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INTERNATIONAL

ETHIOPIA REBELS 'JOIN FORCES' AGAINST GOVT.

Nine rebel groups battling Ethiopia's government joined forces on Friday, as fears grow of Tigrayan fighters advancing on the capital. The alliance includes the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which has been locked in a year-long war against Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government. The TPLF said on Wednesday that its fighters had reached the town of Kemissie in Amhara region, 325 km northeast of the capital, and were running "joint operations" with the OLA, which predicted Addis Ababa could fall in a matter of weeks. The nine groups, in a statement, said they were forming a united front "to reverse the harmful effects of the Abiy Ahmed rule on the peoples of Ethiopia... and in recognition of the great need to collaborate and join forces towards a safe transition in the country".

United Front

It is unclear whether the alliance, named the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces, will affect the trajectory of the conflict, which Mr. Abiy's government has termed "an existential war". The TPLF and the OLA, which the government officially designated as terrorist groups in May, are well-known, but the alliance's other seven members are obscure, said one diplomat following security matters. "If they are really serious about taking up arms against the government then it's potentially a real problem for the government," the diplomat said. "I don't know the majority of them, I don't know how many people they have, what resources they have." The government has dismissed rebel claims of territorial gains, saying on Thursday the TPLF was "encircled" and close to defeat, while also urging Ethiopians to unite and join the fight. On Friday, the Defence Ministry called on veterans to re-enlist in the armed forces. The U.S. Embassy issued an advisory urging citizens to leave the country as soon as possible.

TRADE AND CLIMATE, THE PIVOT FOR INDIA-U.S. TIES

When the history of the 21st century is written, India and the United States and the strategic alliance they forge should play starring roles. Granted, it is far too early to predict how successful their joint efforts will be in creating a free and open Indo-Pacific — one that advances democratic values and confronts autocracies globally and locally. As 2021 closes, with COVID-19 still a present danger and China, the emerging superpower on the global stage, viewed by both as a strategic competitor, India and the U.S. have a long way to go before they can inspire confidence that this blossoming alliance will endure for the long term.

Areas of convergence

We believe that the fate of the grand strategic ambitions of the relationship may in fact depend substantially on how well they collaborate in two areas to which their joint attention is only belatedly turning — climate and trade. The first presents an existential threat while the second is too often dismissed as a secondary consideration, even dispensable in the name of pursuing larger strategic interests. Such thinking ignores the lessons of history: strategic partnerships capable of re-shaping the international global order cannot be based simply on a negative agenda. Shared

concerns about China provide the U.S.-India partnership a much-needed impetus to overcome the awkward efforts for deeper collaboration that have characterised the past few decades. What risks being lost is a reckoning with how interrelated climate and trade are to securing U.S.-India leadership globally, and how their strategic efforts can flounder without sincere commitment to a robust bilateral agenda on both fronts.

Some encouraging signs

There has been progress. The U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, has visited India twice already, and India and the U.S. are collaborating under the Climate and Clean Energy Agenda Partnership. In parallel, there are hopeful signs that they are now prioritising the bilateral trade relationship by rechartering the Trade Policy Forum. Both countries are also taking leading roles, articulating their climate concerns and commitments. However, early signs suggest we might be headed for a replay of previous showdowns at COP26 in Glasgow: while India just announced a net zero goal for 2070 — a welcome development even if well after catastrophic climate scenarios may be baked in — it has called for western countries to commit to negative emissions targets. India's rhetoric of climate justice is likely to be received poorly by U.S. negotiators, particularly if it aligns with China's messaging and obstructs efforts to reach concrete results. Likewise, the failure of the U.S. and India to articulate a shared vision for a comprehensive trade relationship raises doubts about how serious they are when each spends more time and effort negotiating with other trading partners. Protectionist tendencies infect the politics of both countries these days, and, with a contentious U.S. mid-term election a year away, the political window for achieving problem-solving outcomes and setting a vision on trade for the future is closing fast.

The interlinks

Climate and trade are interrelated in many ways, from commercial dissemination of cutting-edge carbon mitigation and adaptation products and technologies to the carbon emissions that come with the transport of goods and humans from one country to another. If governments, such as India and the U.S., coordinate policies to incentivise sharing of climate-related technologies and align approaches for reducing emissions associated with trade, the climate-trade inter-relationship can be a net positive one.

Work on early solutions

For example, India and the U.S. could find opportunities to align their climate and trade approaches better, starting with a resolution of their disputes in the World Trade Organization (WTO) on solar panels. As they have dithered in pursuing cases in the WTO and settling them, China has effectively captured the global market, leaving each dependent on a source they view as a threat. The two countries could also chart a path that allows trade to flow for transitional energy sources, such as fuel ethanol. India currently bans imports of fuel ethanol even as it seeks to ramp up its own ethanol blend mandates and build a domestic sector that can join the U.S. and Brazil in exporting to the world. Left unaddressed, this will be another missed opportunity for the two economies to work to mutual benefit. Shared strategic interests will be undermined if India and the U.S. cannot jointly map coordinated policies on climate and trade. The most immediate threat could be the possibility of new climate and trade tensions were India to insist that technology is

transferred in ways that undermine incentives for innovation in both countries or if the U.S. decides that imports from India be subject to increased tariffs in the form of carbon border adjustment mechanisms or "CBAMs". Climate-inspired trade tensions that might even lead to new trade wars can hardly bolster the strategic partnership.

A point to ponder over

Diplomats on both sides have worked hard over the past few years to paper over such differences so that they do not distract from the efforts to lay the foundations for a closer strategic partnership, but the fissures have not disappeared and ignoring them will not make them go away. Rather, the danger is that they will widen and deepen and come to undermine shared longer-term goals. A mutual failure to confront these issues and present a united front in relations with other countries will surely have strategic consequences. So, even as they continue to embrace warmly in various strategic settings, U.S. President Joe Biden and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi might want to ask how this partnership is clearly falling short of its potential, and why. Concerted action on both the climate and trade fronts is mutually beneficial and will lend additional strength to the foundation of a true partnership for the coming century.

TIME FOR ACTION

The G20 meeting has come at a critical moment for the global political economy

At their first in-person meeting in two years, leaders of the G20 did not shy away from re-engaging with the biggest issues facing the global community today, including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, a major tax agreement, and steps to address concerns regarding global economic growth and stability. On coordinated efforts to mitigate the pandemic, the focus was on vaccine production and distribution, with assurances of support to WHO's target of inoculating 40% or more of the global population against COVID-19 by 2021, and at least 70% by mid-2022. The implicit assumption in this commitment by G20 leaders is that initiatives to boost the supply of vaccines in developing countries will succeed, and cooperation will help the world overcome supply and financing constraints. On climate change, the Group leaders recommitted their nations to providing $100 billion a year toward adaptation, mitigation, and green technologies, focusing on the needs of developing countries. However, in this sphere, a divergence of views still exists across developing and developed nations: ahead of this summit and the 2021 climate conference in Glasgow, India had rejected the call to announce a target of zero emissions. Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears to have scored a victory in this regard as the post-summit communiqué commits the G20 to limiting global warming to 1.5° C and identified sustainable and responsible consumption and production as "critical enablers". The world community is on shakier footing regarding the fragile post-COVID economic recovery underway after paralysing lockdowns. Unsurprisingly, given the rising inflation, spiking energy prices, and alarming supply chain bottlenecks, G20 leaders were quick to affirm that national stimulus policies would not be removed prematurely. Even so, it would remain a challenge to walk the tightrope between preserving financial stability and fiscal sustainability. Perhaps in a bid to avoid potentially debilitating wobbles in global finance, the G20 leadership agreed to slap multinationals with a minimum 15% tax to create "a more stable and fairer international tax system". This would impact the tech titans of Silicon Valley, as this initiative would make it harder for such companies to

benefit from locating themselves in relatively lower-tax jurisdictions. This OECD-led reform enjoys the support of 136 countries, which account for more than 90% of global GDP, and is likely to enter into force in 2023 or after. Nations such as the U.S. are divided on whether to approve this proposal domestically, and unless there is unanimity amongst the discussants, the initiative risks facing implementation delays. The G20 meeting has come at a critical moment for the global political economy. If it results in timely, effective, coordinated action across major nations, hope for recovery will remain afloat.

BATTING FOR 'ONE SOUTH ASIA' MAKES MORE SENSE

Over the course of four days, at the G-20 in Rome and COP26 (the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference) in Glasgow, Scotland, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke at nearly a dozen events, expanding on India's plans to counter climate change. India's record since the 2015 Paris Accord and initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), as a part of which Mr. Modi (along with other leaders) launched the 'Infrastructure for Resilient Island States (IRIS)' at the World Leaders Summit at COP26 were widely welcomed. The announcement of India's new Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and the "Panchamrit" or five goals for the future elicited applause from across the audience. Missing however, was any reference to India's own region, the subcontinent, South Asia, without which India's multiple forays on fighting climate change could well prove fruitless.

South Asia's feeble voice

The absence of a South Asian initiative on climate change led by India, accrues to a number of obvious reasons: India-Pakistan tensions that have led to the degradation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) process, especially since 2014, when the last SAARC summit was held; events in Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover which will bring it closer to its Central Asian rather than South Asian neighbours; the differences over pollution issues within the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) grouping that has held up its initiatives like the common Motor Vehicle Agreement (due mainly to Bhutan's opposition); and slow movement amongst the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries along the Bay of Bengal that have yet to bring about a common charter at the global level despite adding climate change as an area of cooperation a decade ago.

Impact of climate change

Why does this matter? To begin with, regardless of relations between any of the countries in South Asia (India-Pakistan being the only notable rivalry), there is no question that this is a cohesive geographical unit that is sheltered by the Himalayas to the north, fed by its many glaciers in an intricate network of rivers that fall into the ocean, and buffeted by the same climate and monsoon conditions. Second, South Asia is slowly becoming the world's biggest area of concern when it comes to climate change. According to this year's Global Climate Risk Index, India and Afghanistan are among the top 10 countries worldwide in terms of vulnerability, but South Asia classifies for the overall lowest values (https://bit.ly/3bEuMcW). By one estimate, 20 out of 23 major cyclone disasters in the world in the past have occurred around the Bay of Bengal region, and global warming, coastal degradation and soil salinity as well as water scarcities cause the deaths of thousands in South Asia each year. The Asian Development Bank now predicts a decrease of 11%

in South Asian GDPs by 2100 if "Business-As-Usual (BAU) Emissions" are maintained. With global warming and sea levels rising, other estimates predict there will be nearly 63 million climate migrants in South Asia by 2050 ("Costs of Climate Inaction: Displacement and Distress Migration"; https://bit.ly/3mERLuG). Second, all these grim figures build a logic for a combined push for global reparations and assistance for the entire region. As a part of the developing world, the Indian subcontinent is not responsible for the massive damage done to the environment already wrought by the developed world, and according to 2019 figures, no single regional bloc has lower per capita emissions than South Asia does (https://bit.ly/3EKwZjL).

Green potential

When New Delhi speaks of the need for climate justice, global funding and climate adaptation technology transfer, India's voice would only be strengthened multiple times if it speaks for South Asia as a whole. According to the World Bank's newly launched South Asia road map, climate-smart investment opportunities in South Asia total a whopping $3.4 trillion, with "energy-efficient green buildings" alone representing an investment potential of more than $1.5 trillion. Green transport connectivity and infrastructure, electric vehicles could represent another $950 billion in investment opportunities by 2030. This does not include the vast sums of funding available for cross-regional solar grids, windfarms and run-of-river energy projects (https://bit.ly/3ECXF5V).

Other drawbacks, China

However, while India and other countries in the region access global banks, including the BRICS-led New Development Bank (NDB), the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and Asian Development Bank for projects individually, there is no single South Asian entity the banks could work with for a more targeted focus and more concessional financing for the problem that faces the region. Third, growing carbon footprints as well as post-COVID-19 economic compulsions are driving countries into closer regional coalitions, looking for solutions closer home, than those provided by globalisation and long-distance supply chains. South Asia has remained an exception, persistently showing lower inter-regional trade and connectivity, and lower levels of cooperation on migrant labour issues, inter-state tourism and cross-border employment than other regions. Finally, New Delhi has often warned of the pernicious influence of 'Chinese solutions' to problems in the subcontinent, ranging from unsustainable infrastructure financing to environmentally harmful projects as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but it has been unable to proffer a viable alternative, with or without its Quad partners. On certain issues, where India has failed, South Asian neighbours have learned to seek help from other international partners or even each other: when India stopped COVID-19 vaccine exports this year for example, Bhutan, which received vaccines from Denmark and a number of other countries including the United States and China after a desperate global appeal, in turn helped Nepal with stocks of AstraZeneca. When New Delhi failed to respond to Sri Lanka's request for assistance with its currency and debt crisis last year, the Rajapaksa government turned to Bangladesh for a currency swap arrangement. The problems between India and Pakistan that have multiplied manifold in the past few years are no doubt a major obstacle, but not one that cannot be surmounted in the face of a common challenge, as the special SAARC conference on COVID-19 in March 2020 showed.

New Delhi can show the way

When it comes to climate change, there is a chance to turn this trend, and for India, the largest country in the region sharing the most boundaries with other South Asian neighbours, to lead the way to find holistic solutions: accessing funding, tapping the latest climate adaptation technology, and finding cross-border markets for renewable energy networks. Mr. Modi's "One Sun One World One Grid" and 'Panchamrit plans' would clearly pack more punch if they contain a clear road map for the region, and strive for a common South Asian taskforce to tackle the enormous challenge that lies ahead for India and its neighbourhood this century.

PENTAGON RATTLED BY CHINA'S MILITARY PUSH

China's growing military muscle and its drive to end American predominance in the Asia-Pacific is rattling the U.S. defence establishment. American officials see trouble quickly accumulating on multiple fronts — Beijing's expanding nuclear arsenal, its advances in space, cyber and missile technologies, and threats to Taiwan. "The pace at which China is moving is stunning," says Gen. John Hyten, the second-highest ranking officer in the U.S. military, who previously commanded the U.S. nuclear forces and oversaw the Air Force space operations. At stake is a potential shift in the global balance of power that has favoured the U.S. for decades. A realignment more favourable to China does not pose a direct threat to the U.S. but could complicate U.S. alliances in Asia. New signs of how the Pentagon intends to deal with the China challenge may emerge in the coming weeks from Biden administration policy reviews on nuclear weapons, global troop basing and overall defence strategy. For now, officials marvel at how Beijing is marshalling the resources, technology and political will to make rapid gains — so rapid that the Biden administration is attempting to reorient all aspects of U.S. foreign and defence policy. The latest example of surprising speed was China's test of a hypersonic weapon capable of partially orbiting Earth before re-entering the atmosphere and gliding on a manoeuvrable path to its target. The weapon system's design is meant to evade U.S. missile defences, and although Beijing insisted it was testing a reusable space vehicle, not a missile, the test appeared to have startled U.S. officials.

Sputnik moment

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the test was "very close" to being a Sputnik moment, akin to the 1957 launching by the Soviet Union of the world's first space satellite, which caught the world by surprise. Gen. Milley and other U.S. officials have declined to discuss details of the Chinese test, saying they are secret. He called it "very concerning" for the U.S. but added that problems posed by China's military modernisation run far deeper. "That's just one weapon system," he said in a Bloomberg Television interview. "The Chinese military capabilities are much greater than that. They're expanding rapidly in space, in cyber and then in the traditional domains of land, sea and air." On the nuclear front, private satellite imagery in recent months has revealed large additions of launch silos that suggest the possibility that China plans to increase its fleet of land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs. Pentagon officials and defence hawks on Capitol Hill point to China's modernisation as a key justification for rebuilding the U.S. nuclear arsenal, a project expected to cost more than $1 billion over 30 years.

A VOTE FOR STABILITY

Defying expectations, Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) stormed to an outright majority in the country's parliamentary elections on Sunday. The elections were the first major test for the new Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, who took over last month amid enormous challenges. He followed the short-lived tenure of Yoshihide Suga, who succeeded Shinzo Abe. Japan's longest serving Prime Minister, Mr. Abe stepped down in 2020 citing health reasons. Mr. Suga's year-long term was marred by his government's poor handling of COVID-19 and economic woes. Facing the lowest approval ratings of any Japanese leader in years, he resigned. Entering the election in these circumstances, the LDP, which held 276 seats in the 465-seat House of Representatives before the polls, was bracing for a poor show, with wide expectations that it would need to rely on its coalition with the Komeito party to cross the halfway mark. But it coasted to victory unencumbered by coalition considerations. Mr. Kishida now has to deliver on a range of pressing challenges, including the pandemic, the economy and on the security front, relations with China. He has committed to bolstering support to hospitals to ensure a far better response should Japan face another wave. On the economy front, he has put forward a "new capitalism" aimed at an economic revival keeping the interests of the middle class as a priority. He has pledged to come up with an ambitious stimulus package this month. On foreign policy, he will have to keep in mind the wishes of his party's conservative bloc which is calling for significant increases in defence spending. Those are voices he cannot ignore considering that the new leader— Mr. Kishida was also a Foreign Minister — has no real popular support to call upon and will be beholden to what his party wants. In the election campaign, the LDP said it would double defence spending to 2% of the GDP. China's recent air incursions into Taiwan were cited as one major reason, as also North Korea's missile tests. Mr. Kishida has said he will focus on shoring up relations with Washington, and in his early days, has already reached out to the leaders of the Quad. He has also spoken with China's President Xi Jinping, with positive noises about getting relations on track. Ultimately, matters at home will decide which of his two predecessors Mr. Kishida ends up emulating. Given the flagging reputation of the LDP towards the end of Mr. Abe's term and through Mr. Suga's turbulent time in office, the vote appears to be as much an endorsement for stability as it is for his government. It also reaffirms the LDP's unchallenged position in domestic politics regardless of the troubles it has faced in recent years, underlining there is no serious challenger to its continued dominance.

A FORCE OF THE STATUS QUO

For several Sudanese who took to the streets in protest after General Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman al-Burhan ousted civilian Prime Minister Adballa Hamdok and took absolute power in a military coup on October 25, the events would have reminded of Karl Marx's words — "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce". After all, Sudan had in 1964 and in 1985, seen transitions from military dictatorships, only for political infighting, economic crisis and military coups to follow leading to another spell of authoritarian rule. Little is known of Gen. al-Burhan, 61, who was already the chairman of the Sovereignty Council of Sudan (SCS). The Council was formed after the Sudanese revolution in 2019 that ousted dictator Omar al-Bashir's regime. The transition was first conducted by a Transitional Military Council (TMC) under the leadership of Lt. Gen. Ahmed Awad Ibn Auf, who served as de facto head of State for one day, before naming General al-Burhan as his

successor and head of the Council. After civilian protests, aimed at rejecting this council which consisted of military officers who either served or were seen as close to the Bashir regime, were violently put down, the African Union suspended Sudan and imposed sanctions even as agitations led by Force of Freedom and Change (FFC), a joint social movement comprising 22 Sudanese political parties and social groups, escalated. The TMC under Gen. Burhan's leadership finally relented and the FFC was incorporated into a new body, the SCS, which was formed after the Draft Constitution Declaration was signed on August 4, 2019, along with a power sharing agreement, promising elections in late 2022.

Return of tensions

Initially, there were some promising signs that the civilian-military transitional partnership was working. But tensions between the civilian leadership and the military leaders remained over at least one issue — bringing Bashir's regime to account for genocidal acts, human rights abuses and corruption. Analysts say the military was uncomfortable with this as it would expose their own acts and their financial interests that were entrenched during Bashir's rule. Gen. Burhan, after all, played a key role as inspector general of the armed forces during the fag end of Bashir's tenure – overseeing Sudan's intervention in the Yemen Civil War. He had also been a regional army commander in Darfur between 2003 and 2008, a period that coincided with the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians. Gen. Burhan's military cohort that came into prominence are also accused of being part of a small elite that had garnered significant financial clout during the oil boom in the 2010s along with select supporters of the Bashir regime. A New York Times report points out that Gen. Burhan and Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan, the head of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces that is accused of genocide in Darfur and is also the deputy Chairman of the TMC, together controlled "hundreds of state-owned enterprises dealing in the production and sale of minerals, including gold, imports and exports of livestock, construction materials and pharmaceuticals". Clearly, the military coup is an attempt to deter greater civilian control in a country ravaged by poverty and years of misrule. Western governments have promptly cancelled promised tranches of aid and are compelling the return to the transitional regime even as new protests have erupted. But Gen. Burhan seems to be emboldened due to his regime's closeness with those in Egypt and some Gulf countries and would seek to control the transition of power with a pliant technocrat in charge rather than an assertive civilian-linked to political and social movements. Sudan is in for another spell of turmoil.

THE DIVISIVE MONK

Even the most charitable account of Sri Lanka's civil war cannot term the "peace" that followed its bloody, May 2009 end anything but tentative. The ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils remains unresolved. The period has also witnessed a spike in violence directed at the Muslim community. News of every such attack in recent years has invariably come alongside an influential religious figure making emphatic claims about the country belonging first and foremost to Sinhala Buddhists. Galagodaaththe Gnanasara 'Thero' [as Buddhist priests in Sri Lanka are respectfully referred to], 46, is arguably Sri Lanka's most controversial monk, whom President Gotabaya Rajapaksa recently appointed as chairman of a 13-member task force to evolve proposals for the government's 'One Country, One Law' endeavour. The saffron-robed monk, who hails from the southern Galle district and entered priesthood as a child, came to

prominence in 2012 when he founded the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, or Buddhist Power Force) with a fellow priest. The stated vision of the organisation, which Gnanasara Thero describes as a "national movement", is to protect Buddhism for future generations. Within the next year the ethno-religious organisation unveiled the rather divisive terms of its activism. In January 2013, the BBS, led by its General Secretary Gnanasara Thero, campaigned aggressively against the halal certification of meat, that attests food items as being compliant with Islamic conventions, therefore allowing Muslims to consume it both domestically and in the export market. The following month, the BBS held a rally in a Colombo suburb, calling upon on supporters to become a Sinhala civilian police force against Muslim extremism. "This is a Sinhala country; there is a global principle that minorities must reside in a country in a manner that does not threaten the majority race and identity," Gnanasara Thero said at the rally.

Violent mob

In March that year, images of a violent mob led by Buddhist monks pelting a Muslim-owned store with stones, and setting fire to another took the country by shock. It was the surest sign at the time, of the fragility of Sri Lanka's post-war "peace", under persisting threat with majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist forces that had now found a new target. The monk repeatedly made news thereafter, like in June 2014 when he referred to Muslims in derogatory terms at a rally in the southern Aluthgama town. "This country still has a Sinhala police. A Sinhala army. If a single Sinhalese is touched, that will be the end of them all," he warned. The ensuing violence claimed at least four lives and injured dozens. The same year, the monk signed a pact with Myanmar's Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu of the extremist 969 movement. Gnanasara Thero was also present at the central Digana town ahead of a series of targeted attacks on Muslim homes and Muslim-owned shops in early 2018. While probing Sri Lanka's Easter Sunday terror bombings of April 2019, investigators pointed to the Aluthgama and Digana violence as possible triggers for some Muslim youth to radicalise and be drawn to the suicidal terror network. In fact, a Presidential Commission of Inquiry appointed to investigate the serial bomb attacks even recommended that Gnanasara Thero be charged for for "inciting racial tensions" in Aluthgama. But he has been to prison. In August 2018, Sri Lanka's Court of Appeal gave him a six-year jail sentence, convicting him for contempt of court. Except, President Maithripala Sirisena pardoned him when he had served barely nine months. Gnanasara tried entering Parliament twice — in 2004, and 2020 — but was unsuccessful. He, nevertheless, chairs a crucial task force on legal reforms in the country.

