2020 was concerning, and things are most likely to have become worse after the second wave. Many of these surveys find that over 60% of the respondents say that they are eating less than before the national lockdown in 2020. Services such as the Integrated Child Development Scheme



(ICDS) and school mid-day meals continue to be disrupted in most areas, denying crores of children the one nutritious meal a day they earlier had access to. It would, therefore, not be surprising if national surveys (hopefully conducted soon) show a further slowdown in improvement in malnutrition. The novel coronavirus pandemic has affected food security and nutrition across the world. In countries such as India — where the situation was also already poor to begin with — the impact is probably worse. The response cannot be one of denial; rather, what is needed are measures to ensure rapid recovery. It has been pointed out by many that the relief measures of the Government, so far, have been inadequate in comparison to the scale of the problem.

Cuts for schemes

The only substantial measure has been the provision of additional free foodgrains through the Public Distribution System (PDS), and even this has been lacking. It leaves out about 40% of the population, many of whom are in need and includes only cereals. Also, as of now, it ends in November 2021. At the same time, inflation in other foods, especially edible oils, has also been very high affecting people's ability to afford healthy diets. On the one hand, while we need additional investments and greater priority for food, nutrition and social protection schemes, Budget 2021 saw cuts in real terms for schemes such as the ICDS and the mid-day meal. The argument that the GHI is an indicator of undernutrition and not hunger, is only diverting attention away from more substantial issues. Of course, malnutrition is affected by a number of factors (such as health, sanitation, etc.) other than food consumption alone, but that in no way means that healthy diets are not central. There is no denying that diverse nutritious diets for all Indians still remain a distant dream.

RESTLESS MOUNTAINS, SHATTERED LIVES

Flash floods and back-to-back landslips in Kerala bring into focus, once again, the fragile ecosystem of the mountain chain that runs almost parallel to India's western coast

In his preface to the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) report submitted in 2011, ecologist and panel chairman Madhav Gadgil points to the degradation suffered by Kalidasa's "charming maiden" thus: "Once the lady was adorned by a sari of rich green hues; today her mantle lies in shreds and tatters. It has been torn asunder by the greed of the elite and gnawed at by the poor, striving to eke out a subsistence. This is a great tragedy, for this hill range is the backbone of the ecology and economy of south India". Nearly a decade later, the reverberations of Mr. Gadgil's warnings resonated in the minds of many following the tragic loss of over 40 lives in flash floods and landslides in the aftermath of heavy rains in the hilly regions of the Western Ghats in central Kerala districts of Kottayam, Idukki and Pathanamthitta between October 12 and 20. In recent years, Kerala, known for its peaks and rich water bodies, most of which originate from the Ghats, has seen back-to-back calamities, including the disastrous 2018 floods, which raised serious questions on the conservation of the mountain chain. Recognised as one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, the Western Ghats region runs to a length of 1,600 km starting from the mouth of the river Tapti near the border of Gujarat and Maharashtra to Kanniyakumari, the southernmost tip of India in Tamil Nadu. It stretches over the six States of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Goa, Maharashtra and Gujarat. The Ghats are second only to the Eastern Himalaya as a



treasure trove of biological diversity in the country. The 39 serial sites of the Western Ghats were inscribed into UNESCO's World Heritage Site list in 2012 for its "outstanding universal value and for representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems, and communities of plants and animals". They were also recognised as areas containing "the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation".

Sensitive area

It's home to hundreds of globally threatened flora, fauna, bird, amphibian, reptile and fish species. An assessment by the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 2020 had found that the Western Ghats is "under increasing population and developmental pressure that requires intensive and targeted management efforts to ensure that not only are existing values conserved, but that some past damage may be remediated". The WGEEP report, popular as Gadgil report, had designated the entire hill range as an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA). It had classified the 142 taluks in the Western Ghats boundary into three Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs). The panel, which was appointed in 2010 by the then UPA government, recommended that "no new dams based on large-scale storage be permitted in the Ecologically Sensitive Zone 1". It suggested that development activity needs to be decided through a participatory process involving the gram sabhas in these zones. The report had never seen the light until the Delhi High Court issued an order in May, 2012 to make it public. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change had opposed disclosure of the report stating that it could affect the economic and scientific interests of the six States. The successive State governments opposed it stating that most of its suggestions were impractical. The Centre appointed a high-level working group on Western Ghats led by K. Kasturirangan, a noted space scientist, in August, 2012 to examine the Gadgil report. Its mandate was to give special attention to "the preservation of the precious biodiversity" and "the rights, needs and development aspirations of the local and indigenous people". However, the committee's report in April 2013 identified only 37% or 59,940 sq. km of the Western Ghats in the six States as ESAs. Around 4,156 villages along the region were identified as ESAs on the basis of the criterion that "they had 20% or more of ecologically sensitive area within their boundary". Nearly 123 such villages were identified as ESAs in Kerala, provoking political and religious protests. It snowballed into a political conflict between the then ruling United Democratic Front and the Left front and even influenced the 2014 Idukki Lok Sabha election outcome, with the victory of the Left front's independent candidate backed by the High Range Samrakshana Samithi (Protection Council), a collective of various groups under the Catholic Church. The Bharatiya Janata Party and the Sangh Parivar organisations, which had initially supported the Gadgil report, later turned silent. The then Congress-led government decided that an area of 9,993.7 sq. km be considered ESAs in Kerala as against the 13,108 sq. km area proposed by the Kasturirangan Committee. It was based on a recommendation by the State-level expert committee led by Oommen V. Oommen, the then chairman of the Kerala Biodiversity Board, which recommended that the inhabited areas, plantations and agricultural lands in the Western Ghats region be excluded from the scope of ESA. The Union Environment Ministry issued a draft notification in March 2014 by notifying a total of 56,825 sq. km in the Western Ghats as ESA instead of the original 59,940 sq. km recommended by the Kasturirangan Committee. The final notification



remains pending despite a directive by the Principal Bench of the National Green Tribunal in September last that there is no justification for continued delay merely because the States have sought exclusion of area from eco sensitive zone. Farmers had approached the Supreme Court to declare the Centre's draft notification as "unconstitutional" while saying that the recommendations based on Kasturirangan report (and earlier Gadgil report) on land use, farming practices, animal husbandry, forestry, industries, infrastructure development, power generation, transport, tourism, etc. would convert the semi-urban villages in the region into forests with no facilities and roads.

Natural disasters

About 40% of Western Ghat ranges lie in Kerala, which makes the State particularly vulnerable to the ecological changes in the mountain chain. Environmentalists argue that the flash floods and landslips point to the fragile ecosystem of the Ghats and call for urgent action. Take the case of the October landslips in Kerala. Kootickal village in Kottayam, which was among the four local bodies in the State that were removed by the State government in 2015 from the list of 123 ESAs witnessed back-to-back landslides. The increasing extreme climate events have resulted in large-scale disasters and destabilised the already vulnerable districts along the Western Ghats. The World Meteorological Organisation had included the August deluge that rocked Kerala in 2018 as among the five major extreme flooding events in the world between 2015 and 2019. Official estimates showed that there were a total of 2,062 landslides in the State in 2018-19. Idukki was the most vulnerable with the district facing around 1,048 landslides in this period. As Mr. Gadgil reiterated, the human interference and unscientific land use had worsened the already damaged ecosystem of the Western Ghats. The studies by the Geological Survey of India in the landslide vulnerable areas in the hilly districts of Kerala had found faulty cultivation patterns and defective maintenance of drainage systems. Geoscientists have advocated the need for exempting areas of very high susceptibility in the Western Ghats from any types of constructions while urging the government and the local communities to increase the vegetative cover as a first defence against the landslide vulnerability.

WHY IS INDIA FACING BOUTS OF EXTREME WEATHER?

Did Kerala and Uttarakhand receive incessant rain in October due to climate change?

Even as the southwest monsoon began to retreat from the subcontinent, Kerala and Uttarakhand received record rainfall in October. In both these States and others, over the last few years, there have been variations in the pattern and intensity of rainfall. Kerala had seen a severe spell in 2018, which caused havoc. This year's rain, too, claimed lives in Kerala and Uttarakhand.

What is the quantity of rainfall?

According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), the Kerala and Mahe region received 124% excess rainfall from October 14 to October 20. Against the normal 72.1 mm rainfall for the period, the region had received 161.2 mm. Lakshadweep received 15% excess rainfall. From October 1 to October 22, Kerala recorded 121% excess rainfall, with all districts, except Alappuzha, recording above 70% excess rainfall. Alappuzha recorded 52% excess for the period. The latest fortnightly forecast from the agency says "above normal" rainfall is expected over the



next fortnight. Uttarakhand recorded 192.6 mm against the usual 35.3 mm from October 1 to October 20, with several districts reporting 24-hour highs that exceeded the figures from over a century.

What explains the torrential rain?

There are different factors at play in Kerala and Uttarakhand. There have been two rain-bearing 'low pressure systems' that are active in the Arabian Sea as well as the Bay of Bengal since the past week. The low pressure system in the Arabian Sea contributed to the heavy rain in Kerala, whereas western disturbances, which are periodic influxes of moisture-laden clouds from the Mediterranean, and common during winter, are what caused the rain in northern India. The Bay of Bengal is still warm and strong winds from there are reaching as far as Uttarakhand and will contribute to rainfall in several parts of north-eastern India. October is the month when the southwest monsoon entirely retreats from India and the northeast monsoon sets in, bringing rain over Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, coastal Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. Both low pressures as well as western disturbances are tangentially connected to the larger pattern of global warming. The Bay of Bengal is historically the warmer ocean that seeds low pressures and cyclones that bring rain to India. In recent years however, the Arabian Sea, too, has been warmer than normal, and leading to significant cyclonic activity. Overall elevated temperatures are also contributing to warmer waters in the Arctic Ocean and drawing colder air from the poles with greater intensity. This added to the increased moisture, thereby seeding more intense western disturbance activity over north India.

Is the delayed monsoon withdrawal responsible?

This year, the monsoon began its retreat on October 6 and though it was expected to fully retreat by October 16, it is yet to completely withdraw, with the associated clouds still lingering on. The IMD's latest assessment is that the monsoon will completely withdraw by October 26 and that will also herald the beginning of the northeast monsoon. When the atmosphere and the ocean is considered as a whole, rain everywhere is the result of moisture rushing up to fill differences in temperature between oceans and the land and while there is a broad agreement that warming oceans are contributing to intense spells of rainfall in pockets followed by long rainless spells, specific instances — such as what is being seen in Kerala and Uttarakhand — aren't unprecedented. The monsoon cycle is prone to large variations, and every year regional factors get accentuated — it's hard to predict which in advance — that then lead to extreme climate events.

What are the factors responsible for the disasters?

This year, India was poised to receive below normal rainfall until August when global meteorological factors changed and caused a torrential September that largely repaired the monsoon deficit. However, the vagaries in climate reveal their impact in the damage that they cause and the latter is due to society's environmental choices. Kerala and Uttarakhand have large tracts of hilly terrain that are prone to landslips. But construction has continued unabated even on land unsuited for human habitation. Several ecologists and environmentalists have for years warned of the consequences of unplanned development and, in the context of an increasingly



erratic climate, it is only logical that more inhabitants of these regions will be exposed to greater climate risk.

IS GENETICALLY MODIFIED RICE GROWN IN INDIA?

What is the controversy around export of the grain and will it impact farmers?

A French manufacturer of rice flour claimed it had found unauthorised genetically modified rice in a consignment of 500 tonnes of broken rice imported from India this June. Since the European Union does not permit any use of GM rice, manufacturers of confectionery items and baked goods which had used the rice flour were then forced to carry out a mass recall of products. After a complaint letter from farm and environmental groups earlier this week, Indian authorities said they were investigating the allegations, but added that any contamination was unlikely as India does not allow commercial cultivation of GM rice either.

What is GM rice?

GM foods are derived from plants whose genes are artificially modified, usually by inserting genetic material from another organism, in order to give it a new property, such as increased yield, tolerance to a herbicide, resistance to disease or drought, or to improve its nutritional value. Probably the best known variety of GM rice is golden rice, which involves the insertion of genes from a plant — both daffodils and maize have been used — and a soil bacterium to create a grain that is enriched with Vitamin A. India has approved commercial cultivation of only one GM crop, Bt cotton. No GM food crop has ever been approved for commercial cultivation. However, confined field trials have been allowed for at least 20 GM crops. That includes varieties of GM rice which would have improved resistance to insects and diseases, as well as hybrid seed production and nutritional enhancements such as golden rice. Trials have been carried out by public universities and research institutions such as the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI) and Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, as well as private firms such as Bayer Bioscience and Mahyco.

Was GM rice exported from India?

The Commerce Ministry has said that as commercial cultivation of GM rice is banned, “there is no question of export of GM rice from India”. It said the EU was not sure of the exact source of contaminant, adding that contamination could have occurred during the processing of the rice flour in Europe. Despite the outrage, it initiated an investigation by APEDA (Agriculture and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority) which identified a Maharashtra-based trader as the source of the rice consignment, which had been given a non-GMO certification by a testing agency just before shipping. It also demanded that the EU provide details of specific genetic markers in the consignment. Farm and environmental activists allege that plants or seeds from the GM rice field trials could have contaminated non-GM crops, noting that illegal varieties of GM cotton and brinjal are freely circulating among sections of Indian farmers.

What are the implications for Indian farmers?

India is the world’s top rice exporter, earning ₹65,000 crore last year by selling 18 million tonnes of grain, about a quarter of which is premium basmati. Among the 75 countries which buy Indian rice, West Asian nations, the U.S. and the U.K. are the biggest importers of basmati, while the



majority of non-basmati rice goes to African countries and Nepal and Bangladesh. For Indian farmers, the nightmare scenario could be what happened in the U.S. in 2006, when trace amounts of a GM rice variety being tested by Bayer were found in shipments ready for exports. Trading partners such as Japan, Russia and the EU suspended rice imports from the U.S., hitting farmers hard and forcing Bayer to pay \$750 million in damages. Under pressure from the rice export lobby at the time, India drafted policies to ban GM rice trials in the basmati belt.

