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DreamIAS

INTERNATIONAL

WHY RUSSIAN TROOPS ARE ON UKRAINE BORDER, AND WHY WEST IS CONCERNED

The tension on the Russia-Ukraine border represents a major security crisis for the region, with the potential to snowball into a broader conflict. Ukraine says that Russia has amassed around 90,000 troops at the border, and US intelligence reports say that a Russian invasion of Ukraine is possible as early as next month. Russia has shown, as recently as 2014, that it is not averse to taking military action in Ukraine. In that year, Russia seized Crimea from Ukraine in what was the first time a European country annexed territory from another country since World War Two.

What are Russia's and the West's interests in Ukraine?

Ukraine and Russia share hundreds of years of cultural, linguistic and familial links. As part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was the second-most powerful Soviet republic after Russia, and was crucial strategically, economically and culturally. Ever since Ukraine split from the Soviet Union, both Russia and the West have vied for greater influence in the country in order to keep the balance of power in the region in their favour. For many in Russia and in the ethically Russian parts of Ukraine, the shared heritage of the countries is an emotional issue that has been exploited for electoral and military purposes. For the United States and the European Union, Ukraine is a crucial buffer between Russia and the West. As tensions with Russia rise, the US and the EU are increasingly determined to keep Ukraine away from Russian control. Efforts to induct Ukraine into NATO have been ongoing for many years and seems to have picked up pace recently. Russia has declared such a move a "red line", with Moscow worried about the consequences of the US-led military alliances expanding right up to its doorstep.

What was Euromaidan and its aftermath?

November 2013 saw the start of mass protests across Ukraine, but particularly in Kyiv's Maidan, or central square. Protesters were angry at Ukraine's then pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovych's decision to join the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union instead of the EU. The protests, known as the Euromaidan movement, saw massive clashes between the protesters and security forces that reached its peak in February 2014, and led to the ouster of Yanukovych. Soon after, amid fears of growing Western influence in Ukraine, Russia decided to take action by invading Crimea, which was a part of Ukraine. Moscow also began fomenting a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine, which is home to many who are ethnically Russian. The invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea have given Russia a maritime upperhand in the region. It also gave President Vladimir Putin a significant boost in popularity ratings inside Russia. However, it was widely condemned by world powers, and resulted in the US and EU imposing sanctions on Moscow. It also resulted in a strengthened commitment by both the US and the EU to protect the integrity of Ukraine's borders.

What is happening now?

As it moves a large number of troops towards the border, Russia seeks assurances from the US that Ukraine will not be inducted into NATO. However, US President Joe Biden has made it clear that he is not prepared to give any such assurance. This has left the countries in a stand-off, with tens of thousands of Russian troops ready to invade Ukraine at short notice, and the West not budging on Russia's demands. Putin and Biden are set to talk via video link on Tuesday, and many experts believe that Russia is keeping the tensions high at the Ukraine border in order to get

sanctions relief and other concessions from the West. Frantic diplomatic efforts, involving US, European, Ukrainian and Russian officials, are underway to avoid military action.

What next?

US officials, including Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin, have admitted that they are not sure what Putin's intentions are. If the diplomatic efforts to stop the invasion fail, US and EU officials have said they may impose hard-hitting sanctions on Russia in the event of military action on the Ukraine border. However, depending on what Putin's intentions are, experts say sanctions may not be enough to deter him. Any kind of military action by the US or EU against Russia would precipitate a major crisis for the whole world, and has so far not been mooted by any of the parties involved.

'DEMOCRACY DOESN'T HAPPEN BY ACCIDENT'

U.S. President Joe Biden kicked off Day One of his Summit for Democracy, calling on countries to make "concrete commitments" to reaffirm their democratic values. Over 100 countries have been invited, as well as civil society actors, members of various parliaments and the private sector. "Democracy doesn't happen by accident. We have to renew it with each generation," Mr. Biden, sitting beside his Secretary of State Antony Blinken, told over 50 world leaders who could be seen on a large screen. "We have to stand for justice and the rule of law for free speech, free assembly, a free press, freedom of religion, for all the inherent human rights of every individual," the President said. The purpose of the gathering was not to assert that any of the participant countries were perfect democracies, Mr. Biden said, but "to lock arms and reaffirm our shared commitment to make our democracy better" and to share ideas and make "concrete commitments" on combating authoritarianism, fighting corruption and promoting human rights – the three themes of the summit. Mr. Biden said he was launching the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal, which, along with the U.S. Congress would commit $224 million toward various democracy related projects including transparency, fair elections and free and independent media. (A White House factsheet released on Thursday said the Initiative would involve $424.2 million. The White House clarified for The Hindu that this was the correct amount). Calling a free and independent press the " bedrock of democracy", Mr. Biden said the U.S. was launching a multilateral effort to enhance independent media. He also described a recently announced defamation defence fund by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to protect journalists from "nuisance lawsuits designed to prevent them from doing their work and vital work around the world." While the Summit is likely to see commitments, in addition to the launch of initiatives, plans to make these commitments binding appear not to be on the cards. Following the Summit, there would be "a year of consultation, coordination and delivery" a senior administration official told reporters on Monday. Last week U.S. officials had told reporters that there would be a " written, non-binding code of conduct" on human rights parameters for the export of technologies that could be used for repression. Additionally, this week, the U.S. released a strategy on countering corruption. There is a second summit planned for a year from now, where countries are expected to discuss progress on their commitments. However, the monitoring mechanism seems to rely on civil society actors holding governments accountable, rather than there being any binding mechanism that emerges from the discussions. "And our hope is that through the entirety of this process, we can really have a dialogue between participating governments and civil society, and that civil society will hold all of us accountable," one official said during Monday's briefing call. Another official said that coalitions like the Open Government Partnership (India is not a member) or the Universal Periodic Review (a periodic review of human rights records of UN

member states) could be leveraged for monitoring. " …We do intend to host this summit with humility," one official said. "We see ourselves as a democracy not with all of the answers, but with openness and transparency about our efforts to overcome challenges at home…" Earlier this week, the White House released another 'fact sheet' saying the Biden administration is strengthening democracy at home, with details of its work on the infrastructure bill, Build Back Better (not yet passed), voting rights, strengthening unions and other themes Mr. Biden also mentioned during his Thursday launch speech. Thursday's agenda included two plenary sessions, one hosted by Mr. Biden and the second, by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. Pre-recorded interventions by world leaders have been scheduled for Thursday and Friday, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's intervention scheduled for Friday.

MODI LAUDS U.S. FOR SUMMIT; IMRAN TO GIVE IT A MISS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi "commended" the U.S. for holding a summit for democracies that was inaugurated by U.S. President Biden on Thursday, even as Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan has decided to skip it, making India one of only three South Asian nations attending the two-day event. "PM Modi said the democratic spirit, including respect for rule of law and pluralistic ethos, is ingrained in Indians," MEA sources said. "The PM had spoken about the need for democracy in global governance and for technology companies to "contribute to preserving open and democratic societies," they added. Mr. Modi is due to make his "national statement" on Friday where all leaders are expected to make specific commitments on promoting democracy, on the lines of the climate change summit, officials aware of the agenda said. "Certainly India is going to be playing a prominent role. We would encourage those who weren't [invited] to work on commitments to democracy," U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Jennifer Larson said. While India, Pakistan, Nepal and the Maldives were invited to the summit, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka were not among about 100 countries on the list. When asked, Jennifer Larson admitted that limits on the number of invitees on the list had been "arbitrarily placed". She expressed hope that other democratic countries in the region would be invited to the next summit. Pakistan's decision not to attend comes on the back of severe criticism of the summit plans from China, which has not been invited, along with Russia, presumably as they are Communist single-party states. "We remain in contact with the U.S. on a range of issues and believe that we can engage on this subject at an opportune time in the future," the Pakistan MFA said on Thursday, but did not give a specific reason for missing the summit.

DIPLOMATIC GAMES

The U.S. government said on December 6 it will stage what it called a "diplomatic boycott" of the Winter Olympics, set to begin in Beijing on February 4. White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said the decision was taken because "U.S. diplomatic or official representation would treat these games as business as usual". These games, she argued, could not be treated as such because of China's "human rights abuses and atrocities in Xinjiang". The announcement came days ahead of U.S. President Joe Biden's "Summit of Democracy", with leaders and representatives from more than 100 countries; China and Russia were not invited. China's Foreign Ministry has described the boycott as an "outright political provocation", warning that China would take "firm countermeasures". Sharp statements aside, the U.S. move is largely symbolic and is unlikely to have a major impact. A diplomatic boycott, which means no official representation, holds far less weight than a complete boycott which would have meant the absence of American athletes. While Australia and New Zealand have also announced that their officials will not be present in China, it remains to be seen how much traction the U.S. campaign will receive beyond its allies. Russian

President Vladimir Putin, who was in India earlier this week, has announced he will be present at the games, underlining the continuing closeness between China and Russia amid their divergences with the West. China has seized upon both the U.S. boycott and the democracy summit to launch a counter campaign. This week, China's government released a white paper on democracy, saying there was "no fixed model" and criticising the U.S. system for its "money politics", a message that Beijing's officials hope will find sympathetic audiences in Asia, Africa and Latin America, particularly among those countries left out of the summit (including Sri Lanka and Bangladesh). India, meanwhile, has found itself treading the middle ground in this clash of values despite the downturn in ties with China. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi is among the leaders attending the democracy summit, New Delhi last month signed off on a statement issued by the Foreign Ministers of Russia, India and China expressing support for the games. The G20 summit in October had stopped short of doing so, merely saying it looked ahead to the games after the U.S. reportedly opposed a stronger declaration of support. The exchanges this week are a reminder of the current state of ties between the world's two biggest powers, which have clashed over trade, Taiwan and the South China Sea among other issues, even though their two leaders, in a virtual summit last month, agreed to "responsibly" manage an increasingly competitive relationship. What has complicated that task is a growing clash of values, with ideological differences adding another element to a relationship already in trouble over trade and geopolitical leverage.

ASSANGE'S LEGAL TEAM TO APPEAL COURT DECISION, SAYS FIANCÉE

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's legal team would appeal a British appellate court's decision to allow his extradition to the U.S., his fiancée, Stella Moris said. "How can it be fair, how can it be right, how can it be possible, to extradite Julian to the very country which plotted to kill him?" she said. "We will appeal this decision at the earliest possible moment." At the Royal Courts of Justice in London, the U.S. won the appeal against a ruling by a London District Judge that Mr. Assange should not be extradited because he was likely to commit suicide in a U.S. prison. Supporters of Mr. Assange gathered outside of the court after the ruling, chanting "free Julian Assange" and "no extradition". They tied hundreds of yellow ribbons to the court's gates and held up placards saying "journalism is not a crime". Judge Timothy Holroyde said the case must now be remitted to Westminster Magistrates' Court with the direction judges send it to Home Secretary Priti Patel to decide whether or not Mr. Assange should be extradited. Mr. Assange, who denies any wrongdoing, started out as a teenage hacker with the nickname Mendax --a classical Latin word for "liar" --but a few decades later would expose some of the U.S.'s darkest secrets. WikiLeaks came to prominence when it published a U.S. military video in 2010 showing a 2007 attack by Apache helicopters in Baghdad that killed a dozen people, including two Reuters news staff. It then released thousands of secret classified files and diplomatic cables that laid bare often highly critical U.S. appraisals of world leaders from Russian President Vladimir Putin to members of the Saudi royal family. Mr. Assange jumped bail and was offered refuge in 2012 by Ecuador's then-President Rafael Correa. He spent seven years holed up at the Embassy in London while British police spent millions of dollars watching for any sign that he would emerge. After relations with Ecuador soured, Mr. Assange, with white hair and a long beard, was dragged out by British police.

FIVE YEARS OF SOLITUDE FOR THE EX-GUERRILLAS

Five years after a landmark peace accord that brought to end a conflict that lasted more than five decades in Colombia, the United States has finally revoked its designation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) as a foreign terrorist organisation. FARC had disbanded from being a guerilla military organisation as part of the peace accord signed with the Colombian

government in 2016, into an overground political force called the Comunes (commons in Spanish). But splinter groups that did not accede to or abide by the accord continue to be designated as foreign terrorist organisations — dissident groups such as the La Segunda Marquetalia and the FARC-EP (People's Army). This indicates that the accord continues to retain its discontents with some former FARC combatants refusing to give up on what they term is armed struggle, but what many suggest is a strategy in "their economic self-interest" to run some of the rackets that were common during the insurgency. The accord was difficult to achieve — FARC had taken a lot of losses in terms of combatants, leaders and control over territory in the run-up to the 2016 accord, but was still capable of continuing a war of attrition that began as a left-wing peasant struggle in the 1960s but later degenerated into a mixture of guerilla warfare and a criminal enterprise that thrived on hostage taking and later made economic gains from taxing narco-trafficking and growing narcotic plants. But FARC's leadership managed a deal with the Colombian government, then led by the Nobel Peace Prize winning President Juan Manuel Santos, that promised not just the disbanding of FARC, but the recognition of its newly formed political group, protection to their leaders and other concessions such as agrarian reforms such as expanding land registration and redistribution to landless farmers. A recent report by the International Crisis Group says this - "the peace accord has enabled Colombia to put the trauma of nationwide conflict and wartime atrocities behind it, but.. the plan to reintegrate thousands of fighters through cooperatives hit numerous snags. Close to 300 demobilised FARC have been killed, while authorities struggle to pin down the guilty parties".

AFTER NICARAGUA SNUB, U.S. URGES NATIONS TO EXPAND TAIWAN TIES

The U.S. State Department called on "all countries that value democratic institutions" to "expand engagement with Taiwan" in a statement on Thursday after Nicaragua announced it was cutting diplomatic relations with the island in favour of China. The statement said the move by President Daniel Ortega "cannot reflect the will of the Nicaraguan people" due to the the Central American country's recent presidential election being a "sham." "This deprives Nicaragua's people of a steadfast partner in its democratic and economic growth," the department's statement said. Nicaragua's diplomatic switch from Taiwan to China leaves the island with just 14 diplomatic allies but comes as Taipei strengthens ties with multiple unofficial Western friends, including the U.S. At the same time, the U.S. has slammed Nicaragua's November elections that saw long-time leader Ortega re-elected as illegitimate, slapping sanctions on the federal public prosecutor's office and nine officials in response. In the months ahead of the November 7 election, Nicaraguan authorities detained nearly 40 Opposition figures, including seven would-be presidential challengers, virtually assuring victory for Mr. Ortega.

CUFFED AND COLLARED

The sentencing of Myanmar leaders to four years in prison on two separate charges on Monday, by a court run by the military junta, appears to be just the first of a number of sentences aimed at putting State Councillor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and other government leaders in custody for decades. The verdicts that relate to cases dealing with "incitement against the military" and for "breaching Covid laws" are frighteningly farcical. One relates to speeches made during protests against the military's decision to dismiss the results of last November's elections, which Ms. Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), clearly won. The other, even more ridiculous, is for breaching COVID-19 protocols at an election rally when she was photographed wearing both a face mask and a shield throughout her campaign. The sentences, and the ones that will follow, are meant not only to ensure an end to the NLD and Ms. Suu Kyi's

public life but are also part of an effort to break the spirit of democratic groups. Over the past eight months since the military coup in February, more than 1,300 civilians protesting the military's actions have been killed, and thousands including the entire NLD government arrested, with detentions, trials and sentences carried out in secret. In more evidence of the military's brutality, three people were reportedly mowed down by a military vehicle on Sunday, when they took part in a peaceful protest. The military's messaging is not aimed only domestically, however. Its actions are meant to challenge the international community as well, which has failed to take any action against Myanmar's leadership in the past few years: first on its ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya that drove a million out to refugee camps in Bangladesh (which the NLD government was complicit in), and then its actions against the democratically elected government itself. Since February, the UN Security Council has done little other than issuing statements appealing for an end to the violence and the restoration of democracy, and to suspend the nation's UN seat. While China, which has deep links with the military and a considerable investment in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, has sought to protect the junta from sanctions, the U.S. has proven ineffective in ensuring a different outcome as well. It is ironic that Ms. Suu Kyi's sentencing comes in a week when the U.S. hosts a "Summit for Democracy". The Modi government too, given its worries about losing a foothold in the neighbourhood, and its need for cooperation with the Myanmar military over the restive North-eastern border, has chosen silence over any serious attempt to change the course of events in Myanmar. Much like its inability to influence outcomes in Afghanistan, India's ineffectual posture over the developments in Myanmar could also cause it considerable reputational damage as a regional leader.

CONTROVERSIAL EX-NAVY CHIEF IS GOTABAYA'S PICK AS GOVERNOR

Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on Thursday appointed a former Navy chief, previously accused of abduction and conspiracy to murder, as Governor of the North Western Province, delivering what victims' families called "yet another blow" to their 12 year-long fight for justice. Wasantha Karannagoda rendered "a great service to the Motherland during the humanitarian operation as the Commander of the Navy," a statement from the President's office said, of the man named 14th suspect in a gruesome case now commonly referred to as "Navy 11" case. This is Mr. Rajapaksa's second controversial appointment in recent months. In October, he chose a reactionary Buddhist monk Galagodaatte Gnanasara, earlier convicted for contempt of court, and accused of inciting violence against Muslims, to chair a panel on key legal reforms. In the years 2008 and 2009, 11 youth — most of them in their late teens and coming from Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim families — went missing across in different suburbs around Colombo. With witness accounts and the body of evidence pointing to the apparent involvement of a team of naval officers, the Attorney General's Department, in November 2019, indicted over a dozen high-ranking naval officers on charges of abducting and conspiring to murder the 11 young men. The list of suspects, of high-ranking naval officers, included Mr. Karannagoda, who was Navy Commander at the time of the abductions. Activists and lawyers consider the case "emblematic" of the alleged criminal conduct of military during civil war years. It also drew notice for the rare progress made by way of evidence gathering and prosecution in court. However, in a puzzling U-turn this August, the AG's Department said it had decided not to proceed with the charges against the admiral.

Short-lived hopes

After giving families some reason for hope by serving indictments — on 667 charges — in the high-profile case, the AG's decision to spare one suspect alone of the grave charges drew wide

attention. Including from the UN Human Rights Chief Michelle Bachelet, who expressed concern over developments in judicial proceedings "in a number of emblematic human rights cases" in Sri Lanka. From the families' perspective, the AG's decision delivered "a severe blow" to the case. They challenged it at Sri Lanka's Court of Appeal, which subsequently dismissed their petition on grounds that the AG's department had the discretion to drop charges against a suspect. Even as hearings on the original case are set to continue – the charges against the other 13 officers remain and the admiral is yet to be acquitted – victims' families are appalled at Thursday's appointment.

'Completely unfair'

"This is completely unfair," said Jenifer Weerasinghe, mother of Mohammed Dilan Jamaldeen, one of the 11 disappeared youth. "The admiral was the navy commander when my son was abducted. He certainly knows what happened to him and the others. That is why he was named a suspect. How could they give him a post like this?" she asked, terming the development "another huge blow". The President's appointment of the admiral as Governor also adds to the list of military men given civilian positions in recent years. Since 2020, Mr. Rajapaksa has appointed at least 28 serving or former military and intelligence personnel to key administrative posts, the UN Human Rights Chief Bachelet noted in a report early this year. Mr. Karannagoda's appointment is "a double whammy", according to human rights lawyer Bhavani Fonseka from the Colomb-based NGO Centre for Policy Alternatives. "It further entrenches impunity and militarisation," she said.
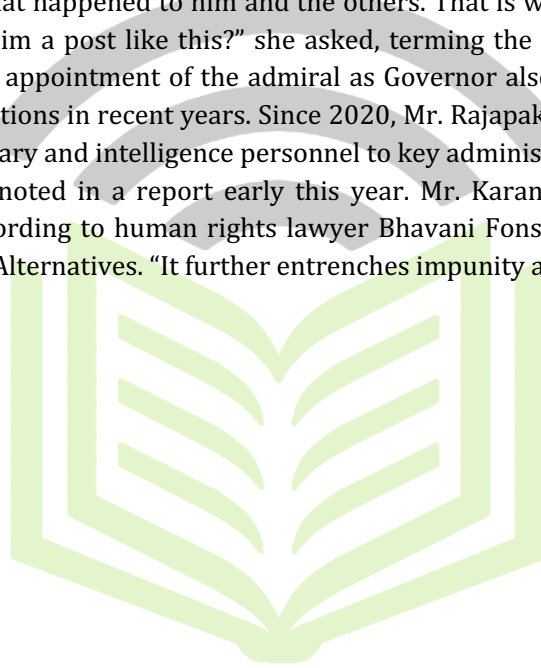
NATION

A ROBUST FRIENDSHIP

Russian President Vladimir Putin has concluded a short summit meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi, highlighting the "all-weather" partnership between the two countries despite trying global circumstances. Not only does the President's visit come as the world faces the grim prospect of the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it also follows years of growing proximity between New Delhi and Washington, a potential irritant to Moscow. Simultaneously, the China factor has been steadily pulling the India-Russia bilateral tango in all the wrong directions. While Russia relies on cordial ties with China to stabilise its interests in an unstable Afghanistan post the U.S.'s exit, New Delhi and Beijing have scarcely seen eye-to-eye on border tensions and geo-political rivalry across the Asia region. Notwithstanding these reasons for possible strategic dissonance, India and Russia reaffirmed the strength of their abiding deep, multi-decade ties, building further confidence in each other through substantive defence agreements. Moscow has agreed on a 10-year military-technical plan that includes technology transfer to India. And trade received a fillip through an agreement for India to produce more than 600,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles. For India's part, despite resistance from Washington through its Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, New Delhi will proceed with purchasing the S-400 missile defence system from Moscow. The challenges facing Mr. Modi and Mr. Putin in terms of maintaining this momentum in bilateral exchanges are multidimensional. First, and most imminently, the pandemic has periodically crippled the growth of both economies and the threats to public health remain despite considerable progress with vaccinations. Second, Russia-U.S. ties are showing signs of fraying yet again, this time over U.S. President Joe Biden's intention, reportedly, to warn Mr. Putin that Russia will face "economy-jarring sanctions" if it seeks to occupy Ukraine, a fear that has grown in the U.S. as Russian troops massed near the Ukraine border. India has so far held firm to its mantra of 'strategic autonomy' in a multipolar world, but South Block will have to work hard to manage the tightrope act between Moscow and Washington. Third, India and China have forged an uneasy truce across their Himalayan border in the aftermath of the Galwan valley exchange in 2020, yet there are numerous potential flashpoints that could send ties into a spiral again, including China's historically provocative actions in the South China Sea and its thinly veiled insecurity about India joining the Quad for Indo-Pacific security. Moscow has adroitly managed to remain friends with both its mega-neighbours, but it will require a robust focus on confidence-boosting cooperative initiatives if India and Russia are to safely navigate the complex geopolitical landscape that they occupy.

EXPANDING INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT ENVELOPE WITH RUSSIA

Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to New Delhi for the 21st India-Russia Summit meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlights the constant efforts by both leaders to nurture and to provide further impetus to the 'India-Russia Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership'. In the new grammar of multipolarity and globalisation, it is of utmost importance for dependable partners to ensure enduring sensitivity to their mutual interests.