LET THE FOOD PASS

Two facts are beyond dispute. First, that Afghanistan is facing an acute humanitarian and food crisis, brought about by a constellation of factors, including the takeover by the Taliban and a prolonged drought. Second, even though New Delhi has insisted — along with many other regional and global powers — that the Taliban regime must demonstrate that it will respect human rights and act as a responsible government that does not export terror, it is keen to provide assistance to the people of Afghanistan in their time of need. And given that as of September 1, India had its highest-ever stockpile of wheat and rice, New Delhi is well-placed, and keen, to provide food aid to Afghanistan. The Taliban, after a meeting with Indian representatives at the Moscow Format last month, was welcoming of Indian aid. Given this context — regimes, demand, supply and need aligning perfectly — the delay by Pakistan in responding to India's request to allow the passage

of foodgrains through the land route to Afghanistan is worrying. Last month, India sent a note verbale to Pakistan asking it to allow the movement of trucks carrying 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan. The land route through Pakistan is essential in this regard because the volume of the foodgrains makes transport by air difficult, if not impossible. The matter also requires some urgency: With winter approaching and a financial crisis gripping the nation, food shortages are all but certain soon. Other countries, including China and Turkey, have already begun the distribution of foodgrains. Given the resources, familiarity and goodwill India has among the people of Afghanistan, India wants to — and should be — on the ground assisting people in need. While Islamabad has not denied permission yet, its delay is a cause for concern. The sheer scale of the aid India seeks to provide means that managing the logistics of the transport operation needs to begin sooner than later. At international fora, including at the Moscow Format, Pakistan's representatives and leaders have spoken of the need for the global community to assist the people of Afghanistan during this period of crisis. Its delay in granting permission for the transport of food aid invites questions about that stated commitment: Is their suspicion of India so great that Islamabad and Rawalpindi are trying to delay — through bureaucratese, if nothing else — the provision of food to a suffering people? Are strategic insecurities greater than basic humanitarian concerns? If not — and hopefully, that is the case — Pakistan must allow India to provide the aid that Afghanistan needs.
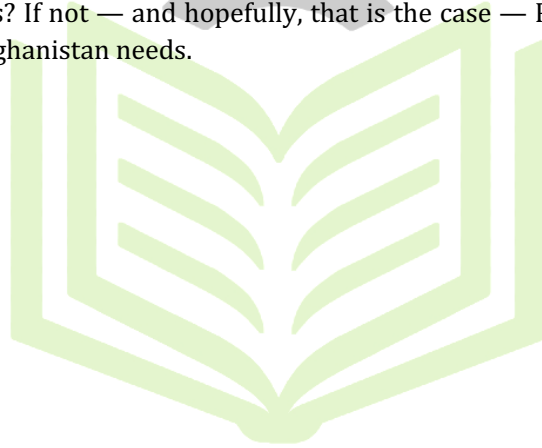
A COURT ORDER FOR THE AGES

In a democracy, how far should the Government be allowed to peep into a citizen's privacy? The Government of India has always maintained that there is no limit to this, as long as the act is carried out in the interest of national security. The current Government has handled all Pegasus-related issues on the basis of this premise. The Supreme Court's recent decision provides a definitive answer to this question. The top court said national security was not a pass for the Government to spy on its own citizens. The expert committee instituted by it is mandated by stringent terms of reference. It is worth noting that the court refused to accept the Government's suggestion for a Government-sponsored commission to investigate the matter. As a result, "we the people" would like to call it a landmark decision. The ruling was made in accordance with the fundamental right to privacy.

Aadhaar case

The Supreme Court had on an earlier occasion interpreted the Constitution and its emphasis on the primacy of privacy. In the Aadhaar case, which I was also a party to, the court determined privacy to be a fundamental right. The current Government has always had a different perspective on this crucial issue. There were allegations that the Government was tapping citizens' phones utilising numerous agencies. The advent of the Pegasus malware brought the issue to a more dangerous level. The disclosure by the Pegasus Project, a media consortium, was so alarming that it shook the entire world. According to their analysis, Pegasus was utilised in India as well as over 45 other nations. The list included journalists, politicians, judges and activists. Even Ministers in the Union Cabinet were not spared. Initially, the Government bolstered its argument by issuing a blanket denial of the report. When it failed, their strategists worked around the clock to save themselves from a catch-22 predicament. Parliament's monsoon session arrived in the midst of this controversy. The Government's main objective was to prevent any discussion on Pegasus. The Opposition, on the other hand, was eager to hold the Government accountable. But the MPs' customary avenues for airing their concerns were systematically diluted. Strictly following the procedures, I gave a notice for the following questions: "The number of memorandum of understandings [MoUs] the Government has entered into with foreign companies and the details sector-wise; whether any of these MoUs with foreign companies has been in order to curb terror activities through cybersecurity and the details of the same; and whether the Government has entered into an MoU with NSO Group in order to curb terror activities through cybersecurity across the nation and, if so, provide details thereof." The Rajya Sabha Secretariat set a date for them to be included during the Question Hour. But these questions were never brought before Parliament. Moreover, the rights of the MPs were suppressed by the authoritarian arrogance of the Government. The monsoon session was marred by unpleasant incidents. An MP may be compelled to question the relevance of Parliament when it is not permitted to examine vital topics, including the Pegasus issue, the farmers' struggle and price rise. When Opposition members tried to talk about Pegasus, their microphones were turned off. We have heard Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterating that Parliament is an avenue to debate national concerns. These assurances are like lines drawn on water. Under the cover of national security, they built a fortress to prevent any discussion on Pegasus. Even the spyware's country of origin, Israel, has launched an investigation

into it. However, the Government of India was adamant to ensure that no mention of Pegasus was made in the House. An "atmanirbhar [self-reliant]" Government is preaching the ideology of hyper-nationalism and then handing over the key of national security to a spyware controlled by a foreign country. As far as national security and a citizen's fundamental rights are concerned, the Supreme Court's terms of reference were clear. The state cannot be an adversary in the defence of basic rights. The Government defends its operations by using the term "lawful interception" to justify its acts under the guise of national security. If that argument is permitted to do its rounds indefinitely, the country will devolve into a police state. The significance of the top court's historic decision is that it underlines that restrictions on the right to privacy must pass constitutional scrutiny. Citizens will definitely look up to this verdict as a protective measure in defence of their civil liberties. But they are anxious to know how the Government will cooperate with the fact-finding voyage of the expert committee.

LOWER JUDICIARY AND CENTRALISED RECRUITMENT DEBATE

The central government is preparing to give a fresh push to the establishment of an All India Judicial Service (AIJS) on the lines of the central civil services. Law Minister Kiren Rijiju has called a meeting of state law ministers in the last week of this month to discuss the AIJS and issues related to infrastructure in the lower judiciary. The idea of centralised recruitment of judges has been debated in legal circles for decades, and remains contentious.

What is the proposed All India Judicial Service (AIJS)?

The AIJS is a reform push to centralise the recruitment of judges at the level of additional district judges and district judges for all states. In the same way that the Union Public Service Commission conducts a central recruitment process and assigns successful candidates to cadres, judges of the lower judiciary are proposed to be recruited centrally and assigned to states.

How are district judges currently recruited?

Articles 233 and 234 of the Constitution of India deal with the appointment of district judges, and place it in the domain of the states. The selection process is conducted by the State Public Service Commissions and the concerned High Court, since High Courts exercise jurisdiction over the subordinate judiciary in the state. Panels of High Court judges interview candidates after the exam and select them for appointment. All judges of the lower judiciary up to the level of district judge are selected through the Provincial Civil Services (Judicial) exam. PCS(J) is commonly referred to as the judicial services exam.

Why has the AIJS been proposed?

The idea of a centralised judicial service was first mooted in the Law Commission's 1958 'Report on Reforms on Judicial Administration'. The idea was to ensure an efficient subordinate judiciary, to address structural issues such as varying pay and remuneration across states, to fill vacancies faster, and to ensure standard training across states. A statutory or constitutional body such as the UPSC to conduct a standard, centralised exam to recruit and train judges was discussed. The idea was proposed again in the Law Commission Report of 1978, which discussed delays and arrears of cases in the lower courts. In 2006, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel,

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Public Grievances, Law and Justice in its 15th Report backed the idea of a pan-Indian judicial service, and also prepared a draft Bill.

What is the judiciary's view on the AIJS?

In 1992, the Supreme Court in All India Judges' Assn. (1) v. Union of India directed the Centre to set up an AIJS. In a 1993 review of the judgment, however, the court left the Centre at liberty to take the initiative on the issue. In 2017, the Supreme Court took suo motu cognizance of the issue of appointment of district judges, and mooted a "Central Selection Mechanism". Senior advocate Arvind Datar, who was appointed amicus curiae by the court, circulated a concept note to all states in which he recommended conducting a common examination instead of separate state exams. Based on the merit list, High Courts would then hold interviews and appoint judges. Datar submitted that this would not change the constitutional framework or take away the powers of the states or High Courts.

What is the opposition to the AIJS?

A centralised recruitment process is seen as an affront to federalism and an encroachment on the powers of states granted by the Constitution. This is the main contention of several states, which have also argued that central recruitment would not be able to address the unique concerns that individual states may have. Language and representation, for example, are key concerns highlighted by states. Judicial business is conducted in regional languages, which could be affected by central recruitment. Also, reservations based on caste, and even for rural candidates or linguistic minorities in the state, could be diluted in a central test, it has been argued. The opposition is also based on the constitutional concept of the separation of powers. A central test could give the executive a foot in the door for the appointment of district judges, and dilute the say that High Courts have in the process. Additionally, legal experts have argued that the creation of AIJS will not address the structural issues plaguing the lower judiciary. The issue of different scales of pay and remuneration has been addressed by the Supreme Court in the 1993 All India Judges Association case by bringing in uniformity across states. Experts argue that increasing pay across the board and ensuring that a fraction of High Court judges are picked from the lower judiciary, may help better than a central exam to attract quality talent.

Why is the government seeking to revive the idea of AIJS?

The government has targeted the reform of lower judiciary in its effort to improve India's Ease of Doing Business ranking, as efficient dispute resolution is one of the key indices in determining the rank. Officials have said that the AIJS is a step in the direction of ensuring an efficient lower judiciary. The government has countered the opposition by states, saying that if a central mechanism can work for administrative services — IAS officers learn the language required for their cadre — it can work for judicial services too.

WHEN CAN LAND USE OF ALLOTTED PLOTS BE AMENDED?

The Supreme Court is hearing a petition challenging the change of land use of a plot near Rashtrapati Bhavan, initially allotted for a recreational park and bus terminal, to residential. The plot, according to the Central Public Works Department (CPWD), will be the site of the new Vice-

President's Enclave, which will include the residence and office of the Vice-President. In an affidavit, the Central Government informed the court that the plot had housed government offices for decades and had never been opened for the public or sported recreational space.

How has the land use been changed?

On October 28, 2020, the government notified the change in use of the 15-acre plot, called Plot No. 1, on Church Road near Rashtrapati Bhavan and North Block. The plot is proposed to be the site of a new residence and office space for the Vice-President, as a part of the larger Central Vista revamp project. The plot had been allocated for "transportation (bus terminal/parking) and "government (President Estate and Parliament House) use in the masterplan of Delhi-2021 and further in the Zonal Development Plan as transportation as well as recreational (neighbourhood play area)". With the 2020 notification, the land use of the plot was changed to "residential". The plot has had offices of the Ministry of Defence since pre-Independence. With two new MoD buildings outside the Central Vista being completed recently, defence personnel have begun shifting from the hutments on this plot as well as others along the Central Vista.

What are the rules on recreational areas in the land acts?

Section 11-A of the Delhi Development Act, 1957, gives the "Central Government" the authority to "make any modifications to the masterplan or the zonal development plan". This section was cited when the Delhi Development Authority published a notice inviting objections and suggestions regarding the then-proposed land-use change on March 4, 2020. As many as 90 submissions were received and "considered" before the change was notified in October. The plot is owned by the Land & Development Office, under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, which is executing the project through the CPWD.

Why does the amendment matter?

The government has said the change was required for it to go ahead with its plan to build the Vice-President's Enclave, for which the CPWD invited bids and shortlisted construction agencies in October. Financial bids have been invited till November 2. The CPWD has proposed construction of three of the nine office buildings planned as the new Central Secretariat on the site of the current Vice-President's residence on Maulana Azad Road. The government has argued the plots occupied by hutments are under-utilised.

What lies ahead?

The CPWD submitted its affidavit on October 28, and hearing the matter the next day, the Supreme Court gave the petitioner time to file a rejoinder. It adjourned the matter till November 16. The CPWD has said the petition is misconceived and liable to be dismissed with costs. It said overall the space open to the public in the Central Vista would increase with the shifting of Ministries from the 27-acre North Block and South Block, which are to be converted into "national museums".

LIVING ON DEATH ROW WITH ILLNESS

Last month, 'Deathworthy: A Mental Health Perspective of the Death Penalty', an important report by Project 39A, based at the National Law University, Delhi, was published. It explores the mental health concerns of death row prisoners, the intellectual disabilities they have, and the psychological impact of being on death row. India remains among the 55 retentionist countries where the death penalty is still handed down for certain crimes. Data on how many death row prisoners have mental health conditions and/or intellectual disabilities are hard to come by (because the prisoners are not specifically assessed for it) and so this report helps to improve our understanding of this much-neglected topic.

No right to fair trial

The report presents the detailed histories of 88 death row prisoners in India. Of them, 30 were found with a depressive illness, 19 with anxiety disorder, and three prisoners reported having psychotic episodes. Of particular concern is the fact that eight had attempted suicide and close to 50% said they had considered it. Worryingly, nearly 11% of these death row prisoners were diagnosed with intellectual disabilities and most of them had deficits in intellectual functioning. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights calls upon countries "not to impose the death penalty on a person suffering from any form of mental disorder or to execute any such person". Yet, the laws of most countries don't explicitly prohibit this. Mental illness and intellectual disabilities complicate the death penalty. Persons with mental illness and intellectual disabilities may not be able to instruct their lawyers to mount a robust defence, thus jeopardising the right to a fair trial enshrined in our Constitution. The 'insanity defence' in the Indian Penal Code sets such a high barrier that it can't be met in most cases. Even when there is an obvious history of mental illness, courts in India are usually unwilling to consider the plea of insanity by defence lawyers. In State of Maharashtra v. Santosh Maruti Mane (2014), the Bombay High Court, while confirming the death penalty for a man who had gone on a bus rampage that claimed nine lives, and rejecting his insanity plea, had stated, "Mere prior incidence of treatment is not sufficient. It has to be established that at the time of commission of an offence, the accused was of unsound mind and incapable of understanding the consequences of his action". It is impossible for any psychiatrist, days or weeks after the offence was committed, to certify that the above conditions existed at the precise moment the offence was committed. In Shatrughan Chauhan v. Union of India (2014), the Supreme Court had said that mental illness should warrant the commutation of death sentence to life imprisonment. Despite this, courts do not consider mental illness as a mitigating factor when imposing punishment. The report also highlights another important and neglected aspect of mental illness: the social determinants of mental illness. Mental illness is more common among the poor and those with mental illness are more likely to end up in poverty. Those who have experienced childhood abuse are significantly more likely to experience mental illness in adulthood than those who did not. The report provides an insight into the poverty, abuse, neglect and violence that mark the overwhelming majority of death row prisoners with mental illness. It sheds light on the stigma, social ostracisation and grief of families of those sentenced to death.

Adopting a psycho-social approach

The authors argue that courts should take a psycho-social approach towards sentence mitigation using the framework recommended by the Supreme Court in Bachan Singh v. State of Punjab

(1980). The apex court had laid down guidelines that courts should take into consideration before imposing the death penalty. These include mental health issues such as "extreme mental or emotional disturbance" at the time of the incident and acting under "duress". A psycho-social approach will allow courts to take into account the life history of an individual and relate this to the mental state of the individual. The report says, "We have sentenced to death people, who, due to the nature of their disability, might very well be exempt from the death penalty altogether." Society, especially those in the criminal justice system, including legal and medical professionals, should mull over this. Mental illness is not a crime. Those with mental illness are vulnerable to violation of their rights. We need to ask ourselves what purpose is served by executing people who have a mental illness or an intellectual disability. This report, one hopes, will trigger these discussions.

ON DEALING WITH FALSE CRIMINAL CASES

It is often alleged that false cases of cruelty are registered by the police at the behest of the estranged wife under Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), and many innocent relatives of the husband are roped in overzealously. This Section, along with Section 304B on dowry deaths, was brought in to check the menace of increasing dowry deaths and the cruelty meted out to married women by their in-laws in 1983. But its misuse has outraged many since then. Similarly, allegations are levelled sometimes for the misuse of certain provisions of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. This special law was enacted to remove the discrimination faced by the SC and ST communities, who remain vulnerable and are sometimes denied their civil rights. But it is alleged that, at times, cases are registered to settle personal scores.

Judgment modified

Realising the misuse of Section 498A, the Supreme Court in Rajesh Sharmavs State of Uttar Pradesh (2017) issued certain guidelines, including the formation of district Family Welfare Committees (FWCs), restraint on arrest till the complaint was examined by the committee, the disposal of the proceedings by a senior judicial officer in case of a settlement between the parties, etc. However, in 2018, the Supreme Court in Social Action Forum for Manav Adhikar vs Union of India modified the same judgment, stating that most of the directions had the potential to enter into the legislative field, which was not permissible. It was held that the constitution of the extrajudicial FWCs was contrary to the procedure prescribed under the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC). Similarly, the Supreme Court in Subhash Kashinath Mahajan vs State of Maharashtra (2018), taking cognisance of the abuse of the process of the courts with regard to certain provisions of the SCs and STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, issued certain guidelines, including the holding of a mandatory preliminary inquiry to avoid false implication of an innocent individual, the approval of the appointing authority before the arrest of a public servant, etc. However, in 2019, the Supreme Court in Union of India vs State of Maharashtra and Ors., overruled the above judgment and held that the guidelines were opposed to the protective discrimination given to members of SC and ST communities as envisaged under the Constitution. Lodging a false report, the court said, "is due to the human failing and not due to the caste factor".

Genuineness of allegations

These judgments indicate that the courts cannot lay additional guidelines when the existing law is unambiguous and only legislature can modify such law in its wisdom. This also means that the onus is on the police to ensure that once the law is set into action, no undue advantage of the special law is taken by the complainant. The investigating officer must not jump to conclusions as soon as a First Information Report (FIR) is registered. Some investigation must be done to confirm the genuineness of a complaint before an arrest takes place. It is a settled law that no arrest can be made in a routine manner on a mere allegation. The arrest must be necessary and justified. Mere authority to arrest is not sufficient. The Supreme Court, in its landmark judgment in Arnesh Kumar vs State of Bihar (2014), asked the police to satisfy themselves on the necessity of an arrest under the parameters laid down in Section 41 of the CrPC. Police officers, in fact, are duty-bound to ensure that the principles set by the Supreme Court in its various judgments are implemented by the investigating officers. Further, the judicial magistrate is also required to peruse the report furnished by the police officer and satisfy themselves before authorising further detention. Though there are legal remedies available against those lodging false reports, the general perception, however, is that the remedial measures are not only insufficient but also ineffective. The first remedial measure is to initiate criminal action against the person who gives false information to the police or levels specific criminal charges against a person. The police, after completing the investigation, may initiate action under Section 182 or 211 of the IPC respectively. However, both these offences are non-cognisable and a magistrate's nod is necessary for initiating further legal action. The court, on its own, in certain cases directs the police to take action under these Sections if, on the completion of the trial, it is found that the allegations were completely false. Second, the complaint may be filed before a judicial magistrate having jurisdiction, who, after an inquiry, can take appropriate action against a person who filed a false case with the police. Third, the complainant may approach a High Court for anticipatory bail and for quashing the FIR. The Supreme Court recently held that even in non-compoundable cases that are not so serious or private in nature, the High Court, using its inherent powers under Section 482 of the CrPC, may quash the judicial proceedings even after a conviction, in case a genuine compromise is reached between the warring parties. The Law Commission, in its 243rd report in 2012, had suggested making Section 498A compoundable with the permission of the court, but it was not accepted by the Government. Fourth, in addition to the above, damages may be claimed under the law of tort for malicious prosecution and causing injuries.

What data show

As per data compiled by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in the report Crime in India 2020, about 5% of the cases under Section 498A were found to be false. About 9.4% were either non-cognisable or civil in nature or with insufficient evidence in the end. Similarly, about 12% of the cases under the SCs and STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Act were found to be false by the police, and about 7% were either non-cognisable or civil in nature or with insufficient evidence in the end. Further, out of the 17,765 cases under Section 498A decided by the courts, 3,425 cases ended with a conviction. Out of the 8,138 cases under the SCs and STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Act decided by the courts, 3,588 cases ended with a conviction. Although there are varied reasons for acquittal, including a delay in lodging the FIR, witnesses turning hostile, compromise between the parties, lack of proper presentation by the prosecution and an appreciation of the evidence by the

court, etc., the problem arises when a court concludes that a case is false. Since the onus of arriving at the truthfulness of a case lies primarily with the investigating officer, it is their duty to investigate the case thoroughly and collect all the facts and circumstances fearlessly. This would ensure that false cases are closed in time and no innocent individuals have to suffer the rigours of the law.

ABORTION RULES TO AID MINORS

The new abortion rules notified by the Union Government recently recognise minors as a vulnerable category and seek to make services more accessible to them. But social stigma and conflict with the POCSO Act, 2012, or the law against child sexual abuse, pose hurdles. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Amendment Rules, 2021, define new categories of vulnerable women who are allowed termination up to 24 weeks upon meeting certain conditions and with the permission of two doctors.

New categories

These include minors, survivors of sexual assault and those with foetal malformation. Others may seek abortion up to 20 weeks with the permission of one doctor upon meeting certain criteria — earlier you needed the permission of one doctor for termination up to 12 weeks, and two doctors for 12 to 20 weeks. The amended law provides for setting up of State-level medical boards to decide if a pregnancy may be terminated after 24 weeks. "Minors were included as a special category because it was found that a large number of them were approaching courts for permission to terminate pregnancies beyond 20 weeks. They were the third largest category after those with foetal abnormalities and rape survivors. Moreover, if you look at the social context, the detection of pregnancies in case of minors gets delayed, and then after that the need to negotiate and seeking relevant care becomes all the more difficult," says Vinoj Manning, Chief Executive Officer of the Ipas Development Foundation and Member, Campaign Advisory Group, Pratigya Campaign. There is a need to fight stigma around adolescent sex. Contraception services rarely reach adolescents. Medical practitioners also rue the obstacles posed by the POCSO Act, 2012, in providing services. Section 19 of the Act requires any person aware of a minor engaging in sex to report the matter to the local police even if it was a consensual act as the law pegs the age of consent at 18. "While the Government has extended the upper limit to 24 weeks for minors, we don't know how much this move will help as adolescent girls find out about their pregnancy in the last minute, when they will be forced to go to medical boards. We need to do more for young people. We need to have information on having sex, ensure access to contraception and be less judgmental so that they don't delay expressing their need for abortion," says Poonam Muttreja, Executive Director, Population Foundation of India. "There is evidence that as a result of POCSO, there is a dramatic drop in the percentage of minors seeking abortion. We have to find a solution for allowing a minor to get a safe termination without the fear of the police harassment," says Dr. Nozer Sheriar, former Secretary-General and MTP Chair, Federation of Obstetric and Gynaecological Societies of India. Acknowledging that POCSO introduces "a chill factor" for doctors, Mr. Manning says the challenge lies in educating them that mandatory reporting should not result in denial of service.

WHY COUNTING CASTE MATTERS

The debate about whether the decennial Census should collect data on caste from individuals who fall into the administrative categories of 'General' and 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs) has been argued by public intellectuals, politicians, and government administrators for decades. As the Census currently only collects data on 'Scheduled Castes' (SCs) and 'Scheduled Tribes' (STs), it fails to provide comprehensive data on India's graded caste hierarchy. In the run-up to the 2011 Census, the political leadership agreed to include a full caste count in the Census. It later prevented a caste-wise enumeration in the Census. The suppression of caste-wise data took place then because of two interconnected dynamics which are likely to reoccur unless they are collectively challenged.