What lies ahead?

In the face of new advances in rice research, scientists and farmers say the regulatory regime needs to be strengthened for the sake of domestic and export consumers.

HIMACHAL'S WOMEN FARMERS EXPAND THEIR HORIZONS, WITHOUT HURTING NATURE

With training and support, low-cost natural farming is increasing incomes and leading to social empowerment

Women farmers in the hill State of Himachal Pradesh are gradually turning to non-chemical, low cost "natural farming", which has not only provided them with a sustainable livelihood but also empowered them better. Launched in 2018, the State's Prakritik Kheti Khushhal Yojana (PK3Y) is promoting the climate resilient Subhash Palekar Natural Farming (SPNF), also called 'Zero Budget Natural Farming'. Over 1.5 lakh farmers have been trained in natural farming in the State so far, with substantial numbers of women participants. Moreover, the coming together of women from the hill regions for natural farming, regardless of their level of education, has helped them gain confidence in matters beyond agriculture. Practical training in natural farming is helping rural women in Himachal Pradesh gain confidence by supplementing family incomes.

'New empowerment'

"It is a different kind of empowerment. Since I shifted to the natural farming technique, the government's Agriculture Technology Management Agency (ATMA) staff is regularly in touch with me. They motivate me and help me stay connected with the latest happenings in the field on a regular basis personally, and on WhatsApp groups, which is happening for the first time," said Ganga Sarni Bisht, 54, from Kilba in the tribal Kinnaur district. Ms. Bisht, a post-graduate in Hindi and a former teacher, has been farming independently since 2013. "I shifted to this non-chemical farming technique three years back, after attending a training workshop on the SPNF technique in Kufri. I am growing vegetables like beans, radish, carrot, spinach and beetroot with natural farming on one bigha land, along with apples. I am happy with the results. I have sown hing (asafoetida) now," she said. Ready to replicate natural farming on another five bighas of land gradually, Ms. Bisht inspires women farmers in the village and shares the latest information with them in a group. Natural farming gave Charna Devi, 49, a tribal woman from Chagaon village in uphill Tapri in Kinnaur, the opportunity to go outside the State for the first time in her life. She had not ventured beyond State capital Shimla before. "The travel taught me so many things," she said. Ms. Devi is now a member of an SPNF women farmers' group formed in 2019. Its members cultivate apples, garlic, maize and other traditional crops in their own farms. The group has over 20 women farmers and it functions like a family. They even help each other in finding solutions for personal and social issues. Executive Director of PK3Y, Dr. Rajeshwar Singh Chandel, said that



women have always had an important role in agriculture in India. “Their inclusion in natural farming for training and exposure will not only build their capacity but will help women farmers gain confidence for overall betterment in society,” he said. At many other places in the State, women farmers who have shifted to natural farming collectively plan to increase their income by processing fruits and creating marketing networks on their own. Another group of more than 20 young women in Khaushshah village near Rampur Bushahr in Shimla district had been contributing in agriculture and horticulture at home but, “We were just silent workers with no say in deciding things in the field. The income from apple orchards was falling due to over-use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Since we were provided training in the natural farming project, we could move out of the four walls of the house and are now actively involved in changing the course of farming,” said Sujata, a graduate farmer.

Breaking barriers

Their group, the Prakritik Kheti Mahila Khushhal Kisan Samiti, Khaushshah, was formed two years back, and registered in 2021. The women farmers’ group is doing natural farming individually on land measuring around 12.5 bighas, and the SPNF technique has helped them grow multiple crops like pulses and vegetables, alongside apples, for regular income from the same field. “Besides, it has helped us in connecting socially, and break mindset barriers on issues other than farming also,” said the group’s members.

BIO-DECOMPOSER A BETTER SOLUTION, SAY FARMERS

As trust builds, many who opted for Delhi Govt.’s spraying initiative last year sign up again

The Delhi Government’s initiative of spraying bio-decomposer solution in agricultural fields to help decompose stubble into manure has brought relief to several farmers in the city. Some farmers in whose fields the solution was sprayed last year told The Hindu that the move helped them save money as the Government was doing it for free. This year, the authorities have so far sprayed the solution in over 500 acres of fields in the city, said officials. “We plan to continue the spraying till November 15. Last year, the Government had sprayed the solution in about 1,935 acres,” said an official. The time taken in the administrative procedure, however, is bothering a farmers’ association. “The Government says it will come to the villages and register the name of those who want the solution to be sprayed in their fields. But in reality, the farmers have to go to the BDO (Block Development Office) for registration. The government takes about a week’s time after the harvest to spray the solution and this is creating difficulties. If this process gets late, the sowing also gets delayed and the farmers suffer. The Government has to fix the administrative procedure for spraying the solution,” said Virender Dagar, Delhi State chief, Bharatiya Kisan Union.

Plea to replicate move

The Delhi Government, which first used the bio-decomposer solution last year, sees it as a means to minimise stubble burning and has been urging other States to adopt the measure. Devender Mann, 45, a farmer from Naya Bans village, said the solution was sprayed in about 11 acres of his field last year and it helped him save around ₹1,500 per acre. “I saved around ₹1,000 per acre on



diesel [for tractor] and ₹300-₹400 per acre in terms of labour charges due to bio-decomposer spraying," he said. Earlier, Mr. Mann had to plough his field several times to cut the stubble. After two-three rounds of ploughing, he used to release water into the field and leave it for around 10 days. The water helped decompose the stubble to an extent. The spraying of the bio-decomposer involves a similar process but the ploughing rounds are fewer as the stubble decomposes faster, officials said. "When the Government first approached us, we didn't trust the move. Still I gave my consent to spray the solution. Twenty days later, I checked by removing the top soil and saw the stubble had decomposed. This year too, I have asked officials to spray the solution in my fields," said Sahdev Mann, a farmer from Holambi Khurd village.

INDIA-MADE SPRAY LINKED TO RARE ILLNESS IN U.S.

Deadly bacterium found in product used by 4 victims

A made-in-India aromatherapy spray is being pulled off retail giant Walmart's shelves in the United States after a medical investigation linked it to melioidosis, a rare disease that has sickened at least four, and may have caused two deaths, in the country. The spray was reported to contain a bacterium, *Burkholderia pseudomallei*, that causes a rare but deadly disease called melioidosis, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said in a statement on Friday. The spray, "Better Homes and Gardens Lavender & Chamomile Essential Oil Infused Aromatherapy Room Spray with Gemstones", was found on October 6 in the home of a Georgia resident who became ill with melioidosis in late July. Other than mentioning that the spray was manufactured in India, no other details on the spray's origins were disclosed. The contaminated spray was sold at 55 Walmart stores from February to October 21 of this year, when the retail giant pulled the remaining bottles and related products from its shelves in all stores. A spokesperson for Walmart, in response to queries from The Hindu, said that the room spray was manufactured by "Flora Classique Inc." and sold under the "Better Homes & Gardens" brand. "We pulled the product from the shelves of about 55 stores where it was part of a pilot programme," the spokesperson wrote. Flora Classique, an online search showed, is registered in Wildomar, California, the U.S. Its website says it is "...affiliated with Ramesh Flowers Pvt Ltd. in Tuticorin India, one of the largest manufacturers and exporters of Home Fragrance and Home Decor products in India since its inception in 1982". Since 2018, the company has been a part of the Gala Candles Group, a German company. The CDC has been testing blood samples from patients as well as soil, water and consumer products in and around patients' homes since they began receiving samples in May. A sample of the Better Homes & Gardens spray tested positive for the bacterium this week and genetic analysis revealed that it was similar to the strains found in South Asia, the CDC statement noted.

CALL TO BIFURCATE ASSAM GROWS LOUDER

Defacing of Assamese slogans on hoardings sparks outrage

The defacing of Assamese slogans on hoardings of Jal Jeevan Mission in the Bengali-majority Barak Valley has led to a call for the bifurcation of Assam. Miscreants had over the past few days smeared some hoardings in black to protest the "imposition" of the Assamese language in Barak Valley, where Bengali is the official language. The valley covers the southern Assam districts of Cachar,

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

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Telegram: http://t.me/DreamIAS_Jamshedpur



Hailakandi and Karimganj. Several Brahmaputra Valley-based organisations, including the All Assam Students' Union, viewed the defacement as an insult to the Assamese language and people. Their demand for action against the miscreants saw the police arrest two persons. Both were released on bail. Leading the call for separating Barak Valley from Assam, the Assamese litterateur and former president of the influential Assam Sahitya Sabha, Nagen Saikia, said bifurcation would go a long way in maintaining peace and tranquillity in the State. "Granting statehood to Barak Valley would bring an end to language-based conflicts. The State Government should take the bifurcation issue up with people in both the valleys," Mr. Saikia said.

TRANSCENDING BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES

Kamla Bhasin's genius lay in her ability to work past different fault lines and build diverse coalitions

The domains of peacebuilding and protest are ordinarily seen as occupying separate and discrete worlds. Yet in the women's movements in South Asia, beginning with the 1980s but more visibly in the 1990s, these became increasingly intertwined as scholars and activists forged synergies and cross-border solidarities. Feminist icon Kamla Bhasin, who passed away in September, contributed to this denouement. She invested her unique energy towards transcending borders and boundaries, past monocultures of the mind that reinforce stereotypes, mistrust and militarism, and reflect the cartographic anxieties of nation states. Bhasin famously said, "Main sarhad par khadi deewar nahi, us deewar par padi daraar hoon [I am not the wall that stands at the border, I am the crack in that wall]". This captured the spirit with which women conflict "resolutionaries" in South Asia, often in the face of stiff opposition, bricolaged around cordons of territoriality to join forces and mobilise across fault lines of country, caste, religion, class and gender. The recognition that women across South Asia face a continuum of violence — both structural and overt — as they confront the patriarchies of the family, the community and the state, and "the complicities between them", sustained networks unfettered by national identities. Bhasin's book with Ritu Menon, *Borders and Boundaries*, and Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, both published in the 1990s, were path-breaking in their accounts of the narratives of pain, loss, displacement and violence that the Partition of India had wrought on women on both sides of the border and the similarity of their experiences. These works revealed how community and even national honour were inscribed on the bodies of women and the gendered nature of citizenship. It triggered explorations around what country, religious identity or even nation really meant for women. It also opened the space for research and activism that interrogated the "sanctity of borders".

Singular experiences

Several ethnographic narratives that gave voice to the singular experiences of women in situations of conflict — in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan and Pakistan — added to the repertoire, enabling civil society transversal engagements across South Asia around the issues of justice, rights, patriarchy, militarisation and nuclearisation. Through periods of adversarial face-offs between different Governments and their neighbours — especially between India and Pakistan — feminists like Bhasin were hard at work to ensure that people-to-people contact and a form of public diplomacy sustained dialogue and nurtured synergies. With women in the lead, initiatives



like the Women's Action Forum (WAF) in Pakistan that reached out to their sisters in Bangladesh to apologise for the atrocities of the Pakistan army in 1971; the Women's Peace Bus undertaken by the Women's Initiative for Peace in South Asia (WIPSA) from Delhi to Lahore in 2000 to demand a war-free South Asia; Women in Security Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) bringing young South Asians together in workshops on conflict transformation; and Sangat with its innovative regional gender training conclaves, to name a few, persevered with the mission to expand constituencies for peace. In recent decades, South Asia has been witness to collectives of "disobedient women" articulating peace and defying state-centric notions of security and order. They have been visible in the mother's movements in Sri Lanka, the Thappa Force in the "Malki ya Maut [ownership or death]" farmers struggle in Pakistan, and in the Chipko, Narmada, Bhopal and Kudankulam movements in India. Demonstrations like the Meira Paibis (women with torches) in Manipur, and the congregation of women at Shaheen Bagh and at the farmers' protests are also part of these traditions of dissent. Drawing from the experience of activists like Bhasin of making a woman's place "in the resistance", these movements have largely entered the peacebuilding arena through the corridors of human security — voicing democracy and reclaiming citizenship.

Core of their engagement

Highlighting the tensions between people's security and what often passes as national security, opposition to war and the cultures of militarism have been at the core of their engagement. Foregrounded is also the need to link issues of peace and security to development in order to address the structural causes of conflict. Feminist scholars have often made the connections between the formal security discourse and certain types of hegemonic masculinity, and how policy priorities and (techno) strategic discourse are skewed to preserve power hierarchies nationally, within the international system and the world economic order. Women's movements have interrogated the conventional peace metaphor of the figure in white, passively holy or wholly passive. To "wage conflict non-violently", transgressing received notions of security, in their everyday resistances against injustice and oppressive socio-political institutions in order to build structural peace, has been their clarion call. The feminist "weapons" they bring to their engagement blend the cerebral, the celebratory and the performative. Bhasin herself, with her extraordinary communication skills, drew in large numbers of young enthusiasts, "deploying" slogans and art, music and humour, making her succinct, accessible primers on gender, patriarchy and peace resonate across groups, while unpacking the most complex of feminist concepts. These forms of protest and peace praxis draw from the global palimpsest of feminist activism chiselled by women the world over. Feminist peace activists today recognise that the search for common ground involves acknowledging differences, while building on commonalities. Women's experiences of conflict and violence are mediated by their "location" and the intersectionality of caste, class, region, religion and gender. Bhasin's genius lay in her ability to work past these different fault lines and build diverse coalitions and communities of practice. Since the mid-1980s, South Asian women activists have sought to "engender" peace by drawing in larger numbers even from perceived "hostile" neighbourhoods into safe "disarmed", empathic spaces of trust. This was well before the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000 had set the global normative template of the Women Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda. Did South Asian feminist peace activism then offer crucial conceptual alphabets for the international template on positive peace (peace with justice) as an inclusive public process, and not just "brokered" in closed negotiations only by men? The story of their seminal contributions to the



WPS discourse needs to become more visible. A people's peace is a perpetual work-in-progress. It also an invitation to civil society to continuously fine-tune the song of democracy. Nurturing a South Asian identity was Bhasin's labour of love. With love, she strove to inscribe it into the lives of others. And she did it, as we all must, with "passion, compassion, humour and style".