Strategic partnership

More importantly, the robust partnership between India and Russia has come out of the shackles of the Cold War inheritance. A practical and result-oriented approach will pave the way for the most reliable partnership. The Putin-Modi meeting in an atmosphere of unprecedented regional

and global transformations can ensure not only a new lease of life but can also generate more vitality to this trustworthy camaraderie. India-Russia relations have withstood the test of time and the ever-shifting nature of national interests. Relations between the two countries have deepened with time irrespective of the quagmire of realpolitik. This exceptional resilience is built on the firm foundation of strategic national interest and the synergy of geopolitics. In the post-Cold War era, India has emerged as an economic powerhouse and a key stakeholder in today's global debate be it climate change, international trade, or the menace of terrorism. Russia with its global status and presence presents a win-win situation for deeper cooperation. This relation between both countries has evolved with time, deepening the integration and widening the breadth of the relation.

A structure in place

Russia has been one of India's closest friends and allies with the signing of the "Declaration on the India-Russia Strategic Partnership" in October 2000 which unlocked new opportunities in strategic, science and technology, space, energy, nuclear ties, trade and commerce, culture and a people-to-people connect. For smooth functioning of this strategic partnership, it was governed by an institutionalised dialogue mechanism involving key stakeholders at the political and official levels. Mr. Putin's visit to India in December 2010 heralded a new chapter in India-Russia relations when the Strategic Partnership was elevated to the level of a "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership".

Convergence and divergence

India and Russia have much convergence spanning different sectors. Russia is the key and principal supplier of arms and armaments to the Indian armed forces accounting for over 60% of weapons. It comprises the whole gamut covering the Indian Army, Indian Air Force and Indian Navy. India recently inducted the S-400 Triumf missile systems. Sukhoi Su-30 fighter aircraft, T-90 tanks, and the Talwar and the Krivak class stealth frigates are key weapons in the armoury of the Indian armed forces. The India-Russia defence cooperation has evolved from a buyer-seller model to new areas of military-technical collaboration. The BrahMos missile system was a successful collaboration of joint research, development, and production. Science and technology, nuclear, energy, space have been key driving forces. But changes in interests and capabilities being fuelled by geopolitical differences are widening the divergence between India and Russia. In terms of geostrategy, Russia is aligned with China and India is more anchored toward the United States. This dissonance was apparent in the Indian and Russian approach over Afghanistan. Bilateral trade has seen the two countries progressing from defence and energy to IT, pharmaceuticals, agro-industries, mineral and metallurgy, fertilizers, and infrastructure projects. India-Russia trade was valued at the U.S.$10.11 billion in 2019–20, but is not a true reflection of the potential that can be harnessed.

Stability and diversity

The '2+2' mechanism has become the standard framework of cooperation to widen collaboration. The inaugural '2+2' dialogue between the Foreign and Defence Ministers of the two countries promises to provide new vitality to the special and privileged strategic partnership. The uniqueness of this approach not only ensures result-oriented cooperation but also deliberates upon regional and global matters of mutual concerns and interests. At a time when global politics is in a state of flux, it becomes more important to have compatibility with geopolitical and

geoeconomic realities along with the trust of the leadership. Therefore, this evolving political framework provides the necessary agility to the relationship in fine-tuning their differences and deepening their bonds. The Modi-Putin meeting has sent the unambiguous signal to the world that the India-Russia partnership is an incredible friendship ensuring stability and diversity. Defence, trade and investment, energy, and science and technology may be part of the agenda, but India and Russia need to work together in a trilateral manner or using other flexible frameworks, particularly in Southeast Asia and Central Asia. Their growing collaboration can be a force of stability and will bring more diversity to the region while strengthening multilateralism. Second, the two countries also need to look at peoples' power — youth exchanges as well as deeper links in various fields including sport, culture, spiritual and religious studies. Finally, Buddhism can be an area where both countries can expand their interaction, where peace and sustainability can act as a balm in this turbulent world.

WHEN CAN AN INDIVIDUAL GET STATUTORY BAIL?

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) has approached the Supreme Court against a Bombay High Court order granting bail to advocate and activist Sudha Bharadwaj. In its bail order, the court has asked the NIA Court to decide the conditions for her release on December 8. While she was given 'default bail', eight others were denied the benefit in the same case. The case highlights the nuances involved in a court determining the circumstances in which statutory bail is granted or denied, even though it is generally considered "an indefeasible right".

What is default bail?

Also known as statutory bail, this is a right to bail that accrues when the police fail to complete investigation within a specified period in respect of a person in judicial custody. This is enshrined in Section 167(2) of the Code of Criminal Procedure where it is not possible for the police to complete an investigation in 24 hours, the police produce the suspect in court and seek orders for either police or judicial custody. This section concerns the total period up to which a person may be remanded in custody prior to filing of charge sheet. For most offences, the police have 60 days to complete the investigation and file a final report before the court. However, where the offence attracts death sentence or life imprisonment, or a jail term of not less than 10 years, the period available is 90 days. In other words, a magistrate cannot authorise a person's judicial remand beyond the 60-or 90-day limit. At the end of this period, if the investigation is not complete, the court shall release the person "if he is prepared to and does furnish bail".

How does the provision vary for special laws?

The 60- or 90-day limit is only for ordinary penal law. Special enactments allow greater latitude to the police for completing the probe. In the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, the period is 180 days. However, in cases involving substances in commercial quantity, the period may be extended up to one year. This extension beyond 180 days can be granted only on a report by the Public Prosecutor indicating the progress made in the investigation and giving reasons to keep the accused in continued detention. In the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, the default limit is 90 days only. The court may grant an extension of another 90 days, if it is satisfied with a report by the Public Prosecutor showing the progress made in the investigation and giving reasons to keep the accused in further custody. These provisions show that the extension of time is not automatic but requires a judicial order.

What are the laid-down principles on this aspect?

Default or statutory bail is a right, regardless of the nature of the crime. The stipulated period within which the charge sheet has to be filed begins from the day the accused is remanded for the first time. It includes days undergone in both police and judicial custody, but not days spent in house-arrest. A requirement for the grant of statutory bail is that the right should be claimed by the person in custody. If the charge sheet is not filed within the stipulated period, but there is no application for bail under Section 167(2), there is no automatic bail. In general, the right to bail on the investigation agency's default is considered an 'indefeasible right', but it should be availed of at the appropriate time.

What happened in Sudha Bharadwaj's case?

In the Bhima Koregaon case, which is under UAPA, the prosecution got the 90-day limit extended to 180 days. Ms. Bharadwaj completed 90 days in prison in January 2019, but the charge sheet was filed only in February. Meanwhile, she had applied for default bail on the ground that the extension given by a Sessions Court earlier was without jurisdiction. The court agreed that only a Special Court could have authorised the extension beyond 90 days. Therefore, she was entitled to statutory bail. However, eight others, who had argued that the court order taking cognisance of the charge sheet was defective, but did not specifically seek default bail, were not given the same relief.

A DOCKET FULL OF UNRESOLVED CONSTITUTIONAL CASES

During the framing of the Indian Constitution, it was proposed that any petition alleging a breach of fundamental rights by the state ought to be judicially decided within one month. While the proposal did not, ultimately, find its way into the text of the Constitution, it nonetheless articulated something of great importance: between the individual and the state, there exists a substantial asymmetry of power. While the violation of rights — whether through executive or legislative action — is relatively costless for the state, it is the individual, or individuals, who pay the price, and who must then run from pillar to post to vindicate their constitutionally guaranteed rights. Consequently, a Constitution is entirely ineffective if a rights-violating status quo is allowed to exist and perpetuate for months, or even years, before it is finally resolved (and often, by the time resolution comes, it is too late in the day for it to have any practical significance).

Blow to accountability

This point, of course, is not limited to the violation of rights, but extends to all significant constitutional questions that arise in the course of controversial state action. Issues around the federal structure, elections, and many others, all involve questions of power and accountability, and the longer that courts take to resolve such cases, the more we move from a realm of accountability to a realm of impunity. In this context, as 2021 draws to a close, a look at the Supreme Court of India's docket reveals a host of highly significant constitutional cases that were long-pending when the year began, and are now simply a year older without any sign of resolution around the corner. All these cases involve crucial questions about state power, accountability, and impunity. Consequently, the longer they are left hanging without a decision, the greater the damage that is inflicted upon our constitutional democracy's commitment to the rule of law.

Kashmir, electoral bonds

What are some of these cases? First, there is the constitutional challenge to the Presidential Orders of August 5, 2019, that effectively diluted Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, and bifurcated the State of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories, controlled by the Centre. There is a widespread tendency to view the Kashmir question as having been "settled" after the events of August 5, 2019, with it now being a political impossibility to return to the pre-2019 status quo. Regrettably, this tendency seems to have gripped the Court as well in how assiduously it has avoided hearing and deciding the case. But politics aside, the case raises certain fundamental questions about constitutional power and accountability. First, it raises the question of whether the Centre can take advantage of an Article 356 situation in a State — a time when no elected government and Assembly is in existence — to make permanent and irreversible alterations in the very structure of the State itself. The answer will have important ramifications not just for Jammu and Kashmir but for the entire federal structure: India has a long history of the abuse of Article 356 to "get rid of" inconvenient State governments, and a further expansion of the power already enjoyed by the Centre will skew an already tilted federal scheme even further. Second, the case also raises the question of whether, under the Constitution, the Union Legislature has the authority not simply to alter State boundaries (a power granted to it by Article 3 of the Constitution), but degrade a State into a Union Territory (something that has never been done before August 5, 2019). If it turned out that the Union Legislature does have this power, it would essentially mean that India's federal structure is entirely at the mercy of Parliament: Parliament could then, constitutionally, convert India from a union of States to a union of Union Territories, if it so wanted. Needless to say, this — as well — would signal a hugely significant shift in power to the Centre. As long as both these questions remain undecided, however, the acts of August 5, 2019 remain presumptively legal, with the prospect that they may well be repeated in other parts of India. For this reason, the Supreme Court's now two-and-a-half-year delay in hearing and answering these questions is unconscionable. Another long-pending case is the constitutional challenge to the electoral bonds scheme, that has now crossed four years. The electoral bonds scheme authorises limitless, anonymous corporate donations to political parties, making election funding both entirely opaque to the people, as well as being structurally biased towards the party that is in power at the Centre. In numerous central and State election cycles in the last four years, thousands of crores of rupees have been spent in anonymous political donations, thus impacting not only the integrity of the election process but also the constitutional right of citizens to an informed vote. However, other than two interim orders, the Supreme Court has refused to accord a full hearing to the constitutional challenge. In a few months' time, it will be one full five-year cycle of central and State elections, with the case still awaiting a hearing: another black mark on the Court's record. It is important to note that in both these cases, the Supreme Court's inaction is not neutral, but rather, favours the beneficiaries of the status quo. In other words, by not deciding, the Court is in effect deciding — in favour of one party — but without a reasoned judgment that justifies its stance.

Other key cases

This is also true for a number of other cases pending before the Court. For example, as far back as 2013, the Gauhati High Court held that the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) was not established under any statutory authority. This verdict was immediately stayed when it was appealed to the Supreme Court, but in the intervening years, it has never been heard. Thus, the CBI continues to function — often controversially — despite a judgment by a constitutional court that has found its very existence to be illegal. More recently, constitutional challenges to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), filed in the immediate aftermath of the legislation's

enactment, remain unheard, as do the challenges to the much-criticised Section 43(D)(5) of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, which makes the grant of bail effectively impossible, and is responsible for the years-long incarceration of several people. The challenge to Section 43(D)(5) is perhaps the case that most directly affects civil rights, as the section continues to be applied on a regular basis (most notoriously, in recent times, in the Bhima Koregaon case). And cases of this kind are legion.

It wounds the judiciary

Apart from benefiting the party that profits from the status quo — which, as we have seen, is invariably the state — judicial evasion of this kind is also damaging for the accountability of the judiciary itself. Once a court decides a case, its reasoning — which must, by definition be public — can be publicly scrutinised and, if need be, critiqued. In the absence of a decision, however, while the Court's inaction plays as significant a role on the ground as does its action, there is no judgment — and no reasoning — that the public can engage with. For obvious reasons, this too has a serious impact on the rule of law. It must be acknowledged that the responsibility for constituting benches and scheduling cases especially cases that are due to be heard by larger Benches rests solely with the Chief Justice of India (CJI). While the three previous CJIs have been criticised for excessive deference to the executive, the current CJI has been on record stressing the importance of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. One way of demonstrating that in action might be to hear — and decide — the important constitutional cases pending before the Court.

GUJARAT HC FLAYS CLOSURE OF NON-VEG FOOD STALLS

The Gujarat High Court on Thursday reprimanded the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) for seizing food stalls selling non-vegetarian food in the city, and asked the civic body how it could stop people from eating what they wanted. The High Court was hearing a plea by a number of petitioners whose carts selling non-vegetarian food items were seized by the AMC recently. The vendors included those selling non-vegetarian food, eggs and vegetables. The court disposed of the petition filed by over 20 street vendors challenging the AMC's drive to remove food kiosks along the main roads in the city.

'Will expedite hearing'

The court directed the AMC that if the petitioners approached it [the High Court] within 24 hours to release their seized goods, "based on the policy and in accordance with law, their cases shall be considered as expeditiously as possible". Justice Biren Vaishnav rapped the civic body, asking whether it would decide what people should eat outside. "What seems to be the problem? You don't like non-veg food? That's your lookout. How can you decide what I should eat outside? It's always the convenience of the respondents. How can you stop people from eating what they want? [Is it] suddenly because somebody in power thinks that this is what they want to do?" Justice Vaishnav asked the counsel representing the civic body. "Tomorrow, you will decide what I should eat outside the house?" He also asked if only non-vegetarian food vendors were being singled out. The AMC has been contending that the drive was not meant to target such vendors but to remove encroachments. Civic bodies in other cities too such as Vadodara, Rajkot, Junagadh and Jamnagar had recently launched a similar drive. This came after Gujarat Revenue Minister Rajendra Trivedi and some municipal councillors from the ruling BJP publicly stated that selling non-vegetarian food on the roads "hurt the sentiments" of Hindus.

HATE IN THE NAME OF HALAL

Ever since the BJP-led government assumed power at the Centre in 2014, the party unit in Kerala has been desperately trying to elbow its way into the State's traditionally bipolar polity. The BJP has been able to increase its vote share marginally among the Nair and the Ezhavas/ Thiyyas of the Hindu community in the subsequent three-tier local body, Assembly and Lok Sabha polls. But despite a high-voltage campaign and even fielding 'Metroman' E. Sreedharan, the party failed to retain even its lone segment Nemom in the 2021 Assembly polls. Now, after the Sabarimala issue, Sangh Parivar organisations are spearheading the halal controversy aimed at creating animosity towards Muslims among sections of Hindus and Christians in time for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

Changing demography

The halal issue has to be read with the changing demography of Kerala, with Muslims now constituting over 26% of the population and appropriating the strong economic and political clout which the Christians earlier enjoyed. Incidentally, the campaign is also centered around Muslim food rituals. This was after a video of a Muslim clergyman blowing air into the first plate of food to make it "holy" before serving it to guests during the Uroos at the Tajul Ulama Dargah went viral on social media. Though halal boards do not appear in hotels as extensively in north Kerala as claimed by the Sangh Parivar outfits, Hindutva and Christian radical groups are tagging the names of hotels owned by Muslims across the State on social media. At the same time, Islamist groups are countering the campaign, asking the Muslim community to avoid hotels owned by the Hindus and Christians. As business started to plummet, some hotel owners in Kozhikode filed a complaint with the police on the growing menace. Subsequently, the halal tags that appeared in non-Muslim regions in the southern and central parts also started vanishing. With the controversy in the air, S.J.R. Kumar, national vice chairman of the Sabarimala Ayyappa Seva Samajam and former State president of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, approached the Kerala High Court seeking a direction to stop the distribution of prasadam made of what was claimed to be halal jaggery in Sabarimala. Incidentally, if Christian and Muslim communities jointly opposed the ban on beef slaughter earlier endorsed by the BJP-led State governments, the current issue has seen Christian groups with the tacit support of Bishops of the powerful Syro-Malabar Church openly coming out against the "dominance" of the Muslim community. Several factors such as the booming Gulf money that benefited the Muslim community, the agrarian crisis, and the crash in the prices of cash crops resulted in the new social, political and economic milieu of the State.

Opposing the agenda

The ruling CPI(M), which had previously organised beef festivals across the State, is trying to oppose attempts to communalise food habits. Its youth wing organised a food street programme with various types of dishes, including chicken, beef and pork. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said that the halal controversy was part of an agenda set by the Sangh Parivar to foment division in the society. As for the Congress, it is still playing hide and seek with the issue without clearly taking a stand, especially when its leaders are coming under public and social media scrutiny. The hate campaign in the name of halal does not augur well for the State; it will only further vitiate the religious divide on a new spectrum of Islamophobia.

PROPOSING A LAW IN BAD FAITH

The BJP Government in Karnataka is keen to follow in the footsteps of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh by passing a law banning religious conversions through "force" or "allurement".

The demand for such a law is not new in Karnataka, but the pitch has steadily increased over the last few months. Interestingly, while the argument in support of the law in other BJP-ruled States was woven around the narrative of 'love jihad', in Karnataka it has been around conversions by Christians. The first indication of this came in July when the Directorate of Minorities Welfare instructed the deputy commissioners of all districts to conduct a survey of churches, purportedly for data collection purposes. It got louder after former Minister and BJP MLA Goolihatti Shekar sought action against missionaries in Hosadurga, his Assembly constituency, for carrying out "rampant religious conversions". His mother, he said, was among the 15,000 to 20,000 people in his constituency who were "victims" of missionaries. The MLA since then has arranged for a 'ghar wapsi' of his mother and a few others. However, officials who carried out a survey in two villages in the MLA's constituency found no cases of "forced" conversions. The following month saw a House committee of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly on Backward Classes and Minorities meeting to decide on a survey to check "forced conversions", chaired by Mr. Shekar himself. A day later, an internal order was issued by the ADGP, Intelligence, to all Deputy Superintendents of Police to collate information about "authorised and unauthorised" churches. In November and December, Karnataka has witnessed many attacks and threats against Christian prayer congregations, particularly in the border district of Belagavi. Several prayer groups that used to hold meetings in halls and open grounds have stopped doing so following alleged threats by Hindutva outfits. The police have "advised" them to discontinue their activity "to maintain peace." In some instances, cases have been booked against those attacked. The last time Karnataka saw a spate of attacks on Christian institutions was in 2008 in Mangaluru and other coastal towns, when the BJP formed an independent government for the first time with B.S. Yediyurappa at its helm. Since November, organisations such as the Shri Ram Sena, Hindu Janajagruti Samiti and a section of seers of various religious sects have kept up pressure on the Government to pass an anti-conversion law. On the other hand, Christian groups have petitioned the Government to underline the dangers of such a law. One petition pointed out that Christians account for only 1.8% of the State's population and there has hardly been any increase, which flies in the face of claims of "rampant conversions." Archbishop of Bengaluru Peter Machado said recently that the law would become a tool for fringe groups to target Christians. He claimed that even in the absence of a law, since January, there have been 32 incidents of attacks on the community. He cited a fact-finding report by the United Christian Forum and others, based on calls received on the Forum's helpline, to say that Karnataka ranks third after U.P. and Chhattisgarh in such attacks. The report notes a rise in attacks in October and November, as the discussion on anti-conversion law grew stronger. Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai, however, has continued to reiterate his government's resolve to implement an anti-conversion law, after studying similar laws in other States. But it remains to be seen if he will push ahead with the bill in the upcoming session or defer it until the party's strength in the Upper House, following the Legislative Council elections scheduled this Friday, gets consolidated enough to pass it without impediments.

FAITH, BELIEF AND WORSHIP

Every religion is a system of faith, belief and worship in a higher power or god who is deemed to be the creator of the universe. Scriptures and commandments illuminate the teachings of the gods. Rituals are designed by religious leaders, to put "communication systems" in place between god and the believer and to cement their position as the "enablers" between the "power" and the powerless. Religion should have been a haven for all human beings, a private relationship between an individual and the god to whom he prays, for guidance through the turmoil of everyday life. But religion and rituals have unfortunately become one of the most contentious and divisive issues of modern times. Yuval Noah Harari sees religion as a source of maintaining the existence of the

fragile and imagined structures and ideas created by man himself to enforce organisation and cooperation throughout a society, by providing an explanation that our laws, organisations and ranking are not made by human beings alone but by a supreme authority outside us. Differences in the precepts and practices of different religions are being exploited by politicians or religious leaders for short-term personal gain. Man turns to god in times of good fortune and misfortune. When knowledgeable persons misguide or misinform the layman on such occasions, religion which is meant to ensure social order causes tension and strife among the believers of different faiths and atheism and scepticism among youngsters. How do we restore the sanctity of any faith? What is the dharma of religion?

Moral law

The Hindu concept of dharma is a moral law governing individual conduct, designed to maintain a stable society. It is the traditional dharma of the parents to sacrifice and provide for their children, the son to look after his ageing parents, of the brother to safeguard his sisters and husband to provide for his family. A change in gender dynamics has altered this concept of dharma, but the essential tenet of "doing what you are supposed to do" continues. What is the difference between religion and the Hindu concept of dharma? Dharma, which Atharva Veda describes as the oldest customary order, carries with it a comparatively freer, flowing concept which relates to what the individual ought to do in this birth. Dharma does not relate to a divine revelation or faith. Dharma and religion are not the same, though the word dharma is also used to refer to the religious beliefs of a person. Just as an athlete practises his routine religiously, so should any human being do his duty or dharma with religious fervour. Religious reforms have come about due to the realisation that religious sanctity accorded to any kind of discrimination among believers destroys the very fundamentals of godliness. Vegans or vegetarians follow their preferences like a religion. Atheists are passionate about their faith in the non-existence of a superpower.

Divinity within

Swami Vivekananda believed that though religions are divergent in various aspects, they are not contradictory, and are rather supplementary to each other. He defines religion as the realisation of divinity within us and this realisation is the one universal religion. He said, "To devote your life to the good of all and to the happiness of all is religion." Arun Shourie in his book Does He know a Mother's Heart talks of how organised religion often tends to frighten the believer into submission to a "benevolent" god, through a system of praise and penalties. Religion should, in fact, empower people with a sense of confidence that they are capable of fighting their battles independently. The obstacles in life cannot be done away with. Religion should help us to develop the capability to counter them.

MY HISTORY VS YOURS

The parliamentary panel on education has got it all wrong: It is not the job of parliamentarians to instruct historians on how to write history textbooks or teach history. The House panel headed by BJP MP Vinay P Sahasrabuddhe has called for a review of the way freedom fighters have been represented in history textbooks, and suggested that "ancient wisdom from the Vedas" be made part of school textbooks. It has also pitched for "due and proper space to hitherto unknown freedom fighters", "removing distortions about national heroes", better representation of "community-identity-based history" and "equal weightage" to various eras, kingdoms and events. All these suggestions might be, on the face of it, innocuous and well-meaning, but they come up

against vital questions: On what academic basis is the diagnosis of unfair representation being made, and solutions being prescribed? Ideological contestation over the teaching of history is not new in India. All nations and national ideologies draw legitimacy from narratives of the past. But the objective of the historian is not to create simplistic or comfortable nationalistic myths, but to arrive at a richer and complex understanding of the past. Unlike popular misconception, there is no "true" or "bias-free" history that exists out there, waiting to be reclaimed by the exercise of right intentions. Nor is historical research a version of the "my freedom fighter versus yours" contest currently being played in contemporary politics and social media. From the 1960s and 1970s onward, academic history writing has moved away from narratives of "great men" and "great kingdoms" to engage with the histories of ordinary people, to look at history from the prism of gender and caste. There is also a growing body of scholarship on regional histories and kingdoms, though it is true that it has not yet found reflection in textbooks. Questions and contestations over blind spots and exclusions have been a part of history writing, but these are debates which the professional historian — and not the politician looking for fuel for more culture wars — must lead. While several organisations have made depositions before the House panel, it is concerning that the Indian History Congress has opposed the recommendations of the committee, instead arguing for the involvement of "recognised scholars" and "with adequate attention to the academic content, derived from a research-based understanding of different historical periods". Any revision of NCERT or state history textbooks in the future must conform to these basic standards.