The importance of caste data

First, caste elites generally believe that caste no longer matters in shaping opportunities and outcomes in the 21st century. This caste blindness, or castelessness, obscures caste privileges and conceals sources of multi-generational structural advantage. Many caste elites view the collection of caste data about anyone but the most disadvantaged as unnecessary and a misuse of public resources. This perspective both serves their own interests and ignores the relational nature of caste — that is, the same societal institutions, systems, and cultural norms that have led to historic and ongoing subjugation of oppressed castes have simultaneously empowered others. To understand the full scope of disadvantage, we must also examine the full scope of privilege and advantage. The suppression also occurred as a result of the machinery of government. Organisations tasked with designing Census questions and overseeing data collection, similar to every other key institution in society, have caste-based inequalities entrenched within them. The bureaucracy blocked the inclusion of a full caste count in the Census 2011 on methodological grounds. It argued that a caste count would be "administratively difficult and cumbersome," "jeopardise the whole exercise," and "compromise the basic integrity of the Census". The official language used by the Congress-led government in 2011 was identical to the language used in the affidavit filed in the Supreme Court on September 23, 2021 by the present BJP-led government. The presentation of (supposedly) insurmountable methodological and logistical challenges is particularly effective as an excuse because it silences non-experts. Caste elites have a numerical and cultural stranglehold over the upper bureaucracy, despite more than 70 years of Central government reservations. In 2019, out of the 82 Secretaries to the Government of India, only four were SCs or STs. Following the suppression of the caste count in Census 2011, the executive bureaucracy reconfigured the Below Poverty Line survey and renamed it the 2011 Socio-Economic Caste Census, which had little resemblance to the original demands by caste census advocates and produced unusable caste data. The purpose for collecting caste-wise data in the decennial Census is to understand the contours of inequality. These data are crucial to understand how caste intersects with class, gender, and regionality to structure access to resources. The collected caste data should be publicly available for use. In this regard, the caste data would continue the existing practice of the Office of the Registrar General of India to make Census data publicly available. The Census has the legal standing, public trust, operational expertise, and resources to collect, analyse, and make public caste data. Caste data must be collected as part of this constitutionally required exercise. Having the caste Census as part of another state project, or overseen by nodal agencies other than the ORGI, as happened 10 years ago, will relegate it to parts

of the bureaucracy with insufficient expertise in a nationwide data collection operation. While counting (or not counting) caste is political, the decision should not be reduced to immediate political contingencies i.e., the expansion of reservation policies, the caste-based mobilisation by political parties, etc. In the absence of detailed caste data, we fail to name and confront major structural and foundational problems of society; leave space for opportunistic politicians to exploit each caste; and miss the opportunity to craft reasoned, data-driven, and inclusive public policies.

Addressing concerns

Yet, important concerns remain. Some progressive and anti-caste scholars fear that a full-caste count will further entrench caste identities. A caste census will require all households to think about, acknowledge, and speak about caste identities. Yet, historically outcast groups have already had to provide caste data in all postcolonial Censuses to implement reservations. A full caste-wise enumeration will help to make visible privileges and resources that have become over time disassociated with caste, despite historical, sociological, and economic evidence to the contrary. Updated data on the entire caste system, including its intersections with other identities, will provide a more complete picture of exclusion and inequality in India. Another concern is that groups will misuse the caste data. But misuse of caste data already takes place. Private groups with access to money and power regularly collect caste data for their needs. Political parties map the caste and religious composition of neighborhoods, cities, and villages to mobilise votes. Collecting caste data in the decennial Census removes this private power by making caste data publicly available to all. While methodological and logistical challenges are real, they are surmountable. Demographers in government agencies and universities have extensive experience working through these challenges. Sample surveys such as the India Human Development Survey have collected caste-wise data. In addition, research on the failed caste count suggests the importance of careful planning to prevent groups from being made invisible in the data, such as Dalit Muslims, Dalit Christians, inter-caste and inter-religious households (particularly those that cut across the line of 'untouchability' or communal divide), and LGBTQ+ individuals. Related to the discussion of castelessness, if a 'no caste' option is included in the Census, the caste count will likely undercount well-to-do caste elites. Given the purpose of the caste count, omissions of marginalised groups and elites require specific attention while designing the survey instrument, training enumerators, educating the public, and analysing collected caste-wise data. Hence, the entire process requires external oversight if the data are to be usable and to minimise potential harm. As the process unfolds, a public oversight group should work to ensure that major operational and methodological decisions align with the data collection's purpose: to understand the scope of caste-based inequities and address structural inequalities. Anti-caste organisations and public intellectuals, who have devoted their life's work to challenging caste hierarchy, must provide oversight and input. Their perspectives and lived experiences of fighting caste oppression are the best safeguards to ensure that the collected data will be used for liberatory purposes.

CENTRE TO SCRAP CASTE-BASED PAYMENTS FOR MGNREGA

The Centre has decided to scrap the system of caste-based wage payments in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme after complaints from State Governments. In an order dated November 1, the Finance Ministry directed the Ministry of Rural

Development (MoRD) to "revert to the previous system of generating single muster, single FTO [or Fund Transfer Order] and transferring money into a single NeFMS [or National Electronic Fund Management System] account". However, a revised accounting procedure will now be implemented to allow expenditure to be captured under three Minor Heads for Scheduled Castes and Tribes and others, through a single FTO, said the order, which The Hindu has seen a copy of. The MoRD has been told to set a date on which the new process will come into effect. The Hindu had reported that the Centre planned to revoke its controversial caste-based wage system after the State Governments warned of rising social tensions in an October 11 meeting. The contentious directive issued on March 2 by MoRD, on instructions from the Finance Ministry, had asked the States to generate three separate FTOs for each of the three caste groups for every muster roll at an MGNREGA worksite. Three sanctions would then be generated and then payments would be made into three separate accounts of the State Government. In a meeting with the Finance Secretary and Expenditure Secretary on October 11, MoRD Secretary N.N. Sinha said that "many States have conveyed difficulties being faced by them due to the new process", said a note attached to the Finance Ministry order. "This has not only multiplied the work at all levels but also resulted in payments going at different times to different communities," it added. In many villages, there were social frictions among communities who got paid as much as two months later than others from the same muster roll, according to reports from workers' unions. A study by LibTech India analysing 18 lakh FTOs over the last six months in 10 States found that SC and ST workers were getting paid significantly faster than those from other communities. Several State governments, including Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, raised the issue with the Central government.

UNDERESTIMATED UTILITY

That as many as 21 of 35 States/UTs have utilised, by October 29, over 100% of their allocated funds under the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) for FY2021-22 is not a surprise. In the previous year, the allocations for MGNREGS were increased by ₹50,000 crore to meet the demand for work, with the Revised Estimates for spending for the scheme going up to ₹1,11,500 crore. MGNREGS was a life-saver for the poor, especially migrant labourers, following the sudden lockdown announced by the Union government. In this year's Budget, the Finance Minister allocated ₹73,000 crore for the scheme, which was higher than the previous year's absolute number in Budget allocations, but this amounted only to 2.1% of the Budget expenditure, the lowest outlay in those terms in the last six years. By October-end, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh had utilised more than 130% of their respective allocations for the scheme, indicating the extent to which rural workers depend on the scheme even in relatively better-off States. Clearly, the Union government has underestimated the demand for work under the scheme, which even if it involves arduous and menial labour has accounted for a large chunk of rural employment at a time when the economy suffered a steep contraction due to the effects of the pandemic. In response to a report, officials in the Rural Development Ministry accused States of "artificially" creating demand, but this has not been borne out from ground reports which continue to indicate rising demand for work and wages in rural India; civil society activists claim that some workers have been turned away by officials despite the demand for work because of the paucity of funds. The Union Government must ensure that the allocation is adequate for wage payments to be done and for demand to be met in the remaining months of this financial year. The utility of MGNREGS as a scheme that alleviates

distress has never been in question. From acting as an effective substitute in the absence of crop and weather insurance in aiding poor farm households and helping to provide wages during agrarian crises, to being an avenue for employment during the economic crisis induced by the pandemic and the response, MGNREGS has turned out to be a salve for farm workers and labourers. Delays in wage payments could also result in a decline in rural consumption, which plays a vital role in stimulating the economy. Besides the scheme's utility in distress, it also has the potential, if works are upgraded suitably, to continue to improve rural development and infrastructure. The Union Government must consider this during allocations and not be conservative in its outlay or remain unmindful of the overall potential of the scheme.

THE CAPTAIN'S KNOCK

Nobody said it better than Virat Kohli. The captain Saturday stood up for his teammate Mohammed Shami after the latter was attacked on social media after the loss to Pakistan in the T20 World Cup match. His words need reiteration, so here they are: "To me, attacking someone over their religion is the most pathetic thing that a human being can do. Everyone has the right to voice their opinion over what they feel about a certain situation, but I personally have never ever even thought of discriminating (against) anyone over their religion. That's a very sacred and personal thing to every human being. People take out their frustrations because they obviously have no understanding of what we do as individuals. They have no understanding of how much effort we put on the field. They have no understanding of the fact that someone like Shami has won India a number of matches in the last few years and he has been our primary bowler with Jasprit Bumrah, when it comes to making an impact in games. If people can overlook that and his passion for his country, honestly, I don't even want to waste one minute of my life to give any attention to those people, and neither does Shami and neither does anyone else in the team. We stand by him fully. We are backing him 200 per cent, and all those who have attacked him can come with more force if they want to. Our brotherhood, our friendship within the team, nothing can be shaken." The clarity of Kohli's statement, its refusal to duck behind pieties and euphemisms, has enormous significance. While former cricketers had sought to defend Shami by excusing a rare "off day", they chose to elide the communal nature of the abuse Shami faced. Kohli looks this brand of divisiveness in the eye, and calls it out for what it is. His assertion of solidarity and brotherhood is not just relevant to cricket. It ripples out to the larger world of politics and culture, where every day the right to take offence is being weaponised to polarise, where micro-contestations over language, advertisements, art and cinema, are used to prise open the bonds that have held communities together and to hand over the freedoms of Indians to moral police and digital mobs. In this environment, Kohli's words draw a line and say: Enough. They also break a long silence. For a while now, the defence of tolerance and secularism — the inheritance from the freedom struggle, the default settings of a diverse nation — is framed as a political shibboleth, anti-this or pro-that. Too many celebrities and public figures, who both think and know better, from all walks of life, do a cost-benefit analysis and decide to shut up rather than speak up and call out hate and bigotry. But that one of India's biggest celebrities, whose talent, achievement and voice reach out to vast numbers of India's young, chooses to do so marks an important moment. Like Olympian Neeraj Chopra before him, Kohli calls the bluff of those ever ready to sound the dog-whistle and twist sport into the service of polarisation. It is for the rest to listen and learn from Captain Kohli.

KASHMIR'S FRAGILITY HAS MORE COMPLEX REASONS

Fear is the prevailing sentiment across many parts of Kashmir today. It has, in turn, led to comparisons with the situation that existed during the 1990s and the early years of the 21st century. In the past few weeks, several civilians as well as security and armed forces personnel, have been killed by terrorists, some of the latter being labelled as hybrid terrorists, though it is not clear what this phrase signifies.

Ground realities

A predictable reaction to the situation has been the exodus of Hindus, especially of the Kashmiri Pandits, and of migrant labour, fearing for their lives and their future. Side by side with this, an impression has been created of increasing support to militancy, though it is unclear whether this is indeed the case. However, as in all situations of this kind, it is apparent that impressions often appear more real than actual ground realities. Latterly, Kashmir had managed to stay away from the headlines despite concerns expressed in different quarters about the 'disciplined democracy' being practised ever since the dilution of Article 370 and the restructuring of the erstwhile State of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) into two Union Territories. In the absence of an agile press, it has not been possible to fathom the intensity of protests against the existing order, and whether they constitute a rejection of the changes effected. Incidents of violence have, however, continued. Notwithstanding this, given the hullabaloo in the immediate aftermath of the changes effected in August 2019, a degree of surface calm seemed to prevail, not very different from that which existed previously. Whether this was peace brought about through controlled conditions, or otherwise, has been difficult to discern. Given the recent recrudescence of violence, it is, nevertheless, evident that the situation remains fragile. Whether this means that the changes effected since August 2019 were merely a 'triumph of wishfulness over prudence', an overestimation of belief on what was possible ignoring the history of several decades past, and the failure of many previous attempts to change the status quo, is hence worth examining.

Pakistan apart

More important is what could possibly be the reasons for the revival of aggravated violence in Kashmir. While assessing the ground situation in Kashmir, Pakistan has always tended to be a factor. It is, however, again possible that the lessons of the past on what needed to be done — to effectively checkmate insurgency from across the border or inflame Kashmiri opinion — might have gone unheeded in the euphoria of having succeeded in altering the character of J&K and Delhi establishing a degree of direct control. Promises made and an unwillingness to use the time and opportunity to create fresh opportunities for dialogue with communities in Kashmir, allied with reputational interest in not accepting that the many steps taken, were inadequate to defeat the machinations from across the border, could also, perhaps, be additional reasons. By this reckoning, Kashmir might well seem, in some remote way, to reveal the same attitude as many post-conflict, pre-modern, hybrid societies with mixed populations. It would imply that in the case of Kashmir, making a transformation to a more stable society will always prove difficult. In addition, Kashmir has difficult neighbours such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and China, which leaves little scope for experimentation — a true test for decision-making of any kind. As violence escalated in J&K, it became commonplace to link it with the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. This could, however, be a highly simplistic answer to a more complex situation. In the current context,

geopolitics is something that cannot and must not be ignored. The sudden surge in violence in Kashmir needs a more careful evaluation of the facts rather than simplistic answers. It is a fact, for instance, that India's world view has steadily expanded, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, and several, including some relatively unknown, tension points have emerged. All these will need to be carefully assessed before coming up with an answer — more so since India is wedged between two known antagonists (Pakistan and China), has a Talibanised Afghanistan as its neighbour, and there has been a resurgence of international terror groups, notably the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

The China factor

Of particular consequence in this context is China's continuing cooperation with Pakistan in many matters, its growing assertiveness in regard to its territorial claims, vis-à-vis India, its opposition to the prominence given to India by the West in both Asian and global forums, etc. All these have further helped cement the nexus between China and Pakistan. Intertwined with this is again the battle raging for spheres of influence between China and India, which has intensified under China's President Xi Jinping. The latter is intent on establishing an Asian system in which China sits at the summit of a hierarchical regional order. All this is altering the ground realities and it is worth considering whether Kashmir is emerging as a pressure point in this context.

Intelligence is critical

What it all boils down to is the need for hard and better intelligence. Hard intelligence is critical to avoid misperceptions and miscalculations. The (recent) history of the world is replete with stories of intelligence failures, misperceptions and miscalculations, which had led to grave situations, and which might well have been avoided had there been better intelligence. The serious miscalculation about Iraqi President Saddam Hussein possessing nuclear weapons based on wrong intelligence led to unnecessary involvement by the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Iraq, followed by an unfortunate train of events that continues to haunt the world to this day. As tensions between India and China, and between India and Pakistan, intensify, the need for hard intelligence is thus vital to be able to control the train of events and avoid any serious miscalculations. What is common to most, perhaps all, intelligence agencies — irrespective of their degrees of competence — is their limited capacity for imagination, viz., to imagine future events and possibilities. Intelligence agencies, by and large, are adept at providing insights about yesterday's threats rather than future ones, specially those that exist just beyond the horizon. Moreover, as intelligence agencies become more wedded to technology, they need to realise that advances in technology tend to be a double-edged sword insofar as intelligence is concerned. It should not negate the need for improved analysis and also how important it is to provide decision-makers with information on what is taking place in the minds of their opposite numbers. In the extant situation, Indian intelligence agencies must avoid the kind of lapses of both imagination and analysis displayed by western intelligence agencies some years ago, who misread, misunderstood and failed to anticipate the role of Sayyid Qutb and his preachings which later set the stage for the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers in New York and other targets in the U.S. Had they understood what Sayyid Qutb preached, viz., that martyrdom was a necessary part of 20th century jihad, they would not have underestimated the influence exerted by Islamist theology on the terrorist mindset. It is, thus, important that the 'missing dimensions' of intelligence in most cases, viz., thinking imaginatively and improved analytical capabilities, receive the close attention of India's intelligence agencies. Only then will it be possible to

understand the nature of current events as a precursor of future threats. This is important to ensure that they do not ignore signals that may not be all too obvious at this time, and keep chasing more obvious and current aspects. Too narrowly focussed intelligence requirements, limited to current events such as, for example, tensions with China on the border, or Pakistan's attempts to push in 'irregulars' and aid the Lashkar and Jaish elements to cross over into India, may prove self-defeating. The arc of intelligence needs to be much wider and Indian intelligence agencies such as the Intelligence Bureau, the Research & Analysis Wing as also the National Security Council Secretariat should ensure that they have the necessary capabilities. Linked to this is also the danger of 'intelligence adjustment', viz., avoiding challenging conventional assumptions, which could undermine their ability to provide a more accurate picture of the larger threat. Today, when India faces problems all around it, to limit what is happening in Kashmir solely to the impetus created by a Talibanised Afghanistan without fully analysing all the facts could cost the country dear.

THE COST OF PROHIBITION

The deaths in the last few days of at least 25 people in Bihar's Gopalganj and West Champaran districts and five in Muzaffarpur apart from several others taking ill after consuming spurious liquor points to the unintended but not unexpected consequences of the total prohibition law that has been in effect in the State for more than five years. Hooch tragedies such as these are a consequence of the unregulated production and sale of liquor via the black market, and the use of illicit liquor as a substitute due to the lack of the sale of over-the-counter and regulated drinks. Prohibition as a policy has been shown up as inadequate to curb the problem of alcoholism and the havoc wreaked by it on households due to excessive consumption for a variety of reasons in State after State. In Bihar, implementation has not been without immense public support, especially among rural women. Yet, despite significant steps taken to enhance enforcement by officials from the excise department, the police and local administration — over 3.46 lakh people arrested in the last five years and close to 150 lakh litres of country-made and Indian Made Foreign Liquor being seized from April 2016 to February 2021 — weaknesses in imposing the ban persist. It is well known that one of the negative externalities of prohibition is the creation of a parallel bootlegger economy that could lead to an increase in violent crime, and this seems to be borne out in Bihar as well. The Chief Minister, Nitish Kumar, has been the strongest proponent of prohibition in the State and the policy has reaped electoral dividends for his party, the Janata Dal (United) and its ally, the Bharatiya Janata Party, as rural women have overwhelmingly welcomed the ban on alcohol. While initially, the ban on alcohol consumption helped rural households increase expenditure on basic goods related to food and education, there are reports from rural Bihar showing how these benefits have waned as spurious consumption is on the rise. Reportedly, illicit liquor in the State claimed at least 60 lives in 2021, much higher than the six deaths recorded by the National Crime Records Bureau's report on accidental deaths and suicides in India in 2020. The scale of the rise in hooch incidents and deaths should set alarm bells ringing about the inability of the administration in curbing the black market in liquor sales and consumption. Mr. Kumar insists that the success of prohibition is only a matter of implementation of the law and in a way has blamed the deaths on the ignorance of those who consumed spurious liquor. But the fact that these deaths persist should alert the government to the misgivings with the idea of total prohibition as a magic bullet in a State marked by weaknesses in institutions and low overall human development.

WHAT IS THE CONTROVERSY OVER MULLAPERIYAR?

Coinciding with an episode of erratic, cataclysmic rain in Kerala's high-ranges, the Supreme Court last week considered a public interest litigation petition filed by a Kerala physician and two former local body representatives on the operation of the Mullaperiyar dam over which Kerala and Tamil Nadu have been sparring for long. With the threat of floods looming large and the reservoirs filling up, the court asked both States to abide by the rule curve for the period set by the Supervisory Committee constituted at its instance. Accordingly, the water level in the dam would be limited to 138 feet till October 31 and 139.5 feet till November 10. The court will hear the case again on November 11.

What is the status now?

Three shutters of the dam were opened on October 30 to release water. While people living downstream were evacuated beforehand, water release from the Mullaperiyar dam did not alter the level in the much larger Idukki reservoir, at over 94% of its storage capacity, located 35 km downstream.

Why is Mullaperiyar dam a sore point?

The Maharaja of Travancore signed a 999-year Periyar Lake lease agreement with the British government on October 29, 1886, for the construction of the Mullaperiyar dam across the Periyar in the present Idukki district. The dam became a reality nine years later. The water supplied from it through a tunnel to the water-scarce southern region of Tamil Nadu, especially the Vaigai basin, would be the lifeline for farmers of Theni, Dindigul, Madurai, Sivaganga and Ramanathapuram districts. On an average, 22 thousand million cubic feet (tmc ft) of water is diverted, irrigating about 2.20 lakh acres and meeting the drinking water requirements of people in the region. Concerns over the safety of the gravity dam built using lime-surkhi (burnt brick powder) mortar came to the fore in 1979. In November that year, a tripartite meeting chaired by the then chairman of the Central Water Commission (CWC), K.C. Thomas, decided that the level had to be brought down from the full reservoir level of 152 feet to 136 feet to enable Tamil Nadu, which owns and maintains it, to carry out dam strengthening works. By the mid-1990s, Tamil Nadu started demanding restoration of the level.

What happened in the legal battles?

The Central Government set up an expert committee in 2000 to look into the dam's safety. The committee recommended raising the level to 142 feet, which was endorsed by the Supreme Court in February 2006. Kerala sought to restrict the level to 136 feet by way of an amendment to the Kerala Irrigation and Water Conservation Act, prompting the Tamil Nadu Government to move the Supreme Court. In February 2010, the court constituted an empowered committee to study the whole gamut of issues concerning the dam. Based on the committee's finding that the dam was "structurally and hydrologically safe", the court, in May 2014, struck down Kerala's Act and allowed Tamil Nadu to maintain the level at 142 feet. It also asked the Central Government to set up a three-member Supervisory Committee to monitor dam safety.

Why is it a social issue?

Commissioned by the Kerala Government in the latter part of the 2000s, a study by IIT-Roorkee raised questions about the survival of the dam, located in seismic zone-3, in the event of an earthquake of a fairly high magnitude. A series of tremors felt in the area in 2011 caused alarm. Subsequently, the floods of 2018 and the erratic nature of annual monsoons ever since brought the focus back on the 126-year-old dam.

Why is the case in the Supreme Court again?

Joe Joseph, a doctor who was the candidate of the corporate-backed Twenty20 in the recent Kerala Assembly election from Kothamangalam, downstream of the Mullaperiyar and Idukki dams, moved the court, along with two others, last year contending that the Supervisory Committee had abdicated its responsibilities to a sub-committee constituted at the direction of the court for water management in the dam. They also urged the court to ask the CWC to fix the 'rule curve', 'instrumentation scheme' and 'gate operation schedule' of the dam. Massive landslides had devastated the hilly regions in central Kerala and weather prediction was ominous when the court's attention was drawn to a report prepared by the United Nations University-Institute for Water, Environment and Health, which cited "significant structural flaws" in the dam and said it "may be at risk of failure". "Leaks and leaching are also concerning, as the methods and materials used during construction are considered outdated, compared to the current building standards," it said. The Kerala Government, a respondent, argued for lowering the full reservoir level to 139 feet as the ageing dam was in a 'deteriorating condition'. In the event of a dam failure, it would result in unfathomable human tragedy and submitted a case for decommissioning the dam, in whose place a new dam could be built to cater to Tamil Nadu's water needs. However, Tamil Nadu, relying on the Supreme Court's two judgments, has been opposing any suggestion for lowering the level from 142 feet, apart from rejecting the idea of a new dam. It says it is taking steps to complete the remaining works to strengthen the dam, including those meant for the 'baby dam,' situated alongside the main dam, for which clearances from the Kerala and Central Governments are required.

What's on the cards?

Design of a new dam by Kerala's Irrigation Design and Research Board is in the final stages. However, without Tamil Nadu on board, this is not going to be a reality. Meanwhile, in the backdrop of bad weather forecast, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan wrote to his Tamil Nadu counterpart M.K. Stalin, urging him to draw maximum quantum of water from the dam through the tunnel so that a large volume release would be avoided altogether. Assuring Mr. Vijayan of all support, Mr. Stalin informed him that the level in the dam was being closely monitored and the current storage was well within the level permitted by the Supreme Court. A meeting between the Chief Ministers to discuss the issue is being planned in December.

RESISTING PATRIARCHY IN POLITICS

Just when its leadership was coming to terms with its poor performance in the Assembly polls, the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) saw a tussle break out between the men and women of its student organisation, the Muslim Students' Federation. Some 10 leaders of Haritha, the women's wing of MSF, accused the office-bearers of making sexist remarks against them in

Kozhikode in June. In response, the IUML leadership dissolved the State committee of Haritha and said that the issue is a "closed chapter" but the case is still under investigation.