QUEEN HEO HWANG-OK OF KOREA, AND HER AYODHYA CONNECTION

On the banks of the Sarayu in Ayodhya, acres of green space, mostly known as Ram Katha Park, have been through a major beautification exercise. Once inaugurated on November 4, the spruced-up space will be known as Queen Heo Hwang-ok Memorial Park, after a Korean queen believed to have had Indian roots. Earlier this month, the Delhi-based Korean Centre for Culture, in collaboration with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, showcased a musical depicting the story of the queen at Kamani Auditorium. Directed by actor and director Imran Khan, The Legend of Princess Sriratna commemorated the completion of the park in Ayodhya.

Who was Queen Heo Hwang-ok?

She was a Korean queen who is believed to have been born Princess Suriratna of Ayodhya, daughter of King Padmasen and Indumati. Padmasen ruled the ancient kingdom of Kausala, a region that extended from present-day UP to Odisha. Her story is described in Samguk Yusa (Memorabilia of Three Kingdoms), a 13th-century collection of legends, folktales and history of Korea's three kingdoms — Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla — and some other regions. In 48 BC, the princess, then 16, travelled to Korea from the ancient land of 'Ayuta' and married Kim Suro, founder and King of Geumgwan Gaya in south-eastern Korea. She travelled by boat along with an entourage, having been sent by her father, who is said to have had a dream about her marrying Suro. She became the first queen of Geumgwan Gaya, believed to be located around modern-day Gimhae city in Southern Gyeonsang province. The couple are said to have had 12 children.

What is her legacy?

More than six million present-day Koreans trace their lineage to Heo Hwang-ok. They belong to clans such as Gimhae Kim, Heo (the queen had asked the king that two of their sons be given her maiden name) and Lee. Her direct descendants include Kim Yoon-ok, wife of former South Korean President Lee Myung-bak. King Kim Suro and Queen Heo Hwang-ok birthed the Karak dynasty, whose descendants include former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and former Prime Minister Kim Jong-pil. For years now, many Koreans have visited Ayodhya to pay homage to the queen's ancestral home. In Gimhae in South Korea, two tombs, believed to be of Kim Suro and queen Heo Hwang-ok, are maintained as a memorial park. A pagoda, believed to have been brought by the queen from India to calm the ocean gods, is placed next to the tomb. Culturally, the queen has been part of Korea's popular culture for years, with many plays and musicals based on her.

What led to setting up the memorial park in Ayodhya?

In 2000, India and South Korea signed an agreement to develop Ayodhya and Gimhae as sister cities. The memorial space was unveiled in 2001. In 2016, a proposal was sent by a South Korean delegation to refurbish the existing memorial. Subsequently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and



South Korean President Moon Jae-in signed an MoU for developing the memorial. South Korean First Lady Kim Jung-sook attended the inauguration of the beautification work in 2018. The memorial now comprises Queen and King pavilions with their busts in place, and a pond to represent Princess Suriratna's journey. According to the legend, the princess had taken a golden egg to Korea, and the park includes an egg made of granite.

How much of her Indian connection is established as fact?

The story has helped boost the relationship between India and South Korea. But there is some debate about her Indian origins. There are many versions of the same story. While Samguk Yusa talks about the queen from a distant land named Ayuta and popular culture considers it Ayodhya, no Indian document or scripture has any record of her. Some historians also believe that the princess could actually be from Thailand's Ayutthaya kingdom. But the kingdom in Thailand came about in 1350, years after Samguk Yusa had already been written.

ART FOR HEART'S SAKE: DEEPAVALI WITH RAJA RAVI VARMA

From oleographs to coasters, an ongoing exhibition allows you to take a bit of the legendary artist home

With Deepavali around the corner, it is time to bring the gods home. What better way to celebrate than investing in a Raja Ravi Varma masterpiece. More than a century after his demise, his works continue to attract aesthetes and devotees alike. Inspired by her mother Rupika Chawla, noted art conservator and author of the acclaimed book, Raja Ravi Varma: Painter of Colonial India, Delhi-based creative designer Mrinalini Chawla is holding an exhibition showcasing a collection of original Raja Ravi Varma oleographs. The oleographs depict themes like goddesses Lakshmi, Saraswati, Mohini and Lord Krishna, which are available in a wide range of sizes and prices. The exhibition has collectibles like 19th century European enamel, Burmese lacquer bowls, and Tanjore paintings from 1950s. Also available are limited-edition home products that Mrinalini designs and hand decorates, such as trays, stoles, wrapping paper, coasters and even an adult-child interactive colouring book inspired by Ravi Varma's works.

Art accessibility

"My intent is to make high-end art accessible to all through affordable and stylish home products. My aim is that the energies of beautiful, aesthetic art should flow in everyone's homes," says Ms. Mrinalini. Having collected the originals from "dusty corners and interesting streets", she reminds that "Ravi Varma's oleographs were created specifically for the common man, who could not afford his oil on canvas works." Over the years, she says, the appeal of his work has expanded to all age groups.

Enriching experience

Mrinalini has been designing products, intimate spaces for theatre and exhibitions for years. "Often, one has been short of production funds. Therefore, I had to rely on imagination, inner aesthetics and improvisation. That has been so enriching. Ravi Varma's stunning works and other beautiful works, discovered after a great deal of searching and time, have helped me design and



create anew,” says the designer, who also runs Scrapilicious, an organisation dedicated to upcycled products. At the exhibition, Deepavali diyas made and decorated by the students of The Leptra India Trust (TLIT) are on sale. The diyas are either wrapped in recycled products or with European enamel and Burmese lacquer to give them a unique look. “Recycling is an integral part of my work and exhibition. We encourage that after use, all diyas are returned to TLIT for recycling. Please get in touch with me if you would like to return your unbroken diyas for recycling,” says Mrinalini, adding that a percentage of sale proceeds from the exhibition shall go to TLIT and the The Yuva Ekta Foundation.

AGNI (ICBM) VS CHINA’S HYPERSONIC MISSILE

Agni-5 Vs China Hypersonic Missile: A look at the importance of Agni 5, the global concerns about China's hypersonic missile, and the difference between ICBM and the new hypersonic technology.

Agni-5 ballistic missile, with 5,000-km range, successfully tested in India: Though inducted over three years ago, India’s foremost Agni 5 ballistic missile was tested for the first time by the user agency, the Strategic Forces Command, on Wednesday evening. The nuclear-capable missile is India’s contender for the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) with a range of 5,000 km. The latest test comes at a time when the relations between India and China are at a nadir, and after reports that China had tested a new hypersonic missile in August. A look at the importance of Agni 5, the global concerns about China’s hypersonic missile, and the difference between ICBM and the new hypersonic technology.

What is the Agni 5 missile?

Agni 5 is India’s long-range surface-to-surface ballistic missile, which can hit a target with a precision that is 5,000 km away. This range puts almost the entire China within the missile’s target range. Though officially an ICBM needs a missile to have a range of at least 5,500 km, the Agni 5 is India’s closest contender for an ICBM, as it can reach countries across other continents, including parts of Africa and Europe. Though the government has claimed that it has a maximum range of around 5,000 km, several reports suggest that it can hit targets as distant as 8,000 km. The nuclear capable missile can carry a warhead of around 1,500 kg and has a launch weight of 50,000 kg, making it one of the most potent missiles in the country.

What is the history of Agni missiles?

India began testing the Agni series of missiles in 1989 with the first test for Agni 1, an Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile, with a range of around 1,000 km. At that time only the US, the erstwhile Soviet Union, China, France and Israel, had IRBM technology. Since then, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) labs have continued to work on it, bringing the latest available Agni 5 to its present capability. In addition to the IRBM-capable nations, only North Korea and the UK have ICBM technology at the moment.



Why is it important for India?

The government said in a statement on Wednesday, after the test, which was the first to be done independently by the user agency—the Strategic Force Command, which is a joint tri-services command, responsible for India’s nuclear weapons—that the test’s success “is in line with India’s stated policy to have ‘credible minimum deterrence’ that underpins the commitment to ‘No First Use.’” What makes Agni 5 agile is that it is a “canisterised” missile. It means that the missile can be launched from road and rail platforms, making it easier for it to be deployed and launched at a quicker pace. The canisterisation, which is an encapsulated system in which the missile is stored and launched from, also gives the missile a longer shelf life, protecting it from the harsher climatic conditions. While India is among the handful of nations with (arguably) ICBM capability, the next generation of the missile, Agni VI, under development, is expected to have a range of around 8,000 km. Regarding hypersonic missile technology (tested by China recently), India is among a select few serious contenders working towards it, even though it is behind China, the US and Russia. Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat had mentioned in September that India is mulling a rocket force for missiles. However, senior defence establishment sources said that it is still an idea that is being considered.

What is a Hypersonic Glide Vehicle that China tested?

About 10 days ago, The Financial Times reported that China had in August tested a new hypersonic missile, which is nuclear capable, which circled the earth before moving towards its target, missing it by two dozen miles. While China denied the report claiming it to be a “spacecraft” and not a missile, it demonstrated the capability in hypersonic glide vehicle technology, which raises strategic concerns not just for its neighbours like India, but even its rivals like the US. A hypersonic glide vehicle is launched by a rocket which moves in the Earth’s lower orbit, at more than five times to 25 times the speed of sound. The vehicle is capable of carrying nuclear payloads, which gives the launching country the strategic capacity to attack almost any target across the world. The Financial Times reported that the test by China had caught the US intelligence agencies by surprise. Though many of the targets that a hypersonic missile can hit are already reachable through the ICBMs, China’s almost successful test has given rise to a lot of anxiety to military powers world over.

How is it different from an ICBM?

Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, which have a range of over 5,500 km, have existed since around World War II. These missiles, meant to carry nuclear payloads, have the capacity to carry several warheads. While an ICBM follows a parabolic trajectory, which mean it goes up and then comes down in a high arc—like when you throw up a ball, only much higher, further and faster—a hypersonic glide vehicle orbits the earth at a lower height, and is manoeuvrable. The ability to change track or target, mid-trajectory, along with the speed, makes them tougher to track and defend against. According to a report in 2017 by Rand Corporation, the global policy think tank specialising in defence, hypersonic missiles can travel approximately at 5,000 to 25,000 km per hour, which makes them six to over 25 times faster than modern commercial aircraft. They fly at the heights of a few tens and 100 km. The mix of the high altitude, high speed and the ability to be manoeuvred makes them, Rand said, “both challenging to the best missile defenses now envisioned and, until the last minutes of flight, unpredictable as to their targets”. According to the



report hypersonic missile's capability gives them both offensive and defensive advantages. The manoeuvrability of such missiles can potentially provide them to use "in-flight updates to attack a different target than originally planned" and the "ability to fly at unpredictable trajectories, these missiles will hold extremely large areas at risk throughout much of their flights". But, according to Joshua Pollack, who edits The Nonproliferation Review, ICBM would remain the preferred choice, because they are more efficient. He called the hypersonic glide vehicle "exotic".

Which countries have hypersonic technology?

Apart from China, the US and Russia are working on the technology. While this would be China's first such test for the capability, Pollack stated on Twitter that the "US military often flies an unarmed orbiter-glider, the X-37B 'space plane'". According to the Rand Corporation's 2017 report, France and India "are the most committed" about gaining the capability, and "both draw to some extent on cooperation with Russia". It noted that Australia, Japan, and European entities are also working towards it. The report stated that hypersonic technology has a dual-use character, as it can be used for non-military purposes like space launch and spacecraft retrieval, but "once a nation acquires hypersonic technology, its intentions can change". "The current situation, with hypersonic research openly disseminated and widely spread among governments, industries, and universities, presents challenges for nonproliferation," it said.

What are the main concerns about China developing such technology?

America's topmost military officer Gen Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff stopped just short of comparing it to Russia taking the lead in space technology with the launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957, hinting that China might have left the US behind in hypersonic capability. Bloomberg reported Milley saying, on Wednesday, "What we saw was a very significant event of a test of a hypersonic weapon system. And it is very concerning... I don't know if it's quite a Sputnik moment, but I think it's very close to that. It has all of our attention." According to Bloomberg, Milley continued saying that China is "expanding rapidly—in space, in cyber and then in the traditional domains of land, sea and air". China developing hypersonic missile capability would mean that it, potentially, would have weapons to overwhelm America's aerial defence systems. Though China already has ICBM missiles to attack the US, the unpredictability of hypersonic glide vehicles would give them an advantage. (Though Pollack mentioned on Twitter that "none of the weapons are good for surprise attacks against the US, which has exceptional detection capabilities" and though ICBMs are easier to predict, even hypersonic vehicles "will be detected at launch and tracked in flight".) A major concern for the US is that all its defences are aimed at protecting any threats from north and west, and it remains vulnerable to a threat coming from the south, as the hypersonic missile can potentially fly over Antarctica. But globally the main concern is that once the technology is successfully established by even one country, it would lead to a larger race for the capability and its eventual proliferation. Rand noted in its report that "major powers are also threatened by the proliferation of hypersonic missiles and the crises they can exacerbate. The more that hypersonic missiles proliferate into the hands of additional nations, the more paths develop for crises". It also stated that there are "strategic considerations" for limiting the technology's proliferation. "Hypersonic missiles do not necessarily increase the vulnerability of nations that do not have missile defenses; they are already vulnerable to current types of missiles. However, an increasing number of nations are acquiring missile defenses that could be penetrated by hypersonic missiles. A hypersonic attack could occur with very little warning time;



this factor and the unpredictability of the targets of a hypersonic attack compress the timeline for response by the party being attacked.”

What kind of long-range ballistic capabilities does China have?