MAHARASHTRA EC STAYS POLLS FOR OBC SEATS IN LOCAL BODIES

A day after the Supreme Court scrapped the Maharashtra Government ordinance giving 27% reservation to OBCs in the local body polls, the State Election Commission on Tuesday stayed the election process on seats reserved for OBCs in the local civic bodies that are going to polls on December 21. A total of 106 municipal panchayats, Bhandara and Gondiya zilla parishad and 15 panchayat samitis under these ZP are going for polls on December 21. In addition, bypolls for four municipal corporation seats and 7,130 vacants posts in grampanchayats are also going for polls. State Election Commissioner U.P.S. Madan said that elections on seats reserved for OBCs have been stayed as per the Supreme Court order. "However elections on general seats and those reserved for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe will continue as per the schedule," he said. Elections on 23 seats in Bhandara and Gondiya ZP, 45 seats in panchayat samitis, 344 seats in municipal panchayats and one seat in municipal corporation have been stayed. Meanwhile, Maharashtra Minister and senior OBC leader from Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Chhagan Bhujbal, on Tuesday said that 54% community not getting electoral representation is nothing but injustice.

'Battle will continue'

"The State Government has formed the backward class commission. At a time when census is not being conducted due to the pandemic, collecting empirical data is an herculean task. However the State Government will continue the court battle and we are in constant touch with senior lawyers regarding this," he said.

HOW MPS' QUESTIONS ARE ALLOWED, DISALLOWED

On Tuesday, The Indian Express reported how a question by Congress MP K C Venugopal in Rajya Sabha, scheduled to be answered on December 2, was removed from the list of finally admitted

questions. His question was whether NRIs were harassed at airports and sent back, and some even asked by authorities to stop helping the farmers' agitation. And on Wednesday, BJP MP Subramanian Swamy said a question he had raised was disallowed. "It is hilarious if not tragic for Rajya Sabha Secretariat to inform me today that my Question whether the Chinese have crossed the LAC in Ladakh, cannot be allowed "because of national interest!!!", he tweeted. Over the last few sessions, MPs mainly from the Opposition have often alleged their questions have been disallowed.

How are questions admitted?

In both Houses, elected members enjoy the right to seek information from various ministries and departments in the form of starred questions, unstarred questions, short notice questions and questions to private members. Usually, MPs' questions form a long list, which then go through a rigorous process of clearance. The admissibility of questions in Rajya Sabha is governed by Rules 47-50 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Council of States. Once a question that fulfils the conditions of admissibility is received, the Secretariat sends it to the ministry concerned. Once the facts are received from the ministry, the question is further examined for admissibility. A final list of questions is circulated to ministers, on the basis of which they frame their answers. In Lok Sabha, once the notice for questions is received, ballots determine priority. Starred, unstarred and short notice questions are entered into software, separately. Next, the questions are examined for admissibility under Rules 41-44 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha. For answering the questions, ministries and departments have been divided into five groups (I to V) that have been allotted Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays respectively. The grouping has been done in such a way that each minister has one fixed day in the week for answering questions in Rajya Sabha and another fixed day for answering questions in Lok Sabha.

What are starred, unstarred and other categories of questions?

STARRED QUESTION: The member desires an oral answer from the minister. Such a question is distinguished by the MP with an asterisk. The answer can also be followed by supplementary questions from members.

UNSTARRED QUESTION: The MP seeks a written answer, which is deemed to be laid on the table of the House by the concerned minister.

SHORT NOTICE QUESTION: These are on an urgent matter of public importance, and an oral answer is sought. A notice of less than 10 days is prescribed as the minimum period for asking such a question.

QUESTION TO PRIVATE MEMBER: A question can be addressed to a private member under Rule 40 of Lok Sabha's Rules of Procedure, or under Rule 48 of Rajya Sabha's Rules, provided that the question deals with a subject relating to some Bill, resolution or other matter for which that member is responsible.

When are the questions asked?

In both Houses, the first hour of every sitting is usually devoted to asking and answering of questions, and this is referred to as the 'Question Hour'. The total number of questions for any day is limited to 175, including 15 questions for oral answers, questions postponed from one list to another for written answers, and 15 questions pertaining to states under President's Rule.

What kind of questions can be asked?

Their admissibility is governed by Rules 47-50 (Rajya Sabha) and 41-44 (Lok Sabha). The Rajya Sabha Chairman or the Lok Sabha Speaker has the authority to decide whether a question or a part is or is not admissible under the norms of the House, and disallow any question or a part. In Rajya Sabha, among various norms, the question "shall be pointed, specific and confined to one issue only; it shall not bring in any name or statement not strictly necessary to make the question intelligible; if it contains a statement the member shall make himself responsible for the accuracy of the statement; it shall not contain arguments, inferences, ironical expressions, imputations, epithets or defamatory statements". In Lok Sabha, questions that are not admitted include: those that are repetitive or have been answered previously; and matters that are pending for judgment before any court of law or under consideration before a Parliamentary Committee.

How often are questions disallowed?

According to Rajya Sabha data, 833 questions were disallowed during the last Monsoon Session. For comparison, during the 2013-14 Winter Session, Rajya Sabha disallowed 748 questions. Once disallowed, it is often difficult for members to challenge the decision.During the Monsoon Session this year:

The government moved to disallow a question in Rajya Sabha seeking details on whether the government entered into a contract with Israeli cybersecurity firm NSO Group, at the centre of a global controversy over the misuse of Pegasus to hack multiple phones in India. The government stated the issue is sub judice after "several PILs have been filed in the Supreme Court."

The Centre wrote to the Rajya Sabha secretariat seeking that a "Provisionally Admitted Question" asked by CPI MP Binoy Viswam, scheduled to be answered on August 12, not be allowed. The government cited Rule 47 (xix) that states "it shall not ask for information on matter which is under adjudication by a court of law having jurisdiction in any part of India".

The Ministry of External Affairs requested the Chairman to disallow a question by Trinamool MP Shanta Chhetri on "Indian Position in Democracy Index" — due for a reply on July 22 — on the ground was that the question was sensitive in nature.

"Question were earlier disallowed very rarely; such instances are getting more regular. Many questions are being disallowed whether it is a sub judice matter or a matter of national security… We used to allow questions regularly and only when a serious issue would come up would the government make a request to the Speaker or the Rajya Sabha Chairman," said P D T Acharya, a former Lok Sabha general secretary. "The concerned officials also should give a good reason on why a question should be disallowed… The reason also cannot be accessed through RTIs due to privilege of the House — tough to take it to court as well. Once a question is disallowed, it is disallowed, and there is no way to contest that," he said.

80% OF FUNDS FOR BETI BACHAO WAS SPENT ON MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

The Government spent 80% of the funds under the 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' (BBBP) scheme on media campaigns and must now revisit this strategy and invest in measurable outcomes in health and education for girls, the Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women has noted in its report tabled in the Lok Sabha on Thursday. "The Committee finds that out of a total of ₹446.72 crore released during the period 2016- 2019, a whopping 78.91% was spent only on media advocacy. Over the last six years, through focussed advocacy BBBP has been able to capture the

attention of political leadership and national consciousness towards valuing the girl child. Now, it is time to focus on other verticals by making ample financial provisions to help achieve measurable outcomes related to education and health envisaged under the scheme," it said. The committee is chaired by Heena Vijaykumar Gavit and the report is titled "Empowerment of women through education with special reference to Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao." The scheme was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in January 2015 with the aim to address sex-selective abortion and the declining child sex ratio, which was at 918 girls for every 1,000 boys in 2011. The programme is being implemented across 405 districts. The total utilisation under the scheme was also poor — the committee found that since the inception of BBBP in 2014-15 till 2019-20, the total budgetary allocation under the scheme was ₹848 crore, excluding the COVID-19-stricken financial year of 2020-21. During this period, ₹622.48 crore was released to the States but only 25.13% of the funds, i.e. ₹156.46 crore, had been spent. The committee noted that the massive spend on advertisements was despite the clearly laid-down formula for utilisation of funds – ₹50 lakh a year is earmarked a district for utilisation under six different components. Of this, 16% is for inter-sectoral consultation or capacity-building, 50% for innovation or awareness generation activities, 6% for monitoring and evaluation, 10% for sectoral interventions in health, 10% for sectoral interventions in education and 8% as flexi funds. Advocacy and media campaigns include television publicity, outdoor and print media, SMS campaigns, radio spots and community engagement through exhibition vans.

DON'T USE STATE FORCE ON POLITICAL OPINION

The Supreme Court in an order has said that "state force" should not be used to "browbeat a political opinion" and journalists should not be made to suffer the consequences of reporting on what is already in the public domain. The court observed that the political class across the country should introspect on the "debasement" in dialogue which was taking place. "State force should never be used to either browbeat a political opinion or journalists suffer the consequences of what is already in public domain," a Bench led by Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul stated in an order. The court hastened to add that "this does not take away the responsibility of journalists in how they report matters, more so in a 'Twitter age'." The court order said it could not "let go off the opportunity of saying something which is troubling society and the court. It is undoubtedly the debasement in the dialogue which is taking place which needs introspection from the political class across the country".

Essence of democracy

It noted, "In a country which prides itself on its diversity, there are bound to be different perceptions and opinions which would include political opinions. That is the very essence of a democracy." The Bench stressed that political exchanges may get heated, but should not explode. "No doubt by the very nature of the job required to be performed by the political class, at times their exchanges may get heated. But it should not explode. We are sure difference in perceptions can be expressed in better language." The order came after West Bengal informed the court that it had no objection to the quashing of FIRs registered on the basis of reports in 'OpIndia' portal. 'OpIndia' editor Nupur Sharma and other petitioners had moved the court, saying the FIRs amounted to an abuse of law and suppression of Press freedom. Quashing the FIRs, the court said that what the petitioners had done was to "reproduce what the political class has stated against each other and which is already in public domain". West Bengal's stand to not proceed with the FIRs was "better late than never and should be a model for others to follow".

PINK TURN IN UP

Elections in Uttar Pradesh have revolved around questions of identity, especially since the 1980s when caste and religion began to influence voting preferences. This has facilitated a politics of exclusion, which is manifest in the vituperative campaign rhetoric that often ignores real issues of governance and representation. With assembly elections round the corner, the Congress, which lost its base to the parties of Mandir and Mandal in the 1990s, namely the BJP, BSP and SP, has launched a manifesto for women with the intent to craft a narrative that it hopes will subsume claims made on behalf of caste and faith. The Congress thinks that gender is a compelling identity, one that can overcome the fault lines of caste and religion. The "pink manifesto" is an attempt by the party to cultivate the woman voter by appealing to her gender identity. This is a welcome change, especially in UP where politics has been a prisoner of overtly masculine rhetoric, mobilisation and negative agendas. The Congress is not the first, or the only, political party that has identified the woman voter as a potential game-changer in elections. The Aam Aadmi Party, for instance, has announced in Goa and Punjab, where elections are due soon, that it would pay a monthly honorarium of Rs 1,000 to every woman above the age of 18. Earlier, in Bihar, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar instituted a slew of schemes for girls, including free education and bicycles. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M G Ramachandran and his successor, J Jayalalithaa, were the earliest to spot a gender dimension in the distribution of public goods. In West Bengal, CM Mamata Banerjee has introduced cash transfers for women. These interventions, erroneously branded as poll sops, have improved the quality of life of women, especially the under-privileged. The Congress manifesto has promised reservation for women in jobs, creche facility in government offices, honorarium of Rs 10,000 per month for Asha and Anganwadi workers, 40 per cent reservation for women in MNREGA work, smartphone for girl students of class 12, scooty for those pursuing graduation, residential schools for girls, free public transport, monthly pension of Rs 1,000 for elderly women, 25 per cent reservation in police, incentives for women to run businesses and so on. It is anybody's guess if these promises can influence electoral outcomes immediately, but parties sooner than later will be forced to start a conversation on these issues. Similarly, the Congress has announced that 40 per cent of its candidates would be women. Reservation for women in panchayati raj institutions has started to build pressure at the grass roots for better representation in assemblies and Parliament. These promises may not turn around Congress prospects in UP, but it may influence the election discourse and transform the state in the long run.

A TRAGIC LOSS

India has lost a capable and experienced military leader in the tragic death of the country's first Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), General Bipin Rawat, in a helicopter crash near Coonoor in the Nilgiris on Wednesday. His wife, Madhulika, and 11 others also perished when the Indian Air Force's Mi-17V5 helicopter came down in a heavily wooded area. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has announced in Parliament that a tri-service inquiry, headed by Air Marshal Manvendra Singh, Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Training Command, of the IAF, will take place into the incident. The IAF chief, Air Chief Marshal V.R. Chaudhari, has already visited the crash site; the cockpit voice and flight data recorders have been recovered, which would give investigators insights into how the crash occurred. It is imperative that the inquiry be done both thoroughly and speedily. Without speculating on the cause, it needs to be stressed that speedy course corrections in training or hardware are imperative given that these Mi-17VF choppers are being used to ferry top military leaders across the length and breadth of the country. Gen. Rawat had not even completed two

years as CDS when the Coonoor tragedy happened. After completing his tenure as Army Chief on December 31, 2019, he slipped into his new role as CDS the very next day. Many of his plans to give India genuine tri-service operational capabilities are still to be realised. In such a situation, the Government should not lose time in appointing his successor to ensure that the plans on the drawing board do not suffer. An aggressive China and a still belligerent Pakistan define India's security challenges. The situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) continues to be tense with Indian and Chinese troops staring down each other. Gen. Rawat, known to have been proximate to the ruling establishment, had never minced words while speaking about the challenges facing the country and had waded into political controversies. Though the concept of having a CDS was recommended by a Group of Ministers in 2000 after the Kargil war, it took another 20 years for one to be appointed. The CDS, who functions as Principal Military Adviser to the Defence Minister, is expected to work in tandem with the three service chiefs who continue to operate in their respective domains — a role and function that is still in the making. To ensure that the new CDS and the service chiefs function as a team, the Government would do well to keep in mind the principle of seniority while choosing Gen. Rawat's successor.

THE HELICOPTER CDS GENERAL BIPIN RAWAT WAS IN

The Indian Air Force helicopter that crashed on Wednesday, with Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat and others on board, belonged to the 109 Helicopter Unit, based out of Sulur air base in Tamil Nadu. It was an MI-17 V5 variant, which is one of the latest versions of this Russian-made military transport helicopter available around the world. It belongs to the MI-8/17 family of military helicopters. It has a digital flight data recorder and a cockpit voice recorder on board to monitor flight parameters and cockpit conversations respectively.

What it contains

As per open source information accessed based on the tail number of the helicopter that crashed with Rawat on board, this one was part of the first 2008 contract for 80 MI-17V5 medium lift helicopters. According to aviation expert Angad Singh, the order was later expanded to 150 helicopters that were assembled at the 3 Base Repair Depot, Chandigarh. This particular helicopter has many variants including a 36-seat one for carrying troops, another for carrying cargo transport, and one equipped with an emergency floatation system. A three-member flight crew including pilot, co-pilot and flight engineer fly the helicopter along with a loadmaster. The MI-17 V5 is one of the most modern modifications of the Mi-8/17 helicopter series of Russian origin. The twin-engine, single-rotor-scheme helicopter with a tail rotor has an advanced performance design with a dolphin-type nose, an additional starboard sliding door and a portside widened sliding door. The MI-17 V5 can carry equipment inside the cargo cabin or an external sling, drop tactical air assault teams, and carry the wounded. The armament systems that can be put on the helicopter include unguided rockets, 23 mm cannons and 250 rounds each. It can also be equipped with self-defence system against heat seeker missiles, along with a heavily armoured cockpit, and other features for enhanced survivability. The navigation and electronics display system is on a glass cockpit and shows the helicopter's present position, an electronic terrain map and flight route, in-flight route reprogramming, details of multifunctioning of helicopter systems, flight information storage, on-board data processing etc. The helicopter has the capability to land on unprepared sites at night and in adverse weather conditions. The manufacturer, Kazan Helicopters, claims the helicopter has the ability to land on even on a single-engine configuration in an emergency. The MI-17 V5 has a maximum speed of 250 km per hour and a cruise speed of 230 km per hour. It has a service ceiling of 6,000 metres, and the flight range with its main fuel

tanks is 675 km. With two auxiliary fuel tanks, it can fly up to 1,180 km. It can carry a maximum payload of 4,000 kg. The maximum take-off weight of the helicopter is 13,000 kg.

The Indian fleet

The Indian government had awarded a contract to the Russian manufacturers for 80 MI-17 V5 helicopters, to begin with, in 2008 at a cost of $1.3 billion. Delivery began in 2013. The final batch of helicopters was delivered to the Indian Air Force in 2018. The IAF has set up a repair and overhaul facility for its MI-17V5 helicopters at 3 Base Repair Depot in Chandigarh. This facility was inaugurated in Chandigarh in 2019. The helicopter, which can be used for both transport personnel and cargo, is the mainstay of the Indian Air Force's medium-lift helicopter fleet. Although a fairly new addition, with less than ten years in service in the IAF, the helicopters are considered among the most advanced, and are not prone to accidents. However, in recent years they have had a few close shaves. The last crash was reported less than a month ago on November 18, when a Mi-17v5 crashed in eastern Arunachal Pradesh due to a technical snag. All on board were, however, safe. In February 2019, when India and Pakistan were involved in a dogfight after the air strikes at Balakot by the Indian Air Force, an Mi-17 helicopter of the IAF, which had taken off from Srinagar, was gunned down in friendly fire, killing six airmen on board. Former Air Force Chief Air Chief Marshal R K S Bhadauria called it a "big mistake" and said action had been initiated against two IAF personnel. Apart from India, it is used by the air forces of nearly 50 countries, including Russia and Iraq, and is also part of the erstwhile Afghan Air Force.

When aircraft with armed forces officers crashed

FEB 1952: An IAF Devon aircraft carrying several high-ranking military officers, including two future Army Chiefs, crashed while flying from Lucknow to Delhi; there were no fatalities. Those on board included Lt General S M Shrinages and Maj Gen K S Thimayya, besides Maj Gen S P P Thorat, Maj Gen Sardanand Singh and Brig Ajaib Singh.

NOV 1963: An Alouette III helicopter of the IAF crashed near Poonch in J&K, killing then Western Army Commander Lt Gen Daulat Singh; GOC, 15 Corps, Lt Gen Bikram Singh, GOC, 25 Infantry Division, Maj Gen N K D Nanavati; AOC-in, C Western Air Command, Air Vice Marshal Erlic Pinto; Commander, 93 Infantry, Brigadier SR Oberoi; and the pilot, Flight Lieutenant S S Sodhi.

MAY 1993: An IAF MI-17 helicopter crashed in Bhutan. Eight killed including the then GOC-in-C, Eastern Army Commander, Lt Gen Jameel Mehmood, and his wife and his military assistant.

NOV 1997: A Cheetah helicopter of the Army crashed in Arunachal Pradesh, killing Union Minister of State for Defence N V N Somu, Major General Ramesh Nagpal and two pilots (both majors).

JAN 2001: Brigadier Raman Sehgal and five others were killed when an Army helicopter crashed near Vaishno Devi Shrine.

OCT 2019: An Army helicopter with the then Northern Army Commander, Lt Gen Ranbir Singh, crashed near Poonch shortly after take-off. The occupants suffered injuries.

WHAT IS AFSPA, AND WHY ARE STATES IN NORTHEAST AGAINST IT?

The Nagaland Cabinet on Tuesday recommended that the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958 be repealed from the state after the incident in Mon district in which security forces gunned down 13 civilians. This has been a long-standing demand in the North eastern states. After

the firing, Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio and Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma have both called for repeal of AFSPA. Nagaland leaders feel the killings have the potential to create mistrust in the Indian government and derail the peace process currently underway between the Centre and the Naga insurgents groups.

What is AFSPA?

The Act in its original form was promulgated by the British in response to the Quit India movement in 1942. After Independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru decided to retain the Act, which was first brought in as an ordnance and then notified as an Act in 1958. AFSPA has been imposed on the Northeast states, Jammu & Kashmir, and Punjab during the militancy years. Punjab was the first state from where it was repealed, followed by Tripura and Meghalaya. It remains in force in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, J&K, and parts of Arunachal Pradesh. AFSPA provides for special powers for the armed forces that can be imposed by the Centre or the Governor of a state, on the state or parts of it, after it is declared "disturbed'' under Section 3. The Act defines these as areas that are "disturbed or dangerous condition that the use of armed forces in aid of the civil power is necessary''. AFSPA has been used in areas where militancy has been prevalent. The Act, which has been called draconian, gives sweeping powers to the armed forces. It allows them to open fire', even causing death, against any person in contravention to the law or carrying arms and ammunition. It gives them powers to arrest individuals without warrants, on the basis of "reasonable suspicion", and also search premises without warrants. The Act further provides blanket impunity to security personnel involved in such operations: There can be no prosecution or legal proceedings against them without the prior approval of the Centre.

Are there safety nets?

While the Act gives powers to security forces to open fire, this cannot be done without prior warning given to the suspect. In the Mon firing, it has been an issue of discussion whether the security forces gave prior warning before opening fire at the vehicle carrying coal miners, and then later at a violent mob. The Act further says that after any suspects apprehended by security forces should be handed over to the local police station within 24 hours. It says armed forces must act in cooperation with the district administration and not as an independent body. In the Mon operation, local law-enforcement agencies have said they were unaware of the operation.

What attempts have been made to repeal AFSPA in the past?

In 2000, Manipur activist Irom Sharmila began a hunger-strike, which would continue for 16 years, against AFSPA. In 2004, the UPA government set up a five-member committee under a former Supreme Court Judge. The Justice Jeevan Reddy Commission submitted its report in 2005, saying AFSPA had become a symbol of oppression and recommending its repeal. The Second Administrative Reforms Commission, headed by Veeerapa Moily, endorsed these recommendations. Former Home Secretary G K Pillai too supported the repeal of AFSPA, and former Home Minister P Chidambaram once said the Act, if not repealed, should at least be amended. But opposition from the Defence Ministry stalled any possible decision. The UPA set up a cabinet sub-committee to continue looking into the matter. The NDA government subsequently dropped the sub-committee and also rejected the findings of the Reddy Commission.

How often have state governments opposed it?

While the Act empowers the Centre to unilaterally take a decision to impose AFSPA, this is usually done informally in consonance with the state government. The Centre can take a decision to repeal

AFSPA after getting a recommendation from the state government. However, Nagaland, which has freshly recommended a repeal, had raised the demand earlier too, without success. The Centre had also imposed AFSPA in Tripura in 1972 despite opposition from the then state government. In Manipur, former Congress Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh had told The Indian Express in 2012 that he was opposed to the repeal of AFSPA in light of the dangerous law and order situation. Many politicians have built their careers on an anti-AFSPA stance, including incumbent Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh, who contested his first election in 2002 in order to "fight AFSPA" after 10 civilians had been gunned down by the 8th Assam Rifles at Malom Makha Leikai in 2000.