A label to shake off

Amid this controversy, Noorbina Rasheed, national general secretary of the IUML's women's wing, defended the party asserting that its ideology is minority politics and not gender politics. While maintaining that there is no discrimination between men and women in the party, Ms. Rasheed said that women in the IUML should not forget that they were "Muslims first and only then women". She said that her role model is Hajira Beevi, wife of Prophet Ibrahim, while former Haritha leader Fathima Thahiliya had stated that she drew inspiration from the legendary communist leader, K.R. Gowri Amma. For the IUML, the label of patriarchy is not easy to shake off. It fielded a woman candidate (Kamarunnisa Anwar) in the Assembly elections for the first time only in 1996. The second time it fielded a woman candidate was 25 years later, in 2021. The candidate was Ms. Rasheed, who lost the election. Early last month, after Haritha leaders attacked the party leadership for being patriarchal, the IUML State working committee adopted a policy to reserve 20% of organisational posts for women in party-linked outfits despite the IUML-backed Samastha Kerala Jamiat-ul-Ulema reportedly expressing its reservations about the move. And yet, no woman figured in the list of office-bearers of the newly constituted committee of the Muslim Youth League, the IUML's youth wing, over a week ago. The IUML leadership believes that its defectors are responsible for the Haritha controversy.

A snowball effect

Meanwhile, while the IUML grapples with the churn, the alleged misogyny in the party has triggered demands in other political parties for more representation for women. The newly constituted 56-member Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee has only five women leaders, including three general secretaries, which has become a subject of discussion. The party leadership was left embarrassed when a former District Congress Committee president, Bindu Krishna, burst into tears while demanding an assurance on her candidature in the Kollam seat in March, and the party's women's wing president, Lathika Subhash, resigned from her post and shaved her head as a mark of protest against the denial of ticket to her at Ettumanoor. The CPI(M), despite its tall claims about gender equality in the State, faces awkward questions about representation at times, although women are assuming leadership roles now in the party committee. It remains to be seen how many women will occupy positions in the State committee as well as the Central committee of the party. The BJP State unit underwent a revamp recently, but the party is still male-dominated. Not one of the general secretaries is a woman. The party vice-president, Sobha Surendran, often perceived as a disgruntled leader, was dropped from the reconstituted national executive committee. Kerala has an impressive Human Development Index and has produced inspirational women leaders. But the representation of women in political parties in leadership and decision-making roles remains low. It is no wonder that the 140-member Legislative Assembly has only 11 women legislators. The recent developments are little steps towards change.

BRANDS MUST STICK TO THEIR STAND

In a famous 1990s advertisement for chocolate, an Indian woman without a bindi is seen dancing unabashedly in public to celebrate her boyfriend's success. If that ad had come today, it would have hardly been surprising if it some had deemed it to be "against Indian culture".

Outrage over ads

A series of recent ads has sparked controversy. A JBL ad showing a woman using noise-cancelling headphones to shut out the noise of Diwali crackers caused consternation. Some wondered aloud how the agency could think of suggesting that Diwali should be peaceful and noise-free. An ACKO ad for automobile insurance annoyed some simply because it was set in a garage where a puja for a car was being performed and also contained slapstick comedy. "Why copywriter cannot think beyond targeting Hindu traditions," someone asked. A recent Fabindia ad got brickbats first because it used an Urdu phrase which means 'celebration of traditions' to refer to a collection being launched before Diwali; and second because some of the models in the ads were not wearing bindis. Nowadays, anything, it seems, can become the basis for outrage. Voices are picked up from obscure corners of social media, relayed by the ultra-powerful on social media, and sometimes even seconded by the ruling party's ministers. Sure, such outrages used to happen earlier too, but the frequency with which this is happening now is alarming. The connecting thread between all the above examples is that the ads "hurt Hindu sentiments". A lot of outrage can be manufactured using this framing. Strangely, even an ad that endorsed the bursting of crackers during Diwali sparked outrage. This was the Ceat ad featuring Aamir Khan. In the ad, Khan advises people in an apartment complex to avoid bursting crackers on roads after a cricket match and asks them to instead burst crackers inside their apartment complex so that they don't disturb the flow of traffic. Many Ceat ads refer to objects or acts that hinder the movement of traffic. But people got angry. Some people, including a minister, said Muslims take up public spaces for namaaz and the company must "address that problem" too.

Two kinds of campaigns

All this anger seems to be rooted in the fear that advertisements have the potential to influence people — whether it is about being casual with regard to religious rituals during Hindu festivals or about the intermingling of people from different religions. To stop ads from influencing people, people react in two ways. The first is by launching a coordinated campaign. Those participating in such a campaign argue that if brands can launch a coordinated campaign for a product, why can't people do the same by using the power of social media? Of course they can. This is entirely legitimate. To put across a counter-view to what the ads propagate is to show a civil disagreement with the ads. If there is a concerted backlash to an ad and if it occurs without threats or coercion, the brands could engage in a conversation with such people by putting forward their counterpoints. But advertising agencies have never been good at conversations; they are only good at broadcasting. Zomato is perhaps the only brand that recently engaged with its critics after the ads starring Hrithik Roshan and Katrina Kaif were put out. Many people argued that the ads normalised the stressful working conditions of gig workers. Zomato responded that its ads were "well-intentioned, but were unfortunately misinterpreted by some people." The ads, it said, were "shot with the purpose of making the delivery executive 'the hero'." The second is through a coordinated boycott campaign. This too is legitimate but is an uncivil disagreement. Brands do not

have a world view — brands rarely have world views except some such as Patagonia; only people do. Brands only have a sales view and invest money in ads accordingly. And brands advertise positive narratives — they do not ask anyone to boycott, hate, or hurt someone. The coordinated boycott campaigns are uncivil precisely because they elicit sentiments of hatred and divisiveness in response to brands asking people to come together and look beyond their differences or proposing newer ways of thinking — both of which are merely perspectives. We saw the first, i.e., a brand depicting togetherness, in the Tanishq Ekatvam ad. It showed a Muslim family preparing a traditional Hindu baby shower for their pregnant Hindu daughter-in-law. It attempted to "celebrate the coming together of people from different walks of life," Tanishq said in a statement after anger erupted, but withdrew the ad nevertheless. And we saw the second, i.e., a brand pushing us to think in new ways, in the recent Dabur ad depicting a homosexual couple celebrating Karva Chauth. In India, same-sex marriages are not legally recognised.

A chilling effect

At the most basic level, brands merely propagate a message in order to sell a product. Brands cannot impose anything on the people, unlike governments. If a person does not approve of or like a brand's ad or its message, they have the freedom to ignore the ad or message. They also have the freedom to disagree vocally and share a counterpoint. But when that disagreement is taken to an extreme level, such as calling for a boycott, that means that the aggrieved person wants to force the brand to comply with their line of thought. That is not just intolerance, it is bullying. This is bound to lead to self-censorship and inhibit the ideas and creativity of brands. It creates a chilling effect on companies. To be sure, people have been taking offence citing "hurt sentiments" for a long time. This is certainly not a recent phenomenon. But earlier, in the quieter days when there was no social media, "sentiments were hurt" in small, isolated circles. Now, any counter-perspective is shared with the world within minutes. And the ones who say their sentiments have been hurt usually tag others who they know will espouse the same ideology or cause. If they all have a huge social media following, the post goes viral within hours or even minutes. Brands should stand by their ideas and creativity. They must decide what is the best way to tell the story of the brand as long as they are not miscommunicating with consumers or misleading them. But that conviction seems to be missing these days. All we see is brands quickly capitulating to bullies and withdrawing their ads. This will only embolden the bullies to call for more boycotts in the assumption that all brands will submit meekly to every threat. This will only fuel intolerance.

THE GOOD BUSINESS OF INTIMATE SPACES

Started in 2016 with claims of pioneering a social movement and breaching an enormous taboo — offering to provide a hotel room for a very short stay for couples — StayUncle has stayed the course. The name of the start-up, a play on then dominant Internet hosting service, Go Daddy, and perhaps, a nod to 'uncles and aunties' who have been at the vanguard of upholding middle-class morals, StayUncle, is considering a name change to reflect its anti-patriarchal, anti-caste, gender-neutral and inter-faith credo. "While the name was just an on-the-spur kind of a thing, the time is now right for a name change," said Amit Sharma, the CEO of StayUncle, where everyone goes by the suffix of 'aunty' or 'uncle'. Operating today in 40 cities and with linkages with 1,800 five-star, four-star and three-star hotels, the start-up is by no means the first in the hospitality business to offer a 'no questions asked' stay. OYO had started its relationship mode a couple of years ago. But

with an aggressive positioning of the brand and single-minded focus on couples, and a cheeky tagline post-COVID — "We are clean to get you dirty" — the managers of the start-up are not worried about the comparison. Neither are they apologetic about their tagline.

Obstacle course

"We are singularly focused on couples," reminded Sanchit Sethi, the co-founder of the start-up. To this end, the entire process of booking a room is literally a phone call and an app away. No questions asked other than preferences according to the customer's budget. An identification document, namely driver's licence or Aaadhar is, however, necessary at the time of booking a hotel. Couples from different religions or castes in India have long faced hurdles — from family opposition to death threats, some even paying with their lives — for daring to fall in love. Moral policing has reared its head in major cities in North India, making it virtually impossible for couples even to be seen in public places. However, StayUncle has managed to steer clear of such controversies by what it calls 'sensitising' its partners. "We carry out sensitising exercises with the hotels and tell them that caste and religion is not their business to meddle with," said Mr. Sethi, a BITS Pilani graduate. The first two years did see threats over the phone and odd-demonstrations by people airing their concern about the corrupting influence of StayUncle.

'Real challenge'

"The real challenge before us was to persuade hotels to be LGBT-friendly. It took us a long time to win them over along with the help of an NGO," he recalled. And business was not really easy for the odd bunch of fresh graduates who fancied themselves as relationship managers, after managing short stays of business professionals to begin with. "The first 20 hotels we reached out to said a flat 'no'. The 21st hotel in Greater Kailash said 'yes' and from there, there was no turning back," Mr. Sethi said.

GETTING NUTRITION BACK ON THE SCHOOL HIGH TABLE

With COVID-19 cases reducing in the country, several establishments, including schools, are opening again. While the reopening of all schools is on the anvil, the festive season ahead and the fact that children are not yet in the ambit of the vaccination drive are causing apprehension. We, as a society, must focus on the nutrition of children to ensure they are armed with good immunity as they get ready to take on new challenges especially after emerging from the confines of their homes. However, It is important to remember that even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, India was facing significant nutritional challenges. Hence, there is a need to pivot on children's nutrition, using the novel coronavirus pandemic to better understand current nutrition and nutritional requirements for a healthy body and mind.

Tackling India's triple burden

India faces multiple problems of under-nutrition and overweight/obesity coexisting with deficiencies of micronutrients such as iron, zinc, calcium and several vitamins. This triple burden of malnutrition has to be identified, understood and addressed. It is much more important especially in the case of children and adolescents as it is during these phases of life that we see rapid growth of the body and development of food habits. Childhood and adolescence are two

conjoined periods of continuous growth and development — a seamless duration. For instance, between two and 10 years of age, children tend to grow at an average of 6-7 cm in height and 1.5 to 3 kg in weight every year. But specifically, when the growth spurt happens at about 10-12 years in girls and two years later in boys during adolescence, their nutritional needs are vastly increased. In the case of girls, their nutritional status impacts not only their health but that of generations to come. Malnutrition in any form can put children and adolescents at risk of compromised immune function, thus making them vulnerable to infections.

Social factors

To understand and foster their immunity, one also needs to understand disruptive social environment factors that affect diet quality. In urban as well as among middle class and affluent communities, restricted movement, constrained socialisation and even dwindling physical contact have become the new normal. COVID-19 isolation and fatigue have led to generalised stress, adding to the immunity challenge for children. These challenges coupled with a lack of diet diversity leading to imbalanced micronutrient intake or consumption of high carbohydrate and high sugar foods, endanger the child's health by compromising their immunity and making them vulnerable to infections. Hence, the way we approach nutrition needs to change.

Need for a balanced diet

It is essential to look beyond minimum calorie requirements and ensure children consume a balanced diet with adequate diversity in order to ensure the required balance of all necessary nutrients. Providing children with a balanced diet packed with all the necessary nutrients provides them with a solid foundation for an active and healthy life. Often overlooked, micronutrients are essential for production of enzymes, hormones and other substances for good immune function, healthy growth and development. Each stage of the body's immune response relies on the presence of many micronutrients. To combat hidden hunger, affordable, accessible and diverse food sources must be made available across India. Micronutrients that are primarily available in fruits, vegetables, greens, nuts, legumes and whole grains play a crucial role in enhancing the native and adaptive immune function and also aid 'immune memory' formation. A substantial serving of fresh fruits and vegetables, as much as about 300-500 gm per day per child is recommended depending on the age group. These, along with curd and nuts, can increase beneficial probiotic bacteria in the intestine. But it is better to help them choose fresh fruits rather than fruit juices. Thoroughly cooked meat/poultry and sea fish are very good for protein; sea fish also provide essential fats. About 300ml-400 ml of milk or curd can provide the required calcium, good quality protein and other nutrients. Among urban and affluent groups, indulgence in frequent munching of high-calorie snacks and sweetened beverages that are devoid of beneficial nutrients should be discouraged. However, fats need not be seen as a villain — children and adolescents need about 25g-50g a day, which should ideally be derived from more than two varieties of oils. Maintaining ideal body weight, regular physical activity, adequate water intake along with adequate sleep and low screen time can go a long way in building and regulating their immunity.

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Noon meal scheme

The Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman Yojana (PM POSHAN) — the mid-day meal programme in its new avatar — is all set to broad base itself even to students of pre-primary levels or Bal Vatikas of government and government-aided primary schools along with primary and upper primary schoolchildren who are already within the ambit of the mid-day meal programme. The PM POSHAN envisages providing 450 Kcal energy and 12g of protein for primary; 700 Kcal and 20g protein for upper primary children through diet diversity. In addition, monitoring haemoglobin levels of schoolchildren, appointment of nutritional experts to ensure the haemoglobin and growth status are continuously monitored; focus on nutrigardens are all welcome steps as we prepare to reopen schools. Moreover, special provisions for nutritional items for children in districts with high prevalence of anaemia and the involvement of farmer producer organisations and self-help group women will strengthen linkages and convergence for promoting children's nutrition. COVID-19 or no COVID-19, good immunity will lay the foundation for long-term well-being. After all, good nutrition, safe food, and positive lifestyles are the cornerstones of great immune function. To ensure this, schools, when they reopen, should be avenues for teaching nutrition as a life skill than rhetorical pedagogy. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that our children are nurtured and nourished.

FIRST GAY COUPLE TO TIE THE KNOT IN TELUGU STATES

It is another instance of two people living together formalising their relationship, says Hyderabad-based lecturer in hotel management Supriyo Chakraborty. Except the couple in this case are two men. Mr. Chakraborty's wedding to his partner Abhay Dang on December 18 will be the first gay union in the Telugu States. The couple have secured the approval of their parents and plan to hold a celebration of their relationship without any marriage formalities, as the law still does not permit same sex marriages. But Mr. Chakraborty is sanguine about that too. Speaking to The Hindu, the 31-year-old Mr. Chakraborty is hopeful that just as queer relationships were decriminalised, marriage too will be allowed for queer couples. When that happens, they will register their marriage, he said. As of now, they'll have a 'wedding' to make their relationship official with the blessings of family and friends, but not the law. "It all started with texting each other on a dating app back in 2012 and and since then we have been together. A few months later we moved in and started living together, which helped us understand each other better. Two years later we bought an apartment of our own," he said. The couple also have a third member in their lives, 'Kaju', a puppy. Mr. Chakraborty said they are blessed with very understanding parents, siblings, friends, and in his case, his students too. "Being Indian parents, initially they didn't say yes to our relationship, and at the same time they did not object. They took a little time and just wanted us to be happy in our lives in our own way," he said. When they started living together, the two weren't out in front of everyone, but gradually they managed to make people understand that they are just like any heterosexual couple in the neighbourhood. While Mr. Chakraborty hails from Kolkata, Mr. Dang, a software development manager at an MNC, is native of New Delhi. Interestingly, the couple plans to have a 'straight' wedding starting from a haldi ceremony to a few of parties, and exchanging rings. The couple state that their wedding is just a celebration of togetherness, "and for celebration you don't need a law."

FINDING A WAY OUT OF INDIA'S DEEPENING WATER STRESS

The complexity and scale of the water crisis in India calls for a locus specific response, that can galvanise and integrate the ongoing work of different Ministries and Departments through new configurations. Such an integrated approach must necessarily cut across sectoral boundaries and not stop at the merger achieved between the two Ministries of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation and the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, which led to the formation of the Ministry of Jal Shakti in 2019.

Understanding sources used

Seeing India's looming water crisis through the locus of 'urban' and 'rural' not only allows a better grasp of the causative factors but also enables a stronger grip on the strategies to be deployed to reverse the water crisis. Fundamental to this is a preliminary understanding of the sources from which the country draws water to meet its varying needs. In the rural areas, 80%-90% of the drinking water and 75% of the water used for agriculture is drawn from groundwater sources. In urban areas, 50%-60% of the water supply is drawn from groundwater sources, whereas the remaining is sourced from surface water resources such as rivers, often located afar, in addition to lakes, tanks and reservoirs. According to the composite water management index released by the think tank NITI Aayog in 2019, 21 major cities (including Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad) were on the brink of exhausting groundwater resources, affecting about 100 million people. The study also points out that by 2030, the demand for water is projected to be twice the available supply.

The Chennai example

A significant, and by no means less worrying, example of the water crisis that unfolded before our eyes was in Chennai in 2019, where life came to a standstill and parts of the city went without piped water for months. Though this may well have been forgotten, Chennai remains a spectacle of the impending tragedies brought about by the city's inability to meet the basic needs of citizens, vis-à-vis drinking water, cooking and sanitation. A closer look at the factors that brought about the water crisis in Chennai is inescapable, should we gain a better grasp of the underlying problems, especially as this was a city which among others like Mumbai had suffered from floods previously. Many have cited the poor rainfall received in Chennai in the previous year as one of the main reasons for the water crisis. Though it is true that rainfall was low, which was 50% less than normal, focusing on this factor alone would absolve responsibility by blaming the vagaries of the rainfall patterns to a fast-changing climate, without understanding the ground-level steps (or missteps) which have been equally responsible factors. Chief among these is that the city has been built by incrementally encroaching floodplains and paving over lakes and wetlands that would have otherwise helped the process of recharging groundwater. The lack of space for water to percolate underground prevented rainwater from recharging the aquifers. This was further exacerbated by the loss of green cover (which would have otherwise helped water retention) to make way for infrastructure projects. Such a situation, on the one hand, leads to flooding during normal rainfall due to stagnation, and on the other hand leads to drought-like conditions due to the prevention of underground water storage. It is only that this situation was more magnified in Chennai, but other cities in India would echo these manifestations in varying degrees owing to a lack of sustainable urban planning. There is also the example, in Mumbai, in 2019, when 2,141

trees were felled at the Aarey colony, amid massive protests, to make space for a shed for the Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation Limited.

Need for synergy

If the Government is serious about addressing the water crisis in urban areas, the Ministry of Water Resources must reconfigure its relationship with other Ministries and Departments (Urban Development, Local Self-Government and Environment). This would be for enhanced integration and coordination through effective land and water zoning regulations that protect urban water bodies, groundwater sources, wetlands and green cover while simultaneously working to enhance waste water recycling and water recharge activities targeting aquifers and wells through rainwater harvesting.

Lessons from rural Punjab

In rural areas, the situation is no different, as the acute water crisis in Punjab shows. The draft report of the Central Ground Water Board concluded that Punjab would be reduced to a desert in 25 years if the extraction of its groundwater resources continues unabated; 82% of Punjab's land area has seen a huge decline in groundwater levels, wherein 109 out of 138 administrative blocks have been placed in the 'over exploited' category. Groundwater extraction which was at 35% in the 1960s and 1970s, rose to 70% post the Green Revolution — a period which saw governments subsidising power for irrigation that left tubewells running for hours. Concomitantly, cultivation of water intensive crops such as paddy have further aggravated water depletion, even turning water saline. Immediate measures need to be taken to manage and replenish groundwater, especially through participatory groundwater management approaches with its combination of water budgeting, aquifer recharging and community involvement. Such an approach to water conservation again beckons new configurations between sectors and disciplines. At the sectoral level, the Ministries and Departments of water resources must coordinate efforts with their counterparts in agriculture, the environment and rural development for greater convergence to achieve water and food security. At the disciplinary level, governance and management should increasingly interact and draw from the expertise of fields such as hydrology (watershed sustainability), hydrogeology (aquifer mapping and recharge) and agriculture sciences (water-sensitive crop choices and soil health). Again, the importance given to groundwater conservation should not ignore surface water conservation including the many rivers and lakes which are in a critical and dying state due to encroachment, pollution, over-abstraction and obstruction of water flow by dams.

Protecting resources

The Ministry of Jal Shakti, last year, had announced an ambitious plan to provide water connections to every household in India by 2024. In view of the ongoing erosion of water resources and an ever-increasing demand for water, the thrust should not be on promising water supply. Instead the aim should be towards protecting and conserving water resources on the one hand and minimising and enhancing efficiency of water usage on the other. As the expert committee constituted under the Union Water Resources Ministry drafts a new National Water Policy, one hopes it would be rooted in locus specific realities and allows greater flexibility for

integrating the insights and work of multiple departments and disciplines making way for new configurations to sustainably manage the country's water resources.

BEFORE MODI, INDIAN PMS WHO CALLED ON THE POPE, AND POPES WHO VISITED INDIA

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi calls on Pope Francis, head of the sovereign of the Vatican City State, for a 30-minute meeting, he will become the fifth Indian Prime Minister to have visited the head of Roman Catholics, the largest religious denomination in the world. Back home, Modi's visit has been excitedly welcomed by the Catholic Church. Even before the government officially announced the visit, the president of the Kerala Catholic Bishops Conference, Cardinal George Alenchery, issued a statement that it would "add more energy and warmth to the relations between our country and the Vatican and the Catholic Church". The visit comes at a time when Christians in many parts of the country have been complaining of harassment and attacks on the community and its institutions. A fact-finding team of the NGOs Association for the Protection of Civil Rights, United Against Hate and United Christian Forum recently presented a report after visiting Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, saying there has been a series of attacks against Christians and churches in these states. Politically, the visit is significant as it comes ahead of Assembly elections in Goa, where the Christian community forms a significant support base. Party leaders said the community's vote is crucial for the BJP in the state, where it has been in power with the support of splinter groups of the Congress and regional parties. The Roman Catholic Church also wields influence in Kerala. Christians and Muslims form almost half the state's population and the BJP is keen to get the backing of the Christians to emerge as a strong political force, something it has failed to achieve so far in Kerala while making electoral gains in other parts of the country. Christians are the third largest religious community in India. According to Census 2011, they form 2.3 per cent of the population, behind Hindus (79.8%) and Muslims (14.2%).

Previous PMs at Vatican

Before Modi, Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, I K Gujral, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee had met the then Popes in the Vatican. When Nehru visited Pope Pius XII in July 1955, the Indian government was facing protests from the Portuguese for its attempts to annex Goa to the Union. With the Portuguese claiming that it wanted to protect the Christians in the region, the community from different parts of the world were sceptical about the Indian government's intentions. Nehru had imposed an economic blockade after the Portuguese had killed 20 people during a protest launched by communist and socialist parties for the freedom of Goa. In his audience with the Pope, Nehru clarified that what was going on in Goa was a "political issue" and "not religious". A report in The New York Times on July 9, 1955, quoted Nehru as telling the media in Rome that the question of Goa was "briefly mentioned" in his talk with the Pope. "Mr Nehru said he had told the Pope that India's controversy with Portugal over Goa, was a political, not a religious problem. 'His Holiness agreed with me,' he added," the report said. Indira Gandhi, who had been part of Nehru's team during his visit, met Pope John Paul II when she was Prime Minister — in 1981. Prime Ministers I K Gujral in 1997 and Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 2000 called on the same Pope during their respective visits to Italy. World leaders who visit Rome for international conferences or summits make it a point to pay a visit to the Holy See.

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Popes in India

The first Pope to visit India was Paul IV, who travelled to Mumbai in 1964 to attend the International Eucharistic Congress. Pope John Paul II visited India in February 1986 and November 1999. Pope John Paul II's second visit to India became controversial when Sangh Parivar outfits such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal staged protests, seeking an apology from the Pope for alleged conversion by Christian missionaries in the past. VHP leader Acharya Giriraj Kishore's description of the Pope as a "dacoit" drew strong criticism, even from the BJP. It is not just Prime Ministers who have paid a visit to the Holy See. Communist veteran and former Chief Minister of Kerala E K Nayanar presented a Bhagavad Gita to Pope John Paul II in 1997 and he kept a rosary presented by the Pope throughout his life. Nayanar was accompanied by current Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who was then a minister in his government. When he visited Pope Francis in October 2019, Union Minister V Muraleedharan also gifted a Bhagavad Gita to him.