The Pentagon said in a report last year that for land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, China may have either achieved parity, or may have even exceeded the US. It noted that China has over 1,250 ground-launched ballistic missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers, while the US has one type of conventional GLBM with a range of 70 to 300 kilometers and no GLCM. But when it comes to long-range ballistic missiles, China has created a People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF), which takes care of China’s strategic land-based nuclear and conventional missile forces. The Pentagon said in its report that China is “developing new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that will significantly improve its nuclear-capable missile forces” and the number of warheads that China’s land-based ICBMs, which are capable of threatening the US “is expected to grow to roughly 200 in the next five years”. It is “expanding its inventory of the multi-role DF-26, a mobile, ground-launched intermediate-range ballistic missile system capable of rapidly swapping conventional and nuclear warheads”. China’s robust ground-based conventional missile forces, the Pentagon report said, “complement the growing size and capabilities of its air- and sea-based precision strike capabilities”. According to the report, China’s DF-26 has a range of around 4,000 km, DF-31 can reach over 11,200 km while DF-41 can hit targets within a range of 12,000 km.

DRONE DELIVERIES A STEP CLOSER: PUBLIC, PRIVATE PROVIDERS TO MANAGE TRAFFIC

In what could be the first step towards allowing beyond visual line of sight (BVLOS) drone operations, the Ministry of Civil Aviation has notified a traffic management framework for drones, under which public and private third-party service providers will manage the traffic movement in the airspace under 1,000 feet. In detailing the need for having an automated UAS (unmanned aircraft system) Traffic Management (UTM) system, the Ministry said: “... India has started taking steps towards enabling advanced use cases like delivery of goods using unmanned aircraft and is also looking at human transportation using unmanned aircraft”. This requires the creation of a separate, modern, primarily software-based, automated UAS Traffic Management (UTM) system, it said, adding such systems may subsequently be integrated into traditional ATM systems. The framework allows third-party service providers to give services such as registration, flight planning, dynamic deconfliction and access to supplementary data like weather, terrain and position of manned aircraft. Also, a set of supplementary service providers will also be permitted under the framework to provide services such as insurance and data analytics. DigitalSky platform shall continue to be the interface for government stakeholders to provide approvals and permissions to drone operators. All drones (except nano drones operating in the green zone) shall be required to share their real-time location through the network to the Centre. It said the third-party providers will first be deployed in small geographical areas that could be increased gradually. They will be permitted to charge drone operators a service fee and a small portion of it might have to be shared with the Airports Authority of India. Drone Federation of India Director Smit Shah said: “Traditional traffic management services provided by ATCs (air traffic controllers) for manned aircraft cannot be scaled for managing drone traffic which is expected to become at least 100 times higher since the traditional ATM is manual and requires human intervention.”



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

WHAT NOMURA'S EQUITY DOWNGRADING SIGNALS

In line with growing concerns over expensive equity valuations, Nomura has now downgraded Indian equities from 'overweight' to 'neutral' as it feels that while the upside is already priced in, there are headwinds emerging that could pose risks in the future. It further said that it is now recommending allocation to China and other Asean countries that have underperformed India in 2021.

What did Nomura say?

Nomura equity strategists Chetan Seth and Amit Phillips prepared a note on Indian equities and downgraded India to neutral in their regional allocation. "We now see an unfavourable risk-reward given valuations, as a number of positives appear to be priced in, whilst headwinds are emerging. We, thus, downgrade India to neutral in our regional allocation and will look for better entry points given our still-constructive medium term view. We like China (significant underperformer seeing stabilising sentiment) and ASEAN (tactically laggard reopening play)," they said in their note. Stating that the valuations look very stretched, they said that 77 per cent of domestic stocks in the MSCI index are trading higher than pre-pandemic or post 2018 average valuations. Among the risks that India faces, Nomura highlighted elevated commodity prices, sticky core inflation and tentative signs of slowdown in demand.

Will this impact FPI flows and lead to correction in markets?

While the concerns around valuations are rising, more such calls by global financial services firms to reduce India equity allocation would result in an outflow of funds going forward and may lead to some correction in the domestic equities. The FPI inflows have already started witnessing moderation. Against a net FPI inflow of Rs 13,154 crore into domestic equities in September, the month of October has witnessed a net outflow of Rs 2,331 crore till date. In line with the growing concerns around expensive valuations, the broader indices too have seen some correction over the last week. While the Sensex hit an all time high of 62,245 on October 19, 2021, it has declined by over 1,400 points or 2.3 per cent since then. If FPIs pull out more funds from the Indian equities, it could lead to a deeper correction.

What are domestic fund houses and financial advisors saying?

As the premier indices have rallied strongly this calendar year and have continued with the strength over the last three months, mutual funds and financial advisors are advising investors overweight on equities to go for reallocation and reduce their exposure to equities. They, however, maintain that those who have little or no allocation to equities, should start or continue with their equity investments.

NO MONEY LEFT IN MGNREGA COFFERS; 21 STATES IN THE RED

The Centre's flagship rural employment scheme has run out of funds halfway through the financial year, and supplementary budgetary allocations will not come to the rescue for at least another



month when the next Parliamentary session begins. According to its own financial statement, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme shows a negative net balance of ₹8,686 crore. This means that payments for MGNREGA workers as well as material costs will be delayed, unless the States dip into their own funds. Activists say the Centre is condemning workers to “forced labour” by delaying wage payments at a time of economic distress. However, the Centre is now accusing many States of “artificially creating demand” for work on the ground. The MGNREGA is a demand-driven scheme, guaranteeing 100 days of unskilled work to any rural household that wants it. During last year’s COVID-19 lockdown, the scheme was ultimately given its highest budget of ₹1.11 lakh crore. This provided a critical lifeline to a record 11 crore workers. However, the scheme’s 2021-22 budget was set at just ₹73,000 crore, with the Centre arguing that the nationwide lockdown was over, and that supplementary budgetary allocations would be available if the money ran out. As on October 29, the total expenditure, including payments due had already reached ₹79,810 crore, pushing the scheme into the red. Already, 21 States show a negative net balance, with Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal faring the worst. “We are facing a situation of MGNREGA closing down halfway through the year. Who is going to absorb the cost? The poorest and most vulnerable communities, who have already been crushed by the pandemic’s impact,” said Nikhil Dey, a founder of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan. “The Government of India is, on the face of it, pushing crores of people into forced labour, as held by the SC,” added Mr. Dey. “It is somewhat early this year [to run out of funds],” admitted a senior official of the Rural Development Ministry, who did not wish to be named. “People will continue to get work. Only thing that might happen is that the payment will only be made once funds are available. But many States can provide temporary funds out of their own kitty and then once the fund is available, it can be reimbursed [by the Centre].” The official blamed the State governments for the current situation. “My apprehension is that the States are using it not as a demand driven scheme, but as a supply-led scheme. The States are asking their field authorities to artificially create demand,” said the official. Activists say the exact opposite is happening on the ground. MGNREGA data shows that 13% of households who demanded work under the scheme were not provided work.

GST SHORTFALL: CENTRE RELEASES RS/- 44K CR BACK-TO-BACK LOAN

The Centre on Thursday released the balance Rs 44,000 crore to states as loan to compensate for shortfall in Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections, taking the total amount to Rs 1.59 lakh crore this fiscal. These funds are in addition to normal GST compensation being released every two months out of cess collection. “It is expected that this release will help the states/UTs in planning their public expenditure among other things, for improving, health infrastructure and taking up infrastructure projects,” the Finance Ministry said on Thursday. The 43rd GST Council meeting on May 28, 2021, had decided that the Centre would borrow Rs 1.59 lakh crore in 2021-22 and release it to states and UTs with legislature on a back-to-back basis to meet the resource gap due to the shortfall in compensation, on account of inadequate amount collected in the GST compensation fund. This amount is as per the principles adopted for a similar facility in 2020-21, where Rs 1.10 lakh crore was released. The funding support comes at a time when many of the states are strapped for cash. While the Central government’s tax collections have become buoyant due to sharp spike in direct tax mop up, many states are on a weak revenue position. “Covid has impacted states disproportionately and many of them are now hard pressed for funds. Funding is essential at state levels to step up capital expenditure and infrastructure creation,” a senior official

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said. The move is expected to cool off yields in upcoming bonds auctions by states. "The early release of the balance amount of the back-to-back GST compensation loan to the states will help them to plan their expenditure in H2 FY2022, avoiding a bunching up at the end of the year. Moreover, it should help to compress the size of the SDL (state development loan) auctions in the immediate term, modestly cooling yields," said Aditi Nayar, chief economist, Icria. On July 15 and October 7, the Centre had released Rs 75,000 crore and Rs 40,000 crore, respectively, to the states. With the release of funds on Thursday, the total amount has reached as back-to-back loan in-lieu of GST compensation is Rs 1.59 lakh crore. The Rs 44,000 crore being released now is funded from the Government of India securities issued in the current financial year. These securities have a tenure of 5 years and are issued at a weighted average yield of 5.69 per cent. No additional market borrowing by the Central government is envisaged on account of this release. Highest amount of Rs 5,010.90 crore has been issued to Karnataka, followed by Rs 3,814 crore to Maharashtra, Rs 3,608.53 crore to Gujarat, and Rs 3,357.48 crore to Punjab, among others.

VERY MODERATE WEALTH TAX CAN GENERATE 1.6% OF GLOBAL INCOME

The bottom 50 per cent of the global population owns just 2 per cent of wealth and 8 per cent of income, while the top 10 per cent of population owns 76 per cent of total household wealth and captured 52 per cent of total income in 2021, the findings of the latest World Inequality Report 2022 showed. The report, co-authored by economist Thomas Piketty, has suggested that a "very moderate wealth tax" ranging from 1 per cent of wealth owned over \$1 million to 3 per cent for global billionaires can generate 1.6 per cent of global income. "Wealth taxation in unequal societies helps tackle extreme inequality and generate substantial revenues to invest in the future. A very moderate wealth tax would generate 1.6 per cent of global income...the average increase in the wealth of billionaires is over 9 per cent per year. So if you tax them at 3.5 per cent, it still means their wealth is going to increase in coming years...this (wealth tax) can raise significant amount of money to invest in climate investments for bottom 50 per cent of the population, in education and also in health," Lucas Chancel, Co-Director, World Inequality Lab, said Wednesday during a pre-briefing meeting of the report to be released in December. On the recent proposal of a global minimum corporate tax rate of 15 per cent, the report has said that 15 per cent global minimum rate is a progress but remains 1.5-2x lower than statutory rate. "The 15 per cent minimum corporate tax deal is going in the right direction but we still feel that 15 per cent is very low as compared to the statutory tax rate paid by low-end and middle-size companies/corporations. In most countries the (tax) rates are 15 per cent to twice that value and are also carve-outs which can reduce the amount of revenues by 20 per cent...we need to be very careful about how this 15 per cent minimum corporate tax is going to develop in practice effectively. We need to look at carve outs. We also need to always remember that 15 per cent is very low and there is also discussion on who gets to gain between the north and the south," Chancel said. As per the estimates in the report, a 15 per cent minimum corporate tax would lead to revenue gains of 83.3 billion euros in EU, 57.0 billion euros in the US, 6.1 billion euros in China and 0.5 billion euros in India (without carve-out). The global bottom 50 per cent income share remains historically low despite growth in the emerging world in the past decades. The share of global income going to top 10 per cent highest incomes at the world level has fluctuated around 50-60 per cent between 1820 and 2020 (50 per cent in 1820, 60 per cent in 1910, 56 per cent in 1980, 61 per cent in 2000, 55 per cent in 2020), while the share going to the bottom 50 per cent lowest incomes has generally been around or below 10 per cent (14 per cent in 1820, 7 per cent

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in 1910, 5 per cent in 1980, 6 per cent in 2000, 7 per cent in 2020), the report said. The top 0.1 per cent of the global population captures more income than the entire bottom 50 per cent. The average annual wealth growth rates among the poorest half of the population were between 3 per cent and 4 per cent per year between 1995 and 2021. The poorest half of the world population only captured 2.3 per cent of overall wealth growth since 1995. The top 1 per cent benefited from high growth rates (3 per cent to 9 per cent per year). This group captured 38 per cent of total wealth growth between 1995 and 2021. The share of wealth detained by the world's billionaires rose from 1 per cent of total household wealth in 1995 to nearly 3.5 per cent today, it said. The report has also put forward the trend of inequality before and after tax transfers. Some countries such as South Africa start with an extremely unequal income distribution before taxes are redistributed but in India it's still a very unequal income distribution before and after distribution of taxes.

EXIT PLAN

In its October meeting, the monetary policy committee of the RBI chose to maintain the policy status quo, keeping the benchmark repo rate at 4 per cent and continuing with its accommodative stance, presumably as long as is necessary to revive growth. But the decision was not unanimous. MPC member Jayanth Varma voted not only against continuing with the accommodative stance, but also argued in favour of raising the reverse repo rate. Concerns over how long the MPC can continue with its policy stance appear to be gaining traction. Even though the other members stuck to their earlier positions, there appears to be a shift in the tone of the commentary, with a member, Ashima Goyal, arguing that “over-stimulus as after the global financial crisis, with delay resulting in sharp adjustment, has to be avoided.” So far, the MPC has continued to attach primacy to growth considerations. In their most recent comments, most members highlighted the uneven nature of the recovery — the scarring of small business and the informal sector. According to another MPC member, Mridul Saggar, of the 404 industries for which data is available, 63.4 per cent are operating below 2018-19 levels. RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das also argued that the “informal sector is likely to take even longer to recoup as the impact of the second wave on this sector was relatively more pronounced.” But the space for continuing with its current stance appears to be receding. On the inflation front, the MPC members were cognisant of the risks, as, even though headline inflation has dipped — CPI fell to 4.35 per cent in September, down from 5.3 per cent in August — core inflation remains elevated. As Varma noted, “inflationary pressures are beginning to show signs of greater persistence than anticipated earlier”. Economists expect inflation to inch back upwards. According to the RBI's projection, it is expected to dip to 4.5 per cent in the third quarter, rising thereafter to 5.8 per cent in the fourth quarter. The withdrawal of policy support is likely to be gradual with the process playing out at multiple levels — beginning with normalisation of liquidity, which has begun, followed by a hike in the reverse repo, a shift in the stance from accommodative to neutral, culminating in a repo rate hike. However, the duration over which this plays out is uncertain. Perhaps a few more months of data will provide greater clarity over the durability of the recovery, allowing the MPC to firm up its exit plans.