What has been the social fallout?

Nagaland and Mizoram faced the brunt of AFSPA in the 1950s, including air raids and bombings by the Indian military. Allegations have been made against security forces of mass killings and rape. It is in Manipur that the fallout has been perhaps best documented. The Malom massacre in 2000, and the killing and alleged rape of Thangjam Manorama led to the subsequent repeal of AFSPA from the Imphal municipal area. Human rights activists have said the Act has often been used to settle private scores, such as property disputes, with false tip-offs provided by local informants to security forces.

Have these excesses been probed?

In 2012, the Extrajudicial Execution Victim Families Association of Manipur filed a case in the Supreme Court alleging 1,528 fake encounters between 1979 and 2012. Activists said these peaked in 2008-09. The Supreme Court set up a three-member committee under former judge Santosh Hegde and including former Chief Election Commissioner J M Lyngdoh and former Karnataka DGP Ajay Kumar Singh. The committee investigated six cases of alleged fake encounters, including the 2009 killing of 12-year-old Azad Khan, and submitted a report with the finding that all six were fake encounters. The Court set up a special investigation team that included five CBI officials and one National Human Rights Commission member. The CBI booked Army Major Vijay Singh Balhara in Khan's death in 2018, but there has been no prosecution against security forces in other cases. Activists note that AFSPA creates an atmosphere of impunity among even state agencies such as the Manipur Police and their Manipur Commandos, believed to be responsible for most encounters in the state, some of them jointly with Assam Rifles. The SIT has investigated 39 cases involving deaths of 85 civilians so far, and filed the final reports in 32 cases. While 100 Manipur police personnel have been indicted, no action has been taken against Assam Rifles personnel with the exception of the Khan killing.

NAGA TALKS: WHAT HAS CAUSED THE STALEMATE SO FAR, AND WHAT IMPACT CAN KILLINGS HAVE?

The killing of over a dozen civilians in a botched Indian Army operation in Mon district of Nagaland on Saturday is likely to have an impact on an already tottering Naga peace process. The key Naga group negotiating with the Centre, NSCN(I-M), has declared it a "black day" for all Nagas and termed the incident "unprecedented in recent history", while the Naga National Political Group (NNPG) has blamed the continued implementation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958 for such incidents.

What is the status of the Naga talks?

While a significant number of Naga groups say the talks have concluded and only finer details are being worked out, the NSCN(I-M) has said an accord cannot happen until the Centre accepts Naga people's demand for a separate constitution and flag. The Centre has said it is in no position to grant these. The NSCN(I-M) has rejected all alternatives— such as cultural flag instead of a national flag and dealing with issues of a constitution after signing the agreement —suggested by the Centre's points-person, former Intelligence Bureau Special Director Akshay Mishra. A month ago, the NSCN(I-M) said in a statement: "Ironically, the Government of India is still pretentiously acting stubborn as the crucial rounds of talks that focused on the Naga flag and the Constitution is driven to hang in balance. The stalemate created is unfortunate." Now the Centre, which had in 2015 announced that the talks had concluded with the signing of a Framework Agreement (FA), sources say, is uncertain when a final deal can be achieved.

How will the killings impact the talks?

Given the public anger against the killings, sources said it has the potential to revive the narrative of India versus the Naga people. "People in these parts quote operations of the 1950s and '60s to articulate perceived atrocities by the Indian state. So, imagine what a fresh incident can do," a senior Nagaland official said. Sources said the killings could be exploited by certain insurgent groups to recruit and even strengthen the hands of the NSCN(I-M), which will likely push for its demands with greater vigour given that the government is on the back foot. Even groups seen being in favour of signing the deal quickly will have to reflect the public anger to remain relevant, sources said. The NNPG, which comprises seven insurgent groups that have so far supported the peace talks process, rescinding many of its earlier demands such as separate flag, said in a statement that the actions of the military have "belittled the commitments made by the Indian Prime Minister and Home Minister". It said, "The draconian laws in Nagaland and military atrocities over many decades have made Naga people very aware that they are not and will never be Indians."

Why is there a stalemate despite the FA?

Sources say the FA itself is turning out to be the biggest roadblock before a final deal. Government officials say the wordings are so vague that both sides have interpreted them according to their own convenience. The NSCN(I-M) has argued that the FA is clear that India and Nagaland would share "sovereign power" and coexist as "two entities". This, it has argued, is affirmation that India accepts the desire of Naga people for sovereignty and staying within India as a separate entity. It has said this simply means India had agreed to a separate flag and constitution for Nagaland. The Centre has said there is no question of granting sovereignty to a state within India and so both the flag and the constitution are out of the question.

What does the FA say?

About the dialogues held since the 1997 ceasefire agreement between the Centre and the NSCN(I-M), it says, "The GoI-NSCN dialogue led to a better mutual understanding. While the GoI, in expression of the understanding recognised the unique history and position of the Nagas, the NSCN understood and appreciated the intricacies of the Indian system... "Both sides... are cognizant of the universal principle that in a democracy sovereignty lies with the people. Accordingly, the government of India and the NSCN, respecting people's wishes for sharing sovereign power as defined in the competencies, reached an agreement on the 3rd August, 2015

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as an honourable solution. …It will provide for an enduring inclusive new relationship of peaceful co-existence of the two entities."

What is the problem with the FA?

Sources said the FA did not clearly spell out how much political space the Centre was willing to cede or not cede for Naga self-determination. They said phrases such as "unique history and position", "sovereignty lies with the people", "sharing sovereign power", and "peaceful coexistence of the two entities" were open to interpretation by both sides. The NSCN(I-M) has argued that references to sharing sovereignty and coexistence as two entities simply mean that Nagaland would remain a sovereign within India with its own constitution and flag. While the Centre has never articulated its interpretation, former Naga talks interlocutor said last year that NSCN(I-M)'s interpretation was "preposterous lies" and that the Centre has "never ever talked, much less negotiated" on territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country with anyone. NSCN(I-M) last year accused Ravi of "craftily" tweaking the FA by removing the word "new" from "enduring inclusive new relationship". It made the FA public. "The FA is so poorly drafted that it leaves the Centre with very little space to spell out what it can't give. It reads like an agreement between two hostile nations where they keep the wordings so vague that no promise made or understanding reached appears final. Had there been no FA, probably, we would have had a deal by now," a senior government official said. Sources said the signing of the FA also established NSCN(I-M) as the main group negotiating with the government in letter, leaving other Naga groups — which Ravi tried to engage with later — lower in the hierarchy.

Why was such an FA drafted?

Government sources say the wording, however poor, was informed by the politics of 2015. "Flag and constitution were not such touchy issues as a state with precisely these rights (Jammu & Kashmir) existed then. It may be argued though that those drafting it should have pondered over the ruling party's ideological position on Kashmir even then and advised the political top brass accordingly. Now, after the decisions of August 5, 2019 on Jammu and Kashmir, these issues have become non-negotiable," another government official said. Sources said, in fact, oral assurances of Naga flag and "unique space" in the Indian Constitution had been made to the NSCN(I-M) during negotiations before August 5, 2019.

What is the road ahead?

The Centre would have to assuage public anger arising out of the Saturday's killings through an impartial and quick probe, followed by action on those responsible. Home Minister Amit Shah on Monday announced in Parliament that a Special Investigation Team has been instituted by the state government. Only after the government can convince people that it means well, despite the killings, can the Centre can resume discussions, sources said. "The pitch has been queered. Now the only solution is for the government to clearly declare what it cannot give and then ask NSCN(I-M) to negotiate on other issues," a senior official from Nagaland said.

BASKING IN REFLECTED GLORY

"Wow!" I said when news flashed that one more Indian, Parag Agrawal, from one of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) had been appointed the CEO of Twitter, a global technology behemoth that is shaping opinions, politics and the lives of people around the world. Is this a cause

for joy? Did the hearts of Indians swell with pride? Indeed. Which parent won't rejoice at such an achievement? Is there any alma mater which will not be proud of students like Mr. Agrawal?

A mass exodus

Yet, there was something troubling, a vague disquiet about this achievement. Can India rightfully bask in the reflected glory of those who left its shores and rose to the very pinnacle of their profession in a foreign land? Is this not the U.S.'s achievement? Is it not the fertile ecosystem of the U.S. that helps spot talent and allows people to rise to the top? The U.S. has its dark spots but it holds a promise to millions, even penniless immigrants, that they can achieve their wildest dreams if they reach there. It is this America of opportunities that has beckoned millions of migrants over two centuries — not just Indians but people from every nook and corner of the world. Mr. Agrawal's journey has been similar to that of many Indians before him who we have admired over the years. Many CEOs are from the IITs and other well-known engineering colleges. After graduation, they headed to the U.S. and graduated from great universities like Harvard, MIT, Stanford, and Cornell. Indra Nooyi (PepsiCo), Sundar Pichai (Alphabet and Google), Satya Nadella (Microsoft), Arvind Krishna (IBM), Ivan Menezes (Diageo), Vasant Narasimhan (Novartis), Punit Renjen (Deloitte) and Ajay Banga (Mastercard) are some of those who rose to the pinnacle of their companies. There are thousands of successful techies in smaller companies who also migrated to lead a gilded life. Technology dominates our business and life. Those who lead tech companies are the new rock stars and demigods of the modern world. They have eclipsed the old-world magnates of steel, oil, and automobiles — men like Paul Getty, Andrew Carnegie and Henry Ford. But there are also other Indian migrants who have distinguished themselves in the U.S. in the fields of management education, science, medicine, and economics, among others. The number of leading physicians in medical schools and hospitals, investment bankers, and professors in academia boggles the mind. But the loftiest stars among them are the Indian-origin Nobel Laureates in physics, chemistry, medicine and economics who pursued their higher education in the U.S. and settled there. The troubling question is, why do our brightest minds fly to the West soon after graduation and mostly to the U.S.? The exodus from our premier institutions started in the late-1960s when private sector companies were few and there were few good jobs available in staid public sector undertakings. The government provided only a few hundred coveted positions each year in the Indian Foreign Service, Indian Administrative Service, and Indian Police Service. The rest joined revenue and allied services and lower-level grades which offered security and sinecure. The exodus continues. Even as we fellow Indians feel a sense of pride at the prosperity of the Indian community in the U.S., we cannot but help feel a tinge of sadness too. India, even after over seven decades of independence, is mired in poverty and inequality while our most gifted head for the West. When Non-Resident Indians — accomplished economists, scientists or CEOs — lecture India on what it should do to become a developed economy or how it should achieve equitable growth to alleviate poverty, there is a widespread feeling that they have lost their rights to give us such advice, even if it is sincere and well-intended, as they don't live here. We who live here have to fight our battles and our injustice and make India a better place.

An insecure diaspora

But there is another lot of Indians too, millions of ordinary ones, largely in the U.S., who, cut off from their moorings and culture, turn inwards by building temples and forming regional as well as religious associations. This is an insecure diaspora which is not fully assimilated into the adopted westernised society and also alienated from its Indian roots. These NRIs have become more and more jingoistic and find false pride in spreading fake messages about ancient Hindu mythology — messages that Indians invented plastic surgery or rocketry or airplanes much before

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the West — and exhorting Hindus in India to be proud of their heritage and religion and guard against becoming a minority in their own nation. In doing so, they forget that they themselves are a minority in an alien land. At times like this, we feel a tinge of shame. Seshadri Kumar, an IIT graduate from Bombay, with an MTech and PhD from the U.S., who returned to India, wrote recently in The Wire that it is not surprising that a "dozen of the top CEOs in the world come from a country with 18% of the world's population." He wrote: "So forgive me if I don't join the celebrations. But you know who should really be proud. The Chinese. Because Chinese people did not need to go to the U.S. to rise to the top. They were able to create success stories for themselves sitting in China. And unlike Indians, who are merely CEOs of companies founded by Americans, like Google, Microsoft and Twitter, the Chinese entrepreneurs founded world beating companies in China – Alibaba, Tencent, Didi, Xiaomi, Great Wall Motors, Huawei, ZTE, Foxconn and many others. When Indians do that, I'll join the party." That should wake up policymakers. What is India doing wrong? The greater glory is not in training engineers to become CEOs in the U.S. but in enabling a conducive ecosystem in India that creates world-beating companies and in building institutions that can produce Nobel Laureates. How can India create a climate that will prevent its best minds from going to foreign lands? The U.S., a nation of immigrants, is a capitalist, market-driven democracy. China is a communist country that has embraced capitalism along with authoritarianism and snuffed out freedom. Both have built a great economy and eliminated poverty. Which of these should India emulate? How can it progress while preserving its diversity and vibrant democracy? Should we not feel remorse that we have failed our youth who do not see a future here and fly to the U.S. after graduation? Shouldn't we reflect about our own migrants and minorities and about their status in our society? Perhaps India is poor not because of a lack of resources or want of talent but because of its policies, polity and politics.

AN INNOVATION THAT CAN BETTER PROTECT POWER GRIDS

Researchers from Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur have come up with an innovation that can help protect power grids against sudden, unexpected current surges. An innovative variation of the superconducting fault current limiter (SFCL), this smart SFCL not only shields the grid from large current surges and consequent fire accidents, it can also sense when the current surges will happen and warn the system about it. Power grids need protection from sudden surges in the current (fault current) that arise due to short-circuits, sudden overdrawing of power or excess power generated due to a falling demand. These surges cause heating of the wires and perhaps melting and consequent short-circuits and fire accidents. Earlier this used to be controlled by using circuit breakers, which would cut off the current in the event of a surge. These suffered from the limitation that if the response time to the current surge was too large, they would fail to be effective. Also, once the circuit was broken to avert the accident, the switch had to be manually turned on once again, and this could lead to longer power cuts.

Using superconductors

In the last decade, mainly in developed countries, a new way to tackle this situation is being explored – using superconducting fault current limiters (SFCL). This device uses a superconductor, which allows a dissipationless passage of current under normal circumstances, as it offers zero resistance to current flow in the superconducting state. However, if the current flowing through it increases beyond a threshold value, as during a fault, its resistance increases sharply. "The operation of a SFCL is very rapid and automatic. Once the fault current reduces and the current flow returns to below the threshold value, the resistance of the SFCL also automatically goes down to zero," explains Satyajit Banerjee, Professor from the Department of

Physics at IIT Kanpur and an expert on superconductivity. Over a period of about three years, Prof. Banerjee and his PhD scholars have developed this "smart" SFCL device which deploys an array of Hall sensors around a basic SFCL. The array of Hall sensors placed around the SFCL constantly "measure and monitor as well as map" the current flowing inside the superconductor. "This sensor circuitry we have incorporated also serves the purpose of monitoring the current flow in the SFCL, which, in turn can be used to detect the initial stages of the current surge during the appearance of a fault," says Prof Banerjee. He further explains that this can help the detection of a fault situation even while it is developing and therefore, before the large surge fully sets in, one can take pre-emptive action to intentionally switch the SFCL into a high resistive state and limit the increase in fault current and also divert the excess current through a lower resistance path. There is also another aspect of smartness to the device. All SFCLs are susceptible to internal thermal instabilities. The prototype they have developed is able to sense this too. This is an added advantage.

Lower cost

The imported SFCL devices cost around a million Euros. The prototype "smart" SFCL developed by Prof. Banerjee's group cuts this cost by 50%-60%. However, he is not at the moment thinking of taking this to the industry. "Scaling up of these technologies cannot be a one man show... Such a thing can happen only with a match of efforts from the Industry and innovations by the academia. The future of the innovation is that it has to be implemented with current state-of-the-art developments in SFCLs to make them more powerful," he opines.

Handling larger currents

Some interesting further innovations that his group is aiming for are in developing high temperature superconducting materials which have larger critical currents, as this will allow the SFCL to operate up to higher currents. "Another important area in this direction is to use our sensor array to enhance its sensitivity further so that we can pinpoint the location of a instability developing in the superconductor in space and time and study its evolution," says Prof. Banerjee. Though this is a challenging area and a "non-trivial task," it is absolutely essential in order to develop more reliable, intelligent and efficient SFCLs.

NOD FOR KEN-BETWA LINK PROJECT

The Union Cabinet on Wednesday approved the funding and implementation of the Ken-Betwa river interlinking project at a cost of ₹44,605 crore at the 2020-21 price level. The Centre would fund ₹39,317 crore for the project, with ₹36,290 crore as a grant and ₹3,027 crore as a loan. The project involves transferring of water from the Ken river to the Betwa river through the construction of Daudhan dam and a canal linking the two rivers, the Lower Orr Project, Kotha Barrage and the Bina Complex Multipurpose Project. The project is slated to irrigate 10.62 lakh hectares annually, provide drinking water supply to 62 lakh people and generate 103 MW of hydropower and 27 MW of solar power. The project is proposed to be completed in eight years. "The project will be of immense benefit to the water-starved Bundelkhand region, spread across Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. This project will provide enormous benefits to the districts of Panna, Tikamgarh, Chhatarpur, Sagar, Damoh, Datia, Vidisha, Shivpuri and Raisen of Madhya Pradesh, and Banda, Mahoba, Jhansi and Lalitpur of Uttar Pradesh," a statement noted. "The project is expected to boost socio-economic prosperity in the backward Bundelkhand region on account of increased agricultural activities and employment generation. It would also help in arresting distress migration from this region," it said.

Many hurdles

Several obstacles have dogged the project. For one, the project will partly submerge the Panna Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh and affect the habitat of vultures and jackals. After years of protests, it was finally cleared by the apex wildlife regulator, the National Board for Wildlife, in 2016. Then Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh reached an agreement on how water would be shared in March.

SURVEILLANCE AS GOVERNANCE

In many public places in Hyderabad, there are signboards that read: 'Big boss is watching you'. It is unclear what this implies: whether it is a warning from the state that people must abide by the law or an assurance that the citizenry is safe under the watch of the state or an ominous message that the movements of citizens are constantly being monitored. While there have been protests in Hyderabad against surveillance and in support of the right to privacy, it was only after Amnesty International raised concerns that "extensive surveillance of Hyderabad is putting human rights at risk" that surveillance was brought to the fore. Surveillance in Hyderabad largely follows a three-pronged approach: there is a wide web of CCTV cameras, facial recognition technology, and cordon and search operations. Amnesty, the Internet Freedom Foundation and Article 19 mapped the CCTV coverage in Kala Pathar and Kishan Bagh, neighbourhoods of the Old City, and found that as much as 53.7% of Kala Pathar and 62.7% of Kishan Bagh was covered by private and government-maintained CCTV cameras. It is pertinent to point out that Telangana's Nenu Saitham project aims to transform the Hyderabad City Police into a Global City Police. To help achieve this aim, the public has been encouraged to install CCTV cameras and share footage when required. Outcomes of this project include preventing crime and monitoring 'high-risk areas'. Further, the construction of a Command and Control Centre, Amnesty International says, has the capability to support the processing of 6 lakh CCTV cameras from the tri-commissionerates. Amnesty says facial recognition technologies can bring under a cloud the right to peaceful assembly as they can act as a tool of mass surveillance and pose a risk to disadvantaged communities. Two cases of the alleged violation of privacy by the police were reported recently. S.Q. Masood, an activist, said the police stopped him during the lockdown, instructed him to remove his mask and clicked photos of him. Similarly, during a crackdown against ganja, the Telangana Prohibition and Excise Department teams checked the phones of people to verify if the word 'ganja' was used in their chats. Following these incidents, Srinivas Kodali, another city-based activist, sent a legal notice to the Hyderabad City Police Commissioner seeking an immediate end to surveillance activities. These incidents underscore crucial issues: the need for a data protection law and the concept of informed consent. Cordon and search operations have been gaining momentum in Telangana. A fact-finding team from Hyderabad which probed cordon and search operations in some areas recently underscored the vulnerability of residents. The team stated that cordon and search operations project such areas as "criminal areas", target "lower rungs of society, and are an infringement of privacy". Another lesser-known facet of policing and surveillance is Operation Chabutra. Chabutra is a raised surface outside houses where people gather for social interactions. The police say they have stopped and "counselled" youths who were whiling away the hours. They have done this even when no prohibitory orders were in force. The police maintain that they are well within the provisions of the law to embark on such operations. In some cases, they say, they act on specific inputs and complaints of nuisance from locals. While upkeep of law and order is paramount, the right to privacy and informed consent cannot be compromised; they need to be protected by a law that defines the limits of use of citizen's data by the state. The unequal power

dynamic between security agencies and the common man who has no choice but to comply cannot be ignored.

BEING FREE OF OLD

The recently released Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) 2.0 guidelines continue to take forward the aims of the SBM launched in 2014, but add an important dimension focused on solid waste management. This goes beyond the efficient collection and transportation of waste and brings focus on processing all types of waste like plastic, construction and demolition waste, as well as providing budgetary support for remediating old waste disposed in all dumpsites across 4,372 cities in India before March 2023. Its components include source segregation; door-to-door collection of waste; separate transportation of different types of wastes; processing of wet waste, dry waste, and construction and demolition waste. Urban local bodies (ULBs) in several States had prepared detailed project reports (DPRs) for setting up waste processing systems for wet and dry waste as part of SBM which were approved, but the process of setting up these facilities was delayed due to lack of funding and techno process knowledge, and delayed DPR approvals. This resulted in unprocessed waste being dumped in several sites, which needs to be processed through bioremediation before space can be created for new waste processing plants. Bioremediation of old waste is the process of dismantling old waste heaps, sieving the material to recover bio earth (enriched soil) and refuse-derived fuel which can be used as heating material in cement kilns. As per the SBM 2.0 guidelines, the total quantity of waste generated by urban areas in India is about 1.32 lakh tonnes daily. This adds up to 4.8 crore tonnes per annum. Of this only about 25% is being processed; the rest is disposed of in landfills every year. Given that the waste dumpsites have been operational since the early 2000s, more than 72 crore tonnes of waste need to be processed. In Karnataka, all the 200-plus municipalities had planned to take up bioremediation over the last two years, but the projects did not kick off due to lack of funds. This is where SBM 2.0 could be an important intervention.

Funding from SBM 2.0

The total funding dedicated for implementation of SBM 2.0 is ₹1.41 lakh crore of which about ₹39,837 crore is set aside for solid waste management. This mission commits to providing financial assistance to set up fresh waste processing facilities and bioremediation projects across all the ULBs. Financial assistance to to set up construction and demolition waste processing facilities is limited to a chosen 154 large cities such as Bengaluru, Mysore, Davanagere, Hubli, and Kalaburagi which have a population of over 5 lakh. The financial assistance committed by the mission varies by State. The commitments made by the Government of India (GoI) for solid waste management projects are as follows: 90% for ULBs in the Northeastern and Himalayan States; 100% for ULBs in Union Territories without legislature; 80% for ULBs in Union Territories with legislature; 25% for other ULBs with more than 10 lakh population; 33% for other ULBs with more than 1 lakh but less than 10 lakh population; 50% for other ULBs with less than 1 lakh population. The remaining project cost will be paid from the 15th Finance Commission grants. SBM was providing 35% funding from the GoI irrespective of the population size of cities. About 23.3% of the project cost was funded by the State governments and the remaining 41.6% was to be funded by the ULBs. The funding was provided to buy efficient vehicles for door-to-door collection and transportation of waste, provide bins for segregation of waste at source, and set up waste processing facilities. SBM 2.0 allocates funding only to set up waste processing facilities; requests for buying vehicles for collection of waste, issuing bins for source segregation or modernising the collection and transportation system are not in its scope.