WHY THE VATICAN HAS ASKED TN CLERGY TO TAKE 'CORRECTIVE MEASURES'

In a letter dated October 8, the Apostolic Nunciature in India — the Vatican's envoy to New Delhi — has directed the Tamil Nadu clergy to stay away from holding positions in independent trusts and NGOs. It has asked the Tamil Nadu Bishops' Council (TNBC), which consists of 18 bishops, to take corrective and regulatory measures to ensure that the clergy is not associated with standalone trusts or societies without the consent of the diocesan ordinary. It said the clergy's association with independent entities outside the church, even if they are to provide assistance for those in need, makes them "financial and political power bases…". The letter quoted the Canon Law 286, which says "clerics are prohibited from conducting business or trade personally or through others, for their own advantage or that of others, except with the permission of legitimate ecclesiastical authority".

The trigger

According to a top source in the TNBC, Pope Francis had been receiving complaints from Tamil Nadu and Kerala about corruption and other aberrations in the lives of the clergy. "In Tamil Nadu, there happened to be some priests who aspire to control the church, lobby for bishop posts and use their political and money power to bully serving bishops for vested interests," the source said. "Priests become powerful when they are spiritually strong, not economically or politically…," another member of TNBC said when asked about the development. The sources mentioned a few incidents which they felt may have led to the Vatican's decision to issue the directive:

* A former bishop of the Diocese of Kotar, in southern Tamil Nadu, faced allegations over a trust he had floated to start a medical college by raising funds. Later, when the new bishop came to take charge, the former bishop claimed it was his private trust. The medical college project, however, never took off.

* Emergence of a priest in Tirunelveli as a political leader of a Tamil nationalist party. He started addressing political gatherings and poll campaigns wearing the cassock in the recent elections. A TNBC source said the priest had canvassed for that party even among the clergy.

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* A powerful priest, who is also running a trust backed by huge funds in southern Tamil Nadu, was arrested over a hate speech against Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The priest was also at the centre of another controversy — for allegedly forcing a bishop to resign to assert his power in the local diocese.

The clergy in Tamil Nadu

The Kerala church, their bishops and senior clergy, who wield great influence in a highly institutionalised church system older than Tamil Nadu's, has been at the centre of controversy for several years over sexual harassment charges, land scams, collusion with political parties, bishops making statements attributing communal motives on other communities, and over restoring certain "puritan" practices from the pre-Portuguese era. In contrast, the Tamil Nadu church has traditionally been less controversial. Unlike in Kerala, followers in Tamil Nadu come largely from the lower-middle-class sections. The Tamil priests, too, were known for their selfless lives and roles in leading public protests on larger causes that benefit the oppressed. During the Kudankulam protests and other public protests, and even during the war in northern Sri Lanka that ended in 2009, Tamil priests were working with and standing by the people. There are mainly two categories of the clergy in the Catholic church — religious and diocesan. The Apostolic Nunciature's directive has been aimed at the diocesan clergy, whose vows are only for the obedience to the local bishop, unlike the religious clergy — Jesuits, Capuchins or Missionaries of Charity — who take vows of obedience, chastity and poverty. Unlike the religious clergy, the diocesan clergy are allowed to have private bank accounts or even own property. The church sees that this is a liberal aspect that was misused by a few individual priests by running trusts and NGOs. Sharing his thoughts, a senior clergy member said the directive may be able to deal with the specific aberrations that may have led to the move, but added that caste issues also play a "major villain". He cited rivalry between devotees who failed to wash off their previous caste identity — depending on who converted from Hindu OBC, Hindu Dalits, or other Most Backward Classes.

PUNJAB DOES A DEEP DIVE FOR INDUS DOLPHINS

The census of one of the world's most threatened cetaceans, the Indus river dolphin (Platanista gangetica minor) — a freshwater dolphin that is found in river Beas, is all set to commence in the winter as part of a project by the Centre. However, Punjab's wildlife preservation wing has gone a step ahead to not only protect the dolphins but also their natural habitat. The Indus river dolphin is classified as endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and, until recently, it was believed that these dolphins were endemic to Pakistan. But in 2007, a remnant but viable population of Indus dolphins was discovered in Punjab's Harike wildlife sanctuary and in the lower Beas river. Since its discovery, research is being done by Punjab's Department of Forests and Wildlife Preservation in partnership with WWF-India on the current distribution, habitat use and population abundance of the mammal. The Indus river dolphin was declared the State aquatic animal of Punjab in 2019. "Enumeration of freshwater dolphins is being undertaken as a nationwide project of the Central Government. At the State level, the Punjab Government has taken the initiative for conservation of dolphins and its habitat," Gitanjali Kanwar, coordinator — rivers, wetlands and water policy, WWF-India, told The Hindu. The project is to be implemented over five years. "Alongside research, importance will be on engaging

the riparian communities by encouraging community-led biological monitoring. Villages around the hot spot sites of dolphin occurrence will be developed as models for community-led conservation. Extension programmes will be held to develop a group of dedicated individuals, called 'Beas-Dolphin Mitras' [friends and protectors] of the river Beas. The project also will embark on dolphin eco-tourism. We will adopt a participatory process to address various water conservation-related issues, including protection of freshwater habitats," said Ms. Kanwar.

A MOVEMENT TO ROOT OUT INVASIVE ALIEN SPECIES

Dr. Sachin Punekar is a man on a mission: the noted city-based botanist, finding his world of flora and fauna increasingly under siege from invasive alien species (IAS), has launched a green forum to combat the menace. Dr. Punekar, along with a number of environmentalists, retired Forest Department authorities, farmers, green activists and other stakeholders has come together to form a forum called Movement Against Biological Invasions (MABI) – a green movement aimed at systematically charting and rooting out IAS. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) defines IAS as "an alien species whose introduction and spread threaten ecosystems, habitats, or species with socio-cultural, economic and environmental harm and harm to human health". "Forest-invasive species can supplant native plants, eliminate food and cover for wildlife and threaten rare plant and animal species," says Dr. Punekar, adding that the impact of globalisation leading to the increased movement of people, trade and de-forestation have led to the introduction of IAS in the indigenous environment in massive quantities.

'Spread is alarming'

"The spread of IAS spread is alarming and is wiping out local native species like grasses and other herbaceous species. As a result, the local food chain is afflicted with the IAS competing for space and light with native flora. For instance, the Cosmos sulphureus IAS is now almost taking up all the space in roadside shrubbery and is widely prevalent in Pune," he notes. MABI has so far conducted several 'obnoxious weed eradication' drives in various parts of Maharashtra as well as across the country, namely in Northeastern States like Sikkim. Seeds of the MABI movement were sown in 2016 when a "bonfire" was organised by Dr. Punekar's environmental NGO Biospheres on the occasion of Holi in association with the Pune Municipal Corporation and State Forest Department. Each week, green spaces in Pune district hum with the activity of MABI members, determinedly rooting out IAS and holding weed bonfires. "The knock-on effects of unchecked IAS are alarming. These species can change the functions of ecosystems and increase losses in forestry and natural resource management costs, while also posing a danger to biological diversity and other human enterprises – as well as to human health," says Dr. Punekar. He further observes the potential threat to livestock health as the IAS hamper the growth of native grasses which are fodder species for herbivores and livestock. "Some IAS are poisonous which may cause allergies and skin diseases among the animals. Furthermore, given that it is virtually impossible to segregate pure fodder from IAS, the chances that livestock will be consuming adulterated fodder is high," Dr. Punekar said. Another indirect effect of the rise in IAS is a heightening of the man-animal conflict. "The widespread prevalence of IAS like Lantana camara has reduced the proportion of natural grasses for herbivorous animals forcing their movement to human habitats in search of paddy crops and other edible items. This has resulted in the movement of animals like

the Indian gaur and the chinkara (Indian gazelle) from their natural habitats to human settlements, thus endangering them," Dr. Punekar said.

Spreading awareness

Given the poor appreciation of this phenomenon in India and other developing countries, awareness was generally low regarding IAS and its baneful effects. "Policymakers and other stakeholders are not yet sensitised to the magnitude of problem. So, awareness is our first priority," he says. One of the MABI's prime objectives is to help farmers improve their productivity by identifying IAS and rooting it out. Through seminars, workshops, slideshows, video teasers, documentary, information brochures, the forum is helping making people literate about various aspects of IAS. "On an average, 32% of the farmers' budget goes into the control of weeds, which includes the regular spraying of insecticide and labour costs. Moreover, weeds change according to climatic conditions," says Maruti Chavan, a farmer from Indapur in Pune district. He added that unchecked growth of IAS was baneful for soil health, which was prone to faster deterioration. To help farmers relate better to the phenomenon, the MABI has hit upon the idea of using historical analogies to explain the potential ill-effects of IAS.

INDIAN FARMING PRACTICES: LEARNING FROM ELSEWHERE IN THE WORLD

A paper has appeared recently in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA(PNAS) titled: "Integrated farming with intercropping increases food production while reducing environmental footprint" (see: Q. Chai et al.,PNAS September 21, 118(38)e2106382118 https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2106382118). This work found that (1) "relay planting" enhances yield, (2) within-field rotation or "strip rotation", allowing strips for planting other plants (such as grass, fruits) besides the major crop was more fruitful, (3) "soil munching," that is, available means such as crop straw, in addition to the major crop such as wheat or rice, and (4) "no-till" or a reduced tillage, which increases the annual crop yield up by 15.6% to 49.9%, and decreasing the environmental footprint by 17.3%, compared with traditional monoculture cropping. This led to the conclusion that small farm holders can grow more food and have reduced environmental footprint. How do these factors apply to the small farmers of India? Current statistics reveal that our country has a significant population of small farmers, many owning less than 2 hectares of land. About 70% of its rural households still depend primarily on agriculture for their livelihood, with 82% of farmers being small and marginal. The total production of food-grains in 2017-18 was estimated to be 275 million tons. Some others have pointed out that only 30% of all farmers borrow from formal sources. The farm loan waivers from the state governments have been helpful in this regard, but yet, over 50% struggle to borrow from Shylockian sources.

Relay planting

The site "Relay Cropping- GK Today" explains this in some detail. Relay planting means the planting of different crops in the same plot, one right after another, in the same season. Examples of such relay cropping would be planting rice (or wheat), cauliflower, onion, and summer gourd (or potato onion, lady's fingers and maize), in the same season. Why do this? Well, less risk since you do not have to depend on one crop alone. It also means better distribution of labour, insects spread less, and any legumes actually add nitrogen to the soil! We have read about how small farmers in Telangana, Karnataka and Maharashtra are actually doing this and earning money out

of such relay farming. They plant onions, turmeric, chillies, ginger, garlic and even some native fruits, thus making profit, during these relay times. 'GK Today' does, however, point out the difficulties involved in such relay cropping, namely mechanisation here can be difficult, plus the management requirements are somewhat higher. It is here that women come in handy. Women plant materials for home food, such as greens, leafy vegetables and pulses such as green grams, Finger millet (ragi in Hindi, kezhwaragu in Tamil) horse gram (chane ki dal in Hindi, kudure gram in Kannada, and kollu in Tamil), cowpeas, and also grass (all of which add to the nitrogen to the soil and also to the world around us, fixing nitrogen not just under our feet but also in the air we breathe; the carbon dioxide, ozone, and the oxides of nitrogen and phosphorus that we inhale every day from the filthy atmosphere is at least nullified a little, thanks to relay cropping)!

Strip cropping

Strip cropping has been used in the U.S. (where the fields are larger than those in India), where they grow wheat, along with corn and soyabean, in the same farm in an alternative manner. However, this needs large lands. In India, where there are large fields (such as the ones owned by cities and state governments), the land is divided into strips, and strips of grass are left to grow between the crops. Planting of trees to create shelters has helped in stabilising the desert in Western India. "Strip crop - a ray of hope" is the title given by the site 'Vikaspedia', which discusses Western Karnataka (and the nearby Telangana and Northern Tamil Nadu), dry belts with frequent droughts, where 80% of the farmers depend on groundnut as their option. The Karnataka Watershed Development (KAWAD), together with the AME Foundation, persuaded the farmers to stop using finger millets, fodder and groundnuts.

Soil mulching and no-till

While these methods are not easy for small farmers in India, they could be practised at least in larger farms such as the ones owned by industry and governments. Soil mulching requires keeping all bare soil covered with straw, leaves, and the like, even when the land is in use. Erosion is curtailed, moisture retained, and beneficial organisms, such as earthworms, kept in place. The same set of benefits are also offered by not tilling the soil. These four methods suggested by the international group are worth following in India.

KEEPING THE FAITH

Following months of speculation, the World Health Organization (WHO) has granted Emergency Use Listing (EUL) to Covaxin, manufactured by Bharat Biotech. This now allows the vaccine's better availability in many more countries, particularly via global groupings such as Covax. One of WHO's key aims is to have at least 40% of people in all countries vaccinated by the year-end — a tall order as the latest estimates suggest that only around 1% of people in low-income countries have received their jabs. Seventy countries are yet to vaccinate 10% of their populations, and 30 countries — including much of Africa — have vaccinated fewer than 2%. In Latin America, only one in four of the population has received a vaccine dose, according to The British Medical Journal. Covaxin is an indigenous, inactivated whole-virion vaccine that has been developed based on well-established protocols. This has meant that it was put on the regulatory speed belt at nearly every stage, the most significant being its emergency approval by India's drug regulators without any published phase-3 efficacy data. The ostensible reason for the haste was that India needed a low-

cost indigenous vaccine that could be quickly administered to many. Though Bharat Biotech has years of experience in producing crores of vaccines, the scale of quickly ramping up Covaxin supply has so far been beyond its capacity. In no month, since July, has Bharat Biotech actually delivered on its promised supply of vaccine, and even after over 107 crore shots have been administered, only around 12% have received Covaxin; many in India have been vaccinated with Covishield. Moreover, before the Centre agreed to take over 75% of the public supply, Covaxin offered no cost advantage — and in some instances was costlier — than Covishield. Bharat Biotech however moved to quickly get WHO's approval for its vaccine under its emergency listing process, in July. But unlike the rapid-fire clearance by India's Central Drugs Standard Control Organization, WHO's evaluation process has turned out to be considerably more involved. WHO cleared the AstraZeneca (Covishield) vaccine in four weeks but that Covaxin has required over 20 weeks — especially in a climate where much of the world is desperate — raises several questions. Bharat Biotech is no novice to WHO's clearance process and would surely be aware of all the requirements. While Covaxin's EUL may now ease foreign travel for a fraction of Indians, there is a real need to know why, in spite of Bharat Biotech's claims that it had furnished the required data whenever demanded, this approval took the time it did. With Covaxin close to being approved for children there will be significant demand now for this population segment; however, the company must work to improve its manufacturing supply and contribute to a larger share of the vaccines globally administered.

THE HUG RETURNS

Remember, the festive seasons before the pandemic? You'd get dressed up, visit friends and family, and a warm hug would begin the party. Politicians would embrace new members — often defectors from some other formation — by clasping them in public. And many a world leader has been in a tight embrace with a counterpart, their physical closeness a sign of warm bilateral ties. Of course, not every hug was a jaadu ki jhappi — there's always the uncle, the over-familiar patriarch, who hangs on a little too long. Then, for the better part of two years, the world lived in fear, festivities were confined to video calls. There was no closeness and in some ways, the gaping chasm left by the lack of physical human interaction was felt all the more with digital spaces making everyone a click away — so close, yet so far. The young, when they did leave home, were racked with guilt and fear about bringing the virus home, and infecting their vulnerable and venerable elders. The old were sick of being controlled, isolated first by age and then by the concerns for their health. 100 crore vaccinations later, the jhappi is making a tentative return. People are still unsure, of course. It begins with a bumping of elbows — a muted Eid Mubarak, Happy Diwali or Merry Christmas is then uttered. The brave venture into a side hug, so as not to tempt fate. It is a balancing act between the need for community, of the drive that human beings possess as social animals and the biological reality of the virus and the fear of mortality. It's the world leaders, finally meeting each other again, who seem to be completely unafraid. Masked, double-vaccinated, some even gloved, the hug has ceased to be a risk for them.

COVID-19 AS A TALE OF JOB HARDSHIP AND MARGINALISATION

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region — it is now known as the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf — that hosts about 23 million migrant workers (International Labour Organization, 2017) is riddled with problems that are particularly related to the discrimination of

women migrant workers. Most of the migrant workforce which dominates the workspace of the GCC region — accounting for about three-quarters of the workforce of the region (ILO, 2017) — hails from the South Asian and South-east Asian countries, and are on temporary contracts and mostly engaged in low-wage occupations.

A thread of vulnerability

Women account for 39% of migrant workers in the GCC (International Labour Organization, 2017) and the feminisation of the workforce across multiple sectors of the economy demonstrates a growing trend. Women migrants, who are in the skilled category are mainly nurses in the organised health industry; those in the semi-skilled or unskilled category are domestic workers, care workers, cleaning crew, manufacturing workers, salon staff and salespersons. These workers are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. For instance, domestic workers, who are mostly women, are greatly vulnerable to abuse owing to the very nature of their workspace. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of women migrant workers. For health workers it is more about the deterioration of their working conditions than the problem of losing their jobs. While interviewing women working across the broad spectrum of jobs, a senior nursing staff said, "The government wanted nurses to be deployed at the COVID centres, and all the hospitals under the Ministry were asked to send their staff. The private hospitals on the other hand were asked not to function. This drastically increased the burden on the government hospitals." As a result, private hospital staff were asked to go on unpaid leave during the lockdown and the Ministry staff could not even take leave as the situation was declared an emergency.

Stress in the health sector

In many countries, the work hours of nurses in many countries were extended from eight hours to 12 hours without overtime remuneration — that too in challenging working conditions. A government nurse in Kuwait, recounted, "Initially, our doctor asked us not to use excess gloves and masks because of the fear of falling short of these supplies. So only the nurses at the point of care were allowed to wear a mask. But then the cases started to increase, and we were allowed to wear a mask." Another one of them told us, I was assigned the triage area. The personal protective equipment (PPE) gown, mask, and face shield were there, but we were not using gloves; we were using sanitisers. I had to be there continuously every day for three months, from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m.; I had to stand continuously, taking temperature for each patient. This was stressful for my back; this was difficult work for me." One of our respondents, working in Saudi Arabia, recounted, "The area where I stay was completely locked down due to a large number of cases, we had just one open road. Many hospitals gave leave to staff staying there, but my hospital asked us to continue to commute to work. It was stressful not knowing whether we would catch the infection, as we were also exposing our children and other family members." A staff working in Kuwait, shared her anxiety. "We used to wear two N95 masks, but there was no social distancing. The staff from different wards travelled together to and from work. This was very risky as workers with asthma and respiratory problems travelled by the same bus." Even in January 2021, many of these nurses from different countries had not taken leave, including their annual leave, except if they were COVID-19 positive. Even those who could manage to get off days could not travel home, which added to the immense mental stress. Amidst all the pandemic chaos, our respondents sounded relieved that they somehow kept a job and monthly pay; many of their spouses had lost jobs and had families waiting for their monetary assistance in India.

For semi-skilled workers

Many of the semi-skilled and unskilled workers found themselves in a bind when they lost their jobs, wages and their accommodation too. When we spoke to another staff in early 2021, her visa was about to expire, and she was searching for a job. She worked in a salon in Kuwait owned by a local woman who had provided her with shared accommodation, salary and decent working hours. The salon had 30 married women workers from South and South-east Asia. The salon first closed temporarily in March 2020 and all the workers were given accommodation and food till October, which was deducted from their indemnity benefit. However, the salon soon went bankrupt in October and the workers had to vacate without benefits. A social worker we spoke to described the situation of women working in vulnerable sectors during COVID-19. The vulnerability of the workers has worsened during COVID-19 because of the severe restrictions to mobility. "These exploited women include domestic workers, beauty parlour workers and cleaning crew in hospitals and big companies. Those staying in employer's premises, especially housemaids are more vulnerable. They did not know what was happening outside, about [the] corona situation. Many women working here, especially housemaids, do not have any medium for getting news about the current situation. Some do not even have [a] phone, while most have only basic phones." Their communication to the outside world including family is restricted and it is difficult for an outsider to reach them, a hard truth we learned while trying to contact these women for this article. We spoke to a 60-year-old housemaid who had returned to India from the United Arab Emirates. She had health problems and her employer did not want to be saddled with her health problems during the pandemic. Her maid visa that had an insurance coverage of 600 dirhams, was just not enough to cover her health costs.

Other cases

Some of the more vulnerable workers were the ones working 'illegally'. For example, there was a woman who had emigrated on a child-care visa, but lost her job as her former employers were concerned about the safety of their child during COVID-19. The woman then started working as a housemaid with very low wages but was reluctant to ask for a raise, as she feared being reported. There was also another woman who emigrated as a housemaid in 2008, received her last salary in March 2020, after which her employer gave her the option to work without pay or to return home. Some who found themselves in more challenging situations have quit their jobs and returned home penniless; some have had to borrow money for the air ticket home. Situations such as these have made women workers more vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation. Whether professionally skilled or unskilled, migrant women workers have not had it easy in a foreign land where the discrimination and exploitation they faced were compounded by the novel coronavirus pandemic. This definitely focuses light on the lacunae persisting in the creation of women-centric, rights-based policies to safeguard migrants.

BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

EU, UNITED STATES END THEIR CLASH OVER STEEL AND ALUMINIUM

The United States and the European Union on Sunday ended a dispute over steel and aluminium tariffs and said they would work on a global arrangement on steel and aluminium to combat "dirty" production and overcapacity in the industry.

Following are some key details about the deal:

– The United States will not apply Section 232 duties imposed by former president Donald Trump and will allow duty-free importation of steel and aluminium from the EU at a historical-based volume.

– The EU will suspend tariffs on US products like whiskey, powerboats and Harley-Davidson motorcycles, imposed in retaliation for the steel and aluminium tariffs.

– The EU and the United States will negotiate what they call the world's first carbon-based sectoral arrangement on steel and aluminium trade by 2024, with their arrangement aiming to address carbon intensity and global overcapacity.

– The two sides said they will work to restrict access to their markets for "dirty steel" and limit access to "countries that dump steel" in their markets, both of which contribute to worldwide oversupply.

– The United States also published a consultation that brought on board what it called "like-minded nations" like Japan and Britain on issues related to steel and aluminium, with a focus on the impacts of overcapacity on the global steel and aluminium markets.

LOOKING EAST

In his engagement with the Asian leaders last week, conducted under the banner of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said all the right things. He reaffirmed India's commitment to a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, and underlined Delhi's support for the centrality of the ASEAN. But Asia is changing rapidly and is very different today from the one that India re-engaged in the early 1990s in the name of a Look East Policy. Much of the churn in the region has taken place since Modi won office in 2014. The PM then promised to impart fresh energy to the regional engagement with his "Act East Policy". Until now Delhi had it easy. It just needed to effectively implement the ASEAN agenda of regional cooperation. But the structural changes in the region and the breakdown of the old certitudes demand that India reboot its ASEAN engagement. If the ASEAN was widely viewed as a thriving regional organisation just a few years ago, it is struggling to retain its internal coherence today. There have been serious differences on how to deal with the military coup in Myanmar. The rise of China and its assertive policies towards its neighbours deeply trouble the ASEAN. But overwhelmed by China's proximity and power, few are willing to raise their voice against Beijing. The region is also shaken to its core by the deepening political confrontation between Beijing and Washington and the prospect for an economic decoupling between China and the US. Squeezed by

the sharpening Sino-US rivalry, ASEAN members are ambivalent about the geopolitical conception of the Indo-Pacific. Many of them have bought into Beijing's narrative that brands the Indo-Pacific as anti-China. They also are wary about India's membership of the Quad that is viewed as a potential challenge to ASEAN centrality. Delhi has its task cut out in explaining its vision of the Indo-Pacific, reassuring the region on Delhi's membership of the Quad, and intensifying its own bilateral cooperation with the ASEAN states. Delhi's withdrawal from the region-wide free trade agreement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in 2019, continues to rankle among the ASEAN members. Linked to the RCEP is the widespread regional perception that India has turned inward again with its "Aatmanirbhar" policies. There is little regional awareness of India's recent economic reforms promoting greater role for domestic and foreign capital. Delhi can't assume that the logic of its new international posture is self-evident to its ASEAN partners. It needs a comprehensive effort to promote a better Asian understanding of its policies and the new opportunities they present for deeper economic and political cooperation.