‘AUDITORS MUST REPORT TO RBI ON DEVIATIONS IN REGULATED ENTITIES’

Auditors have a duty to report directly to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on matters of material significance arising from the audit of banks and other regulated entities, central bank governor

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Shaktikanta Das said. Highlighting that statutory auditors played a vital role in maintaining market confidence on audited financial statements, he said that in the banking industry, such a public role was particularly relevant for financial stability, given that banks hold public deposits. He said in a globally integrated economy, fair and impartial audit was not just a domestic concern, but also an instrument to enhance the country's reputation and credibility on a global stage. He was addressing probationers and other Indian Audit & Accounts Service officers at a conference organised by the National Academy of Audit and Accounts at Shimla on Monday. "It assumes greater significance during difficult times such as the one we are going through now due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With increasing complexity of financial markets and higher expectations from the public about efficient resource allocation, the role of audit has become even more important," the governor said. Mr. Das added that inaccurate information might lead to sub-optimal decisions or excess resource allocation, which would be neither in public interest, nor in the interest of individual stakeholders. "To overcome the problem of unreliable information, an assurance mechanism is required... Such mechanism is provided through the audit mechanism, both internal and external," he said.

FUEL AND FOOD

In just over three months, Brent crude prices have soared from under \$70 to nearly \$86 per barrel. Rising energy prices have spurred demand for bio-fuels. Crude palm oil is trading at a record 5,000 ringgits per tonne in Malaysia, from 4,200 ringgits in mid-July. Similarly, raw sugar in New York has crossed 19 cents per pound, from already elevated 17.5 cent levels three months ago. The Food and Agricultural Organisation's world food index had eased to 124.4 points in July, after touching 127.9 in May, its highest level since September 2011. But it rose again to 130 points this September, marking a 10-year-high. The same story — of renewed global price increase from July dips — has been repeated for skimmed milk powder. And the ruling benchmark Cotlook 'A' index rates of 120 cents per pound for cotton were last seen in July 2011. Simply put, commodity inflation is back. That may not be bad for producers, including farmers. Soyabean is selling at Rs 5,100-5,200 per quintal in Madhya Pradesh's Ujjain mandi, well above the government's minimum support price (MSP) of Rs 3,950. This applies also to raw un-ginned long staple cotton (Rs 7,200 versus Rs 6,025/quintal) and to some extent groundnut (Rs 5,700 versus Rs 5,550/quintal) at Rajkot in Gujarat. Basmati paddy growers in Haryana are realising Rs 3,000-plus per quintal rates in the ongoing marketing season, which is higher than the Rs 1,960 MSP for non-basmati varieties. Even international wheat prices today, at \$300-350 per tonne depending on the country of export, are above India's MSP of Rs 2,015 per quintal (\$269/tonne). But for farmers, all this isn't unqualified good news. They are paying roughly a third more for diesel than a year ago. Higher energy prices have rubbed off on fertilisers as well. Their global prices are anywhere from 10 to 13-year highs now, even as there are reports of desperate farmers raiding trucks carrying di-ammonium phosphate. Central banks, including India's, have largely been viewing the current inflation as transitory and caused by the post-Covid supply chain disruptions. Having learnt from the 2013 "taper tantrum", they wouldn't want to withdraw stimulus or close monetary spigots too quickly. But when fuel and food prices stay high for long, they feed into inflation expectations of consumers, producers and investors. All discussions about "transitory" or "core" inflation, then, become purely academic. Anchoring inflation expectations is important. The government must play its part by slashing excise duties on petrol and diesel. It can restore them later, when supply response to the vaccine-induced global demand surge would also have hopefully kicked in.

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JUSTICE ASHOK BHUSHAN IS NEW NCLAT CHAIRPERSON

OVER 19 months after the post was left vacant by the retirement of the then chairperson, Justice S J Mukhopadhaya, in March 2020, the Centre on Friday appointed retired Supreme Court Judge, Justice Ashok Bhushan, as the full-time chairperson of the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT). Justice Bhushan, who retired from the Supreme Court in July this year, has been appointed for a period of four years, or “till he attains the age of 70 years, or until further orders”, according to the government notification. The government also appointed retired Chief Justice of the Manipur High Court, Justice Ramalingam Sudhakar, as the chairperson of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), for a period of five years, or till he attains the age of 67 years, or until further orders. His appointment as the full-time chairperson of NCLT comes nearly 21 months after its first chairperson, Justice M M Kumar, retired in January 2020. On September 12, after it was pulled up by the Supreme Court, the government had appointed 11 judicial and 10 technical members to the NCLT. In its observations, the court had said the government had “emasculated” tribunals, such as the NCLT, by not appointing members. The court noted a “critical situation has arisen” due to the vacancies at the NCLT and NCLAT, with respect to completion of corporate bankruptcy proceedings. Days later, the court again pulled up the Centre for removing acting NCLAT Chairperson, Justice A I S Cheema, from his post 10 days before he was due to retire. A day later, however, the government told the Supreme Court that Justice Cheema would be allowed to complete his tenure.

REVENUE SHARING ON CONVENIENCE FEE: WHY WAS IRCTC HIT

Within 24 hours, the government withdrew its order asking the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) to share 50 per cent of its revenues collected from convenience fee from users. The decision led to correction in share price of the company on Friday morning and it fell sharply by up to 29 per cent.

What is the convenience fee and how much does IRCTC charge per ticket?

Convenience fee is charged by IRCTC as a form of service fee from users who use its internet ticket booking platform to book train or air travel tickets. A majority of the fee, however, comes from train ticket booking. For online booking of tickets till November 22, 2016, IRCTC levied a service charge or convenience fee of Rs 20 plus tax per ticket for non-air conditioned (AC) travel classes, and Rs 40 plus tax per ticket for air conditioned class tickets. For nearly three years after that, this fee was withdrawn by the Ministry of Railways as an initiative for promotion of digital transactions. On September 1, 2019, IRCTC restarted collection of convenience fee on ticket booking, charging Rs 15 plus goods and services tax (GST) per ticket on booking of non-AC tickets, and Rs 30 plus GST for AC class tickets.

How did the government directive on convenience fee sharing impact IRCTC share price?

On Thursday, after market hours, the state-run online railway ticket booking platform informed the stock exchanges that the Ministry of Railway had asked IRCTC to share in a 50-50 ratio the revenues earned from the collection of convenience fee. The decision, IRCTC said in the notification to exchanges, was to be effective November 1. IRCTC shares had ended at Rs 913.75 on Thursday. On Friday, within an hour and half of opening of the markets, IRCTC prices fell

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sharply by as much as 29 per cent to hit day's low of Rs 650.10. However, nearly two hours after the markets opened and the sharp fall in share prices, the Department of Investment and Public Asset Management said that the Ministry of Railways had decided to withdraw its decision of asking IRCTC's to share 50 per cent revenue collected from convenience fee. Following the decision, IRCTC share prices recovered sharply to trade at day's high of Rs 906.60, before stumbling back a little. At 1:05 PM, IRCTC shares were trading at Rs 856.45, which is 6.2 per cent lower compared to last day's close.

GIFT CITY A REINSURANCE HUB IN THE MAKING: IFSCA ALLOWS MORE PLAYERS

The country is set to become a reinsurance hub with the International Financial Services Centre Authority (IFSCA), India's first single regulator for the Gujarat-based International Financial Services Centre (IFSC), announcing a new liberal regulatory regime for facilitating the formation of various international and Indian insurance businesses in the Gujarat International Finance Tec-City (GIFT City). The regulations for setting up IFSC Insurance Offices (IIOs) and IFSC Insurance Intermediaries Offices (IIIOs) were notified by the IFSCA on October 22. The new facilities will help India to develop a global reinsurance hub in the country, competing with offshore financial centres like Singapore, Dubai and Hong Kong, which currently dominate the insurance business in Asia. "Even non-insurance entities can incorporate public companies in IFSC and undertake insurance or reinsurance business. Similarly, Indian insurance companies can set up subsidiaries to undertake insurance or reinsurance business as IIO," said an insurance official. Foreign intermediaries will also be allowed to set up IIOs alongside Irdai registered intermediaries like insurance brokers and corporate agents. Although IFSC offers zero tax provision for 10 years, no foreign reinsurer has set up operations in the centre till now. Global reinsurers can procure business from the region around India by setting up an operation in the GIFT City, said an insurance analyst. Under the new regulations, foreign insurers and reinsurers can set up branch offices as IIOs to undertake insurance or reinsurance business from IFSC either by setting up branches or subsidiaries. Even Indian insurance and reinsurance companies including foreign reinsurance branches (FRBs) registered with Irdai can also set up branch offices to undertake insurance or reinsurance business from IFSC. In the case of a branch, a player doesn't have to bring in any capital and with regard to subsidiaries, new insurance or reinsurance companies will require a paid-up capital (as per Insurance Act, 1938) of Rs 100 crore for insurance and Rs 200 crore for reinsurance. The new rules specify that no onshore assigned capital will be required for foreign insurers or foreign reinsurers setting up IIOs as branches. The assigned capital of \$1.5 million can be maintained in home jurisdictions. Further, there's no onshore solvency requirement for IIO in the IFSC. Also, the assigned capital solvency margin will have to be maintained in the home jurisdiction. "The new regulations have the potential of unlocking opportunities for global insurers and reinsurers. The regulatory framework is very friendly and addresses the aspirations and expectations of the players," said Satyendra Shrivastava, senior partner, Consortia Legal. The new regulations also, for the first time, allow managing general agents under a binding agreement while a delegated authority from foreign insurers or foreign reinsurers will also be able to set up an IIO.



LIFE & SCIENCE

IMPACT OF ASTEROIDS AND COMETS

Was the evolution of the Earth's atmosphere affected by asteroid, comet strikes?

Between 2.5 and 4 billion years ago it was not uncommon for asteroids or comets to hit the Earth. In fact, the largest ones, more than 9 kilometres wide, altered the chemistry of the planet's earliest atmosphere. Now, a study by U.S. researchers analysed remnants of ancient asteroids and modelled the effects of their collisions to show that the strikes took place more often than previously thought. These strikes may have delayed when oxygen started accumulating on Earth, says a Harvard University press release. The new models can help scientists understand more precisely when the planet started its path toward becoming the Earth we know today. The researchers found existing planetary bombardment models underestimate how frequently asteroids and comets would hit Earth. The new, higher collision rate suggest impactors hit the planet roughly every 15 million years, about 10 times higher than current models. The scientists realised this after analysing records of what appear to be ordinary bits of rock. They are actually ancient evidence, known as impact spherules, that formed in the fiery collisions each time large asteroids or comets struck the planet. Researchers modelled how all these impacts would have influenced the atmosphere. They essentially found that the accumulated effects of meteorite impacts by objects larger than 9 kilometres probably created an oxygen sink that sucked most of the oxygen out of the atmosphere. The findings align with the geological record and the Great Oxidation Event.

WEIGHED DOWN

Sexism remains a major obstacle for women in space industry

In 1983, when astronaut Sally Ride became the first American woman in space, a lot of the media attention around her accomplishment focussed on one question: What make-up would she use aboard the Space Shuttle Challenger? Ride recalled this in an interview soon after she had completed her first space trip: "They didn't care about how well prepared I was to operate the [Space Shuttle] arm or deploy communications satellites". Echoes of this question could be heard once again in the media focus on astronaut Wang Yaping, who is set to become the first Chinese woman to walk in space as she stays on board China's Tiangong space station for six months. An official from the China National Space Administration reportedly said on the state television network, "Female astronauts may be in better condition after putting on make-up." And there's been a lot of chatter about the fact that Wang has a five-year-old child — her two male colleagues were not asked about their families — and about how she would manage her menstrual cycle in space. Over 50 years have passed since Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in space and yet, so much of the curiosity, when it comes to female astronauts, remains centred on their bodies and the traditional duties they're expected to fulfil, even as, professionally, they match their male colleagues, step-for-step. The number of women in the space industry remains abysmally low: According to the UN, only 11 per cent of astronauts so far have been women. The skewed sex ratio perpetuates a vicious cycle, making it harder for women to enter this field, as when the first-ever all-women spacewalk was cancelled in 2019 because there were not enough space suits to

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fit them, or the fact that there is significantly less data on the effects of microgravity on women's bodies. The weightlessness experienced in space may be a "great equaliser", as Ride once said, but on terra firma, gender equality remains a distant dream.

SPARE THE POTATO

Potato is meant to be hearty and heavy. Please don't reduce it to a mere milk substitute

The potato has been generous like few foods. For millennia, this humble, unprepossessing tuber flourished in the inhospitable terrain of the Andes, feeding the civilisations that rose and fell on its volatile slopes. It then crossed the cold Atlantic to stave off hunger in the Old World and here, just like in its South American homeland, it was made to do the work of 10 crops. It has given bulk and bite to meat-deprived pies and curries and added creaminess to stews and soups. It has been mashed to replace bread, brewed to make alcohol and roasted and fried to a crispness that no other food — whether it comes from animal or plant — can hope to match. Now, it has been used to make something called potato milk. Veg of Lund, a Swedish plant-based company, has developed what it claims is the world's first plant-based "milk" made from potatoes. The company claims that its potato milk is the most sustainable of all plant-based milk — 56 times more water-efficient than almond milk and twice as efficient in land use as compared to oat milk. In a market that is always on the lookout for the next big plant-based substitute, the idea of "milk" squeezed out of a potato may just catch on. According to a recent trends report published by a UK-based retail chain, potato milk is set to be one of the hottest new foods in 2022. In view of the climate crisis, the urge to give up all animal-based foods is laudable. Given that food systems are designed to make us more dependent on animal proteins, it is perhaps even heroic. But, some things are sacred and the potato is one of these. It is meant to be hearty and heavy, shoring up the most meagre meal with its abundance of carbohydrates. What an ignominy to reduce something like this to a mere milk substitute.