Achieving the target

Lack of funds was one of the main reasons for the partial success of SBM in solid waste management. Now, since SBM 2.0 is committing to paying a significant portion of the project cost, the ULBs are likely to take up projects by matching the shortfall with their reserved funds, thereby hoping to achieve the GoI target of waste disposal sites being free from old waste by March 2023. Also, the transformation of waste disposal sites to processing sites is likely to produce 72 lakh tonnes of organic compost per annum from 4.8 crore tonnes of waste generated across all ULBs in the country. Organic compost recovered from the wet waste, which is 60% of the total waste, can be used to enrich the soil quality and can meet about 10-12% of the country's fertilizer demand. That will reduce the amount of chemical fertilizer imported and save about ₹2,600 crore of subsidy paid by the government.

FAKE ENTRIES MAR T.N. DATA ON VACCINATION

Several fake entries have crept into the COVID-19 vaccination data in Tamil Nadu. The reason, according to healthcare professionals and workers, is "unrealistic vaccination targets" that resulted in "undue pressure", forcing them to make fake entries. Reliable sources in the Health Department said in some instances, multiple identity cards of individuals, readily available line list with mobile numbers that include even deceased individuals, were utilised to make entries on the CoWIN portal. In some cases, database of mobile numbers not in use for a long time were obtained and made use of. Complaints of wrong entries have been surfacing in many parts of the State of late. In one instance, the mobile number of an unvaccinated senior citizen in Chennai received two text messages in October, months after he had died, stating that two different individuals were vaccinated with the first dose of Covishield. More recently, a Government employee, who was fully vaccinated many months ago, was surprised when he received three SMS in a span of two to three minutes notifying that three persons had been vaccinated — one of receiving the first dose, while two others were fully vaccinated — using his phone number. "Fake entries are a real problem. The pressure to achieve unrealistic daily targets has left many in a pathetic situation. For instance, a primary health centre is given a daily target of 250 doses. But they are able to convince only 75 to 80 persons to get vaccinated. So, they get identity cards from individuals or the line list of persons and make fake entries. What is needed is not unrealistic targets but a scientific approach to encourage people to get vaccinated," an official source in the Health Department said. A health official pointed out that many healthcare workers were under severe stress. "The field-level staff are being humiliated during door-to-door vaccination drives. The remaining unvaccinated are a highly reluctant population and we need different kinds of measures to reach out to them," he said. In the light of complaints on fake/false certificates for COVID-19 vaccination, Director of Public Health and Preventive Medicine T.S. Selvavinayagam issued a circular to all deputy directors of health services, saying any violations or lapses would be viewed seriously.

MODI, AMITABH ON BIHAR'S LIST OF VACCINATED

Days after the Bihar Government claimed to have vaccinated more than eight crore people in the State, the names of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah and actors Amitabh Bachchan, Priyanka Chopra, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan and others have cropped up on the list of those either fully vaccinated or have undergone RT-PCR tests in Arwal district. "The fake entries are on the list from an additional primary health centre under the Karpi police station. A probe was ordered, and two data operators were sacked," a senior State Health Department official told

The Hindu. In Arwal, the district administration sacked data operators Pravin Kumar and Vinay Kumar for the irregularities. Apart from the Prime Minister and Bollywood actors, sources in the Health Department said names of more than a dozen politicians from both the State and the Centre were found in the list. However, Mr. Pravin Kumar told a local news channel that they had been working under tremendous pressure to enter the names that they were provided with. "We were told to enter names of those in the list provided to us by our manager. We were supposed to make entries into the computer but when the irregularity surfaced, only the two of us are sacked," he said. His colleague at Sahar Telpa APHC, Vinay Kumar, said the two were made scapegoats. "Such things happen when the Government announces to have administered over 33 lakh vaccine doses on a single day on September 17, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's birthday. Such glaring irregularities are bound to happen," said Shakeel, who heads the Bihar-based Centre for Health and Resource Management, a civil society organisation for providing medical assistance to those in need. Dr. Shakeel had earlier raised doubts over the number of doses claimed to have been administered by the Government under its mega Tikaa Abhiyan (vaccination programme) on September 17, saying it could be a "case of data manipulation, misuse of resources and mismanagement to beat drums of achievement". Earlier this year, hundreds of fake entries had cropped up in the list of those allegedly tested for COVID-19 at primary health centres in Bihar, causing major embarrassment for the Health Department. Then, too, some data operators were sacked for entering fake names and details. Several people have also complained that they have received incorrect vaccination messages. In some cases, the messages were issued in the names of even deceased persons.

THE WAY TO TACKLE MALNUTRITION

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 shows negligible gains in nutritional outcomes among under-five children. There has been tardy progress in reducing undernutrition, wasting and stunting. It is a national shame that even now, 35.5% of under-five children are stunted and 19.3% are wasted. Childhood anaemia has worsened from NFHS-4. Anaemia among adolescent girls and women aged 15-49 has also worsened. Though institutional delivery has gone up, early initiation of breastfeeding is static. If we are serious about a healthy new generation, we must ensure proper nutrition and growth. While we need to monitor data for programmatic evaluation and correction, the question is, what type of data do we need to help starving children? Is it data on how much food is supplied, served and consumed or data on what went wrong and the prevalence of weight loss and growth stagnation? Do we need output or impact data or input and process data with their quality parameters? We need to monitor the input and process indicators. That is how we can rectify past mistakes. Data generated quickly can lead to mid-course corrections. Data-driven planning and strategies lead to good governance with accountability.

The way forward

So, what can we do? After monitoring the successful initiation of breastfeeding in the hospital, anganwadi workers, ASHA workers and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives must continue to monitor exclusive breastfeeding till the infant is six months old. Then they must record the timely initiation of complementary feeding with soft gruel. If this step is missed, growth faltering starts. And this is the critical period of growth that we cannot afford to compromise on. We must also ensure that there is take-home ration for under-three children through the regular supply of supplementary nutrition from the Integrated Child Development Services. We also need to know whether anganwadis are intermittently closed without any valid reason; whether the supervisors are erratic in field monitoring; how we can capture the regularity and quantity of dry rations supplied

to anganwadi centres and schools for mid-day meals; whether there is live web-based centrally monitorable data on the movement of dry rations to anganwadis and schools; whether parents and teachers can monitor the serving of hot, cooked meals; whether self-help groups of women are involved in preparing the menu and procuring locally available vegetables, grains and millets to ensure dietary diversification and whether eggs are being denied or stopped for sociopolitical reasons. What goes into the family pot is also important. This depends on what parents can earn, and their purchasing capacity. So, it is important to monitor the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme workdays as well as the wages earned in areas where droughts frequently recur; where there is mass migration; and where there is prevalence of high malnutrition. The National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau was shut down some years ago. So, we don't know what families can afford to cook and what they are cooking.

Monitoring PDS

Real-time monitoring of the Public Distribution System (PDS) will go a long way in ensuring food at the family level. Except in a few States where web-based portals are functioning, there is no monitoring of when PDS shops are open as well as the quantity and quality of dry rations supplied. Unfortunately, PDS is a hunger-mitigation mechanism; it does not enable nutrition security. The aim of the National Food Security Act of 2013 is to ensure that nobody goes to bed hungry and there is no starvation. The PDS is focused on procuring wheat and rice through the Food Corporation of India to distribute to families. Cereals fill the stomach and hunger is averted, but not malnutrition. There seems to be an aversion to facts and to reality that demands immediate action. Many established surveys seem to have methodological errors. The Consumer Expenditure Survey results of 2017-18, for instance, were withheld. Both Poshan Abhiyan and the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana need to be monitored with the help of the community to ensure sustainable nutrition security. Little of what is happening in the field right now reaches programme managers and policymakers for timely action. So, what is the point of crying over spilt milk? Malnourished children do not need repeated surveys that confirm our apathy and heartless inaction.

THE NEED TO REOPEN ANGANWADIS

Being closed since the April 2020-lockdown, anganwadis are slowly reopening. Those in Karnataka, Bihar and Tamil Nadu are opening or considering opening shortly. As part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), anganwadis play a crucial role in supporting households, particularly from low-income families, by providing childcare, health and nutrition, education, supplementary nutrition, immunisation, health check-up and referral services. The largest in the world, ICDS covers about 88 million children aged 0-6 years in India. Their closure significantly impacted service delivery and weakened an important social safety net.

Source of crucial support

Surveys by IDinsight across five States in November 2018 and November 2019 found that anganwadi workers were a primary source of nutrition information for families. Even as anganwadis resumed services, the closure has impacted their ability to serve as childcare centres. According to National Family Health Service (NFHS)-5 data, in 2019-20, less than 15% of five-year-olds attended any pre-primary school at all. A recent study estimates that the time women spend on unpaid work may have increased by 30% during the pandemic. In our COVID-19 rural household surveys across eight States, 58% of women cited home-schooling as the biggest contributor to increase in unpaid work. Sending younger children to anganwadis will free up

women's time, including for economic activities. Early childhood, the period from birth to five years of age, is a crucial developmental window. As platforms for early childhood education and nutrition support, anganwadis can play an important role for children to achieve their potential. The National Education Policy, 2020, places anganwadis at the centre of the push to universalise access to early childhood care and education (ECCE). Last week, the government proposed a phased rollout of ECCE programme across all anganwadis, covering one-fifth each year, starting from 2021-22. Even as we acknowledge their heroic work and push for urgent reopening, we need to offer solutions to their myriad challenges. Despite being the primary information-source on nutrition, anganwadi workers can lack key knowledge – as found by studies from Delhi and Bihar. Surveys we conducted in 2018-19 found that among mothers listed with anganwadi workers, knowledge about key health behaviour such as complementary feeding and handwashing was low, at 54% and 49%. Anganwadi workers often do not have the support or training to provide ECCE. Administrative responsibilities take up significant time, and core services like pre-school education are deprioritised. A typical worker spends an estimated 10% of their time — 28 minutes per day — on pre-school education, compared to the recommended daily 120 minutes. Anganwadis often lack adequate infrastructure. NITI Aayog found that only 59% of anganwadis had adequate seating for children and workers, and more than half were unhygienic. These issues worsen in an urban context, with the utilisation of early childcare services at anganwadis at only 28%, compared to 42% for rural areas, according to NFHS-4 data.

Deepening impact

As anganwadis reopen, we must prioritise interventions with a demonstrated history of success, and evaluate new ones. Studies in Odisha and Andhra Pradesh (and globally) have found that home visits, where volunteers work with children and caregivers, significantly improved cognition, language, motor development and nutritional intake while also reducing stunting. Recent initiatives around home-based newborn and young child care are promising, but they need to extend beyond the first few months of a child's life, with seamless coordination with anganwadi workers. Many States will have to improve career incentives and remuneration for anganwadi workers. One way to ensure they have more time is to hire additional workers at anganwadis. A recent study in Tamil Nadu found that an additional worker devoted to pre-school education led to cost effective gains in both learning and nutrition. Policymakers have tried linking anganwadis and primary schools to strengthen convergence, as well as expanding the duration of daycare at anganwadis. Reaching out to women during pregnancy can increase the likelihood that their children use ICDS services – as tried in Tamil Nadu. In order to boost coverage as they reopen, large scale enrolment drives, that worked in Gujarat, may help mobilise eligible children. As the world's largest provider of early childhood services, anganwadis perform a crucial role in contributing to life outcomes of children across India. To improve these outcomes, we need to invest more significantly in anganwadis, and roll out proven innovative interventions.

WHAT IS THE DEBATE ON THE DAM SAFETY BILL?

The Dam Safety Bill, 2019, which provides for the surveillance, inspection, operation and maintenance of all specified dams across the country, and has been debated for decades, finally got the nod of the Rajya Sabha on Thursday (December 2), after a four-hour discussion. In August 2019, the Bill was approved by the Lok Sabha.

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Why is a law on dam safety required?

India ranks third globally with 5,745 large dams in operation. According to the National Register of Large Dams prepared in June 2019 by the Central Dam Safety Organisation (CDSO) in the Central Water Commission (CWC), 67 dams were built prior to the 20th century and 1,039 dams during the first 70 years of the 20th century. For stakeholders of the water sector, ageing of dams in the country has been a matter of concern. Jal Shakti Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat told the Rajya Sabha that since 1979, there were 42 instances of dam failure, the latest being Annamayya reservoir in Kadapa district of Andhra Pradesh that led to the death of at least 20 people in November 2021. Even though the CWC, along with the CDSO, has been functioning as the apex body to advise States on issues of dam safety, there is no specific Central law that governs the subject, given the situation that the ownership of dams and their maintenance predominantly falls in the purview of the States. In July 1986, a panel of experts recommended to the Centre that a legislation be framed. In 2007, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal Assemblies passed resolutions empowering Parliament to come up with a law on dam safety, under Article 252. Since 2010, different versions of the Bill were introduced.

What does the legislation seek to do?

The Bill covers those dams having the height of over 15 metres and between 10 and 15 metres with certain stipulations. It seeks to create two national institutions -- National Committee on Dam Safety to evolve dam safety policies and recommend necessary regulations, and the National Dam Safety Authority to implement policies and address unresolved issues between two States. The legislation also envisages the formation of State Dam Safety Organisations and State Committees on Dam Safety. Dam owners will be held responsible for construction, operation, maintenance and supervision of dams.

Why has the Bill become contentious?

In the last 10 years, several States, including Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Odisha, opposed the legislation on the ground that it encroached upon the sovereignty of States to manage their dams. Critics also raised the constitutional validity of the legislation in the light of water being a State subject. The silence on the payment of compensation to people affected by dam projects was cited as another shortcoming. Tamil Nadu has all along been a critic of the legislation as it fears that it will lose its hold over four of its dams, which are located in Kerala. The dams include Mullaperiyar, whose structural stability and safety are being debated for over 40 years, and Parambikulam, an important reservoir that caters to irrigation requirements of the western districts of Tamil Nadu including Coimbatore. Taking a cue from the 2011 report by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Water Resources to invoke Entry 56 of the Union List, the Centre framed the legislation, declaring that "it is expedient in public interest that the Union should take under its control the regulation of uniform dam safety procedure for specified dams." In his speech in the Rajya Sabha on Thursday, Mr. Shekhawat contended that Entry 17 of the State List (dealing with "water") was no bar for the Union to frame a law on the subject. However, the PRS Legislative Research, a New Delhi-based think tank, opined that even then, "it is unclear how Parliament would have the jurisdiction to frame a law for dams on rivers where the river and its valley are entirely within a State." Another point adduced in support of the legislation is that inter-State basins cover 92% of the country's area and most of the dams, making the Centre competent to enact such a law.

What is the way forward?

Given the sentiments expressed by a number of parties, including the AIADMK, an ally of the BJP, on the Bill, the Centre can hold talks with the States to allay their fears and frame rules suitably for legislation.

DR CARE

She was a final-year medical student in Madras of the 1950s, when a visit to a mental hospital gave her a glimpse of its patients — filthy and uncared for, prone to bouts of aggression or drifting in a funk. Struck by the indignity of their lives, Sarada Menon felt she "must do something". That moment of empathy was, perhaps, the first step in the journey of India's first woman psychiatrist, who died at the age of 98 on Sunday. Born in Mangalore in 1923 to a Malayali family not thrilled about the birth of another daughter, nor encouraging of her education, Menon, nevertheless, quietly found a way to study medicine. In 1957, she went on to specialise in psychiatry at Bangalore's India Institute of Mental Health (now Nimhans). At the time, not only were there few takers for the discipline, but the mentally ill were also seen as less than human — condemned to being sedated or subject to shock therapies, locked up in cells, often forsaken by their families. But new drugs and approaches were changing the discipline. In her long career as superintendent of the Government Kilpauk Mental Hospital in Madras, Menon turned it from an asylum to a place where rehabilitation was possible. An out-patient department was set up, and a day care centre where families could leave patients for the day. Social workers were brought in to act as a bridge between patients and doctors; and the mentally ill were coaxed back into a life of self-independence and work. Her efforts are believed to have convinced the state government to open psychiatry OPDs in all district hospitals. She is remembered not only as an institution builder but as a teacher and practitioner who inspired future generations of psychiatrists. Menon's life spanned an era, from pre-Independence India to the current times, when ideas about self-care, therapy and neurodivergence are no longer taboo. Those conversations would not have been possible without Menon's work.

CENTRE LOOKING TO USE STUBBLE AS BIOFUEL

The Union Government is working on a plan to use stubble as a biofuel and manure as part of an effort to deal with stubble burning that was often cited as a source of pollution in northern India, Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav told the Lok Sabha on Friday. The Minister, who is yet to make a detailed reply to a discussion on climate change, stated that the Centre had completely "decriminalised" stubble burning in the Air Quality Commission Act. Mr. Yadav was responding to Shiromani Akali Dal member Harsimrat Kaur Badal, who alleged that farmers from Punjab and Haryana were being "defamed" by the Delhi Government for causing air pollution and criminal cases are filed against them. Making a short intervention during a discussion on climate change in the Lower House, the Minister said the National Thermal Power Corporation had procured 3,000 tonnes of stubble to be used as bio-fuel and would study the results. A sum of ₹700 crore had been allocated to get rid of stubble. About one lakh acres of manure and compost from stubble were used in Punjab and Haryana, while Uttar Pradesh used it in six lakh acres. Taking a dig at the Aam Aadmi Party Government, Mr. Yadav claimed that Delhi used only 4,000 acres but put out big advertisements on utilising stubble as manure. The discussion, which was started on Wednesday and continued on Friday, also saw Opposition members questioning Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement of a 'Net Zero' target of 2070 at the climate summit in Glasgow. Trinamool member Saugata Roy said, "Even a week before the COP 26, the Government of India did not show

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any inclination to announce 'Net Zero' target. Actually, the Environment Secretary had ruled it out in the media. What prompted and under what pressure the Prime Minister did a volte-face in Glasgow and announced 'Net Zero' target in 2070?" N.K. Premachandran of the Revolutionary Socialist Party accused the developed nations of diluting their climate commitments over the past three decades. Agatha Sangma, MP, urged the Centre to reconsider the palm oil mission and do proper consultation before implementing it in the northeast.

HIGH LPG PRICES ARE SCORCHING THE AIR POLLUTION FIGHT

The sustained rise in the price of LPG cylinders has been burning a hole in many a household budget for more than a year now. The price of LPG refills has risen by more than 50% to over ₹900 per cylinder in November this year compared to around ₹600 over the past year. With no refill subsidies in place since May 2020, there is genuine concern about many households now slipping back to using polluting solid fuels for cooking, such as firewood and dung cakes.

A start

Solid fuel use for cooking is the leading contributor to air pollution and related premature deaths in India, estimated to be around over 600,000 every year, as per the Global Burden of Disease Study 2019. To tackle this issue head-on, the Government of India has taken several measures to improve access to clean cooking energy. For instance, under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana scheme, the Government distributed more than 80 million subsidised LPG connections. But how far have we managed to dissuade households from biomass? What more do we need to do as a country to move the needle further? Sizing up India's LPG revolution. Good news first. As per the India Residential Energy Survey (IRES) 2020, conducted by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) and the Initiative for Sustainable Energy Policy, LPG has now replaced biomass as the most common cooking fuel in India. Nearly 85% of Indian homes have an LPG connection and 71% use it as their primary cooking fuel, compared to only 30% a decade back. This reversal of trends could be attributed to the success of the Ujjwala, consumption-linked subsidies and gradual strengthening of the LPG distributorship. Needless to say, this would have significantly influenced the sector's contribution to air pollution. However, the battle is only half won. Around 30% of Indian households continue to rely on biomass as their primary cooking fuel, mainly due to high LPG prices. Another 24% stack LPG with biomass. The practice of biomass usage is predominantly concentrated in rural areas, particularly among States such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal. Urban slums are also critical hotspots where the use of biomass for cooking is widely prevalent. Easy availability of free biomass and lack of home delivery of LPG refills further reduce the efficacy of LPG as a reliable and affordable proposition.

Reinstate subsidies

To sustain the country's momentum on clean cooking energy access and thereby, cleaner air for all, we propose three key steps. First, reinstate the subsidies on LPG refill for low-income households. At the current refill prices, an average Indian household would have to spend around 10% of its monthly expense on LPG to meet all its cooking energy needs. According to a CEEW study, this is just double the actual share of reported expenses on cooking energy (as of March 2020). In fact, nearly half of all Indian households will have to at least double their cooking energy expense to completely switch to LPG at current prices. Given the loss of incomes and livelihoods during the novel coronavirus pandemic, the ability of households to afford LPG on a regular basis has taken a further hit. Thus, resuming subsidies would be critical to support LPG use in many

households. Our estimates suggest that an effective price of ₹450 per LPG refill could ensure that the average share of actual household expenditure on cooking energy matches the pre-pandemic levels. The Government could take this into account as it reconsiders resuming LPG subsidy. The Government can also explore diverse approaches to identify beneficiaries. This may include limiting the subsidy provision to seven to eight LPG refills annually and excluding well-to-do households using robust indicators. For instance, lowering the income-based exclusion limit for LPG subsidy to ₹2,50,000 a year from ₹10 lakh a year or excluding families owning a non-commercial four-wheeler vehicle can significantly reduce the number of eligible beneficiaries. At the bare minimum, subsidy must be resumed for the households granted LPG connections under the Ujjwala scheme.

Availability and biomass

Second, boost timely availability of LPG for all consumers. Only half the rural LPG users receive home delivery of LPG refills, while the rest have to travel about five kilometres one way to procure a cylinder. Gaps in the doorstep delivery of LPG cylinders are also present in urban pockets, particularly in slum areas. This is a major factor behind the use of biomass among urban slum households. There is a need to strengthen the LPG supply chain and enforce timely service delivery, particularly in States with a large number of Ujjwala connections and slum population. This must be complemented by higher incentives for rural distributors, who have to otherwise service a low but distributed demand at similar commissions. Looping in self-help groups could also help aggregate demand and create jobs in distant areas. Third, create a new market for locally available biomass. The Government needs to pilot initiatives focused on promoting the use of locally available biomass in decentralised processing units that manufacture briquettes and pellets for industrial and commercial establishments. For instance, the National Thermal Power Corporation recently invited applications to supply biomass pellets to fire their power stations. The Government can incentivise entrepreneurs to participate in such activities. Similarly, households can be incentivised to supply locally available biomass (including crop stubble or dung cakes) to Compressed Bio-Gas (CBG) production plants being set up under the Sustainable Alternative Towards Affordable Transportation (SATAT) scheme. Such measures would help enhance local income and livelihood opportunities, in turn encouraging rural families to use LPG on a regular basis. In August, the Prime Minister launched the Ujjwala 2.0 scheme to distribute 10 million additional free LPG connections to poorer households. It shows the Government's commitment towards promoting clean cooking energy access. But ensuring affordability and timely availability of LPG cylinders for refills would be a must to wean households away from polluting biomass and reap the benefits of the investments made in the Ujjwala scheme over the past five years. Such efforts would go a long way in improving the health and well-being of our citizens.