FISCAL CUSHION

The Centre's gross tax revenues have grown 64.2 per cent year-on-year during April-September. With net tax as well as non-tax revenue receipts up 96.3 per cent and total expenditures rising only 9.9 per cent, the fiscal deficit of Rs 526,851 crore for the first half of 2021-22 is just 35 per cent of the budget estimate for the whole year. That ratio, according to the Swiss investment bank Credit Suisse, is the lowest since 2007-08 and way below the 10-year-average of 74 per cent. Simply put, government finances — at least the Centre's — are much better than projected in the budget that was presented before the second wave of Covid. Thus, not only has the pandemic had very little impact on revenue collections this fiscal, the Centre is in a position where it can actually spend in the second half. This is unlike previous years, when the finance ministry would force arbitrary last-quarter expenditure cuts by all departments in order to meet fiscal deficit targets. There are two probable reasons for the above turnaround; the fact that gross tax revenues are up 28.7 per cent even over April-September 2019 suggests it isn't just due to last year's low base. The first has to do with the increasing formalisation of the economy. Demonetisation, GST (goods and services tax) and the lockdown have led to organised sector firms gaining market share from informal enterprises. That, along with e-way bills and other systems now for tracking transactions and plugging leakages, has translated into overall improved tax compliance. This again is borne out by corporation and income tax collections during April-September 2021 being 23.8 per cent and 28.7 per cent higher than their corresponding respective levels for April-September 2019. The second factor has been petrol and diesel taxes. The Centre's revenues from excise duties (mainly on fuels), at Rs 171,684 crore during April-September, have grown 79 per cent over the Rs 95,930 crore for the same period two years ago. What should be the way forward? The Centre should, for starters, consolidate its fiscal gains. That is important in the current scenario where yields on its 10-year bonds have already hardened to nearly 6.4 per cent, from the sub-6 per cent levels till early June. With most central banks signalling their intent to suck out excess liquidity in response to inflation concerns, the pressure on yields may only go up. The Indian economy needs no demand stimulus today, but cannot also afford interest rate hikes derailing an ongoing recovery. Improved finances gives the Centre enough leeway to slash fuel excise duties (necessary to curb inflation expectations) and clear GST compensation dues to states (which it has already done). But a renewed spending spree is something wholly avoidable.

THE WORKER COUNT

The first quarter GDP data showed that the Indian economy was around 9 per cent lower than its pre pandemic level. High frequency indicators suggest that in the period thereafter, parts of the economy have recovered to pre Covid levels. However, there continues to be uncertainty over the extent of the distress in the informal sector. By all accounts, the impact of the pandemic has been felt more by the unorganised sector — this is also the third shock to this segment following demonetisation and GST. Some have argued that these shocks, coupled with various policy initiatives have led to a sharp increase in the pace of formalisation in the economy. But in the absence of data, it is difficult to know for sure, both, the extent to which the informal economy continues to struggle, and the permanent gains to the formal segment. According to an estimate presented by an officer at the National Statistical Division of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, the informal/unorganised sector in India accounted for 52.4 per cent of the total value added in the economy in 2017-18, and employed around 87 per cent of the total labour force. Economists at SBI, who have tried to quantify the extent of formalisation in the economy, argue that value added by the informal sector has declined from 52.4 per cent in 2017-18 to 15-20 per cent in 2020-21. Such a large decline appears improbable. But it is difficult to arrive at precise estimates. Shifts from the unorganised to the organised sector occur at two levels — one, the formalisation of the firm, and two, the formalisation of the informal labour force. While in the case of the former, enterprises are essentially shifting from the informal to the formal part of the economy, the latter could be a consequence of both, formalisation of the firm, and/or formalisation of the informal labour force of an existing formal enterprise. But this debate on the extent to which the formal sector has gained at the expense of the informal raises several questions. First, considering that economists have argued that informal enterprises are characterised by high birth and death rates, have these informal enterprises permanently shut shop? Are the gains to the formal sector permanent? Second, have these organised sector firms absorbed this part of the informal labour force leading to a rise in the formal workforce? If not, then this forced formalisation would have simply exacerbated the employment problem. There is also the issue of estimation. Informal employment typically implies workers with no written contracts, or paid leave and other benefits including some form of social and job security provided by employer, or the government. Mere registration of unorganised workers on the e-Shram portal does not imply formalisation. However, notwithstanding these concerns, the high demand for work under MGNREGA signals continuing distress in the informal economy. Though in the absence of data its difficult to gauge precisely the extent of the distress.

RBI PANEL ON ARCS PROPOSES NORMS FOR VALUERS, RESERVE PRICE

To streamline the functioning of asset reconstruction companies (ARCs), a Reserve Bank panel has come out with a host of suggestions including the creation of an online platform for the sale of stressed assets and allowing ARCs to act as resolution applicants during the IBC process. The committee, headed by former RBI Executive Director Sudarshan Sen, suggested that the scope of Section 5 of the SARFAESI Act be expanded to permit ARCs to acquire financial assets from all regulated entities, including AIFs, FPIs, AMCs making investment on behalf of MFs and all NBFCs including HFCs. The performance of the ARCs has so far remained lacklustre, both in ensuring recovery and in revival of businesses. Lenders could recover only about 14.29% of the amount

owed by borrowers in respect of stressed assets sold to ARCs in the 2004-2013 period. To improve the performance of ARCs, the RBI had appointed the committee to examine the issues and recommend measures for enabling ARCs to meet the growing requirements of the financial sector. Stakeholders can send comments on the report to the RBI by December 15. For accounts above ₹500 crore, two bank-approved external valuers should carry out a valuation to determine liquidation value and fair market value. "Also, the final approval of the reserve price should be given by a high-level committee that has the power to approve the corresponding write-off of the loan," the report said.

WHEN CAN PSU BANK STAFF BE PROBED FOR NPAS?

The Finance Ministry has issued a fresh set of norms to guide state-owned banks in adopting a uniform staff accountability framework for non-performing assets (NPAs) up to Rs 50 crore. The aim is to "protect employees for their bona fide actions and at the same time make them accountable for any wrongdoing or any inaction on their part". The guidelines will be implemented with effect from April 1, 2022, for accounts that turn NPAs beginning the next financial year.

What is the new framework?

The 'Staff Accountability Framework for NPA Accounts up to Rs 50 crore (Other than Fraud Cases)', issued on October 29 by the Department of Financial Services (DFS), advises public-sector banks to revise their staff accountability policies and frame procedures with approval of their respective boards. Banks will have to complete an accountability exercise within six months from the date an account is classified as NPA. Depending on the banks' business size, the guidelines suggest threshold limits for scrutiny of the accountability by the chief vigilance officer. If NPA is caused by external factors — such as change in government policy, natural calamities, non-release of government subsidy/grant — it should not attract a staff accountability examination, the guidelines say.

Why was the need felt?

The step has been taken to protect bankers and remove their fears of being investigated for bona fide business decisions gone wrong. Bankers have provided feedback to the government that sometimes decisions on credit sanctions are slow as bankers fear investigative agencies may come after them if the accounts turn NPA. "This approach not only adversely affects staff morale but also puts a huge strain on the bank's resources. While punitive action needs to be taken against the officers having mala fide intent/involvement, it is essential to ensure that bona fide mistakes are dealt with compassion," says the Indian Banks' Association (IBA).

What has led to such fears?

After the Rs-13,000-crore loan fraud on Punjab National Bank by diamond trader Nirav Modi came to light in 2018, senior officials of the bank were hauled up and those involved had to face tough action. This, and a series of other unrelated frauds, led to an environment in which PSU banks became extremely cautious and risk -averse even in the case of bona fide corporate loans. This was seen as stalling credit deployment, which is crucial to support economic growth. In December

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2019, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman assured the heads of state-run banks of protection from undue harassment from probes into their lending decisions. She said after a review meeting with top bankers from state-run banks that "fear of 3Cs – CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation), CVC (Central Vigilance Commission) and CAG (Comptroller and Auditor General)" was holding back banking decisions.

What are the rules laid down?

UP TO RS 10 lakh: Staff accountability need not be examined in NPA accounts with outstanding up to Rs 10 lakh. The government has argued that most loans up to Rs 10 lakh are "template-based" and do not constitute a major percentage of the NPA portfolio by amount. Such accounts can turn into NPA even due to a slight change in circumstances including a family health crisis or a shutdown, leading to disruption in cash flows.

Rs 10 LAKH–RS 1 CRORE: For examining staff accountability, banks may decide on a threshold of Rs 10 lakh or Rs 20 lakh, depending on their business size. For loans between Rs 10 lakh and Rs 1 crore, which mainly include home and car loans, SME and agriculture credit, staff accountability is to be examined by a committee formed at regional/controlling offices. For preliminary examination, the controller will submit to the committee a brief report, covering details of the loan and observations in inspection/audit reports for the previous four years. If the committee finds a case of staff accountability exists, this will be examined by a fact-finding officer.

Rs 1 CRORE–50 CRORE: Accounts in this range are mostly credit facilities sanctioned to business units warranting examination by a specialised unit within the banks. NPA accounts in this range should undergo a preliminary examination by a committee constituted at one level higher than the sanction level — an account sanctioned at the regional office will be taken up at the zonal level, those at the zonal level by circle office or head office, and so on. The committee should be headed by an official senior to the sanctioning authority. For preliminary examination by the committee, a detailed report should be submitted through the controller. If the committee finds material lapses in any of the processes, the account may be referred at the discretion of the committee to the controlling audit office for a detailed examination of staff accountability.

What is the existing framework?

Currently, different banks are following different procedures for staff accountability exercises. Banks carry out such exercises in respect of all accounts that turn NPA. This has made many bankers reluctant about taking exposure in new units or projects. As a result, credit offtake to small units that require bank funding were starved of liquidity, especially after the pandemic began.

What about accounts above Rs 50 crore?

According to the Finance Ministry notification, for NPA accounts in this range, staff accountability is to be examined as per the existing guidelines. However, the RBI has set a framework under which banks must initiate and complete a staff accountability exercise within six months from the date of classification as a fraud. Details of the exercise and the action taken may be placed before the SCBF (Special Committee of the Board for monitoring and follow-up of Frauds) and intimated to the RBI at quarterly intervals. The RBI says banks should bifurcate all fraud cases into vigilance

and non-vigilance categories. Only vigilance cases should be referred to investigative authorities. Non-vigilance cases may be investigated and dealt with at the bank level within a period of six months. In cases involving very senior executives, the board or the audit committee may initiate the process of fixing accountability, which should not be held up on account of the case being filed with law-enforcement agencies.

How will the new norms improve credit growth?

Banking industry executives say the new norms will help bankers take credit decisions faster and help support the economy. Slow credit delivery to industries due to the fear of implication needs urgent address, the IBA said. Non-food credit offtake increased by 6.8 per cent to Rs 108.94 lakh crore during the 12-month period ended September 2021, after 5.1 per cent in the previous year, with the country lifting Covid-induced restrictions and the economy on the comeback trail. Credit growth to industry picked up to 2.5 per cent in September 2021 from 0.4 per cent in September 2020. "A growing economy depends heavily on bank credit. The Government and the RBI also have on various occasions expressed their concern on slow credit off-take and have stressed on eradication of fear in taking business decisions. Fair, predictable and transparent systems and procedures of conducting staff accountability are necessary to eliminate subjectivity," the Finance Ministry said.

NEARLY 5 YEARS SINCE NOTE BAN: CASH WITH PUBLIC RISING, AT ALL-TIME HIGH

Currency with public has continued to rise even five years after the government announced demonetisation on November 8, 2016. With cash remaining the preferred mode of payment, currency with public for the fortnight ended October 8, 2021 stood at a record high of Rs 28.30 lakh crore — up 57.48 per cent, or Rs 10.33 lakh crore, from a level of Rs 17.97 lakh crore on November 4, 2016. Cash with public has shot up 211 per cent from Rs 9.11 lakh crore, recorded on November 25, 2016. According to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) data, for the fortnight ended October 23, 2020, the currency with public rose by Rs 15,582 crore ahead of the Diwali festival. It rose by 8.5 per cent, or Rs 2.21 lakh crore, on a year-on-year basis. After Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 notes were withdrawn in November 2016, currency with the public, which stood at Rs 17.97 lakh crore on November 4, 2016, declined to Rs 7.8 lakh crore in January 2017. Cash in the system has been steadily rising, even though the government and the RBI have pushed for a "less cash society", digitisation of payments and imposed restrictions on the use of cash in various transactions. The jump was primarily driven by a rush for cash by the public in 2020 as the government announced stringent lockdown to tackle the spread of the Covid pandemic. As nations around the world announced lockdowns in February and the Indian government also prepared to announce lockdown, people began accumulating cash to meet their grocery and other essential needs that was being mainly catered by neighbourhood grocery stores. As per the RBI's definition, currency with public is arrived at after deducting cash with banks from total currency in circulation (CIC). CIC refers to cash or currency within a country that is physically used to conduct transactions between consumers and businesses. The rise in currency in circulation in absolute numbers is not the reflection of reality. "What needs to be taken into account is the currency to GDP ratio, which had come down after demonetisation," said a banker. The cash in circulation to GDP ratio has been 10-12 per cent till about FY20. However, post the covid-19 pandemic and due to the growth of cash in the ecosystem, CIC to GDP is expected to inch up to 14 per cent by FY25. The RBI's own

view of CIC suggests that there is little or no correlation between CIC and digital payment penetrations and that CIC will grow in line with nominal GDP.

THE CRYPTO CONUNDRUM

Bitcoin and other private cryptocurrencies have been on a bull run recently. Unlike previous rallies, the current rally in bitcoin has witnessed the increasing participation of retail investors in India. Since 2020, when the Supreme Court overturned an order by the Reserve Bank of India dated April 6, 2018, restricting the use of cryptocurrencies, traffic in domestic cryptocurrency exchanges in India has grown many-fold. Yet, the future of bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies is unlikely to be as bright as many believe it to be.

A case of speculative mania?

The most important feature of cryptocurrencies that is flaunted by their enthusiasts is their limited supply. In a world where central banks create a lot of money out of thin air, it is natural for investors who are looking to protect their wealth to seek abode in alternative assets whose supply cannot be cranked up as easily. Money creation by central banks causes the price of all goods to rise and also tends to accelerate the adoption of alternative assets as currencies. When central banks create a lot of money, it leads to an increase in the prices of not just goods such as food and cars but also that of commodities such as gold and silver, considered to be alternative forms of money. Yet, for various reasons, the rally in bitcoin may be no more than a case of speculative mania. For one, scarcity alone is not sufficient to facilitate the adoption of cryptocurrencies as money. Any asset must have either use value or exchange value in order for it to possess any fundamental value. This fundamental value, in turn, is reflected in the price of these assets in the long run. Stocks and bonds, for instance, possess exchange value that is based on the expected future cash flow from these assets. Commodities such as oil and steel possess use value because these assets are used to run vehicles and build real estate. Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies may be scarce but it is questionable whether they possess any use value or exchange value. Gold and silver have traditionally served as hedges against inflation because they possess fundamental value derived from their use as jewellery and money. But bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies neither offer direct use value nor possess significant exchange value — bitcoin can buy you very few real goods and services. In short, cryptocurrencies possess no significant fundamental value to sustain their current high prices. Yet, many believe that the rising prices of cryptocurrencies reflect their likely future value as a currency. It is possible that investors are bidding up the price of bitcoin because they foresee a future in which private currency is widely accepted as money. After all, all investments are forward-looking. One may also grant that the extreme volatility seen in the price of cryptocurrencies, which seems unrelated to any similar fluctuations in their fundamentals, may be due to the nascent, illiquid nature of the cryptocurrency market. However, the more cryptocurrencies are accepted in exchange for goods and services, the greater the chances of governments cracking down on them.

Issuance of money

The monopoly that governments (and central banks) possess over the issuance of money is at the root of their power and influence. This allows governments to fund their budget deficits, particularly during times of crises such as the current pandemic when tax revenues have taken an

unprecedented hit. It also allows central banks to tinker with the money supply under the mandate of managing aggregate demand in the economy. In essence, monopoly control over money allows governments to indirectly tax citizens by increasing the supply of currencies, thus devaluing them. If cryptocurrencies like bitcoin are going to challenge fiat currencies like the U.S. dollar as a medium of exchange, they would essentially be challenging the authority of the government to print and spend. This is not an assault that governments will tolerate for long. They will allow cryptocurrencies to exist only as long as these currencies remain a speculative asset and not a medium of exchange. This is not to say that governments are justified in their crackdown against cryptocurrencies. China recently imposed a complete ban on all cryptocurrencies and plans to issue its own central bank-issued digital currency. Private alternatives to fiat currencies offer people greater choice in what currencies they choose to use as a medium of exchange. The benefits of free market competition in money were elaborated by economist Friedrich Hayek in The Denationalization of Money. Most notably, competition between currencies to cater to the demands of customers would ensure that fiat currencies that are printed indiscriminately simply go out of use. This is the outcome that governments fear and would fight to avoid at any cost.

INDIA'S 5G LEAP IS ABOUT POWERING TOMORROW

The fifth generation mobile network, or 5G, is the next level of mobile network that will shape the Fourth Industrial Revolution, or Industrial 4.0, quality of service delivery, innovation, etc. by facilitating smarter and developing societies. Commercial 5G networks began to be deployed in 2020 and are expected to reach 12% of world mobile connections (1.1 billion) and generate revenues up to U.S.$1.3 trillion by 2025 for operators. The technology that 5G uses will improve data transfer speed at unexpected higher levels — almost 100 times more — and reduce latency times helping mission-critical services. Thus, 5G is essential but are we ready for it?

Some roadblocks

India's telecom sector, which has revolutionised the digital space and facilitated services-led growth and quality of life, has been estimated to be one of the top performers globally for several years; but it has also been in doldrums for the last few years. Moreover, the Supreme Court of India's ruling on the dues being sought by the Department of Telecommunications (estimated to be more than ₹90,000 crore has further exacerbated the financial condition of telecom companies. It is no wonder then that the number of telecom operators has come down to a handful from around 15 a few years back. In this scenario, the huge investment required for 5G may add to their worries. The trial run of 5G in developed countries such as Japan and the United States reveals that the investment is very high, ranging from $6 million per small city to $60 million per large or densely populated city.

Much potential

The new generation mobile network has the transformative potential to provide a wide range of benefits to the Indian economy, which when enhanced with artificial intelligence provides a new dimension to connected and autonomous systems. Its use is a chance for Indian policy-makers to educate and empower citizens and businesses, and transform existing cities into smart and innovative cities. This may allow citizens and communities to get socio-economic benefits and comforts delivered by a well-advanced, more data-intensive, digital economy. Broadly speaking,

the uses of 5G in India may encompass enhanced outdoor and indoor broadband, the Internet of things, smart cities, smart agriculture, energy monitoring, remote monitoring, smart grids, telehealth, industrial automation, remote patient monitoring and industrial automation to name some of the areas. There is great potential for India to move to an advanced digital revolution. However, it is imperative to undertake an independent economic assessment, city wise, beginning with the metro cities, to assess the commercial viability for 5G deployment in India. Till this happens we may continue enhancing the existing quality of 4G networks. Singapore had planned four 5G networks — two comprehensive 5G networks and two others with smaller and limited coverage, the reason being the high cost in deployment of fibre cables and the scarcity of 5G airwaves.

What needs to be done

The immediate priority for India will be in identifying end users and population to be covered, analysis of the existing network and operators, identification of cities for the 5G roll out, working out an investment model, and minimisation of the digital risk and pricing based on the externalities and usage of various sectors. The deployment of 5G in India needs to be carefully planned after a cost benefit analysis by independent experts which will create a level-playing field through market mechanism such as facilitating, simulating, auctioning, ensuring competition, functioning markets, etc. Once a case is made for 5G, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) may consider preparing a foolproof spectrum road map with a predictable renewal process which will compensate the huge investment required for deployment and ensure coverage. A level-playing field should be created for all telecom companies with more focus on companies which have the experience of ensuring telecom networks to remote areas and the potential to provide affordable coverage. Global trial runs show that the key areas for 5G deployment are harmonisation of 5G spectrum bands, pricing and sharing of the spectrum. Sharing of available spectrum to maximise its efficient use especially in rural areas, and spectrum allocation procedures that favour investment, need to be considered.

Essential sector-friendly steps

As the deployment of 5G network is expensive, both the Central and State governments may need to consider measures which stimulate fibre investment, attract investment through public private partnerships (PPPs) and facilitate investment funds on a nominal interest basis. Fortunately, the big telecom package along with reforms announced by the Government in the middle of September bring relief and create an enabling environment for investment in the sector. Steps such as a moratorium on dues, redefining adjusted gross revenue, and reducing spectrum charges will help all telecom companies, more so Airtel and Vodafone Idea who face precarious financial situations. Further, allowing 100% foreign direct investment in the telecom sector under the automatic route along with these policy reforms augurs well for the sector to attract investment. Implementation of 5G requires huge investment and the relief package is welcome step.

Tax issues too

The Government also needs to address information asymmetry and negative externalities through laws and regulations/taxes and subsidies. The deployment of 5G technology will also need right of access to government infrastructure such as traffic lights, lamp posts, etc. where wireless

operators can deploy electronic small cell apparatus. At the same time, reasonable fees may be charged by State and local governments to operators for affordable deployment of 5G equipment. Further, removing the tax burden for deploying fibre networks reduces associated costs, thereby promoting investment as was done by Singapore government, could help in the smooth deployment of fibre in India. As India has already witnessed digital revolution even in its remotest areas due to cost-effective 4G technology, the use of 5G can play a vital role in enhancing this sector and also facilitating India's goal to emerge as a manufacturing and innovation hub. The negative implication of 5G is furthering the 'digital divide'. Therefore, Government policies should also focus on affordable coverage through synchronisation of bandwidth.

IT'S TIME TO PAY ATTENTION TO ETFS

In these times, there's one investment idea that is steadily gaining attention. That's passive investing, where one invests in an index — such as the Sensex or the Nifty 50 — to earn the same return that the index does. Within passive investing, Exchange Traded Funds or ETFs are gaining so smartly so that it's perfectly possible to build a good, diversified portfolio with just ETFs. But ETFs can be tricky investments if you don't know how they are built or the factors to look out for. So, let's dig in.

Wide variety

Why is it important to know about ETFs in the first place? For one, active mutual funds (MFs), i.e. those that aim to beat the market, are finding it increasingly hard to sustain higher returns, and several have been lagging benchmarks. Investing in indices lowers the impact of the fund's underperformance on returns, and removes the need to keep note of performance to weed out poor funds and reinvest in good ones. Second, the ETF space is evolving. ETFs are now being built on indices with strategies, sector opportunities, and behaviour that are distinct from the plain-vanilla Nifty 50 or the Sensex or even mainstream MFs. Low volatility, alpha, value-based, quality-based, private banks, target-maturity debt indices are some examples of differentiated strategies. New ETFs lined up for introduciton include indices built on growth sectors, electric vehicles, auto, manufacturing and new-age digital, to name a few. A well-rounded portfolio needs a mix of strategies and styles to capture different opportunities, to manage both downside containment and participation in rallies. Differentiated indices make great portfolio additions as they offer a return perspective that can complement your core mutual fund portfolio. Three, some of these indices do not have an index MF variant. In many cases, even where there are index funds, they invest in the ETF itself and not directly in the index. That introduces an additional layer of expense for you; avoidable if you hold the ETF itself. There are more than 90 ETFs already available, spanning a range of indices in equity and debt, as well as global indices. Silver ETFs are on their way, too!

What they are

ETFs are introduced by asset management companies (AMCs). They pick the index to track and unveil a new fund offer (NFO) for the ETF. The amount collected in the offer is invested in the constituents of the index (or commodity) in the correct weights. The AMC breaks the ETF into units. Investors in the initial ETF launch will receive units. So far in the story, this is what an index MF also does. From here, ETFs differ. The units are listed on stock exchanges, and subsequent

investment or selling happens in these units only on the exchange. In other words, post an ETF's introduction, you buy or sell ETFs like you'd buy or sell a share. You would need a demat account to invest in ETFs. Trading activity in these funds does not change their asset size.