NEW LIGHT ON HOW INSULIN SIGNALLING AFFECTS TISSUE HEALTH

Inputs from the fasted insulin levels created a memory that improved the fed insulin inputs, finds a study

In a study that examined the effect of insulin on liver cells taken from mice, researchers have uncovered how insulin amounts shape the flow of information through the signalling network. The study also provides insights into the degree to which major and minor components are important in keeping this signalling process intact. This knowledge can direct further studies to identify targets for therapy.

Larger role of insulin

Insulin is a hormone secreted by the b cells of the pancreas. It is commonly associated with an ability to regulate glucose metabolism. However, later studies (from around 1949 until recently) have shown it plays a larger role and helps in growth and maintenance of tissues. Despite years of study, fundamental details as to how differential amounts of insulin impact cells are unknown. An important mechanism in the cell is insulin signalling, which is a series of biochemical reactions that convey information about availability of insulin and the necessity to regulate the glucose in

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the blood. There are two main pathways for insulin signalling, named AKT and ERK, which together balance metabolism and growth. These specifically control storage of glucose in the liver and also stimulate glucose transport in skeletal muscle and fat. Abnormalities in insulin signalling thus impact health and survival itself of organisms and the study addresses an important piece of the puzzle.

Study design

The study was done on liver cells isolated from mice. The experimental design mimicked both normal levels of insulin, as in a healthy individual, and abnormal levels of insulin that is associated with pathophysiology. "This was achieved by treating cells with (a) low fasted concentrations of insulin (b) high fed concentrations of insulin (c) very high hyperinsulinemic levels (d) pulsatile fasted insulin followed by fed insulin and (e) continuous or repeat exposure to fed insulin levels," says Namrata Shukla from Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), Mumbai, the first author of a paper on this work published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. The study was a collaboration between TIFR Mumbai, TIFR Hyderabad and Indian Institute of Technology Bombay. Ullas Kolthur-Seetharaman from TIFR (Mumbai and Hyderabad), who led the work, explains that previous studies employed different, often very high amounts of insulin to investigate changes in signalling. While these have revealed the components, the network properties and robustness of signaling has not been assessed by varying insulin inputs. "Our study employs multiple regimes of insulin, both normal and abnormal, which together have illustrated how changes in levels of insulin is able to shape the flow of information within cells," he says. The study found that the inputs from the fasted insulin levels created a memory that improved the fed insulin inputs. "It also elucidates the detrimental impact of constant high insulin as in the case of uncontrolled feeding habits, without a fasting phase, and its effects on signaling molecules that govern tissue maintenance and growth," says Prof Kolthur-Seetharaman.

Future interventions

"Finally, it identifies potential novel regulatory components and parameters whose modulation could lead to better therapeutic interventions in the future to reduce tissue damage, beyond the usual impact on blood glucose," he adds. Ranjith Padinhateeri and Shantanu Kadam from IIT Bombay collaborated with the TIFR group on the mathematical modelling or simulation part of the study.

MORE STUDIES SHOW THE SUPERIORITY OF HYBRID IMMUNITY

Differences between the memory B cells triggered by infection, vaccination might also underlie the heightened responses of hybrid immunity

Yet another study has shown that a combination of natural infection with a single dose of vaccine provides greater immunity than either natural infection without vaccination or full vaccination in infection-naïve individuals. People without prior infection but fully vaccinated with the Pfizer or AstraZeneca vaccine showed a decline in neutralising antibodies over a period of three to seven months. But the decline was much less in vaccinated people with prior infection. Though 500 health-care workers with or without prior infection were vaccinated, those with hybrid immunity — natural immunity from an infection combined with the immunity provided by the vaccine —

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had a higher and more durable neutralising antibody response. The hybrid immunity offers stronger protection than just infection or full vaccination alone.

Neutralising antibodies

The study, posted in the preprint server medRxiv on October 19 (preprints are yet to be peer-reviewed), has found that in 500 health-care workers, the neutralising antibodies were twofold more in people immunised with Pfizer vaccine following natural infection compared with people immunised with Pfizer vaccine but without prior infection. In the case of people vaccinated with AstraZeneca following natural infection, the neutralising antibodies were threefold more than in vaccinated people with no prior infection.

Early evidence

One of the early evidences of hybrid immunity being better than full vaccination in people without a prior infection came in end-April. The results posted in preprint server medRxiv found that vaccination led to increased levels of neutralizing antibodies against variants in people who had been previously infected compared with those without a prior infection. An earlier study posted on August 25 in the preprint server medRxiv found that compared with vaccine-induced immunity from two doses of Pfizer vaccine, natural immunity conferred longer lasting and stronger protection against infection, symptomatic disease and hospitalisation caused by the Delta variant in Israel. But naturally infected individuals who were given a single dose of the vaccine showed additional protection against the Delta variant; the protection level conferred by hybrid immunity was even higher than the one offered by natural infection or full vaccination. Soon after vaccines were rolled out, researchers began to notice higher levels of antibodies in people who were naturally infected prior to vaccination compared with vaccinated people without prior infection. In short, the hybrid immunity from natural infection followed by vaccination provided superior immunity than either natural infection alone or full vaccination.

Contrary point

However, a study published recently in the journal Science observed that “boosting of pre-existing immunity from prior infection with vaccination mainly resulted in a transient benefit to antibody titers with little-to-no long-term increase in cellular immune memory”. There is a growing body of evidence that protection from natural immunity can be potent, and researchers are beginning to acknowledge this. However, scientific consensus about the exact strength or durability of the natural immunity post natural infection is not known. Also, the strength and durability of natural immunity might not be uniform and might vary between people depending on the nature and duration of infection (asymptomatic or symptomatic) and severity of disease (mild, moderate or severe). “Antibody levels are really variable after recovering from infections, and those at the lower end of the spectrum might be more susceptible to reinfections,” Deepta Bhattacharya, Professor of immunology at the University of Arizona told NBC News. “But after a single vaccine in people who have recovered from COVID-19, antibodies skyrocket up, including those that neutralize variants of concern.” Researchers at Rockefeller University in New York City looked at how different types of immunity would protect against potential variants. They modified the coronavirus spike protein such that it contained 20 naturally occurring mutations. In the lab, the modified spike protein was tested against antibodies from people belonging to three groups —



those who have been fully vaccinated without prior infection, people with prior infection but not vaccinated, and people with hybrid immunity. They found the modified spike proteins were able to evade the antibodies from the first two groups but not antibodies from people with hybrid immunity. The study is posted in the preprint server BioRxiv. In August, CDC published a study in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) where they showed that unvaccinated people without previous infection are twice as likely to be reinfected compared with vaccinated people with a prior infection. This study prompted the CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky to urge all Americans to take a vaccine even if previously infected. “If you have had COVID-19 before, please still get vaccinated,” she appealed.

Immunological edge

The immunological advantage from hybrid immunity arises mostly from memory B cells. While the bulk of antibodies after infection or vaccination decline after a short while, the memory B cells, which evolve in the lymph nodes, get triggered on subsequent infection or vaccination. So when people who recovered from COVID-19 are re-exposed to the spike protein, the memory B cells are capable of churning out highly potent antibodies. “Differences between the memory B cells triggered by infection and those triggered by vaccination — as well as the antibodies they make — might also underlie the heightened responses of hybrid immunity. Infection and vaccination expose the spike protein to the immune system in vastly different ways,” Dr. Michel Nussenzweig, an immunologist at the Rockefeller University in New York City told Nature. Dr. Nussenzweig’s team isolated hundreds of memory B cells from people at various time points after infection and vaccination. They found that unlike after full vaccination, antibodies produced by natural infection continued to grow in potency and their breadth against variants for a year after infection. According to Nature, unlike after vaccination, the memory B cells formed after natural infection are more likely to make antibodies that block immune-evading variants. But two studies have found that memory B cells in the fully vaccinated people without prior infection are growing in number and gaining mutations up to 12 weeks after the second dose, which allows the B cells to recognise and neutralise variants.

MIND GAMES

Mental health issues, long considered taboo in sports, are slowly coming into the open, and mind coaches and psychologists are becoming a part of the sporting ecosystem in India as well

At one time, it would have been taboo. But American gymnast Simone Biles, tennis star Naomi Osaka, cricketers Ben Stokes and Chris Gayle publicly announced that they would prioritise their mental health over professional sport. It was a big step. Over the years, sportspersons have grappled with mental health issues in silence, fearing they will lose their place in the team. Fearing they will be written off as ‘weak’. Fearing they will not be considered for the big matches. Medium-fast bowler Chetan Sharma faced harsh criticism for years after conceding a last-ball six to Pakistan’s Javed Miandad in an ODI in Sharjah in 1986. He confesses, “I would wake up with nightmares of that terrible moment.” He faced his demons alone. Hockey goalkeeper Mir Ranjan Negi, known for his excellent performances, was a shattered man following the 7-1 drubbing by Pakistan in the 1982 Asian Games final in New Delhi. He not only lost his position in the team but



also lost close friends. "I was a lonely man," he recalls. He was tormented by memories of that afternoon at the National Stadium. It impacted his career and he was never the same player again. Sportspeople compete in a crushingly challenging arena even when they are not in the best state of mind: "It means you begin by conceding ground to the opponent much before the competition has begun," says cricketer Yuvraj Singh, who battled a life-threatening illness to emerge as player of the tournament at the 2011 World Cup. Yuvraj is candid as he talks of the fear of failure. "It's common in every sport; you keep getting the feeling 'what if you fail?' You need to address it and understand it as an important aspect of mental health. But it is a topic that's not discussed because the players are just supposed to go out there and perform."

Stresses of sport

Chaitanya Sridhar confirms this. "Mental health is a neglected subject in Indian sport and swept under the carpet," says the physician, who describes herself as a 'holistic sports psychologist and organisational performance consultant'. She has trained Indian athletes in the past three Olympics and also works with cricketers. "Mental health is the psychological and emotional well-being of an individual. How does it impact performance or day-to-day life? Are you enjoying what you're doing? Do you suffer from anxiety or depression? Do you have suicidal ideation? There are so many aspects to it," she says. Most athletes know that ups and downs are part of sport, but how do they deal with it? "One chapter, one page, is how you deal with it," says Dr. Sridhar. "Does the athlete need a break? Are you burnt out? Are you overworked? Much depends on the person." Obviously, players like Kohli and Nadal are always under intense scrutiny, so downtime can be stressful. "When down, you hold a mirror to them to show what they have achieved," says the doctor. "Sometimes taking a break can be relaxing. Sadly, our society expects robotism, but you have to learn to switch off." As Indian sport struggles to find a spot in the spotlight, it is only now beginning to address this vital aspect of training. Sports psychology might have been around in developed countries for decades, but it's still fairly new and untested here. For Ramji Srinivasan, a former head of strength and conditioning for the national cricket team, mental health is a subject close to his heart. "It's easy to be in total control of the body," he says, "but to control the mind and tune it to success is a different ball game." He blames the Indian ecosystem. "It prevents people from coming out of their shell and expressing themselves," he says. "They are shunned or ridiculed or held responsible for team or individual failure." Before the Tokyo Olympics, some shooters as well as table tennis and badminton players had sought counselling, made available to them through the Target Olympic Podium Scheme. The idea was to overcome 'tournament anxiety'. One Olympics participant says, "I had concerns about my preparation. There were first-timers who needed guidance. A mind coach is now an integral part of training." Indian sportspeople discussing health issues that impact performance and seeking help is a recent development. Women athletes, for instance, would rarely disclose their menstrual cycle to coaches. Some athletes have conditions such as bipolar disorder, others are battling divorce and breakups. They are now beginning to share worries and personal issues.

Wake-up call

Ace table tennis player Sharath Kamal says, "Mental health is being given importance now because there is awareness. Earlier, we did not know who to approach. When you compete professionally, it is tough. There can be extraneous pressures too. I have a mind coach to guide me." Yuvraj echoes this, "I think a sports psychologist is a must. I remember [coaches] Gary Kirsten and Paddy Upton



talking to us about mental health. Now the quarantine has added to the stress. There is a big impact on the minds of the players, going from bubble to bubble; a huge toll on mental health. And I say this from experience.” In one sense, the pandemic might have been a blessing because it has compelled the sporting ecosystem to take notice. The forced isolation made people confront mental health issues. “Wellness goes beyond the absence of mental illness,” says Delhi-based psychologist Divya Jain. “It encompasses emotional and social well-being. It impacts our thoughts, feelings and behaviours, our capacity to cope with the challenges of everyday life, and the ability to reach our full potential. While sport psychology interventions largely focus on performance enhancement, personal wellbeing needs to be prioritised too.” The pandemic has placed unprecedented restrictions on players. “The inner struggles that athletes have endured during this time will probably not be comprehended even by sportspersons themselves,” says Olympic shooter Suma Shirur. “The public only knows about the concept of the bio-bubble through cricket. But what about other sports? There have been equal restrictions on mobility and social interaction. Sometimes they’ve been confined to their hotel or hostel rooms for a week or more. All this affects the athlete’s mental health, especially as they approach a competition,” says Shirur.