GREEN SHOOTS

The repeal of three controversial farm laws by the Narendra Modi government through a parliamentary resolution has defused the conflict over them, but the underlying questions regarding the sector remain unresolved. Farmers who had stayed put at sites around the national capital for a year are now dispersing, but not with much clarity on the road ahead. The defeatism of the Government, and the triumphalism of the farm unions and the Opposition over the repeal of the laws have created a hostile environment for a long-term resolution to the agricultural practices that are economically and environmentally unsustainable. No reform can be possible without building sufficient political support for it, unless unlimited state force is used to suppress

the opposition. In this instance, the Government went ahead without adequate consultations and landed in a stalemate with entrenched farming communities. Any aggravation of the situation would have been dangerous for the stability of the country, but what forced the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) into retreat was its immediate political calculations for Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. But farmers remain ambiguous in their approach to the party. A section of them in western Uttar Pradesh might consider voting for the BJP, but for many, the wounds are still fresh, and they distrust the BJP. In Punjab, the BJP has managed to be a part of the conversation, but the road to any political reward over the repeal appears long at the moment. Farmers have resolved to review the progress of their agreement with the Government in mid-January. Their key remaining demand is a legal guarantee of minimum support prices for all crops. While the Government has promised that the existing minimum support price regime will not be diluted, the questions on extending its coverage and backing it up legally have been left to a committee constituted by the Prime Minister. The committee includes representatives of farmers too. The Indian agriculture sector requires a balance between national development priorities and market linkages, and ensure long-term economic sustainability for those employed by it. Wider coverage of minimum support prices could encourage farmers in Punjab and Haryana to switch from irrigation intensive, and expensive rice to a diverse crop pattern without compromising on the food staple. Water abundant areas could adopt appropriate crops. To achieve an ecologically appropriate geographical spread of crops, the existing regional disparity in the sector needs to be addressed, by giving more state attention to regions and crops that are now in a shadow. Enhancing agriculture incomes is a shared objective of all political parties, and it is most unfortunate that they are unable to put their heads together to achieve this. The calm achieved by rightly repealing the three laws should be wisely used by the Centre to build a political consensus on the country's agriculture sector.

RESEARCHERS DOCUMENT 43,118 BUTTERFLIES IN DAKSHINA KANNADA

A team of researchers from Mangalore University, in collaboration with other two institutes, has identified and documented 43,118 butterflies (individuals) belonging to 175 species in Dakshina Kannada. Of them, 22 species are habitat-specific. The butterflies were identified at eight heterogeneous landscapes ranging from coastal sand dunes to agricultural fields to botanical gardens to semi-evergreen forests on the foothills of the Western Ghats. The team comprised M.S. Mustak, Associate Professor, Department of Applied Zoology, Mangalore University, and Deepak Naik, a Ph.D. student at Mangalore University. The study, over two years, was done in collaboration with Shyam Prasad Rao, a researcher at Yenepoya Deemed to be University, Mangaluru, and Krishnamegh Kunte, a researcher from the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bengaluru. "Using indicator value analysis, 22 habitat-specific and several shared indicator species were identified. The study also documented larval host plants, and over 283 habitat-specific host-butterfly species pair interactions," Mr. Mustak told The Hindu. Their research paper, a study on the abundance and habitat preference of butterflies of the Western Ghats, has now been accepted for publication by the international Journal of Insect Conservation, a publication devoted to the conservation of insects and related invertebrates.

'Easily conserved'

The researchers said that butterfly communities indicate the type and state of a habitat, and can easily be conserved by the restoration of habitats with diverse host plants. They have great public appeal, are easy to work with, and are indicators of a healthy ecosystem, they said. Mr. Mustak said, "People usually cherish abundant and widely distributed butterflies, but fail to appreciate

less common or habitat-specific species. Our study gives quantitative data on the butterflies of the Western Ghats, which is essential for public awareness and outreach." The study showed interesting patterns. Some of the most abundant species are Common Crow (Euploea Core), Common Emigrant (Catopsilia Pomona), Common Four Ring (Ypthima Huebneri), Tawny Coster (Acraea Terpsicore), Lesser Grass Blue (Zizina Otis) and Rustic (Cupha Erymanthis).

HIGHLY INVASIVE SNAIL SPOTTED IN KERALA

A tiny snail with a striking, pellucid, golden-yellow shell found in the Edappally canal in Kochi has been flagged as an invasive species that could play havoc with native ecosystems. Having spotted it during a biodiversity impact assessment study, researchers of the Department of Marine Biology, Microbiology, and Biochemistry of the Cochin University of Science and Technology (CuUSAT) identified it as the acute bladder snail Physella acuta, globally branded as highly invasive. This is the first time this snail has been reported in Kerala, according to the research team. What makes its discovery worrying is that it plays host to worms that can cause food-borne diseases and skin itches in humans. Moreover, its rapid growth rate, air-breathing capability, and tolerance to pollution makes the Physella acuta a potential competitor to native fauna. The findings by S. Bijoy Nandan, Dean, Faculty of Marine Sciences; postdoctoral fellows P.R. Jayachandran, R. Radhika, B.P. Aneesh, K.S. Santu, and research scholar M. Jima have been detailed in the scientific journal Proceedings of the Zoological Society. The team recovered 23 live specimens from the Eroor part of the Edappally canal during the biodiversity impact assessment for the Integrated Urban Regeneration and Water Transport System (IURWTS) in Kochi. First described by J.P.R. Draparnaud in 1805, Physella acuta is considered native to North America but is now found in all continents except Antarctica. It was first reported in India in the early 1990s. It is believed to have reached Kerala through the aquarium trade, a major vector for invasive species. In the Edappally canal, the snail had made its home in a highly polluted stretch plagued by high sedimentation, untreated sewage, effluents, construction waste and a thick growth of invasive aquatic weeds. Small in size, the snail can grow to 16 mm in height and 9 mm in width. Physella acuta is easily identified by its sinistral (left-opening aperture) shell. Its good looks make this snail a favourite of aquariums, but Dr. Jayachandran is quick to add a warning note. "Special care should be taken while dealing with this snail and it should not be kept in home aquariums," he said.

BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

GOODS AND SERVICES TAX AS AN UNFINISHED AGENDA

GST, or Goods and Services Tax, an institutional tax innovation intensively marketed in many countries by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, was wrapped in a "one nation one tax" package, and was accepted by India on the midnight of July 1, 2017. Despite the alleged haste in its launching by the central government, there were adaptations to make it to suit the Indian context. Hailed as a landmark reform in India's tax history, it was expected to improve tax-GDP ratio, end tax cascading, enhance efficiency, competitiveness, growth, and ensure lower prices. It was also projected as a watershed in India's fiscal federalism. While the States have forgone a substantial part of their own tax revenue, they were in turn guaranteed a GST compensation assuring 14% growth in their GST revenue during the initial five years. Many exemptions, along with different tax rates, as against the single rate in many countries, have been accommodated to protect the interests of different stakeholders.

Unresolved issues

Even after 50 months in existence, a number of relevant issues, both for policy and action, remain unresolved. A recently held international seminar on GST, organised by the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation that brought together experts from India and select countries (Malaysia, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Brazil, Mexico and Canada), was the venue for a sui generis policy debate focusing on India's GST experience. We, as participant observers, cherry-pick some of the observations that were made for reflection by policymakers and the wider public.

The base and pillars

India's GST architecture is built on the firm foundations of a GST Council and the GST Network (GSTN). The first is the key decision-making body, chaired by the Union Finance Minister with a Minister of State in charge of Finance and the Finance Ministers of States as members. This is envisaged as a due federal process to protect the interests of the States. GSTN generates high frequency data and subjects them to analytics for informed policy making. Built on this foundation, India's GST paradigm stands on two key pillars: revenue neutrality and GST compensation for the States. Designed on the principle of destination-based consumption taxation, with seamless provision for input tax credit with CGST levied by the Centre, SGST by the States, UTGST by the Union Territories, and IGST levied on inter-State supply including imports, GST is applicable to all goods and services except alcohol for human consumption and five specified petroleum products with a common threshold exemption applicable to both CGST and SGST. The assured revenue neutrality remains a mirage and many States have experienced a declining tax-GDP ratio. Studies show that in the case of major 18 States, the ratio of own tax revenue to GDP has declined. While the share of the Centre in total GST increased by 6%, that of States put together lagged behind with only a 4.5% increase. Stark differences between the Revenue Neutral Rates (RNR) for the producing States and consumption State have been observed. States producing exempted food grains also lost out. Since the rates were lower under GST vis-à-vis the VAT regime, revenue neutrality was not adhered ab initio. The problems were compounded with massive evasion following the dismantling of check posts, and later on fake invoices, that grew by leaps and bounds. Exemptions and subventions complicated and worsened the situation. The South African experience illustrates how zero rating and large exemptions have defeated revenue goals. In Mexico, although the country relied more on income tax, with a

standard rate of 16% they could raise over 4% of GDP from GST. Reviewing 30 years of the Canadian experience with GST, it is shown that GST could be improved by limiting zero rating, tax-exemptions and harmonising tax rates. The Brazilian experience indicates that transfers through social security or subsides tend to be more progressive than subventions or exemptions because reduced rates or zero rating do not usually get passed on to target groups or industries as happening in India. The resilience of the economy at the time of rolling out of GST is critical for its wider reception as the Australian experience shows. However, India was in the reverse gear given the downturn following demonetisation. GST in India was possible only because the States surrendered much of their constitutionally inherited indirect taxes. While the States collectively forewent 51.8% of their total tax revenue, the Centre surrendered only 28.8%. Yet, GST is shared equally between the Centre and States despite two expert committees recommended for a higher share for the States. Given the revenue neutrality failure and the host of other issues, many of the States are left with no option except to depend on GST compensation. While compensation legitimately has to coexist with GST, even the constitutionally guaranteed compensation for five years has not been implemented in letter and spirit, forcing the States to beg for their entitlement. This is not conducive to sustainable co-operative federalism.

IGST woes, other points

Although IGST is a key source of revenue for many of the States, the clearing house mechanism and the process therein remains terra incognita. It was pointed out that GST is discriminatory to manufacturing States, indicating the need for a revenue sharing formula that duly incentivises exporting States by sharing IGST revenue among three parties instead of two. The Malaysian experience demonstrates the need for swift and transparent functioning of the input tax credit system through a flawless IT infrastructure. Malaysia ended up abandoning GST owing to these woes. We operate in an almost information vacuum especially with respect to IGST along with several glitches in the digital architecture. GSTN is now in the doldrums. It neither makes effective use of the massive and invaluable data being generated nor shares them to enable others to make use of them. Such practice in "data monopoly" was a fact of history in India's statistical system and has to go sooner rather than later. Australia, having several similarities with India, in terms of Centre and the subnational units, and destination-based, multi-stage tax with input credit provisions, has not been revenue-buoyant. The GST revenue of Australia has fallen relative to GDP from 3.85% in 2003-04 to 3.28% in 2018-19. It is a matter for consideration whether such adventures such as widening exemptions and the replacing of income-tax by GST in the case of small and medium enterprises are advisable measures in the Indian context. GST should be seen purely from a revenue point of view and as a fiscal policy tool for efficiency, competitiveness and growth. Even by this standard, India's GST is still on a rocky road, with several of the assumptions falling flat while expectations stand belied. Neither the States nor the consumers seem to have benefited since the rate reductions are not translated into prices due to profiteering and cascading. Despite many years of efforts in evolving an Indianised GST system and over 50 months of adjustments with over a thousand notifications, with accompanying uncertainties in the first year and the novel coronavirus pandemic and the lockdown still in the saddle, GST continues to be an unfinished agenda. But how far and how long?

LOW TOBACCO TAX, POOR HEALTH

In India, 28.6% of adults above 15 years and 8.5% of students aged 13-15 years use tobacco in some form or the other. This makes the country the second largest consumer of tobacco in the world. Tobacco use is known to be a major risk factor for several non-communicable diseases such

as cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and chronic lung diseases. India also bears an annual economic burden of over ₹1,77,340 crore on account of tobacco use. Yet, there has been no major increase in taxation of tobacco products to discourage the consumption of tobacco in the past four years since the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017 except for a small increase in the national calamity contingent duty (NCCD) in the 2020-21 Union Budget which only had the effect of increasing the average price of cigarettes by about 5%.

A worrying trend

The absence of an increase in tax means more profits for the tobacco industry and more tax revenue foregone for the government — revenue that could have easily been utilised during the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been a 3% real decline in GST revenues from tobacco products in each of the past two financial years. The average annual tax revenue collection from all tobacco products (based on the past three years), including excise duty, NCCD, GST, and compensation cess, is about ₹53,750 crore. Excise taxes on many tobacco products used to be regularly raised in the annual Union Budgets before the GST. Similarly, several State governments used to regularly raise value-added tax (VAT) on tobacco products. During the five years before the introduction of the GST, most State governments had moved from having a low VAT regime on tobacco products to having a high VAT regime. The 17.3% relative reduction in the prevalence of tobacco use among adults that India experienced between 2009-10 and 2016-17, as shown by the Global Adult Tobacco Survey, could be partly attributed to this as well. International literature recognises tax increase as one of the most cost-effective ways of regulating the consumption of tobacco. The lack of tax increases in post-GST years might mean that some current smokers smoke more now and some non-smokers have started smoking. This could potentially lead to a reversal of the declining trend in prevalence. This might jeopardise India's commitment to achieving 30% tobacco use prevalence reduction by 2025 as envisaged in the National Health Policy of 2017 by the Government of India. The lack of tax increase means that the tax burden on tobacco products (tax as a percentage of the retail price) decreases. The tax burden on bidis, cigarettes, and smokeless tobacco, on average, stands at 22%, 53%, and 64% in 2021, while the World Health Organization has been recommending a uniform tax burden of at least 75% for each tobacco product. Given that the vast majority of tobacco taxation today is in the form of GST and compensation cess and their revision requires consensus within the GST Council, tobacco taxation has not seen any increase whatsoever under the GST since 2017. In other words, the tobacco industry has been virtually enjoying four years without extended tax on tobacco products, since the introduction of the GST. This has made tobacco products more affordable post-GST as shown in recent literature from India. This is highly detrimental to public health. Meanwhile, the share of central excise duties including NCCD in the total tobacco taxes decreased from 54% to 8% for cigarettes, 17% to 1% for bidis, and 59% to 11% for smokeless tobacco products, on average, from 2017 (pre-GST) to 2021 (post-GST). Several countries in the world have high excise taxes along with GST or sales tax and they are continuously being revised. Yet, the excise duty on tobacco in India continues to remain extremely low.

A considerate view of public health

The Union government should take a considerate view of public health and significantly increase excise taxes — either basic excise duty or NCCD — on all tobacco products. The upcoming Union Budget gives a perfect opportunity for this. The Budget should fix an excise tax of at least ₹1 per stick of bidis while aiming for a significant increase in the excise tax of cigarettes and smokeless tobacco products. Taxation should achieve a significant reduction in the affordability of tobacco

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products to reduce tobacco use prevalence and facilitate India's march towards sustainable development goals.

20-DIGIT LEI MUST FOR CROSS-BORDER TRANSACTIONS SOON: RBI

Starting October next year, companies will have to quote the legal entity identifier (LEI) number so as to undertaking cross-border transactions of Rs 50 crore or more, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said on Friday. The LEI is a 20-digit number used to uniquely identify parties to financial transactions globally to improve the quality and accuracy of financial data systems. The identifier has been introduced by the central bank in a phased manner for participants in the over-the-counter (OTC) derivative, non-derivative markets, large corporate borrowers and large value transactions in centralised payment systems. "In order to further harness the benefits of LEI, it has been decided that AD Category I banks, with effect from October 1, 2022, shall obtain the LEI number from the resident entities (non-individuals) undertaking capital or current account transactions of Rs 50 crore and above (per transaction) under FEMA, 1999," the RBI said in a circular. As regards non-resident counterparts/ overseas entities, in case of non-availability of LEI information, banks may process the transactions to avoid disruptions, it said. The Reserve Bank also said banks may encourage concerned entities to voluntarily furnish LEI while undertaking transactions even before October 1, 2022. "Once an entity has obtained an LEI number, it must be reported in all transactions of that entity, irrespective of transaction size," it added.

UPI-BASED PRODUCTS FOR FEATURE PHONES SOON

The RBI is planning to come out with UPI-based payment products for feature phone users, which will be launched by leveraging on innovative products from the central bank's Regulatory Sandbox on retail payments. This is being done as part of steps to further deepen digital payments and make them more inclusive, ease transactions for consumers, facilitate greater participation of retail customers in various segments of financial markets and enhance the capacity of service providers, the RBI said. The central bank has also proposed to make the process flow for small value transactions simpler through a mechanism of 'on-device' wallet in UPI applications. It has also enhanced the transaction limit for payments through UPI for the Retail Direct Scheme for investment in G-secs and initial public offering (IPO) applications from Rs 2 lakh to Rs 5 lakh. Unified Payments Interface (UPI) is India's single largest retail payment system in terms of volume of transactions, particularly for small value payments.

OMICRON SHADOW

The RBI's latest monetary policy action, of maintaining status quo on benchmark interest rates, the policy stance, as well as the full-year GDP growth and inflation projections, stems largely from a wariness of the risks posed by the Omicron variant of the novel coronavirus. Announcing the bimonthly policy, Governor Shaktikanta Das observed that 'headwinds from global developments' were the main risk to the domestic outlook, which was now "somewhat clouded by the Omicron variant of COVID-19". With the key drivers of demand in the economy — private investment and private consumption — still lacking meaningful momentum, the Monetary Policy Committee had opted to continue with its growth supportive 'accommodative' policy stance so as to enable a durable and broad-based recovery, he said. While it may sound churlish to question the MPC's stand, given that the ongoing recovery from last fiscal's record contraction is still yet to register an across-the-board expansion from pre-pandemic levels, the fact that one of the six members of the rate-setting panel has dissented on the policy stance for a third consecutive time, cannot be

ignored. Positing in October that the 'upside risks to long-term inflation and to inflation expectations had become more aggravated', external member Jayanth Varma had at the time cautioned the committee against falling into "a pattern of policy making in slow motion" guided by an excessive desire to avoid surprises. And while his specific reasons for voting against the grain this week are not immediately available, that the MPC is for now prioritising growth over price stability is clear. Governor Das, who acknowledged the criticality of taming inflation when he asserted "price stability remains the cardinal principle for monetary policy as it fosters growth and stability", however, seems to be sanguine about the outlook for retail prices. Contending that winter arrivals would help bring down vegetable prices, which had spiked in October contributing to a marginal quickening in headline CPI inflation that month, Mr. Das has banked on optimism in asserting that the 'slack in the economy' may limit the pass-through of cost-push pressures that have kept core retail inflation persistently high for 17 months. The RBI's November round of 'Inflation Expectations Survey of Households' shows that households expect inflation to accelerate in the near and medium term. The median inflation expectation of respondents polled in an extension survey earlier this month, in order to factor in both a possible Omicron impact and the softening in fuel prices in the wake of the cut in excise duty, projects the three-months ahead rate at 10.8% and the one-year ahead reading at 10.9%. And though the RBI has begun to slowly tighten the liquidity spigot it opened in the wake of the pandemic last year, a more robust response to ward off price pressures will become imperative sooner rather than later. For a delay risks undermining precisely what Mr. Das said was the RBI's motto at this juncture, ensuring "a soft landing that is well timed".

FARMING OUT

In September this year, at a meeting of the Indian Banks' Association, the idea of floating an asset reconstruction company (ARC) to improve the recovery from bad loans in the agricultural sector was discussed. The arguments offered in favour of such a mechanism are straightforward. As agricultural markets are dispersed, a single institution, as opposed to multiple banks, would perhaps be more suited to deal with collections and recoveries from farm loans, optimising the costs of the recovery. Considering the absence of a unified framework to deal with the enforcement of mortgages created on agricultural land, there is a case for creating an effective mechanism for the recovery of dues. However, this proposal raises several issues that need careful deliberation. For one, the government has already set up such a framework for the resolution of corporate sector loans that have turned bad. Considering that doubts have been expressed over the effectiveness of this architecture, a more prudent approach would be to assess its experience and then chalk the way forward. Moreover, if there is indeed a need to provide for a similar framework for agricultural loans, then the same architecture could be employed. Second, as banks also have far greater presence on the ground than a single ARC, they are likely to be more capable of navigating the local terrain to recover their dues. Local bank officials may be more successful in dealing with hundreds and thousands of these small borrowers than a single ARC. Third, as rural land markets are characterised by lack of clear titles and multiple stakeholders, this is not as straightforward as it may seem, nor comparable to ARCs operating in the corporate loan market, where their performance itself has been mixed. Recovery will prove to be difficult. Moreover, even though land is a mortgageable asset, it is an emotive, political issue. Fourth, there is also the possibility that since these issues are state subjects, such an approach could risk being seen as encroaching on the rights of states. The issue though may gain traction considering the election cycle — seven states go to elections in 2022, followed by nine in 2023, before the general election in 2024. The possibility of another round of loan waivers being announced by political parties is hard to ignore. This also raises the prospects of strategic default — as per the RBI's

Financial Stability Report, bad loans (gross non-performing assets) for the agricultural sector stood at 9.8 per cent at the end of March 2021. In comparison, they were at 11.3 per cent and 7.5 per cent for the industry and services sectors respectively. But, doing so would not only be fiscally ruinous for state governments, it would destroy the credit culture and make banks reluctant to lend. There are better ways to help farmers. Ensuring timely access to credit on more favourable terms for one. But the broader policy framework should facilitate farming becoming a more remunerative occupation.

HOW IS HALLMARKING BEING IMPLEMENTED?

The Government of India has made hallmarking of gold jewellery mandatory in the country. It is now being implemented by the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) in a phased manner. With an aim to bring transparency in the jewellery trade and increase trust among consumers, the Government has also made it mandatory for the introduction of a Hallmark Unique Identification (HUID) number in every piece of jewellery. In the first phase, it is being rolled out in 256 districts of the country, though the move was opposed by jewellers' trade bodies.

What is HUID?

HUID is a six-digit alphanumeric code, or one that consists of numbers and letters. It is given to every piece of jewellery at the time of hallmarking and is unique for each piece. Jewellery is stamped with the unique number manually at the Assaying & Hallmarking (A&H) centre. The hallmark consists of three symbols which give some information about the jewellery piece. The first symbol is the BIS logo; the second indicates purity and fineness; and the third symbol is the HUID. Before buying any piece of gold jewellery, the buyer should check all these three symbols. Hallmarking & HUID are mandatory for 14-, 18- and 22-carat gold jewellery and artefacts.

Why is it being introduced?

HUID gives a distinct identity to each piece of jewellery enabling traceability. It is critical to the credibility of hallmarking and to help address complaints against adulteration. In HUID-based hallmarking, registration of jewellers is an automatic process with no human interference. In addition to its role in authentication, it also helps check malpractice by members of the trade. According to the Government, it is a secure system and poses no risk to data privacy and security. Jewellers' trade bodies, however, say it's cumbersome to number each piece of jewellery and HUID cannot be engraved in tiny pieces and also that it will increase cost for consumers. The Government has made it mandatory to sell hallmarked jewellery in the first phase in 256 districts of the country, each of which has at least one Assaying & Hallmarking centre. HUID numbers are engraved at these centres. More than one lakh jewellers are registered and daily, more than three lakh pieces of jewellery get hallmarked with the HUID number.

What does this mean for the consumer?