Market price

That brings up the second aspect — market price. You know the net asset value (NAV) in an MF, which is the asset size divided by the number of units in the fund. An ETF also has an NAV as it still is a pooled investment broken down into units. But the NAV is not the price at which you invest in an ETF — remember, you are buying or selling units on the stock exchange only and not with the AMC itself. So, you'll be paying the market-determined price when investing in the ETF. The main factor that influences this price is the underlying index movement. In an ideal world, the market price will exactly track the index (less expenses, of course) and the underlying ETF NAV. But unfortunately, that's not the reality. An ETF's market price is additionally influenced by the demand for the ETF's units and their supply. To explain, if an ETF sees more buyers on the exchange and not enough sellers, its price moves up and vice versa. This can render the market price out of sync with the underlying index movement and the NAV — where the ETF will return much higher than the index or lower. AMCs that manage their ETFs well will see to it that such supply-driven fluctuations are addressed by creating more units (by inviting large investors to invest directly in the ETF and increase its size and units) or managing market activity to ensure that price aberrations are corrected. A key point to check in an ETF is how closely it tracks the index it is built on — i.e., how much the ETF's returns deviate from the index's returns, known as tracking error. Lower the error, better the ETF. A large differential between the ETF NAV and its market price is a red flag and an indicator of potentially higher tracking error. Of course, 100% accuracy is not possible due to ETF costs. An ETF's expense ratio can thus make a difference.

Keep an eye out

The next factor is trading volumes. Healthy volumes of at least a few crore rupees or several lakhs are good. This means it is easy for you to invest or sell any amount, and without such activity impacting the market price. Tracking errors also tend to be lower if volumes are healthy, though it is not a rule. In a nutshell, ETFs are starting to offer new opportunities that can be good diversifiers in your portfolio. Keep note of this investment option!

ANNUAL I-T INFO STATEMENT, AND HOW IT WILL AFFECT TAXPAYERS

The Income-Tax Department has rolled out a new Annual Information Statement (AIS) which includes additional categories of information such as those related to interest, dividend, securities transactions, mutual fund transactions and remittances from abroad.

What is the AIS, and how will it help?

At present, Form 26AS is detailed by the Tax Department, which is a consolidated annual tax statement that includes information on tax deducted/collected at source, advance tax, and self-assessment that is available on the Income-Tax website against a taxpayer's Permanent Account Number (PAN). The Budget for 2020-21 had announced the revised Form 26AS, giving a more comprehensive profile of the taxpayer, going beyond just the details of tax collected and deducted

at source. The revised Annual Information Statement (AIS) includes additional categories of information of interest, dividend, securities transactions, mutual fund transactions, and remittances from abroad, along with information on many other transactions that are at present available with the Income Tax Department. "There may be other transactions relating to the taxpayer which are not presently displayed in the AIS," the Tax Department said.

Will Form 26A cease to exist now?

Form 26AS will continue to exist until the new AIS is validated and is completely operational, the Tax Department said. In May last year, the Department had notified the new annual information statement in Form 26AS, effective June 1, 2020. The revised Form 26AS included all details provided by banks and financial institutions, which were earlier recorded in their Statement of Financial Transactions (SFTs).

What will taxpayers have to do now?

The new AIS can be accessed by clicking on the link "Annual Information Statement (AIS)" under the "Services" tab on the new Income tax e-filing portal (https://www.incometax.gov.in). If the taxpayer feels that the information is incorrect, relates to another person/year, is a duplicate etc., a facility has been provided to submit feedback online. Feedback can also be furnished by submitting multiple information in bulk. An AIS Utility has also been provided for taxpayers to view AIS and upload feedback in offline manner. The reported value and value after feedback will be shown separately in the AIS. In case the information is modified/denied, the information source may be contacted for confirmation. A simplified Taxpayer Information Summary (TIS) has also been generated for each taxpayer, which shows aggregated value for the taxpayer for ease of filing returns. If the taxpayer submits feedback on AIS, the derived information in TIS will be automatically updated in real time, and that information will be used for pre-filing of returns. Pre-filling will be enabled in a phased manner. Taxpayers have been asked to check all related information, and to report complete and accurate information in their Income Tax Returns.

LIFE & SCIENCE

ROBOTS HIT THE STREETS AS DEMAND FOR FOOD DELIVERY GROWS

Robot food delivery is no longer the stuff of science fiction. But you may not see it in your neighbourhood anytime soon. Hundreds of little robots —— knee-high and able to hold around four large pizzas —— are now navigating college campuses and even some city sidewalks in the U.S., the U.K. and elsewhere. While robots were being tested in limited numbers before the coronavirus hit, the companies building them say pandemic-related labor shortages and a growing preference for contactless delivery have accelerated their deployment. "We saw demand for robot usage just go through the ceiling," said Alastair Westgarth, the CEO of Starship Technologies, which recently completed its 2 millionth delivery. "I think demand was always there, but it was brought forward by the pandemic effect." Starship has more than 1,000 robots in its fleet, up from just 250 in 2019. Hundreds more will be deployed soon. They're delivering food on 20 U.S. campuses; 25 more will be added soon. They're also operating on sidewalks in Milton Keynes, England; Modesto, California; and the company's hometown of Tallin, Estonia. Robot designs vary; some have four wheels and some have six, for example. But generally, they use cameras, sensors, GPS and sometimes laser scanners to navigate sidewalks and even cross streets autonomously. They move around 5 mph. Remote operators keep tabs on multiple robots at a time but they say they rarely need to hit the brakes or steer around an obstacle. When a robot arrives at its destination, customers type a code into their phones to open the lid and retrieve their food. The robots have drawbacks that limit their usefulness for now. They're electric, so they must recharge regularly. They're slow, and they generally stay within a small, pre-mapped radius. They're also inflexible. A customer can't tell a robot to leave the food outside the door, for example. And some big cities with crowded sidewalks, like New York, Beijing and San Francisco, aren't welcoming them. But Bill Ray, an analyst with the consulting firm Gartner, says the robots make a lot of sense on corporate or college campuses, or in newer communities with wide sidewalks. "In the places where you can deploy it, robot delivery will grow very quickly," Ray said. Ray said there have been few reports of problems with the robots, other than an occasional gaggle of kids who surround one and try to confuse it. Starship briefly halted service at the University of Pittsburgh in 2019 after a wheelchair user said a robot blocked her access to a ramp. But the university said deliveries resumed once Starship addressed the issue. Patrick Sheck, a junior at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio, gets deliveries from a Starship robot three or four times a week as he's leaving class. "The robot pulls up just in time for me to get some lunch," Sheck said. Bowling Green and Starship charge $1.99 plus a service fee for each robot delivery. Rival Kiwibot, with headquarters in Los Angeles and Medellin, Columbia, says it now has 400 robots making deliveries on college campuses and in downtown Miami. Delivery companies are also jumping into the market. Grubhub recently partnered with Russian robot maker Yandex to deploy 50 robots on the campus of Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Grubhub plans to add more campuses soon, although the company stresses that the service won't go beyond colleges for now. U.S. delivery orders jumped 66% in the year ending in June, according to NPD, a data and consulting firm. And delivery demand could remain elevated even after the pandemic eases because customers have gotten used to the convenience.

NEVERLAND

Of course, it had to be New Zealand. It's not enough that the Other Land Down Under is blessed with breathtaking natural beauty, a mostly-peaceful society and a progressive government led by one of the most popular leaders in the world — it also seems to be the one country on the planet where outlaws are urging people to get vaccinated. Seven gang leaders, representing four of New Zealand's most notorious gangs — Black Power, Mongrel Mob, Head Hunters and King Cobras — have come together for a video urging members of their communities to get their Covid jabs. The video was commissioned by the minister for Maori development, Willie Jackson, as part of the government's Covid outreach to the country's Maori and Pacific New Zealander populations which have been especially vulnerable to the pandemic, but which are also much harder to reach for the usual authorities. With gangs holding sway within communities in these populations, one leader was even granted "essential worker" status last month, so that those at risk could be tested and treated more effectively. This customised, sensitive approach to the pandemic seems par for the course in New Zealand, a country which grew to be the envy of the world in the Trumpian era when the present Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern took over leadership of the ruling Labour Party in 2017 and inaugurated what she calls "the politics of kindness". This new ethos was evident in that year's polite, misinformation-free general election and in Ardern's empathetic response to the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings. In a world struggling against an epidemic of unkindness — besides the actual viral pandemic — New Zealand's inclusion of its outlaw gangs in anti-Covid measures seems like something out of a Utopian fantasy. This is wonderful, of course, but it's so wonderful that we wonder if New Zealand is for real.

BAT-BIRD

It is no easy feat, defying a system of taxonomy that has been in place for over three centuries and forms the basis of one of the most significant branches of science. But this year's annual poll to elect New Zealand's "Bird of the Year" managed to fly not just in the face of Carl Linnaeus's system of binomial nomenclature, it has simultaneously challenged the worldview of Confucius, and almost any other conservative realist. The best bird in New Zealand is a bat. More specifically, the pekapeka-tou-roa or long-tailed bat, which is among the most endangered species in the world. The organisers of the popular poll, Forest and Bird, faced more than a little opprobrium from purists when they included it as one of the nominees earlier this year. But, like a controversial "outsider" in politics — think Donald Trump — the mammal has beaten many an established avian to steal the prize. The organisers of the election insist that the mammalian inclusion was not a publicity stunt: "Bats face the same threats as birds, so we decided to include them in the competition," a member of Forest and Bird said. Societies degenerate, according to Confucius, when the names of things cease to correspond to reality. And the syllogism — "Birds face dangers; bats face dangers; therefore, bats are birds" — will have Aristotle rolling in his grave. Perhaps, the bird-mammal distinction exists on a spectrum, and if it can save a species, what's wrong with ignoring taxonomy and science for a just cause? It's not as though the pekapeka-tou-roa will complain about being patronised by bird-normative environmental activism, which refuses to see a bat on her own terms. Just remember, though, that it will be difficult to entertain complaints of a post-fact world if people choose to ignore them every time a good cause presents itself.

NAP TIME

For weary, sleep-deprived city dwellers anywhere in the world, one of the few things guaranteed to have a soporific effect is the rhythmic movement of a train or bus commute. In Hong Kong, one bus company has capitalised on this phenomenon by offering five-hour long nap rides in an air-conditioned double-decker bus to its customers. This should be a welcome service in a city where the sight of tired commuters dozing off in public transport is so common that there's an Instagram account dedicated to it. Public health officials in the city-state have been warning about an epidemic of sleep deprivation that has only intensified since Covid-19 struck. Clearly, Hong Kong's residents, their sleep disrupted by the usual stress of work and life, political unrest, climate emergency and the pandemic, are badly in need of as many good, refreshing naps as they can get. But that's probably true of the rest of us, too. The fact is that never has the world run on as little sleep as it does now. In an older, slower-moving age, the midday or afternoon nap was a cherished practice, celebrated by philosophers, poets, political leaders and artists for its restorative powers. As the world speeded up, caffeine became its fuel of choice and productivity its most popular religion. With that, the daytime nap developed a reputation problem, never mind that decades of research has consistently upheld its value for cognitive function, creativity, mood regulation and overall well-being. Ideally, of course, we should all be able to get our full 8 or 9 hours of deep, unbroken sleep at night. But this is a far-less-than-ideal world; and the few comforts that it offers — including sleep — come in scraps. So we'll just have to take our naps as and when they come, even if only on our regular bus home.

WHERE TECH GIANTS STAND ON USE OF CONTROVERSIAL FACIAL RECOGNITION TECH

Facebook is phasing out its 'facial recognition tool', the company announced in a blogpost written by Jerome Pesenti, VP of Artificial Intelligence. Facebook claims while over one-third of its daily active users had the feature turned on and found it useful, it was moving away from the technology given regulatory uncertainty. But Facebook's step back comes at a time when there is growing scrutiny of the use of facial recognition technology, especially by the police in many countries. We take a look at why facial recognition technology is viewed as controversial and where other tech companies and policy makers stand on it.

What is facial recognition technology? How does it work?

Facial recognition technology as the name suggests can identify a person by capturing his face from a photo or video. The technology can work in real-time as well and relies on advanced machine learning algorithms powered by deep neural networks to identify faces and map them to an existing data base. For example, in Google Photos or even Apple Photos, the app will try and bucket photos of a person and ask users to identify the face. All of this is possible due to a form of facial recognition technology being used by these services. On Facebook too, it was possible to turn on the feature and have the service automatically identify oneself if they were part of any photos or videos uploaded by friends or family. But companies such as Amazon, Microsoft have made it possible to use the technology at a much bigger scale and to analyse more than just images from your phone's library. The technology is also outsourced to governments and law enforcement agencies, which has sparked concerns on its use.

Why has Facebook removed it?

While Facebook's facial recognition tool was only being used on the platform, the company is stopping the use of the tech given its controversial nature. There are several privacy concerns around the deployment of such tools, especially since Facebook is such a big social network with billions of users and many photos and videos being uploaded. In the post, Facebook asaid it needs to "weigh the positive use cases for facial recognition against growing societal concerns, especially as regulators have yet to provide clear rules," and it has taken this decision after "careful consideration". The company has already settled a lawsuit in the state of Illinois in the US, where it paid nearly $550 million to a group of users who had argued that the facial recognition tool violated the state's privacy laws.

What about Amazon?

The other bigger more controversial name around this is Amazon, which offers its Rekognition Software as a service (Saas) as part of its cloud services. But Rekognition has faced criticism because Amazon has offered the tool to law enforcement services as well. Police enforcement groups prefer Rekognition because it can track and analyse people in real time and even identify up to 100 people in one single image. But the technology is not exactly accurate as it has been shown in the past by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). However, in a statement last year, Amazon said it was "implementing a one-year moratorium on police use of Amazon's facial recognition technology." But it will continue to offer it to organisations such as a "Thorn, the International Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and Marinus Analytics" in order to help "rescue human trafficking victims and reunite missing children with their families." The statement also called for governments to "put in place stronger regulations to govern the ethical use of facial recognition technology," and hoped the US Congress would take a stand on the issue and put in place "appropriate rules," around the use of the technology. A major criticism of Amazon's Rekognition tool in the past was around its accuracy, especially when identifying people of colour, and African-Americans in particular. The use of the technology by law enforcement could lead to wrongful arrests and more discrimination, according to experts. Regarding criticism from rights groups about inaccuracy with the software, Amazon had responded saying they were using an outdated version.

What about other tech companies?

In June 2020, Microsoft also joined Amazon in saying it would not sell the technology to law enforcement until there was a federal law regulating this in the US. Microsoft President Brad Smith had told the Washington Post that the company had not sold its technology called Face API, part of its Azure Cloud services, to police departments in the US. Smith was quoted as saying, "We will not sell facial-recognition technology to police departments in the United States until we have a national law in place, grounded in human rights, that will govern this technology." In the past, Microsoft's Azure cloud services, which included "facial recognition and identification", have been offered to the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for which it faced criticism. IBM, on the other hand, announced it was exiting the business of facial recognition entirely in June 2020. IBM CEO Arvind Krishna wrote a letter to the US Congress calling for regulations on the US of the technology. "IBM firmly opposes and will not condone uses of any technology, including facial recognition technology offered by other vendors, for mass surveillance, racial profiling,

violations of basic human rights and freedoms, or any purpose which is not consistent with our values and Principles of Trust and Transparency," he wrote in a letter, according to CNBC.

What has Google said on the use of facial recognition?

In January 2020, Alphabet and Google CEO Sundar Pichai hailed the European Union for its temporary ban on the use of the technology. Google has been outspoken about the problematic nature of the technology for a while. For instance, in a 2018 blog post, Google SVP of Global Affairs Kent Walker explained why Google Cloud does not offer "general-purpose facial recognition APIs", adding that policy questions around its use need to be answered. working through important technology and policy questions." As part of its AI responsibilities declaration, Google has also raised questions about the use of facial recognition saying, the technology's implementation needs to be "fair, so it doesn't reinforce or amplify existing biases, especially where this might impact underrepresented groups." It has also said that the technology should not be used in "surveillance that violates internationally accepted norms." and that it needs to "protect people's privacy, providing the right level of transparency and control."

What have governments said about the use of facial recognition?

The big problem with facial recognition is that as the technology gets faster and more accurate there are worries that it will be used for mass surveillance. There are also worries the technology could get so good, it could deduce intent and expressions, leading to real-time surveillance. In China, the government has used the technology to track Uighurs, the Muslim minority in the country. It was also used in the UK to monitor football fans arriving for a match in 2020. In India too there have been concerns over the use of facial recognition technology by police, especially during protests. In the US, the Facial Recognition and Biometric Technology Moratorium Act has been proposed by some members of Congress, which would ban the use of the technology by federal entities. It would also ban other biometrics such as voice recognition, gate recognition, and recognition of other immutable physical characteristics, from being used by federal entities. The bill has been sent to House Committees for further consideration. Meanwhile, the European Union has passed a resolution banning the use of facial recognition technology by the police. This is a non-binding resolution. However, the use of the technology is a major concern of the EU's upcoming AI Act, which will be debated and voted upon by the EU Parliament. The bill states that AI systems which are meant for real-time and post remote identification of people are "high-level risk systems" and would require compliance before the company can get access to the EU market. It also imposes restrictions on how "real-time" remote biometric identification systems can be used in public spaces for the purpose of law enforcement.

WHY FACEBOOK IS STARTING ITS METAVERSE JOURNEY BY REBRANDING ITSELF AS META

'An immersive embodied internet', that's how Mark Zuckerberg, creator of Facebook and now the CEO at 'Meta', is describing the 'metaverse' that the company wants to 'help' build.

What does the new name 'Meta' mean? Is the Facebook app also called 'Meta' now?

'Meta' in Greek means 'after' or 'beyond'. The overall Facebook company will now simply be called Meta. However, the Facebook app will retain its name and there's no change for other apps. But

Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger are now all under the company 'Meta'— like Google has all its products under the umbrella company Alphabet. And the way Zuckerberg pitched his vision in the keynote, it seems all of these apps will continue to have a role in the upcoming metaverse, though in a very different way. "...we will be metaverse-first, not Facebook-first. That means that over time you won't need a Facebook account to use our other services. As our new brand starts showing up in our products, I hope people around the world come to know the Meta brand and the future we stand for," he wrote in a post. Meta has a new logo as well, which is sort of like the symbol for infinity. In a blog post, the company says that the 'Meta' symbolise is "designed to dynamically live in the metaverse — where you can move through it and around it."

What exactly will it mean to live in the metaverse?

The way Zuckerberg is envisioning the 'metaverse', it will go beyond the internet as we know it, with interoperability, avataars, natural interfaces, teleporting, Home Space, presence, digital goods being some of the key features of this metaverse. As we noted in an earlier article, metaverse is not an idea original to Facebook or Meta as it is now called. The idea originated in the novel Snow Crash by Neal Stephenson. Of course, the vision Silicon Valley is selling now is not so dystopian as in the novel. One could experience being in a digital space, almost as if it were real, and also share the space with others. Think realistic holograms, virtual avatars which are present everywhere and a holographic screen you can just access by gestures or even a tilt of your head. Zuckerberg insists that living in the 'metaverse' will feel more 'natural and vivid'. "Devices won't be the focal point of your attention anymore," he said. Based on Facebook's presentation it could be possible for two people in two different cities on the planet to attend a concert together, even attend a party with other virtual or holographic avataars. Work from home in the metaverse would have a different meaning. Logging in would let you experience the office, almost as if you were there, without having to be there in the actual physical sense. But the metaverse is more than the ability to teleport oneself into different spaces or to experience mixed reality. One of the key characteristics of the 'metaverse' is that it is live and continuous and doesn't reset. And while this might sound like the digital world will overtake our entire lives, Zuckerberg insists it will not be about spending more time on screens.

How does Facebook plan to build this 'metaverse'?

Meta knows it is not the only company that can 'build' this metaverse. The plan is to keep the experience of the metaverse free and for that Meta will sell its "devices at cost or subsidised to make them available to more people." These are VR or AR devices which can be used to access parts of the metaverse such as the Oculus Quest 2 or 3. There's also a new VR device called Project Cambria, which will be more expensive and with more advanced tracking technology. This is coming next year. Facebook also has its AR glasses project called Aria, which is still in the works. Meta will also "support side-loading and streaming from PCs so people have choice, rather than forcing them to use the Quest Store to find apps or reach customers," he wrote. "And we'll aim to offer developer and creator services with low fees in as many cases as possible so we can maximise the overall creative economy. We'll need to make sure we don't lose too much money along the way though," he added. In his keynote, Zuckerberg also took a direct shot at other platforms, namely Apple. He said, "This period has also been humbling because as big of a company as we are, we've also learned what it's like to build on other platforms. Living under their rules has profoundly shaped my views on the tech industry. I've come to believe that the lack of choice for

consumers and high fees for developers are stifling innovation and holding back the internet economy." So clearly the all encompassing metaverse, will also offer Facebook a chance to escape the rules of Apple and Google, which tightly control the iOS and Android platforms respectively.

But this sounds a lot like science fiction? Is this going to be real in the next few years?

Well science fiction is the inspiration behind the idea and even Zuckerberg knows it won't be built in the next few years. He's hopeful that parts of the metaverse will exist by the next decade. But there are lots of challenges to the metaverse. For one, all those accurate and real holographic projections will require the technology to catch up. It is not quite there yet. And Facebook is not the only one working on making this mixed reality an actual reality. Epic Games is giving a big push to creating elements of the Metaverse using its unreal engine. Microsoft's Project Mesh is also trying to bring a similar kind of mixed reality to life and would include the ability to allow 'holoportation' for individuals. But again the technology is far from ready. Google's Project Starline showed a similar kind of mixed reality experience for video calls, but again the technology is only in the beginning and yet to roll out at scale. One big challenge will be interoperability. This would mean that a piece of digital item you buy in the metaverse should technically work everywhere. For instance, a virtual item such as a virtual t-shirt should work in all aspects of metaverse. Right now this is not possible. For instance, items bought in PUBG cannot be used in Fortnite. In the metaverse, this would be possible thanks to interoperability, though Zuckerberg admits this would require rewriting of rules and more open standards.

What about privacy on Metaverse?

Meta or rather Facebook has its fair share of problems when it comes to user privacy. But Zuckerberg insists that the metaverse will be built keeping in mind 'user' privacy. The keynote also talked about how they don't want to surprise people with new technology, and that they would need to work with policy makers, governments as the metaverse is being built. But details are still unclear on how privacy would function in this metaverse. And given how metaverse wants to be all encompassing, how 'Meta' handles privacy will certainly be a much scrutinised aspect of this new world.

A NUCLEAR-POWERED SHOWER? RUSSIA TESTS A CLIMATE INNOVATION

The water was hot, steamy and plentiful, and Pavel Rozhkov let it flow over his body, enjoying a shower that is not for the squeamish: On his bare skin, he was feeling the heat produced by an atomic reaction, pumped directly from a nuclear reactor into his home. "Personally, I'm not worried," Rozhkov said. His shower came courtesy of nuclear residential heating, which remains exceedingly rare and was introduced in the remote Siberian town of Pevek only a year ago. The source is not a typical reactor with huge cooling towers but is the first of a new generation of smaller and potentially more versatile nuclear plants — in this case aboard a barge floating nearby in the Arctic Ocean. As countries from across the globe meet in Scotland this week to try to find new ways to mitigate climate change, Russia has embraced nuclear residential heating as one potential solution, while also hoping it can bring a competitive advantage. Companies in the United States, China and France are considering building the type of small reactors connected now to Pevek's waterworks. "It's very exciting," Jacopo Buongiorno, a professor of nuclear science and engineering at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said in a telephone interview. These small

reactors, he said, could also warm greenhouses or provide heat for industrial purposes. In bringing to life the new approach, he said, "the Russians are ahead." Nuclear-powered residential heating is distinct from running space or water heaters with electricity generated from nuclear sources. Direct nuclear heating, tried in small pockets of Russia and Sweden, circulates water between a power plant and homes, transferring heat directly from fissioning uranium atoms to residences. Warming homes with nuclear power also has environmental benefits, advocates of the idea say. Primarily, it avoids wasting the heat that is typically vented as steam through the conical cooling towers of nuclear plants, and instead captures it for use in residential heating, if customers are fine with it. Still, some experts are concerned about the potential risks, pointing to the many spills and accidents on Soviet and Russian submarines and icebreakers that used similar small reactors. Nuclear submarines sank in 1989 and 2000, for example. "It is nuclear technology, and the starting point needs to be that it is dangerous," said Andrei Zolotkov, a researcher with Bellona, a Norwegian environmental group. "That is the only way to think about it." Rozhkov's wife, Natalia Rozhkova, was initially skeptical. They can see the new nuclear facility, which is about a mile away, from their kitchen window. She said she "worried for the first two days" after their apartment was connected to one of the cooling loops of the reactors. But the feeling passed. "Whatever is new is scary," Rozhkova said. Still, somebody has to be first, she suggested, adding, "We were the closest, so they hooked us up first." The experiment in Siberia, Buongiorno said, could play a vital role in convincing countries that using nuclear power to limit climate change will require using it for more than just generating electricity, the source of about a quarter of greenhouse gas emissions. "Decarbonizing the electrical grid will only get you one quarter of the way," he said. "The rest comes from all these other things." Yes, but a nuclear shower? Buongiorno said he would take one — but conceded that "obviously this is not going to work if people don't feel comfortable with the technology." The experiment with nuclear heating hardly makes Russia a crusader on climate change. One of the world's heaviest polluters, it has adopted contradictory stances on global warming, of which Pevek itself is an example: At the same time it is switching its heating to nuclear power, rather than coal, it is benefiting from climate change in the Arctic, reviving as a port as shipping lanes become more navigable.