Euphoria and isolation

For athletes, as for any individual, interacting with other people is important. “They need a sense of coming together, of connecting,” says Dr. Sridhar. “They must build new routines that help them keep in touch with family and friends.” “You can go mad,” says a top cricketer, who takes books with him to stay sane in the bio bubble. It’s a strange dichotomy — when athletes emerge from the isolation of a bubble, they have to instantly engage with training, practising intensely and peaking at the right time. The euphoria of success is often followed by isolation again. “Fear of failure, fear of success, the pressure to perform, everything affects sportspersons,” says Dr. Sridhar. This is where the sporting ecosystem has to kick in. Athletes must be empowered, their mental strength bolstered. It’s here that the role of the sports psychologist becomes critical. As Jain says, “The focus needs to be on building mental health literacy, encouraging help-seeking behaviour, creating social support networks, and providing access to treatment.” The lack of access to experts has been a stumbling block. Seeking help has been considered shameful. “The fear of stigma is rife in sports because we expect our athletes to be ‘strong’ and larger than life,” says Jain. “But if we want players to achieve both well-being and peak performance, mental health needs to be given the same importance as physical health.” Indian sport today needs the right people, both in management and as support staff. Till that happens, athletes will not be able to fight from within the system or depend on the system; they will always have to fall back on their own efforts and resources. Slowly, a sense of the magnitude of the issue is beginning to seep through. Dealing with mental health has now become an integral part of every national sports federation. Mind coaches and sports psychologists are in demand. The Board of Control for Cricket in India and the Sports Authority of India (SAI) have both accepted that sportspersons have to be given space and accommodated during tough times. Officials are encouraging players to talk about problems, whether depression, fear of failure, or relationship issues. SAI has been organising mind-strengthening sessions with experts, and players have willingly shared their inner demons. Thanks to the likes of Osaka, Biles, Stokes and Gayle, there’s hope that Indian players, too, will not punish themselves or push themselves over the limit. And that talking about mental health will no longer be taboo.



WHY FACEBOOK WANTS TO REBRAND ITSELF FOR THE 'METAVERSE'

Facebook metaverse: What exactly is the metaverse and why is Facebook so invested in it? More importantly, does the metaverse even exist?

Facebook plans to rename itself. And the change could be announced at the company's annual Connect Conference on October 28 or earlier, according to a report by The Verge. For Facebook, the 'rebranding' isn't just about a switch in the company name but a reflection of the company's growing ambitions and focus on a new area: metaverse. Facebook has already announced plans to invest \$50 million as part of its efforts to create a 'responsible' metaverse. It also plans to create nearly new 10,000 jobs in Europe as part of its 'metaverse' ambitions. But what exactly is the metaverse and why is Facebook so invested in it? More importantly, does the metaverse even exist? We explain below.

What is this about Facebook renaming itself?

It was The Verge that first reported on Facebook's plans to rename itself. Just like how Alphabet is now the parent company of Google, we could see a new parent company, under which Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and others operate. Facebook's attempt to rename is to align itself with the focus on building the metaverse, which CEO Mark Zuckerberg clearly sees as becoming a reality sooner or later. And Facebook, which also owns the Oculus VR gaming platform, doesn't want to be left behind in the race to be a part of the metaverse. It also signals that Facebook wants to be known for more than just social media. The timing would also seem right, considering the negative spotlight that Facebook is under, with the latest whistleblower revelations just adding to the company's problems. And Facebook is under regulatory scanner in most countries, including its home market of the US. But there are larger ambitions at play here, and that's why we need to talk about metaverse in the context of Facebook.

Where does the idea of metaverse come from?

The idea follows from the cult science fiction novel Snow Crash by Neal Stephenson published in 1992, where the phrase metaverse was first used. The novel is set in a dystopian world where governments have ceded power to private corporations and deal with many aspects of the modern world be it virtual reality, digital currency, etc. Stephenson's book has found a god-like reverence among Silicon Valley leaders. But the idea of the metaverse has also been playing out in works such as Ready Player One by Ernest Cline (2011 novel, which later became a movie in 2018), and of course, there's the Matrix as well. There are also several essays on the internet each trying to explain what the metaverse really is or what it can be. VC investor Matthew Ball actually has a nine-part series on his blog, in addition to an introduction to the metaverse essay, which is a great primer for anyone who wants to dive deep into the concept.

What exactly is metaverse?

There can be many complicated answers to this questions. But a simplistic way to look at the metaverse is as a parallel, virtual, world where users can have different identities, possessions and characters. In the complex explanation, Metaverse is supposed to be the post-Internet world, a decentralised computing platform of sorts if you will, which is continuous, and live. It is an



entirely digital economy, and the way most Silicon valley intellectuals see this, metaverse exists both in the digital and physical realm. Interoperability is key to metaverse's success, according to Ball's essay. Yes, virtual reality would be an element of this metaverse, but the idea goes beyond just donning a VR headset and starting to play a game. According to Ball, the metaverse does not reset or pause or end, but "continues indefinitely." Metaverse is not something that just one company can build. Nor is Facebook the only one working on this. Epic Games, the creator of Fortnite, has big plans for the metaverse using its unreal engine. In fact, Fortnite already has many elements which would conform to the idea such as live events, its own currency, etc.

How will the metaverse really work?

Digital spaces, Virtual Reality games, a virtual world, or even just a game like Fortnite is not the metaverse, according to Ball, though he acknowledges that Fortnite does have elements of the latter. For instance, Fortnite recently held a 'music experience' where upcoming artists were able to have their interactive experiences with their musical sets inside the game. So the game sort of allows other brands and creators to showcase their products to players. The metaverse is being envisioned as a new world order really, where your services could be offered virtually in exchange for other virtual assets, or Cryptocurrencies. The way to look at it is that your existence will be enmeshed with the digital world in a much deeper, complex way. On one level it does sound dystopic and most examples in popular fiction where the virtual and physical world have merged live up to that image. Because everything and everyone is supposed to be a part of this, interoperability will be key. In order to ensure that the metaverse functions smoothly, it would require a rewriting of the current rules as they are for most of the internet services and functions, according to Ball.

What is Facebook's plan with the metaverse?

The metaverse is critical for Facebook's future and it is not hard to imagine why. A digital world where we spend most of our time interacting with friends, where virtual assets have higher importance, where the rules will be entirely different. Of course, Facebook would want this. Plus Facebook has its own Oculus VR gaming platform, which could prove to be a gateway into this metaverse. According to Facebook's own definition, found in its news announcement, the metaverse will let users hang out with people who are not in the same physical space. "You'll be able to hang out with friends, work, play, learn, shop, create, and more. It's not necessarily about spending more time online — it's about making the time you do spend online more meaningful," the company wrote. The definition is rather simplistic, compared to how the metaverse has been theorised by others. Facebook also admits that the metaverse won't be "built overnight." and many of the products will "only be fully realised in the next 10-15 years." But Facebook says it needs to work on the questions of how the metaverse will be built. The social media giant says it wants to help build the metaverse "responsibly". In September, it announced the XR Programs and Research Fund, which is a two-year \$50 million "investment in programmes and external research" where it will partner with the "industry civil rights groups, governments, nonprofits, and academic institutions to determine how to build these technologies responsibly."



FB WATCHED AS TRUMP IGNITED HATE IN AMERICA

The reports of hateful and violent posts on Facebook started pouring in on the night of May 28 last year, soon after then-President Donald Trump sent a warning on social media that looters in Minneapolis would be shot. It had been three days since Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on the neck of George Floyd for more than eight minutes until the 46-year-old Black man lost consciousness, showing no signs of life. A video taken by a bystander had been viewed millions of times online. Protests had taken over Minnesota's largest city and would soon spread throughout cities across America. But it wasn't until after Trump posted about Floyd's death that the reports of violence and hate speech increased "rapidly" on Facebook across the country, an internal company analysis of the ex-president's social media post reveals. "These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd and I won't let that happen," Trump wrote at 9:53 a.m. on May 28 from his Twitter and Facebook accounts. "Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts the shooting starts!" The former president has since been suspended from both Twitter and Facebook. Leaked Facebook documents provide a first-hand look at how Trump's social media posts ignited more anger in an already deeply divided country that was eventually lit "on fire" with reports of hate speech and violence across the platform. Facebook's internal discussions were revealed in disclosures made to the Securities and Exchange Commission and provided to Congress in redacted form by former Facebook employee-turned-whistleblower Frances Haugen's legal counsel. Hate speech and violence reports had been mostly limited to the Minneapolis region after Floyd's death, the documents reveal. "However, after Trump's post on May 28, situations really escalated across the country," according to the memo, published on June 5 of last year. The internal analysis shows a five-fold increase in violence reports on Facebook, while complaints of hate speech tripled in the days following Trump's post. By June 2, "we can see clearly that the entire country was basically 'on fire,'" a Facebook employee wrote of the increase in hate speech and violence reports in the June 5 memo. Facebook says it's impossible to separate how many of the hate speech reports were driven by Trump's post itself or the controversy over Floyd's death. But Trump continued to use his Facebook account, which more than 32 million follow, to fire up his supporters throughout much of the remainder of his presidency. "Facebook really benefited from Trump and Trump's ability to draw attention and engagement through outrage," Mercieca said. "They wanted Trump to keep going on."

DIGITAL DEMONS

Facebook deploys hardly any resources in India to tackle misinformation. This must change

Since 2016, at least, Facebook has been under the scanner in the US for its alleged role in encouraging fake news, to the extent of affecting — and, in effect, subverting — elections, promoting hate speech and emboldening prejudice. In the dock before the US Congress, the social media giant spends 87 per cent of its global budget earmarked for tackling misinformation in North America — where only 10 per cent of its users reside. Now, for the first time, leaked internal reports have made it clear that the issues that plague social media in the US are also true for India, the company's largest market, with 340 million users. Among the cache of internal documents accessed by Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen, reported by The New York Times, several



refer to India. In one instance, a Facebook researcher created an account as recently as February 2019 to see what it was like using the app in Kerala. The researcher simply liked and followed the pages and people the algorithm recommended. The report on the experience said: “The test user’s News Feed has become a near constant barrage of polarising nationalist content, misinformation, and violence and gore.” Other reports show how bots (AI) and fake accounts tied to political parties and cultural organisations tried to spread fake news, ostensibly to subvert elections. And in some cases, Facebook did little — if anything — to curb reported instances of hate speech against minority communities. Speaking to this paper, a Facebook spokesperson said that the internal reports “led to a deeper, more rigorous analysis” of its recommendation system in India. The assurances by Facebook carry little water. Given the incongruity in the resources it deploys in its first market (the US) and its largest one (India), it is clear that the well-being of some users and geographies matters more than others. Most importantly, for over half a decade, in country after country, Facebook Inc has spoken of doing more to protect values of liberal, constitutional democracy and not allowing its platforms to be used to incite violence — in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, for example — but only after reports of its apparently cavalier and negligent behaviour came to light. It must, going forward, be more transparent and proactive in addressing the fundamentals of its algorithms and business models, which can clearly cause social harm. The onus, however, is not on the social media giant alone. Political parties and their proxies — groups representing narrow community interests — have used the platform to great effect for their own ends. In practice, their devotion to evidence-based discourse, to a digital public sphere that is not vitriolic and polarising, is often visible only in its glaring absence. For impartial and reasonable regulation of the digital sphere, the political class, too, must be willing to sacrifice the quick gains it has reaped on social media, sometimes at the expense of the guiding principles of constitutional democracy.

HERE IS HOW YOUTUBE RECOMMENDATIONS WORK

It is quite hard for users to come out of YouTube watching just one video. That is the power of YouTube’s recommendation engine which suggests what users should watch in the first place and they what they should watch next. “Today, Recommendations drive a significant amount of the overall viewership on YouTube, even more than channel subscriptions or search. And, we are thinking about it in a responsible way. Our goal is to help connect viewers to high-quality information by minimising the chances of them seeing problematic content, explained Cristos Goodrow, VP Engineering, YouTube in a recent call. He said YouTube’s goal was to have views of borderline content from recommendations kept below 0.5% of overall views on YouTube.

So how does, the recommendation engine on the world’s most popular video platform work?

Recommendations were originally built on the simple principle that it should help people find the videos they want to watch and give them value. Users now encounter recommendations at two places — one on the homepage as they enter YouTube which is a mix of content based on past viewing and subscriptions as well as latest news. Then they also see recommendations in the “Up Next” panel as they are watching a video.

What decides the YouTube algorithm for recommendations?



YouTube tries to predict what a user would like to see next based on what they usually like to watch, based on their own preferences and interests. It does not use connections from the social network to recommend what to watch next. YouTube takes signals from a mix of user behaviours which are strong indicators that they like a video. So clicks on videos, watchtime and shares are taken as good cues. Along with these, YouTube also measures “valued watchtime” using user surveys that ask them to rate a watched video on a scale of one to five.

Can these recommendations be switched off?

Yes, when users delete their watch history they also disable personalised recommendations in the process. Removing a certain video from watch history also pauses recommendations linked to that video.

What is borderline content and how does YouTube keep it off recommendations?

Since 2011, YouTube has limited low-quality content from being widely viewed via recommendations. In 2015, it started taking steps to demote “sensationalistic tabloid content” on the homepage. Within a year, YouTube was able to predict “the likelihood of a video to include minors in risky situations” and started removing those from recommendations. In recent years, YouTube has been keeping “problematic misinformation and borderline content —that is content that comes close to, but doesn’t quite violate our Community Guidelines” out of recommendations. The platform does this by using classifiers to identify whether a video is “authoritative” or “borderline” with the help of human evaluators placed across the world.

How does YouTube factor in languages while recommending videos?

Interestingly, Goodrow told The Indian Express that “the recommendation system in general, doesn’t have a notion of language”. He elaborated: “Most of the recommendations start or are based on what we call code, watching videos that get watched again. This tends to ensure that that videos of the same language, get recommended together. Or if people speak only one language they mostly only get videos in that language.” This means there’s nothing in particular that’s done to sort of filter or determine what are the languages that a particular user speaks with respect to recommendations. “It’s really due to just the frequency of two videos being watched together.”

How does YouTube recommend videos when a user is in incognito mode?

Goodrow says in such a situation they “usually don’t have much information to go on”. In such a case they base recommendations based on the devices and what is popular in your location. “At that time we try to ensure that there is some diversity.”

How does YouTube handle recommendations for search queries?

When users are searching for a news event, YouTube uses the top shelf to showcase news from authoritative and trustworthy sources. This also means content from untrustworthy sources are demoted and further down in the results.