Given that gold plays a big role in the lives of Indians, mandating gold hallmarking is aimed at protecting consumer interests. In an introductory note on the mandated procedure, the Department of Consumer Affairs said hallmarking of gold jewellery provides 'third-party assurance' to consumers on the purity of gold jewellery. Under the scheme, jewellers are granted certificate of registration to sell hallmarked jewellery and A&H centres "are recognised to assay the purity of the jewellery submitted by the registered jeweller along with declaration of purity…"

Are there concerns around the process?

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Speaking to The Hindu, Somasundaram P.R., Managing Director, India, World Gold Council, said that the HUID concept is "innovative, out-of-the-box thinking and more than makes up for stepping in late with mandatory hallmarking." "It is the sort of global leadership India has and needs to show in gold-related reforms. Trade support is yet lacking as 'traceability of hallmarking integrity [a consumer benefit] and financial tracking of purchases [a trade concern]' have been combined, coupled with teething infrastructural issues and these need to be addressed urgently," he said. The World Gold Council is of the view that the HUID system has the potential to be rolled out globally to enhance trust in gold at the retail end and remove a strong barrier to gold-buying. "We support this digitally supported progressive initiative that will infuse further transparency in the ecosystem and deliver a win-win solution for consumers and the Indian gold industry alike," said Mr. Somasundaram.

BETTER.COM, THE MORTGAGE COMPANY THAT FIRED OVER 900 EMPLOYEES OVER ZOOM CALL ZOOM CALL

A US-based home mortgage and home ownership company's India origin chief executive officer Vishal Garg fired more than 900 employees over a short Zoom call last week. Garg cited market efficiency, performance and productivity as the reason behind the firings. Among those fired were the diversity, equity and inclusion recruiting team. The layoffs are learnt to have happened primarily in the US and India.

What does Better.com do?

Started in 2014, Better.com works on "improving house mortgaging" and financing by allowing people to apply for loans and financing online, instead of them having to go directly to banks. The company claims to offer loans at fixed and adjustable rates for conventional and jumbo loans for several types of homes without charging any commission. Over the years, the company has expanded its footprint rapidly, having teamed up with different companies during the process. For example, in 2015, the founders partnered with Avex Funding, a California originator specializing in prime conforming and jumbo mortgages for over 10 years. In 2016, the company changed its name to Better Mortgage and got $30 million in Series A funding. The same company was also approved as a Fannie Mae seller or servicer. A year later, the company again raised $15 million in Series B funding with Kleiner Perkins Caufield Byers, while again in 2019, the company raised $160 million in Series C funding. The firings also came close on the heels of the company having raised $750 million in fresh capital from two of its backers, Aurora Acquisition Corporation and SoftBank. The company also plans to go public by the Special Purpose Acquisition Company (SPAC) route soon.

Why were the employees fired?

As per the Zoom call, Garg said that lack of market efficiency, performance and productivity was the reason for the people being let go. The company's chief financial officer Kevin Ryan, in a statement said that, "a fortress balance sheet and a reduced and focused workforce together" was needed to "play offense going into a radically evolving homeownership market". Meanwhile, Garg had also accused the employees of "stealing" from their colleagues and customers by being unproductive and only working two hours a day.

Are Indian employees of the company also impacted?

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The company had hired around 1,100 employees in India following the onset of the pandemic in early 2020. It had announced on-boarding people who were laid off from the hospitality industry. At the time, however, US-based mortgage lending companies were on an aggressive hiring spree globally on account of a surge in demand for mortgage products and subdued interest rates. During the pandemic, Better.com also paid its employees in India a stipend of Rs 10,000 a month as Covid19 benefit, in addition to paying them for incurring additional expenses for their work-from-home set up. India is home to most of the back-end operations of the company. While the company hasn't confirmed the geographical break-up of the lay-off, indications are that several people in India were also handed pink slips.

HEALTH ACCOUNT NUMBERS THAT REQUIRE CLOSER SCRUTINY

Low public spending on health in India has meant that people depend heavily on their own means to access health care. It causes rich-poor, rural-urban, gender and caste-based divides in access to health care, pushes people to poverty, and forces them to incur debt or sell assets. As a result, our health outcomes are worse than in many neighbouring countries. In this context, the National Health Accounts (NHA) report for 2017-18 is being celebrated widely as it shows that total public spending on health as a percentage of GDP has increased to a historic high of 1.35% of GDP, finally breaking through the 1%-1.2% mark of GDP. Out-of-pocket expenditure as a share of total health expenditure has come down to less than 50%. An increase in public spending and decline in out-of-pocket expenditure, if actually realised, are welcome steps forward to achieve greater financial protection. However, the NHA numbers need to be carefully scrutinised before jumping to conclusions. The NHA capture spending on health by various sources, and track the schemes through which these funds are channelised to various providers in a given time period for a given geography. Multiple data sources are combined to produce the estimates. Out-of-pocket expenditure, the biggest part of NHA estimates is captured using "Household Social Consumption in India: Health" survey of National Sample Survey Organisation. Public spending on health by various departments of the Union and State governments, major urban local bodies, and social security schemes are captured from Budgets. Various sources are also used to capture insurance premiums, expenditure estimates from firms, non-governmental organisations and foreign entities. Various sources are also used to capture insurance premiums, expenditure estimates from firms, non-governmental organisations and foreign entities.

Spending is one of the lowest

India's total public spending on health as a percentage of GDP or in per capita terms has been one of the lowest in the world. There has been a policy consensus for more than a decade now that public spending has to increase to at least 2.5% of GDP. However, there has not been any significant increase so far. Despite several pronouncements, it has continued to hover around 1%-1.2% of GDP. The Union government traditionally spends around a third of the total government spending whereas the majority is borne by the States. The increase shown in NHA 2017-18 is largely due to increase in Union government expenditure. For 2017-18, the Centre's share in total public spending on health has jumped to 40.8%. However, if we study the spending pattern of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Ministry of AYUSH, we see that expenditure increased to 0.32% of GDP from 0.27% in 2016-17 — insufficient to explain the overall jump. Much of this increase has actually happened on account of a tripling of expenditure of the Defence Medical Services (DMS). Compared to an expenditure of ₹10,485 in 2016-17, it increased to ₹32,118 crore. During this period, expenditure on the National Health Mission increased only by 16% to ₹25,465 crore. Though the increasing spending for the health of defence personnel is a

good thing, such spending does not benefit the general population. Clearly, the health of women in the reproductive age-group and children below five years, who constitute a third of our population, have been accorded lesser priority compared to the around 64 lakh families covered under the DMS. The other thing to note is that the share of current health expenditure has gone down to 88% of THE compared to 92.8% in 2016-17. Within government expenditure, the share of current health expenditure has come down to 71.9% compared to 77.9% a year ago. This essentially means, capital expenditure has increased, and specifically in defence.

Capital expenditure

There is a problem in accounting capital expenditure within the NHA framework. Equipment brought or a hospital that is built serves people for many years, so the expenditure incurred is used for the lifetime of the capital created and use does not get limited to that particular year in which expenditure is incurred. Counting the capital expenditure for a specific year leads to severe over-counting. Considering this, the World Health Organization proposes to leave out capital expenditure from health accounts estimates, instead focus on current health expenditure. However, in NHA estimates in India, in order to show higher public investment, capital expenditure is included; thus, Indian estimates become incomparable to other countries. If we take out the capital expenditure, current health expenditure comes down to only 0.97% of GDP. This is only a marginal increase from 0.93% in the previous year.

More a sign of distress

The NHA estimate also shows that out-of-pocket expenditure as a share of GDP has reduced to less than half of the total health expenditure. Over the last few years, the share of out-of-pocket expenditure has been declining. For the year 2017-18, out-of-pocket expenditure has declined not only as a share of total health expenditure but also in nominal and real terms. Is it a welcome development? Does it mean improved financial protection? Has it declined because public spending has increased? NSSO 2017-18 data suggest that during this time period, utilisation of hospitalisation care has declined compared to 2014 NSSO estimates for almost all States and for various sections of society. The decline in out-of-pocket expenditure is essentially due to a decline in utilisation of care rather than greater financial protection. The experience of various developing countries suggests that as public spending on health increases, utilisation of care increases because there is always a lot of latent demand for health care which was hitherto unrealised as people could not afford health care. With increased public investment as health care becomes cheaper, people tend to access care more. Since it is very unlikely that peoples' need for health care has declined, and current government health expenditure has not increased much, a decline in out-of-pocket expenditure could be due to lower utilisation of care — a sign of distress rather than a cause of celebration. Actually, the NSSO survey happened just after six months of demonetisation and almost at the same time when the Goods and Services Tax was introduced. The disastrous consequences of the dual blow of demonetisation and GST on the purchasing power of people are quite well documented. As purchasing power declined, health care would have become more unaffordable, forcing people to forgo care. Though more people have moved towards subsidised public services to some extent, this has not been enough to offset the decline in utilisation. Another plausible explanation is linked to limitations in NSSO estimates. The NSSO fails to capture the spending pattern of the richest 5% of the population (who incur a large part of the health expenditure). Thus, out-of-pocket expenditure measured from the NSSO could be an under-estimate as it fails to take into account the expenditure of the richest sections. To sum up, one may argue that much of the increased public spending is not going to benefit the common people as it is mostly a one-time investment for defence personnel. The reduction of out-of-pocket

expenditure is a sign of distress and a result of methodological limitations of the NSSO, rather than a sign of increased financial protection.

MEDIATION BILL: NOT GETTING THE ACT TOGETHER

Over the last 15 years, the dispute resolution landscape in India has undergone significant change with the advent of mediation. To house this consensual creature in the same stables as thoroughbreds of adversarial litigation and arbitration was a challenge, and even more to ensure that they got on reasonably well, working in tandem in inventive ways like arbitration-cum-mediation and vice versa. It seems to be the way of the world that when something becomes prominent, there must be a law to regulate it. And so with mediation. While scattered mention was made of its use in several statutes, including commercial and consumer disputes, there was no comprehensive statute providing for all dimensions of the mediation process and its practice. Such a need was articulated in several quarters, notwithstanding doubters and dissenters who insist that regulation will kill the free spirit that mediation embodies. A group of senior mediators was set up by the Supreme Court Committee in charge of court-annexed mediation process, and over a period of several months, a draft Bill emerged which then started to make its way through the labyrinthine processes of governmental and legislative mandarins. The resultant Bill titled the Draft Mediation Bill 2021, slated for presentation now to Parliament, bears no resemblance to the original in some crucial places. It reminds the mediation community of an old Clint Eastwood film — the Good, the Bad, and the Sad (tweaked).

The good

The Bill recognises that mediation has come of age and needs to be treated as a profession, which is a huge improvement over the part-time honorarium basis it has in the court-annexed mediation schemes. The Bill acknowledges the importance of institutes to train mediators, and service providers to provide structured mediation under their rules. It provides for pre-litigation mediation. This is quite a remarkable step, but is designed to be easy to implement. Parties are required to have at least one substantive session with the mediator where the process is explained to them. Thereafter they are free to continue or terminate the mediation and follow the litigation path if they so decide. Further, if any urgent interim order is needed, they can bypass mediation at the first stage and return to it after resolving the interim relief issue. Another plus is that the Bill does away with the confusion emanating from using both expressions "mediation" and "conciliation" in different statutes by opting for the former in accordance with international practice, and defining it widely to include the latter. It recognises online dispute resolution, a process that is going to move mediation from the wings to centre stage in a world that COVID-19 has changed. It provides for enforcement of commercial settlements reached in international mediation viz between parties from different countries as per the Singapore Convention on Mediation to which India was a notable signatory. The Convention assures disputants that their mediation settlements will be enforced without much difficulty across the world, unlike the fresh headaches that the litigative decree or arbitration award present at the time of enforcement.

The bad

Leading in from the last point, it is expected that this Bill would make India a hub for international mediation in the commercial disputes field, and indeed institutions are being opened for this purpose. Exactly the reverse may happen. This is because the Bill unwisely treats international mediation when conducted in India as a domestic mediation. The settlement under the latter is given the status of a judgment or decree of a court. Now, that is excellent for cases between Indian

parties, but disastrous when one party is foreign. The reason is that the Singapore Convention does not apply to settlements which already have the status of a judgment or decree. Ergo, if you conduct your cross-border mediation in India, you lose out on the tremendous benefits of worldwide enforceability. In sum, go to Singapore or Sri Lanka or anywhere else other than India to conduct your mediation. If this drafting mismatch is not remedied, dreams of our robust hubs and ease of doing business in India are neatly nipped in the bud. Then comes the governing mechanism, the Council. It has three members: a retired senior judge, a person with experience of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) law and an academic who has taught ADR. This is an all-powerful body which regulates, certifies, accredits, plans, governs, etc., and it doesn't have a single mediator. Judging from the fact that these are full-time members, it is clear that none of them will be active practitioners. Most likely we are looking at sinecures for the bureaucratic and academic world. Certainly this Bill will be unique where a profession is being regulated without a single professional on the regulator. Try doing that to lawyers, doctors and accountants. And one more lapse — this is the field of dispute resolution, the judiciary's domain, so how come the Chief Justice of India is not in the picture for making appointments? Then there is a long list of disputes which should not be mediated. Some of them look understandable at first sight but unnecessary at second. Fraud, for example. It is standard practice in litigation to make as many and as serious charges as possible; that doesn't prevent parties from settling, and these accusations are disposed of by retraction or apology or simply ignored. In cases involving minors or persons of unsound mind, the law provides for the court to pass orders to protect them. All that is necessary is to provide that any settlement of disputes involving them needs the court's approval, not to deny the possibility of a beneficial mediated settlement. Patents and copyright cases settle on commercial terms leaving untouched the validity of the grant, so why deny this possibility and consign the parties to litigative longevity? In the case of telecom, why can't manufacturers and service providers and consumers be allowed to talk and resolve issues?

The sad

Why can't we get our act together to get the Mediation Bill in good shape? Why can't all the stakeholders get this Bill together? Mediators, lawyers, judges have applied their minds to a considerable degree. To be fair to the government, it did call for comments on the draft Bill. What is missing is the element of focused and engaged discussion after comments are sent. It is as though a wall has been erected and no one knows what is going to emerge. We all have a common purpose: to place mediation strongly in our legal landscape, and place India prominently in the world's mediation landscape. Even if it takes more discussion and consideration amongst all stakeholders, let that be done. It is for Parliament now to do the needful. We should not settle for less.

BE AWARE OF BITCOIN, OTHER CRYPTOCURRENCIES

Virtual currencies created using blockchain technology have been the subject of great speculation and discussion in recent times. Legendary investors Charlie Munger and Warren Buffet have gone as far as to call Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies 'rat poison.' Before debating on whether to ban private cryptocurrency, it is prudent first to understand what cryptocurrencies are. Cryptocurrencies are digital encrypted tokens that can be transferred between two parties without the need for a centralised regulator. The facilitators of the transaction work to verify a transaction individually and maintain a public ledger open for anyone to see.

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No intrinsic value

The elimination of a centralised entity is why we see the word 'decentralisation' being thrown around very often. Cryptocurrencies are not 'untraceable' as most believe; in fact, it happens to be more traceable than currency notes due to the public ledger leaving a clear trail. In addition, when discussing the merits of cryptocurrencies, one must understand that it possesses no intrinsic value. Stocks provide partial ownership of a firm that produces goods and services, bonds provide a steady source of income, and gold has inherent metal value. Cryptocurrencies are non-productive assets that are merely traded because there is demand for it. Ex-RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan had stated recently in a TV interview that "a lot of cryptos have value only because there is a greater fool out there willing to buy". Cryptocurrencies are eerily similar to the tulip mania of 1636, when tulips were being traded for the sake of turning a profit. Another essential point to note is that although theoretically there is a scarcity of Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies, that does not mean anything in terms of economics because there needs to be a particular purpose that will sustain demand for the asset. Some claim that Bitcoin and other private cryptocurrencies are a new revolution in currencies and the monetary system. No central bank or government around the world would be interested in relinquishing power over the money supply. Private cryptocurrencies being adopted as a legitimate currency in the nation will spell the end of regulation and economic intervention by the central bank. This is because central banks require the ability to manipulate the money supply to intervene during a crisis. Private cryptocurrencies strip the central bank of this power, leaving the central bank effectively unable to set interest rates and control the money supply efficiently. In a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it would become challenging for monetary regulators to step in and aid a wounded economy. Therefore, it is improbable for any notable government to favour and encourage private cryptocurrencies for these reasons. Moreover, due to speculation, cryptocurrencies ensure that they can never act as a measure of the value of goods and services. For a cryptocurrency such as Bitcoin to be accepted as a currency, it has to price goods. Bitcoin, an extremely volatile cryptocurrency (like its counterparts), cannot act as a currency in a stable economy.

Ban on cryptos

Although a particular country can choose to ban private cryptocurrencies, that this does not mean anything to the asset as a whole is untrue. The significant advantage which cryptocurrencies pose, which is decentralisation, leads to its downfall. Any government with large enough pockets can decide to take down the cryptocurrency by destroying its monetary value. The incentive for miners and other participants to maintain the system is financial. If the price of a cryptocurrency such as Bitcoin were to drop to 0, it would be devastating. The act of a significant government announcing its intention to take down cryptocurrencies would leave a considerable dent in the price. Additionally, cryptocurrency mining takes up a substantial amount of a country's resources which could be put to more productive uses. It is crucial for governments worldwide to decide on a course of action regarding this growing technology and equip themselves accordingly. The longer it takes for regulators to implement a plan, the greater there is to lose as the amount of money being channeled into the asset grows further. Unfortunately, all bubbles come to an abrupt end leaving many financially distraught. Those who invest in cryptocurrencies need to understand that they are speculating rather than investing. It follows that while speculating, one takes comprehensive care to know what they are getting into. Therefore, it is vital that an individual does not stake their financial security upon this novel asset.

TWITTER'S NEW HELMSMAN

Early last year, amid news that one of Twitter's large investors was pushing for a leadership change at the social media network, NYU marketing professor Scott Galloway told NPR, "I think product development has been anaemic. I think their business model is flawed. But more than anything, you know, the lowest lying fruit here is to find a full time CEO." The reference was to the fact that co-founder Jack Dorsey wasn't just heading Twitter; he was also the CEO of the financial services company Square. Pushing for a change was powerful investor Elliott Management. A truce was eventually worked out, giving Mr. Dorsey a breather, and Elliott and private equity firm Silver Lake board seats. A Reuters report said at that time that, "In reaching the agreement with Twitter, Elliott keeps a close eye on Dorsey while also giving the company more time to formulate long-term plans and repair missteps, people familiar with Elliott's thinking said." More than a year-and-a-half later, Twitter now finally has a full-time CEO. A few days ago, the baton passed from Mr. Dorsey to Parag Agrawal, its chief technology officer. It was just 10 years ago that Mr. Agrawal joined Twitter as a software engineer. This was after a BTech from IIT-Bombay and a doctorate from Stanford University, where his thesis was about presenting "efficient techniques for managing and integrating uncertain data". He needed just six years to become its CTO, a role in which, as Reuters reported, "he oversaw Twitter's technical strategy and was responsible for improving the pace of software development while advancing the use of machine learning across the company". While the selection of an Indian-origin person to a global CEO role isn't rare any more, the development was nonetheless a matter of great interest in India. What is rare about Mr. Agrawal's rise to the top job is he is one of the few CTOs to have been pushed up to the top job. Also, at 37, he is the youngest to head an S&P 500 company. Mr. Dorsey, announcing his resignation to his employees, wrote that Mr. Agrawal "has been my choice for some time given how deeply he understands the company and its needs. Parag has been behind every critical decision that helped turn this company around." Mr. Dorsey further added: "My trust in him as our CEO is bone deep."

Flow of news

Twitter carries enormous clout in the flow of the news in the world. But this clout has rarely translated into the kind of commercial success that, say, Facebook has managed to taste. Its ability to monetise adequately has almost always been under scrutiny. It has also never managed to scale up beyond a few hundred million users, much less than the billions that the Meta (Facebook) family of social networks have. But its problems don't stop there. Like other social platforms, it has been pulled up by authorities across the world over its interpretation of what is acceptable content and what is not. But we have a hint of the new CEO's thought process regarding this. In an interview with MIT Technology Review last year, Mr. Agrawal said, "Our approach to it isn't to try to identify or flag all potential misinformation. But our approach is rooted in trying to avoid specific harm that misleading information can cause." Mr. Agrawal, as the head of tech, has been credited with speeding up implementation in a company that has faced criticism that it doesn't bring on new features fast enough. And over the years, it has indeed added new elements to its primary offering. The changes include increasing the character limit, building a Snapchat-like feature that makes sure content disappears after 24 hours, creating a social audio feature a la Clubhouse, and introducing a subscription service. But they haven't decisively shifted Twitter's growth trajectory upwards. Mr. Agrawal has also played an important role in Mr. Dorsey's pet project Bluesky, an attempt at building a decentralised standard for social media. This is seen as a solution that promises to support free speech while minimising the impact of abusive online behaviour. While giving up his role, Mr. Dorsey said Twitter has finally broken away from being a

"founder-led" company, which he felt was "severely limiting and a single point of failure". How this translates into choices that the new CEO makes remains to be seen.

LIFE & SCIENCE

BEES FROM ASIA

Research led by York University has shown that a species of honey-producing bee called the western honey bee (Apis mellifera) most likely originated in Asia, settling the hotly debated topic for decades. Until recently, it was believed that these bees had originated in Africa. The study (Science Advances) found that the western honey bees expanded independently from Asia into Africa and Europe creating seven separate geographically and genetically distinct evolutionary lineages traceable back to Western Asia, a York University release says. The research team sequenced 251 genomes from 18 subspecies from the honey bee's native range and reconstructed the origin and pattern of dispersal of honey bees. The team found that an Asian origin – likely Western Asia – was strongly supported by genetics. The study highlights several "hot spots" in the bee genome that allowed honey bees to adapt to new geographic areas. While the bee genome has more than 12,000 genes, only 145 of them had repeated signatures of adaptation associated with the formation of all major honey bee lineages found today, the release says. The sequencing of these bees also led to the discovery of two distinct lineages, one in Egypt and another in Madagascar. The researchers hope their study finally lays to the rest the question of where the western honey bee came from so future research can further explore how they adapted to different climates and geographic areas. The western honey bee is used for crop pollination and honey production throughout most of the world, and has a remarkable capacity for surviving in vastly different environments – from tropical rainforest, to arid environments, to temperate regions with cold winters. It is native to Africa, Europe and Asia.