METHANE PROMISE

In recent years, there has been increasing focus on the role of methane as a driver of climate change. Traditionally, conversations on global warming had much to do with energy, industry and transport. However, there is now evidence that a quarter of the global emissions are products of agriculture and land-use changes. According to the IPCC, more than 40 per cent of methane emissions come from farms or are an outcome of peatland destruction. The pledge by more than 80 nations, helped by the US and EU, to cut emissions of this GHG (greenhouse gas) by 30 per cent is, therefore, an important step in global warming mitigation efforts. But the announcement should be read with a number of caveats. Such pledges are commonplace at UNFCCC meets. Multiple similar promises to arrest deforestation, for instance, await concrete action — on Tuesday, another group of nations vowed to stop the destruction of forests. More importantly, its links with agriculture make methane a sensitive topic amongst developing countries. It's not surprising, therefore, that India, China and Russia are amongst the nations that did not lend their voice to the pledge. As a global warming agent, methane is 80 times more powerful than carbon dioxide in its first 20 years in the atmosphere. The latter, however, stays in the atmosphere for much longer. Cutting methane emissions, therefore, is seen as a potent way of mitigating global

warming in the near term. While much of the contentious aspects of curbing emissions of this GHG pertain to agriculture, the oil and gas industry — especially natural gas, whose popularity as a relatively cleaner fossil fuel has led to a 50 per cent increase in its use in the past 10 years — is the second-highest emitter of this gas. Persuading people to change their dietary or farming practices can be a tricky proposition but slashing methane emissions from other sectors can be a relatively straightforward matter — even profitable for the industry in the long run. The International Energy Agency estimates that the fuel industry can achieve a 75 per cent reduction in methane emissions using existing technologies. In June, the US Congress voted to reinstate the Obama-era rules to reduce methane emissions from the US energy sector, rolling back one of the most climate-regressive measures of the Trump administration. The Biden administration has also proposed stricter regulations to reduce methane leaks from oil and gas industry operations. In his speech at Glasgow, President Biden avoided any reference to India, China and Russia but he did exhort more countries to sign the pledge. If the history of climate diplomacy is any indicator, it's only time when outliers to the methane compact would face pressure to check methane emissions — India is amongst the top three emitters of this gas. It's heartening, therefore, that agriculture research institutes in the country have started work on farmer-friendly technologies to reduce emissions from the livestock sector. Conversations have also begun on ways to change paddy cultivation practices to make them climate-friendly. These technologies must reach the farmers at the earliest.

HOW QUICKLY DOES THE CLIMATE RECOVER?

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently warned that the average global temperatures would breach the two degrees Celsius mark by 2100 compared to pre-industrial times. To understand how quickly the climate can recover from this warming, an international team studied a global temperature rise that occurred 56 million years ago. Their findings show that it took about 20,000 to 50,000 years for the climate to stabilise after the rise of five to eight degrees Celsius. The results were published recently in the journal Science Advances. About 56 million years ago, our Earth experienced a natural period of global warming triggered by a volcanic eruption. This period was known as the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum (PETM) and there were huge amounts of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere. This caused about 8°C surface ocean warming in the high latitudes. Several studies have shown that during this period ocean acidification caused mass extinctions in the deep ocean and there were changes in the biota in the surface ocean.

How did they study what happened millions of years ago?

The team analysed rocks, single-celled marine organisms, clay minerals, and lithium isotopes to decode what happened during the period. Due to global warming, there would have been weathering of rocks. These dissolving rocks release lithium into surrounding water bodies and by studying the isotopes of lithium we can understand the amount of erosion. Clay minerals from the bottom of the sea were used to study the lithium isotopes stored in water. "Lithium has the advantage that it is one of the very few elements that is not used by biology or plants at all. So signals from growing or dying plants don't affect lithium. Also, Lithium isotopes (Li-6 and Li-7) have their relationship (ratio) to each other changed by the weathering process – Li-6 is preferentially retained in clays that form during weathering. So, basically, Li is a tracer that only

is affected by weathering and nothing else, which is a great advantage," explains lead author Philip Pogge von Strandmann in an email to indianexpress.com. He is a Professor in Sedimentary Geochemistry at the Institute of Geosciences, Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany. They also examined planktonic foraminifera or single-celled organisms with calcareous shells that were formed millions of years ago.

So, will our temperature decrease after thousands of years?

Prof. Philip Pogge von Strandmann explains that in terms of stabilisation timing, the difference between the PETM and the present is that the PETM had more warming (up to 8°C) but was slower, but what we're seeing at the moment is probably 3-4°C (worst case), but much much quicker than the PETM. He explains that recovery will probably be broadly similar in timing (plus/minus a few thousand years). The findings will hold true only if there is a significant reduction in CO_2 release. When asked if other greenhouse gases can delay our climate stabilisation, he explained: "Methane and nitrous oxide are big problems in the short term, but they don't stay in the atmosphere as long as CO_2. Also, methane is removed from the atmosphere by weathering…If you're looking at timescales longer than a few hundred years, CO_2 is the main player in warming."

Enhanced weathering

Prof. Philip Pogge von Strandmann adds that there is a key interest now in studying whether we can use weathering to artificially remove CO_2 from the atmosphere on more useful timescales for us. The process is known as 'enhanced weathering'. "You speed up weathering by grinding up rock into powder (so it weathers faster) and ploughing it into fields, where it should remove CO_2 and act as a fertiliser. This is now at the field experiment stage in several places around the world." "It will never remove all the CO_2 we're adding to the atmosphere, but if we manage to significantly reduce emissions, processes such as enhanced weathering could remove the rest, and help us with 'negative emissions', that is removing more CO_2 than we add, and reducing CO_2 concentrations," he explains.

ONE SUN, ONE WORLD, ONE GRID FOR SEAMLESS ENERGY

On the second day of COP26, an initiative by India and the United Kingdom to tap solar energy and have it travel seamlessly across borders was announced. It includes a group of Governments called the Green Grids Initiative — One Sun One World One Grid group — and was announced at COP26 by summit host United Kingdom's Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the presence of other heads of government, including U.S. President Joe Biden, the two Prime Ministers presented the One Sun Declaration, endorsed by more than 80 countries, setting out the group's aims.

Clean energy

"All the energy humanity uses in a year is equal to the energy that reaches the earth from the sun in a single hour," Mr. Modi said. "The sun never sets — every hour, half the planet is bathed in sunshine. By trading energy from sun, wind and water across borders, we can deliver more than

enough clean energy to meet the needs of everyone on earth," Mr. Modi added. Mr. Modi said at the gathering that the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) had developed an application that could compute the potential solar energy at any point on earth and help decide if it would be suitable for solar energy installations. A Ministerial Steering Group will work towards accelerating the making of large solar power stations and wind farms in the best locations, linked together by continental-scale grids crossing national borders.

Members of the group

The Ministerial Steering Group includes France, India, the United Kingdom and the United States, and will also have representatives from Africa, the Gulf, Latin America and Southeast Asia, said an accompanying press statement by the Green Grids Initiative. Germany attended the first meeting as an observer, while post-election negotiations on a new government continue, as did Australia. Research support for the Green Grids Initiative is being provided by the Climate Compatible Growth consortium of universities, which includes Cambridge, Imperial College, Oxford and University College London. The Green Grids Initiative Working Groups made up of national and international agencies have already been established for Africa and for the Asia-Pacific region. Their membership includes most major multilateral development banks, such as the African Development Bank (AfDB), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank.

INFRA AND SOLAR ALLIANCE: INDIA'S CLIMATE VISION

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will launch a new programme to secure and strengthen critical infrastructure in small island states against disasters induced by climate change. Infrastructure for Resilient Island States or IRIS is the first major initiative by the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) started by India in 2019.

What is CDRI?

The effort is to climate-proof critical infrastructure in member countries. Twenty-six countries, including the US, Germany, UK, Australia, Brazil, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Japan are already part of the coalition. The coalition will not create any new infrastructure — rather, it will serve as a 'knowledge centre' for member countries to share and learn best practices with respect to disaster-proofing of infra. It will work towards making existing and upcoming infrastructure in member countries more robust and resilient against climate disasters such as floods, heat, cyclones, forest fires, and rain. According to CDRI estimates, every one dollar invested in making infrastructure more resilient in low- and middle-income countries can potentially save losses of over $4 when a disaster strikes. There is widespread acknowledgment that despite the actions by countries to fight climate change, the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events and disasters will likely only increase in the coming years. Countries are already experiencing more intense flooding, heat waves, and forest fires every year, and they realise the urgency of the problem. India's east coast, especially Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, has for example been experiencing more powerful and frequent cyclones every year. Thanks to the significant progress in advance warning and tracking systems, and timely evacuation of people, the loss of lives has been greatly reduced over the years. But the threat to infrastructure has persisted. So, power plants stop functioning, communication towers are damaged and street lights uprooted, and trains and flights have to be stopped. All this has

cascading effects, and the monetary costs of the damage and disruption runs into billions of dollars every year. The aim of CDRI is to minimise the damage and disruptions.

Has India taken such a global climate initiative before CDRI?

CDRI is India's second international climate initiative; the first was the International Solar Alliance (ISA), launched at the 2015 Paris climate change conference. ISA's main objective is to promote largescale harnessing and exploitation of solar energy. Equatorial and tropical regions get very good sunlight for most of the year, which is sufficient to meet the energy demands of many countries in this belt. ISA is working towards boosting the use of solar power in the region, mainly by bringing down the cost of technology and finance, which can facilitate rapid, mass deployment of solar energy. It hopes to do so by aggregating the demand from a large number of countries, standardising equipment and grid, and promoting research and development. To take this idea forward, the One Sun One World One Grid (OSOWOG) proposes a common grid through more than 100 countries. The idea is to stabilise energy supply, overcome local and natural fluctuations in the availability of sunlight, and to maintain reliable baseload capacities at all times. ISA and CDRI are an attempt by India to claim climate mission leadership at the global level. Both have received wide support from developing as well as developed countries. The solar alliance will result in the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions through a largescale switch from fossil fuels to solar energy, while also addressing issues of energy access and energy security. CDRI is aimed towards achieving the adaptation goal. Together, they form the bases of India's vision for global climate action that also takes into account issues of equity, development, and the special needs of developing and least developed countries.

What is IRIS?

As OSOWOG is a specific work programme to realize the objectives of the ISA, IRIS seeks to operationalise the CDRI initiative. Small island states are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. As sea levels rise, they face a threat of being wiped off the map. According to CDRI, several small island states have lost 9 per cent of their GDPs in single disasters during the last few years. Kamal Kishore, co-chair of the executive council of CDRI, pointed out that infrastructure in these smaller countries is more critical simply because there is so little of it. "A larger country may have several airports, for example, so even if one or two are damaged in climate disasters, the country can divert their operations elsewhere. But many small island states have a single airstrip that is their only connection to the world, and their only supply line," he said. Unsurprisingly, several small island states have joined the IRIS platform, and drawn up plans for implementation. The bulk of the work would involve mobilising and directing financial resources towards building resilient infrastructure, retrofitting existing infrastructure, development of early warning systems, and development and sharing of best practices.

THE RACE TO TACKLE GLOBAL WARMING

The COP26 UN Climate Change Conference opening in Glasgow, Scotland, on Sunday has raised expectations, just as the COP21 conference in Paris did six years ago, that there will be determined action by 2030 on the defining challenge before humanity. After the COVID-19 pandemic forced a postponement of the event in 2020, nearly 120 countries are now ready to engage in environmental diplomacy until November 12, when major emitters of greenhouse gases, such as

China, the U.S., the EU and India, and developing countries, including small island states, will try for consensus on rules to cut emissions, mechanisms to adapt to climate impacts and compensation for nations for loss and damage. The climate negotiations seek to raise the ambition of countries under the Paris Agreement of 2015 to cut carbon dioxide emissions, after a long spell of drift since 2015 caused by economic declines, an upsurge of nationalism, the withdrawal of the U.S. from the pact under President Donald Trump and the pandemic. Under President Joe Biden, the U.S. returned to multilateral diplomacy and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), giving new life to the idea that advanced nations will transfer green technologies without hard intellectual property barriers and provide the agreed $100 billion funding for developing countries annually from 2020 to help reduce emissions. The funds will also help them adapt to extreme climate events such as intense storms, fires, droughts, floods and food deficits.

Climate impact

The impact of the climate on the frequency and intensity of these events was documented by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its special report of 2018 on 1.5 degrees C warming, and the just-released assessment on the physical science behind a warming world. All the headline points in the latest report point to a narrowing window for the world to taper down emissions before the temperature rises beyond 2 degrees C. At Glasgow, the poorer half of the world, which did not contribute to the problem but faces disastrous impacts, will press the key question of equity. Under the UNFCCC, all countries do not have the same responsibilities, given their respective levels of development. This principle of common but differentiated responsibilities guides the Paris Agreement. India, which has pledged to cut the emissions intensity of its growth by 33-35% of GDP from 2005 levels by 2030, has declared its pre-2020 performance on this metric achieved, at 24%, while it is working to fulfil other Paris promises — raising renewable energy capacity to make up a 40% share and expanding forest cover to create a 2.5 to 3 billion tonne carbon sink. More recently, it announced a scale-up of its renewable power plans to 450 GW by the end of the decade, and a national hydrogen policy to produce the chemical element through green methods, aiding its deployment in industrial sectors as well as transport, and aiming for export.

Science sets tempo

The tempo for the Glasgow conference has been set by scientific reports, warning of continuing extreme human pressure on the climate system. One IPCC report of August 2021 warned that the observed increase in global surface temperature showed unprecedented warming during the 1850-2020 period compared with reconstructed temperature data over a period of 2,000 years. On the eve of the climate meet, the UN Environment Programme issued its 12th Emissions Gap Report, comparing the updated emissions reduction pledges made by countries for 2030, with what is needed to keep the rise in global temperature to 1.5 degrees C or even 2 degrees C. That gap, between a projected emissions reduction of 7.5% for 2030 against the need for 30 to 55% cuts, and even taking into account the latest promises by countries, could lead to a rise in temperature by 2.7 degrees C by the end of the century. Moreover, G20 countries, accounting for nearly 80% of global emissions, are not on a clear course to achieving net zero (balancing out emissions) based on 2030 commitments. The net zero concept remains contentious, because of the uncertainties surrounding long-term targets, but big countries such as China have set such a goal, while the EU as a bloc, Germany, the U.K., France, Canada and others have legal mandates. At

COP26, the road to these targets is set to become the focus of debate. Article 6 of the Paris pact provides for the establishment of rules, modalities and procedures, which will enable countries, public and private entities to reduce emissions, and which will be accounted towards national pledges. The private sector sees the potential for a market mechanism for emissions credits, while critics see scope for juggled numbers that do not cut real emissions, and lead to deception through creative accounting. Another conference priority is to raise the ambition of high carbon countries, notably China, to phase out coal in energy production. This is a contentious issue, since coal is a reliable option for many, despite its contribution to high emissions and atmospheric pollution, and even the U.S., along with India, emphasises carbon capture technology — expensive and nascent at present — rather than a quick move to alternatives. Australia too bats for coal.

Power shortage

The International Energy Agency (IEA) predicted a "rebound" in global coal use in 2021 spurred by COVID-19 recovery, and the recent power shortages worldwide have increased attraction for coal. Solar and wind are not adequate to meet the surge. That setback, however, has not eased up the pressure from young climate activists on countries to move away from "dirty" coal. Their disinvestment campaign is hurting, as public and private sectors pull out their money. The militant campaigners, led by the face of the youth movement, Greta Thunberg, will be heard in Glasgow. Scientists too are disappointed with the progress. James Hansen, the former NASA researcher whose testimony to the U.S. Congress in 1988 on human-caused global warming proved greatly influential, has called COP26 a 'gas bag season' since politicians are not ready to talk about the gravity of scientific evidence. The IPCC says in its latest report, "It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred." COP26 will be a stocktake of whether political will is strong enough to stave off disaster.

THE RIGHT TIME FOR INDIA TO HAVE ITS OWN CLIMATE LAW

As the world watches the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26, from October 31 to November 12, 2021), the most important climate summit in years at Glasgow, Scotland, India has said it wants to be a part of the climate solution.

The Indian proposals

Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced, on November 1 at Glasgow, a 'Panchamrit solution' which aims at reducing fossil fuel dependence and carbon intensity (reduce one billion tonnes of total projected carbon emissions by 2030) and ramping up its renewable energy share to 50% by 2030. Glasgow is important as it will call for practical implementation of the 2015 Paris Accord, setting the rules for the Accord. And as the world recovers from the biological and environmental stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters, climate change has also become personal. Union Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change Bhupender Yadav has reasserted the call for the promised $100 billion a year as support (from the developed world to the developing world) but as we consider new energy pathways, we must also consider the question of climate hazard, nature-based solutions and national accountability. This is the right time for India to mull setting up a climate law while staying true to its goals of climate justice, carbon space and environmental protection. There are a few reasons for this.

Current laws and gaps

Which law covers climate? First, our existing laws are not adequate to deal with climate change. We have for example the Environment (Protection) Act (EPA), 1986, the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981 and Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974. Yet, climate is not exactly water or air. Which law would cover the impacts of a cyclone, for instance or work to reduce future climate impacts? And neither are we ready to tackle environmental/climate violations. The Environment (Protection) Act is grossly inadequate to deal with violations on climate. Clause 24 of the Act, "Effect of Other Laws", states that if an offence is committed under the EPA or any other law, the person will be punished under the other law (for example, Code of Criminal Procedure). This makes the EPA subordinate to every other law. Second, there is a need to integrate climate action — adaptation and mitigation — and monitor progress. Comprehensive climate action is not just technological (such as changing energy sources or carbon intensity), but also nature-based (such as emphasising restoration of ecosystems, reducing natural hazard and increasing carbon sinks.) Finally, India's situation is unique. Climate action cannot come by furthering sharpening divides or exacerbating poverty, and this includes our stated renewable energy goals. The 500 Gigawatt by 2030 goal for renewable, solar or wind power for example (of installed power capacity from non-fossil sources), can put critically endangered grassland and desert birds such as the Great Indian Bustard at risk, as they die on collision with wires in the desert.

Create a commission

A climate law could consider two aspects. One, creating an institution that monitors action plans for climate change. A 'Commission on Climate Change' could be set up, with the power and the authority to issue directions, and oversee implementation of plans and programmes on climate. The Commission could have quasi-judicial powers with powers of a civil court to ensure that its directions are followed in letter and spirit. It should be assisted by a technical committee which can advise the commission in the discharge of its functions as well as guide various private and public agencies in meeting their climate-related obligations. As an example, the commission could look at agencies or institutions that have a disproportionate impact on climate or environment, and suggest lower energy pathways that are adhered to.

Tracing carbon footprints

What, for example, is the carbon footprint of a single activity from start to finish? We have the Bureau of Energy Efficiency, but we also need overall carbon efficiency that looks beyond electronics. How could intelligent interventions be made for reduction of footprints, along with common sense, and practical public health interventions which are unaccounted for so far? In a recent case in the National Green Tribunal it was revealed that the National Thermal Power Corporation did not even cover coal wagons with tarpaulin on railways, decades after environmental clearances were granted in 1999, in Chhattisgarh. In 2020, the Supreme Court passed an order directing for the wagons to be covered within a month's time. There will be eventual emissions by coal use. But there is also the issue of respirable coal dust that is spewed into the air through irresponsible transportation. As of now, many environmental mediations remain glaringly haphazard. The ban on plastic bags in Delhi is a failure because plastic bag substitutes were never really pushed at scale by the understaffed environment department. A

plastic bag ban to succeed in one State requires a similar commitment from neighbouring States. A nation-wide intervention here, led by a Climate Commission, considering substitutes at scale for plastic-based products (which are derived from petroleum) and looking at both innovation and implementation, would be useful.

Need for accountability

Second, we need a system of liability and accountability at short-, medium- and long-term levels as we face hazards. This also means having a legally enforceable National Climate Change Plan that goes beyond just policy guidelines. Are climate vagaries acts of god, or do certain actions exacerbate them? In an order of the National Green Tribunal in 2016, the court examined the damage caused when floods occurred in 2013 in Pauri, Uttarakhand. When Srinagar dam (Uttarakhand) opened its sluice gates, muck created 8-foot tall deposits, destroying property and fields. While muck is not hazardous, the handling of the dam — especially in a mountainous area in the face of climate events — created serious damage. The court held the damage was not an 'Act of God' and invoked the Principle of No Fault liability. The Alaknanda Hydro Power Company was asked by the Tribunal to pay more than ₹9 crore in damages. But all this was after the disaster. A Climate Commission could ideally prevent such gross negligence in fragile areas and fix accountability if it arises. We have an urgent moral imperative to tackle climate change and reduce its worst impacts. But we also should Indianise the process by bringing in a just and effective law — with guts, a spine, a heart, and, most importantly, teeth.

INDIA'S CLIMATE COMMITMENTS ARE BOLD, BUT MEETING THEM WILL BE A CHALLENGE, SAY EXPERTS

India's headline announcement at COP26, to become carbon neutral by 2070, suggests that it has committed itself to decisive action to curb runaway greenhouse gas emissions from mid-century. However, experts say that much will become clear only after India submits its updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC). This document spells out the minutiae on how exactly it plans to go about achieving these targets. India's five-fold plan, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi spelt out on Monday, says India's non-fossil energy capacity will reach 500 GW by 2030; it will meet 50% of its energy requirements with renewable energy by 2030; it will reduce its total projected carbon emissions by a billion tonnes by 2030; and reduce the carbon intensity of its economy to less than 45% and achieve net zero by 2070. Net zero is when a country's carbon emissions are offset by taking out equivalent carbon from the atmosphere, so that emissions in balance are zero.

Peaking year

However, achieving net zero by a specific date means specifying a year, also called a peaking year, following which emissions will start to reduce. Though there is no clarity yet from the Government, experts in the run-up to COP26 have wrestled with these questions. A March 2021 study by analyst Vaibhav Chaturvedi at the Council for Energy, Environment and Water suggested that for a 2070 net zero year and peaking year of 2040, India would have to reduce the emissions intensity (emissions per unit GDP) by 85% — it has so far reduced it to 24% from the 2005 levels. The share of non-hydro renewable energy has to increase to 65% from the 11% today; the share of electric cars in passenger sales has to go from 0.1% today to 75% by 2040; and the share of fossil energy in primary energy has to decrease from 73% to 40%. For a peaking year of 2030,

these targets would be stiffer. India, as part of its NDC in 2015, had committed itself to installing 175 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2022. Till February 28, 2021, the country had achieved 94 GW, comprising 25% share in total installed capacity for power generation. If large hydro installed capacity is included (45 GW by February 2021), then India's non-fossil energy capacity is 139 GW — close to 38% of installed capacity — according to the Centre for Science and Environment. Diplomatic compulsions likely forced India to announce a net zero date as it was the only one among major economies not to have specified a net zero year until now. India, however, should have said that it will reach net zero by 2070, only if other developed countries themselves commit to reaching net zero before 2050, said Navroz Dubash, Professor, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. There is also no clarity on how many of the announced targets are unconditional and how many are conditional. Professor Dubash said the billion tonnes of carbon dioxide reduction in the next decade also needed more clarity. The billion tonnes would be premised on a reference point that shows what the emissions would be in a business-as-usual scenario. "We don't yet know what scenario has been considered. This is the time we should have more careful and broad modelling," he noted.