TRIGONOPTERUS CORONA: A BEETLE SPECIES NAMED AFTER CORONAVIRUS

Beetle species named after coronavirus. Before that, insects called *P. coronavirus*, *A. quarentnus*, *S. covida*.

On the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, museum scientists have discovered 28 new species of beetles. The species, all of which measure 2-3 mm, are described in the journal *Zookeys*. One of them has been named *Trigonopterus corona*. This reflects the large impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on this project, Pensoft Publishers, which brings out the journal, said in a blog spot. And it is not the only insect species to be named after the pandemic. In April, a new species of caddisfly (a moth-like insect) was collected near a stream in Kosovo by a team of scientists, and named *Potamophylax coronavirus* (*Biodiversity Data Journal*). The same month, out of six new species of Brazilian wasps described in the *Journal of Hymenoptera Research*, one was named *Allorhagas quarentenus*, a reference to the quarantine, which occurred while the authors were describing the species. And earlier this month, out of five new wasp species discovered in Mexico, scientists named one *Stethantyx covida* (*Zookeys*).

THE GLASGOW CLIMATE TEST (ANTÓNIO GUTERRES - SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS)

G20 leaders in particular need to deliver

The climate crisis is a code red for humanity. World leaders will soon be put to the test at the UN Climate Conference, known as COP26, in Glasgow. Their actions — or inactions — will show their seriousness about addressing this planetary emergency. The warning signs are hard to miss: temperatures everywhere are reaching new highs; biodiversity is reaching new lows; and oceans are warming, acidifying and choking with plastic waste. Increasing temperatures will make vast stretches of our planet dead zones for humanity by this century's end. The *Lancet* just described climate change as the “defining narrative of human health” in the years to come — a crisis defined by widespread hunger, respiratory illness, deadly disasters and infectious disease outbreaks.

An achievable target

Despite these alarm bells ringing at fever pitch, we see new evidence in the latest UN reports that governments' actions so far simply do not add up to what is needed. Recent new announcements for climate action are welcome and critical — but even so, our world is on track for calamitous global temperature rises well above 2°C. This is a far cry from the 1.5°C target to which the world agreed under the Paris Agreement — a target that science tells us is the only sustainable pathway for our world. This target is achievable if we can reduce global emissions by 45% compared to 2010 levels this decade, if we can achieve global net zero by 2050, and if world leaders arrive in Glasgow with ambitious and verifiable 2030 targets, and new, concrete policies to reverse this disaster. G20 leaders in particular need to deliver. The time has passed for diplomatic niceties. If governments, especially G20 governments, do not lead this effort, we are headed for terrible human suffering. But all countries need to realise that the old, carbon-burning model of development is a death sentence for our planet. We need decarbonisation now, across every sector in every country. We need to shift subsidies from fossil fuels to renewable energy, and tax



pollution, not people. We need to put a price on carbon, and channel that towards resilient infrastructures and jobs. And we need to phase-out coal — by 2030 in OECD countries and 2040 in all others. Increasing numbers of governments have pledged to stop financing coal; private finance needs to do the same, urgently.

Everyone has a role to play

People rightly expect their governments to lead. But we all have a responsibility to safeguard our collective future. Businesses need to reduce their climate impact, and fully and credibly align their operations and financial flows to a net zero future. No more excuses; no more greenwashing. Investors must do the same. They should join front runners like the net zero asset owners' alliance, and the UN's own pension fund, which met its 2021 carbon reduction investment objectives ahead of time and above its target, with a 32% reduction this year. Individuals in every society need to make better, more responsible choices in what they eat, how they travel, and what they buy. And young people need to keep doing what they're doing: demanding action from their leaders and keeping them accountable. Throughout, we need global solidarity to help all countries make this shift. Developing countries are grappling with debt and liquidity crises. They need support. Public and multilateral development banks must significantly increase their climate portfolios and intensify their efforts to help countries transition to net zero, resilient economies. The developed world must urgently meet its commitment of at least \$100 billion in annual climate finance for developing countries. Donors and multilateral development banks need to allocate at least half their climate finance towards adaptation and resilience. The UN was founded to build consensus for action against the greatest threats facing humanity. But rarely have we faced a crisis like this one – a truly existential crisis that, if not addressed, threatens not only us, but future generations. There is one path forward. A 1.5°C future is the only viable future for humanity.

IN GLASGOW, ALL EYES ON 2030 (D. RAGHUNANDAN IS WITH THE DELHI SCIENCE FORUM, A CONSTITUENT OF THE ALL- INDIA PEOPLES SCIENCE NETWORK)

COP26 must focus sharply on reducing emissions till 2030, rather than on net zero 2050, which is too distant a goal

The stage is set for the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow, starting October 31. Major preparatory conferences and bilateral meetings have been held to persuade countries to raise their emission reduction commitments from the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) under the Paris Agreement. Some positive outcomes have been achieved. Yet, many high-emitter countries are woefully short of the emissions reductions required by 2030 to restrict global temperature rise to “well below 2°C” or the now de facto goal of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. The loudest buzz now, however, is around net zero emissions by 2050 i.e., greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions equalling absorption by sinks such as forests, even though the substance is much less than the slogan suggests.

Net zero mirage

Media reports and commentary in India and abroad greeted the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released in August 2021 with shock and awe, but the revealing scientific data were glossed over. Far from emphasising net zero alone, AR6



emphasised that to keep temperature rise within 1.5°C, global emissions should be reduced by 45% from 2010 levels by 2030, on the way to net zero 2050. Importantly, in the net zero drumbeats spurred on by the U.S. and the UN Secretary General, the foundational principle of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which is common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), has been forgotten. Developed countries, responsible for over 75% of accumulated atmospheric GHGs causing climate change, should shoulder most of the burden for reducing emissions, while developing countries should do what they can, with technological and financial assistance from the former. So, if the goal is global net zero emissions by 2050, all countries cannot be obliged to reach that goal by the same year. CBDR would imply that developed countries should reach net zero by, say, 2035-40, while developing countries can get there later. Net zero 2050, as currently posed, is at best a distracting message and at worst deliberately diverts attention away from the urgent 2030 target that COP26 should focus on. The net zero 2050 target is also no proverbial silver bullet, as clearly shown by numbers put out in the UNFCCC Synthesis Report on the updated NDCs, released in September 2021.

2030 targets critical

One hundred and thirteen parties out of 194 submitted updated NDCs by end-July 2021. The UN NDC report tells us that even accounting for these, global emissions in 2030 are expected to be 16.3% above the 2010 level, whereas the IPCC has called for 2030 emissions to be 45% less from 2010 levels for the 1.5°C goal. The report therefore calls for “a significant increase in the level of ambition of NDCs” till 2030. Several large emitters have announced deeper emission cuts than in the Paris Agreement. The U.K. and the European Union have raised their targets to a significant 68% and 55%, respectively, compared with 1990 levels by 2030. The U.S. is still lagging behind, even as U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry tours the world pushing other countries for deeper emission cuts. The U.S. has now promised net zero emissions by 2050 compared to the 80% reduction that it had promised earlier. The Biden administration has also promised to reduce emissions by 50–52% below 2005 levels by 2030. This is grossly insufficient as the U.S. is the world’s second largest emitter, and the 2005 baseline makes its commitment considerably lower than those of the EU, the U.K. and others using the Kyoto 1990 baseline. Others standing in the way of rapid reductions are Russia, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro ravaging the Amazon forests, and China, the world’s largest emitter, whose relentless push to add maximum infrastructure, industrial and power-generation capacities before peaking in 2030, may use up much of the cumulative global emissions available for 1.5°C. The gravity of the situation may be better appreciated through the more scientific metric of carbon budgets, as highlighted in AR6 and AR5. Carbon budgets represent the quantum of CO₂ the atmosphere can hold for a given global temperature, best assessed through cumulative emissions and not annual flows. The report of updated NDCs states that “the cumulative CO₂ emissions in 2020–2030 based on the latest NDCs would likely use up 89% of the remaining carbon budget, leaving a post-2030 carbon budget of around 55 Gt CO₂, which is equivalent to the average annual CO₂ emissions in 2020–2030.” Although negotiators and analysts are steeped in using annual flows, estimates based on carbon budgets should be used at Glasgow, if only to assess flows-based arrangements arrived at. As the NDC report says, reaching net zero is necessary to stabilise global temperature rise at a particular level, “but limiting global temperature increase to a specific level would imply limiting cumulative CO₂ emissions to within a carbon budget.”



Whither Glasgow COP26?

To reiterate, COP26 must focus sharply on reducing emissions till 2030, rather than on net zero 2050, which is too distant and with possibilities of gaming the system. If COP26 does not focus on achieving the 45% emission cuts from 2010 levels required by 2030 for limiting temperature rise to 1.5°C, and continues with geopolitics as usual, then the world may well have squandered away one of its last chances to avert disastrous climate impacts. Pressure will undoubtedly come from Africa, Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Small Island States and others, but will that tilt the scales against the powerful status quo? It was suggested some years ago that the COP ensures that Parties iteratively raise their commitments till they add up to the requisite 45% reduction by 2030. But who will hold their feet to the fire? Or will the U.S. and others succeed in focusing on the false net zero 2050 solution, escaping their own obligations for 2030 and dangerously kicking the can down the road? As usual, India is in its own double-edged position. The country emits 7% of global emissions, has extremely low per-capita emissions that are far below the global average and yet ranks as the world's third largest emitter. It is a G20 member and reputed economic and industrial power. India has so far resisted pressures to raise its Paris Agreement emission reduction commitments. But it has not yet submitted its updated NDC as required and may face difficulties at Glasgow, especially from LDCs and most vulnerable countries feeling existentially threatened even as powerful nations wheel and deal. The well-known website Climate Tracker has now placed India in its second- worst performing category of countries regarding conformity with global 1.5°C goals, down from the top category for 2°C just after the Paris Agreement. India can, without much difficulty, raise its NDC pledge of reducing Emissions Intensity (ratio of emissions to GDP) by 33-35% from 2005 levels by 2030 to 38-40%. This is quite achievable since India has been averaging around 2% p.a. reduction in EI as per its own NDC. Given the net zero chorus, India could also offer to achieve that by 2070-75, invoking CBDR and comparing well with China's 2060 pledge. If pressed on a peaking year, a 2040-45 guesstimate may not be far off the mark, especially if increasing forest and tree cover are stepped up instead of undermined. For India to convert its ambitions of installing 450GW of renewable power by 2030, adding green hydrogen or increasing electric vehicles into commitments may require more homework than done so far. Will India have the gumption to leverage these offers to push the U.S. and other developed country laggards to step up their commitments and actions towards the 2030 goal, without trade-offs on promises of financial assistance? Only time, of which the world has little left, will tell.

INDIA'S EXPECTATIONS FROM COP26

Ahead of the 26th meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP) next month in Glasgow, there have been several bilateral meetings between India and other countries including the U.S. and the European Union. The big push at the COP will be to have more countries commit to a "net zero" deadline by mid-century. This would mean ensuring that a country's emissions are balanced out by absorbing an equivalent amount either by carbon sinks (such as forests) or carbon capture and storage technologies. India, the world's third largest emitter, has not agreed to a net zero deadline.

Why has India not agreed to a net zero target?

India sees a mid-century target upon itself as opposed to the principle of "common but differentiated" responsibility that allows countries to eschew fossil fuel without compromising



equitable development. Net zero means that a country must commit to a year beyond which its emissions won't peak and a point at which it will balance out its emissions by taking out an equivalent amount of greenhouse gas from the air. Even theoretically committing to a net zero by 2050 would require India to retire its coal plants and fossil fuel use overnight and even this will not guarantee that temperature-rise stays below 1.5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. India avers most of the countries clamouring for a net zero target for India will continue to pollute on a per capita basis way beyond their fair share. India says countries responsible for the climate crisis have not made good on previous promises to fund mitigation and adaptation projects and so future net zero promises are therefore hollow.

What are India's expectations from COP26?

Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav, following a meeting last week with U.K. Foreign Minister Elizabeth Truss, said the upcoming COP should be “.. the COP of action and implementation”. He said the “huge expectations” in COP 26 include arriving at a consensus on unresolved issues of the Paris Agreement Rule Book, long-term climate finance, market-based mechanisms. The COP26 should also be initiating the process of setting the long-term climate finance for the post-2025 period. India welcomed the U.K. COP26 Presidency's five key initiatives on sustainable land use, energy transition, low emission vehicle transition, climate finance and adaptation. India was also hoping to strengthen global climate initiatives including the International Solar Alliance, Coalition Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), leadership Group for Industry Transition (LeadIT Group), Call for Action on Adaptation and Resilience and Mission Innovation.

What are India's core demands?

India has said it is “open to all options” provided it gets assurances that commitments in previous COPs such as developing countries getting compensated to the tune of \$100 billion annually, the carbon-credit markets be reinvigorated and the countries historically affected by the climate crisis be compensated by way of “Loss and Damages,” and clean development technologies be made available in ways that its industries can painlessly adapt to.

What do independent experts have to say about India's approach to COP26?

Analyst Vaibhav Chaturvedi of the Council for Energy Environment and Water opines that India needs to focus on three points for success at COP. First, if India should introduce equity in the net zero targets or at least present it as a proposal for discussion. India needs to go beyond the \$100-billion demand and focus on tangible deliverables. For the power, mobility and hydrogen sectors, India may only need \$12-15 billion per annum which should be given at 4% interest rate subvention. And lastly, India should focus on the development of technology, how to reduce the cost of technology for mitigation and co-development of technology. Dhruva Purkayastha, Director, Climate Policy Initiative, said there has to be a mechanism by which CO₂ is extracted. The world needs to set the price of carbon and it should not be a bilateral discussion point. Private market would put in money only if backed by public money. Only \$800 billion finance flows from the trillions of dollars which are talked about is highly inadequate. “If India is pushed to shut down a coal capacity there is a cost to it. Financial and social costs to it which cannot be solved not just with finance but price of carbon has to be linked with it.”