COVID TERMS TOP GOOGLE'S 'NEAR ME', 'HOW TO' SEARCHES

The intensity of Covid-19 spread during the second surge earlier this year is reflected in internet search queries made in the country, with 'Covid vaccine near me', 'Covid test near me', 'Food delivery near me', 'Oxygen cylinder near me' and 'Covid hospital near me' being among the top searched queries in the 'near me' category in India during 2021, according to Google. Similarly, in the 'How to' category, the top five search queries were: 'How to register for Covid vaccine', 'How to download vaccination certificate', 'How to increase oxygen level', 'How to link PAN with AADHAAR, and 'How to make oxygen at home'. Shortage of oxygen cylinders grappled Covid-19 patients during the second surge, which lasted from late March till June. Notably, the peak interest in most of these Covid-related terms happened during April, but the search terms continued to top the charts even at the end of the year. In comparison, during 2020, the top five 'near me' search queries were: 'Food shelters near me', 'Covid test near me', 'Crackers shop near me', 'Liquor shops near me', and 'Night shelter near me'. In the 'How to' category, the top five search queries last year were: 'How to make paneer', 'How to increase immunity', 'How to make dalgona coffee', 'How to link PAN card with aadhaar card, and 'How to make sanitizer at home'. Back in April, in line with the nationwide spike in cases, search queries representing people looking for Covid-19 essentials such as Remdesivir injections, RT-PCR tests, oxygen cylinders and hospital beds had surged on Google. As an example, compared to the third-ranked 'How to' query this year — 'How to increase oxygen level' — last year's top 'How to' query — 'How to make paneer' — had witnessed a lower peak. The numbers on the Google Search trends represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. As per Google, the suffix "near me" to a search term indicates a "signal of intent" by those running that query on the search engine. "'Near me'

searches this year were especially evocative of the year that was, with searches on Covid Vaccine, Covid tests, Covid hospital filling up the top slots. Searches for oxygen cylinders and CT scans also witnessed a spike as people fought the tide of the pandemic over the course of the year. In addition, queries on food deliveries, tiffin services and takeout restaurants also surged with people looking to ride out the intermittent lockdowns," it said in a statement. Among the overall search queries though, cricket continued to top the charts in India, with 'Indian Premier League' and 'ICC T20 World Cup' filling the first and third spots, split by 'CoWIN'. At fourth and fifth were 'Euro Cup' and 'Tokyo Olympics', respectively.

SPORTS TOPPED INDIA'S GOOGLE SEARCHES IN 2021

Sports, COVID-19 and farmers' protest were among the top topics that Indian users looked for and talked about on social media in 2021. While Indian Premier League (IPL) and ICC T20 World Cup filled the top spots in the overall list of queries on Google search, '#Covid19' and '#FarmersProtest' were the most tweeted hashtags on Twitter. IPL, which had topped the trending query list last year as well, was followed by CoWIN, ICC T20 World Cup, Euro Cup, Tokyo Olympics and COVID Vaccine in the top trending query list on search engine Google. 2021 also witnessed a strong interest in regional cinema, with Tamil film Jai Bhim securing the top spot on the movies list. On Twitter, Australian cricketer Pat Cummins's tweet about his donation to COVID-19 relief in India was the most retweeted tweet of the year in the country, while Indian cricketer Virat Kohli's tweet announcing the birth of his daughter was the most liked tweet.

NEW ZEALAND'S PLAN TO END SMOKING: A LIFETIME BAN FOR YOUTH

New Zealand's government believes it has come up with a unique plan to end tobacco smoking — a lifetime ban for those aged 14 or younger. Under a new law the government announced Thursday and plans to pass next year, the minimum age to buy cigarettes would keep rising year after year. That means, in theory at least, 65 years after the law takes effect, shoppers could still buy cigarettes — but only if they could prove they were at least 80 years old. In practice, officials hope smoking will fade away decades before then. Indeed, the plan sets a goal of having fewer than 5% of New Zealanders smoking by 2025. Other parts of the plan include allowing only the sale of tobacco products with very low nicotine levels and slashing the number of stores that can sell them. The changes would be brought in over time to help retailers adjust. Because the current minimum age to buy cigarettes in New Zealand is 18, the lifetime smoking ban for youth wouldn't have an impact for a few years. In an interview with The Associated Press, New Zealand's Associate Health Minister Dr. Ayesha Verrall, who is spearheading the plan, said her work at a public hospital in Wellington involved telling several smokers they had developed cancer. "You meet, every day, someone facing the misery caused by tobacco," Verrall said. "The most horrible ways people die. Being short of breath, caused by tobacco." Smoking rates have steadily fallen in New Zealand for years, with only about 11% of adults now smoking and 9% smoking every day. The daily rate among Indigenous Maori remains much higher at 22%. Under the government's plan, a taskforce would be created to help reduce smoking among Maori. Big tax increases have already been imposed on cigarettes in recent years and some question why they aren't hiked even higher. "We don't think tax increases will have any further impact," Verrall said. "It's really hard to quit and we feel if we did that, we'd be punishing those people who are addicted to cigarettes even more." And she said the tax measures tend to place a higher burden on lower-income people, who are more likely to smoke. The new law wouldn't impact vaping. Verrall said that tobacco smoking is far more harmful and remains a leading cause of preventable deaths in New Zealand, killing up to 5,000 people each year. "We think vaping's a really appropriate quit tool," she said.

The sale of vaping products is already restricted to those aged 18 and over in New Zealand and vaping is banned in schools. Verrall said there was some evidence of a rise in youth vaping, a trend she is following "really closely." New Zealand's approach to ban the next generation from tobacco smoking hasn't been tried elsewhere, she said. But she said studies have shown youth sales decrease when minimum ages are raised. In the U.S., the federal minimum age to buy tobacco products was raised from 18 to 21 two years ago. While public health experts have generally welcomed the New Zealand plan, not everybody is happy. Sunny Kaushal said some stores could be put out of business. Kaushal chairs the Dairy and Business Owners Group, which represents nearly 5,000 corner stores — often called dairies in New Zealand — and gas stations. "We all want a smoke-free New Zealand," he said. "But this is going to hugely impact small businesses. It should not be done so it is destroying dairies, lives and families in the process. It's not the way." Kaushal said the tax increases on tobacco had already created a black market that was being exploited by gangs, and the problem would only get worse.

THE LONG WEEKEND

At a time when most of us are waking up screaming from nightmares about Zoom meetings that get scheduled on the weekend or work deadlines that coincide with down time, the UAE has pulled off something revolutionary. The country has introduced a four-and-a-half day work week, becoming the first in the world to have a national work week that's shorter than the global five-day week. The UAE's new work week has been instituted to serve two purposes. The first is aligning the country with nations that follow a Saturday/Sunday weekend and strengthening economic links with them. But it's the second one that has a more universal resonance — boosting worker productivity and improving work-life balance. It is not a coincidence that the UAE's move should come even as countries like the US and the UK reel under what is being called The Great Resignation, with record numbers of people quitting their jobs. The pandemic may have driven many to quit their jobs, thanks to the phenomenon known as Covid burnout, but the situation was far from ideal even before the virus erased whatever faint lines that people had managed to draw between their work lives and personal lives. The meandering, seemingly endless virtual meeting may have become our chief bogeyman only since March 2020, but the 3 am work text was a very real horror even before then. Contrary to what those who oppose shorter working hours fear, the promise of assured rest only makes people more productive, with the proper amount of leisure time recharging them enough to work with greater motivation. This was proved by Iceland's nationwide trials, run from 2015 to 2019, that reduced work hours without reducing pay, resulting in less stress and burnout, with productivity being unaffected or even improving. More leisure also makes sense from an economic perspective: As time frees up for leisure activities, related sectors, such as travel, sports and entertainment, see growth. The UAE has already seen the wisdom of this. The rest of the world shouldn't lag behind.

UN CONFERS OBSERVER STATUS ON SOLAR ALLIANCE

The UN General Assembly has conferred Observer Status on the International Solar Alliance (ISA), a historic decision which India said would help provide for a well-defined cooperation between the alliance and the UN that would benefit global energy growth and development. The ISA was conceived as a joint effort by India and France to mobilise efforts against climate change through the deployment of solar energy solutions. It was presented by the leaders of the two countries at the 21st Conference of Parties (COP21) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Paris in 2015. "I am taking the floor on behalf of India and France. I take this opportunity to thank the entire UN membership for adopting the resolution conferring

Observer Status to the International Solar Alliance (ISA). I am particularly happy that such a historic decision has been taken by the UN General Assembly under your [UNGA President Abdulla Shahid] leadership, under the Presidency of Hope," Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti said in a statement on Thursday. "Congratulations! Today, the General Assembly, based on the Sixth Committee report, adopted resolution 76/123 & unanimously decided to invite the International Solar Alliance to participate in the sessions & work of the General Assembly in the capacity of an 'Observer'," UN General Assembly President Shahid tweeted.

WEALTH OF NATIONS

The latest World Inequality Report — authored by co-director of the World Inequality Lab, Lucas Chancel, along with economists Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman — makes for a sobering read. It details the rising levels of income and wealth inequality across countries. As far as income is concerned, the richest 10 per cent of the global population currently takes 52 per cent of global income, whereas the poorest half of the population earns 8.5 per cent of it. The picture is worse when it comes to wealth inequalities. India is one of the worst performers. "India stands out as a poor and very unequal country, with an affluent elite," states the report. While the top 10 per cent and top 1 per cent hold respectively 57 per cent and 22 per cent of total national income, the bottom 50 per cent share has gone down to 13 per cent. It is not just the inequality in income and wealth that plagues India. The report also points to extreme gender and carbon inequality. For instance, at 18 per cent the female labour income share in India is one of the lowest in the world — only slightly higher than the average share in the Middle East (15 per cent) and significantly lower than the average in Asia (21 per cent, excluding China). Similarly, a person in the bottom 50 per cent of India's population is responsible for, on average, five times fewer emissions than the average person in the bottom 50 per cent in the European Union and 10 times fewer than the average person in the bottom 50 per cent in the US. Inequality is so high in the country that when India is removed from calculations, the global bottom 50 per cent income share rises. Alarming as these findings are, they are not entirely surprising. That's because in India's case the primary instrument — that is, fast economic growth — to reduce poverty and counter inequality has been faltering for a while. GDP growth has been rather iffy since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and has completely lost its momentum since the start of 2017. For a relatively poor country such as India, the most durable and dependable way to reduce inequality is to increase the size of the GDP pie. That is the first policy lesson for the government. However, as evidence from across the world has shown, fast GDP growth alone doesn't help, especially when it comes to tackling inequalities in accessing education and health. That is the second key policy lesson. A good starting point in this regard would be for the government to improve the quality of data on inequality within the country.

INDIA 'VERY UNEQUAL', TOP 10% HOLD 57% OF NATIONAL INCOME: INEQUALITY REPORT

India stands out as a "poor and very unequal country, with an affluent elite", where the top 10 per cent holds 57 per cent of the total national income while the bottom 50 per cent's share is just 13 per cent in 2021, according to the latest World Inequality Report 2022. The report has also flagged a drop in global income during 2020, with about half of the dip in rich countries and the rest in low-income and emerging regions. This is attributed primarily due to the impact of "South and Southeast Asia, and more precisely" India. "When India is removed from the analysis, it appears that the global bottom 50 per cent income share actually slightly increased in 2020," states the report authored by economist and co-director of the World Inequality Lab, Lucas Chancel, along

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with economists Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman. According to the report, India's middle class is relatively poor with an average wealth of only Rs 7,23,930 or 29.5 per cent of the total national income, as compared with the top 10 per cent and 1 per cent who own 65 per cent (Rs 63,54,070) and 33 per cent (Rs 3,24,49,360), respectively. The average annual national income of the Indian adult population is Rs 2,04,200 in 2021. The bottom 50 per cent earned Rs 53,610, while the top 10 per cent earned over 20 times more (Rs 11,66,520), the report states. The average household wealth in India is Rs 9,83,010, with the bottom 50 per cent owning almost nothing, with an average wealth of 6 per cent of the total Rs 66,280. The share of top 10 per cent and bottom 50 per cent in pre-tax national income has remained broadly constant from 2014 onwards. For India, the quality of inequality data released by the Government has seriously deteriorated, making it particularly difficult to assess recent inequality changes, the report states. As per the recent Multi-dimensional Poverty Index (MPI) prepared by Niti Aayog, one in every four people in India was multidimensionally poor. Bihar has the highest proportion of people (51.91 per cent of the state's population) who are multidimensionally poor, followed by Jharkhand at 42.16 per cent and Uttar Pradesh at 37.79 per cent. According to the inequality report, global inequalities seem to be about as great today as they were at the peak of Western imperialism in the early 20th century. The poorest half of the global population "barely owns any wealth" possessing just 2 per cent of the total, whereas the richest 10 per cent of the global population own 76 per cent of all wealth, it states. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are the most unequal regions in the world, whereas Europe has the lowest inequality levels, the report says. In Europe, the top 10 per cent income share is around 36 per cent, whereas in MENA it is 58 per cent. In East Asia, the top 10 per cent makes 43 per cent of total income and in Latin America the share is 55 per cent. According to the report, even as countries have become richer over the last 40 years, their governments have become significantly poorer, a trend which has been magnified due to the pandemic. "The share of wealth held by public actors is close to zero or negative in rich countries, meaning that the totality of wealth is in private hands. This trend has been magnified by the Covid crisis, during which governments borrowed the equivalent of 10-20 per cent of GDP, essentially from the private sector," it said. The report has suggested levying a modest progressive wealth tax on multimillionaires. "Given the large volume of wealth concentration, modest progressive taxes can generate significant revenues for governments. In our scenario, we find that 1.6 per cent of global incomes could be generated and reinvested in education, health and the ecological transition," it says. In 2021, there were 62.2 million people in the world owning more than $1 million (measured at market exchange rates), the report states. Their average wealth was $2.8 million, representing a total of $174 trillion and a global effective wealth tax rate of 1.2 per cent could generate revenues of 2.1 per cent of global income, it says. On gender terms, women's share of total incomes from work (labour income) was about 30 per cent in 1990 and is less than 35 per cent now, the report states. The report also notes that inequalities within countries are now greater than those observed between countries. At the same time, the gap between the average incomes of the top 10 per cent and the bottom 50 per cent of individuals within countries has almost doubled. "This sharp rise in within-country inequalities has meant that despite economic catch-up and strong growth in the emerging countries, the world remains particularly unequal today," the report states. Since the mid-1980s, deregulation and liberalisation policies have led to one of the most extreme increases in income and wealth inequality in the world, it said. "While the top 1 per cent has largely benefited from economic reforms, growth among low and middle income groups has been relatively slow and poverty persists," it states.

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HYDROGEN SULPHIDE SUPPRESSES HIV

Researchers at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc.) and their collaborators have identified a key role played by hydrogen sulphide (H2S) gas in suppressing the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). Increased H2S was found to have a direct effect on reducing the rate at which the virus multiplies in HIV-infected human immune cells. The finding paves the way for developing a more comprehensive antiretroviral therapy against HIV. The team included researchers from the Department of Microbiology and Cell Biology (MCB) and the Centre for Infectious Disease Research (CIDR) at IISc., along with collaborators from the Bangalore Medical College and Research Institute. The results are published in the journal eLife. According to an IISc. release, current state-of-the-art combined antiretroviral therapy (cART) is not a cure for HIV. It can only suppress the virus by causing it to become latent. "Unfortunately, in some cases, cART is known to fail even when patients fully follow their drug regimen. Certain negative effects are also associated with cART, such as the build-up of toxic molecules leading to 'oxidative stress' and loss of function in the mitochondria, the cell's powerhouse. These effects can contribute to inflammation and organ damage. Stopping cART is also not an option because the virus can reactivate – emerge from its latent state – in the absence of therapy," according to the release. Amit Singh, Associate Professor in MCB/CIDR and corresponding author of the study, said, scientists have recently begun exploring the beneficial effects of the presence of H2S in HIV-infected cells on both oxidative stress and mitochondrial dysfunction. As the role of H2S in HIV has not been explored before, the authors had to set up experiments from scratch. "Studying the effects of a gaseous molecule on HIV required us to build and validate new model systems," said Virender Kumar Pal, a PhD. student in MCB and the first author of the study.

STUDY FINDS MECHANISM OF BLOOD CLOTS AFTER GIVING OXFORD VACCINE

A multi-institutional study published on December 1 in the journal Science Advances has revealed for the first time the mechanism responsible for blood clots arising from thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS) following vaccination with AstraZeneca vaccine. Thrombocytopenia syndrome causes low platelet count. A low number of platelets – blood cells that help prevent blood loss when vessels are damaged – can result in no symptoms or can lead to an increased risk of bleeding or, in some cases, clotting.

Rare adverse effect

Thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome is a very rare serious adverse effect following vaccination using chimpanzee adenovirus Y25 (ChAdOx1), human adenovirus type 26 (HAdV-D26), and human adenovirus type 5 (HAdV-C5). In June 2021, scientists from Germany and Norway reported that antibodies that activated the platelets, a blood component involved in clotting, were seen in young people who developed the clots after vaccination with AstraZeneca vaccine. But the precise mechanism behind it was not known then. AstraZeneca vaccine and the Indian counterpart Covishield use the chimpanzee adenovirus Y25, while Johnson & Johnson vaccine uses the human adenovirus type 26. The Sputnik vaccine uses both human adenovirus type 26 and human adenovirus type 5 as vectors to ferry the spike protein into certain cells. The researchers found that all three adenoviruses used in a few COVID-19 vaccines as vectors bind to platelet factor 4 (PF4). They found that adenoviruses form stable complexes with PF4.

Misplaced immunity

According to an Arizona University release, in very rare cases, the viral vector may enter the bloodstream and bind to PF4, where the immune system then views this complex as foreign. The scientists believe this misplaced immunity could result in the release of antibodies against PF4, which bind to and activate platelets, causing them to cluster together and triggering blood clots in a very small number of people after the vaccine is administered. They used state-of-the-art computational simulations to demonstrate an electrostatic interaction mechanism between platelet factor 4 (PF4) and the viral vector used in the AstraZeneca vaccine. They determined the structure of the viral vector used in AstraZeneca vaccine to carry out the computational simulation. In addition, the researchers also confirmed it through in vitro studies involving cell-based experiments and surface plasmon resonance. "Vaccine-induced immune thrombotic thrombocytopenia (VITT) only happens in extremely rare cases because a chain of complex events needs to take place to trigger this ultra-rare side-effect. Our data confirms PF4 (platelet factor 4) can bind to adenoviruses, an important step in unravelling the mechanism underlying VITT. Establishing a mechanism could help to prevent and treat this disorder," Dr. Alan Parker, an expert in the use of adenoviruses for medical applications from Cardiff University's School of Medicine, said in the release. "We hope our findings can be used to better understand the rare side-effects of these new vaccines – and potentially to design new and improved vaccines to turn the tide on this global pandemic," he added. The scientists believe that the specific interaction between the fibre knob protein of the adenovirus and platelet factor 4 (PF4), and the manner the complex is presented to the immune system might prompt the immune system to see it as foreign and release of antibodies against this complex.

Electrostatics in action

One of the ways the fibre knob protein of the adenovirus and platelet factor 4 tightly bind is through electrostatic interactions. The group showed that the fibre knob protein is mostly electronegative across approximately 90% of its surface, interrupted in interhexon spaces, where the surface potential rises. On the other hand, the platelet factor 4 (PF4) has a strong electropositive surface potential. This makes the fibre knob protein attract other positively charged molecules, particularly the platelet factor 4 (PF4) to its surface. They found that the human adenovirus type 26 (HAdV-D26) has an overall electronegative surface potential but less strong than chimpanzee adenovirus used in AstraZeneca vaccine. "We demonstrate that this interaction is not specific to chimpanzee adenovirus Y25 (ChAdOx1) fibre knob protein and that platelet factor 4 forms interactions with Ad5 and Ad26 with similar affinity. We also observed that heparin reduces the ability of platelet factor 4 (PF4) to associate with chimpanzee adenovirus fibre knob protein," they write. The human adenovirus type 26 has also been implicated in TTS at a similar frequency to chimpanzee adenovirus Y25 (ChAdOx1) on a per dose basis. Using a previously published model of Ad26, the researchers performed simulations for ChAdOx1 and observed that platelet factor 4 (PF4) contacted Ad26 less frequently than ChAdOx1. But further studies are needed with Ad26 before reaching any conclusions, they note.

Using heparin

"Current clinical guidance from the World Health Organization advises against the use of heparin in the treatment of TTS. Although our data suggest that heparin may inhibit the proposed interaction between ChAdOx1 and PF4, it does not provide any insights as to the effect of heparin on patients after they develop symptoms or its behaviour in the wider biological context. Therefore, it is important to continue to adhere to current clinical guidance pending further

studies on the role of heparin in TTS," they write. "With a better understanding of the mechanism by which PF4 and adenoviruses interact there is an opportunity to engineer the shell of the vaccine, the capsid, to prevent this interaction with PF4. Modifying ChAdOx1 to reduce the negative charge may reduce the chance of causing thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome," Dr. Alexander T. Baker from Arizona University says in the release.

A PLANT-BASED CHEWING GUM THAT 'TRAPS' CORONAVIRUS

Researchers have developed a chewing gum that they say can potentially reduce transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. The chewing gum is laced with a plant-grown protein, which serves as a "trap" for the virus. This reduces viral load in saliva and potentially tamps down transmission, say the researchers, who have published their study in the journal Molecular Therapy. When a person infected with SARS-CoV-2 sneezes, coughs or speaks, some of the virus can be expelled and reach others. The chewing gum targets the virus in the saliva, and does so by trapping it with the ACE2 protein. The ACE2 protein in humans is where the coronavirus latches on to, in order to enter the cell. Before the pandemic, Henry Daniell of the University of Pennsylvania had been studying ACE2 for treating hypertension. His lab had grown ACE2 using a patented plant-based production system. Daniell and colleague Hyun (Michel) Koo had also been working on developing a chewing gum infused with plant-grown proteins to disrupt dental plaque. Daniell wondered if such a gum, infused with plant-grown ACE2, could neutralise SARS-CoV-2 in the oral cavity, the University of Pennsylvania said in a release. Daniell, Koo and virologist Ronald Collman grew ACE2 in plants, paired with another compound, and incorporated the resulting plant material into cinnamon-flavoured gum tablets. Incubating samples obtained from nasopharyngeal swabs from Covid-positive patients with the gum, they found that the ACE2 could neutralise SARS-CoV-2.

A MEASURED RESPONSE

The threat posed by Omicron is tenuous and it will still be a few weeks before a comprehensive understanding of it emerges, but what is known unambiguously is that this latest variant of the coronavirus is extremely infectious. Nearly 50 countries now have reported its presence within their borders but insight into its effects is available only from South Africa. A preliminary analysis of patients in Tshwane district, in Gauteng Province of South Africa, which has been the global epicentre of the Omicron-led fourth wave, suggests that despite its infectiousness, Omicron is less deadly than other variants that have led the country's previous three waves. When 166 new admissions were analysed, there were 10 deaths in the past two weeks, making up 6.6% of the 166 admissions. By comparison, the death rates in previous waves ranged from 17%-23%. The major caveat, as scientists who are part of the South African Medical Research Council point out, is that patterns could rapidly change in the next two weeks as it takes nearly a month for infection to reveal its worst-case outcome of death, and so the current data of two weeks are insufficient. Trends in hospitalisation too are encouraging, the scientists say. Finally, the third piece is that an overwhelmingly large number of those needing intensive care were unvaccinated. Of 38 adults in the COVID wards, six were vaccinated, 24 were unvaccinated and eight had unknown vaccination status. Of nine patients with COVID pneumonia, eight are unvaccinated. Therefore, the prevalent wisdom that despite being highly infectious, vaccination — it is not clear if those in the wards were fully or partially vaccinated — significantly protected against disease and death. But vaccination trends in South Africa are not encouraging. Only about 30% of the country has had one dose and only 25% fully vaccinated. Reports have suggested that the South African government has actually had to delay vaccination because it claimed it had "too much stock", underlining that problems of vaccine hesitancy or easy access for the greater part of the

population was a challenge. As observed in previous waves, the first line of defence — or neutralising antibodies produced as a result of a prior infection or vaccination — was significantly reduced when confronted with the Beta or Delta variants. The same appears to be the case with Omicron, but the second line of defence, or cellular immunity, continues to be effective from the extant evidence. Hence, the lesson for the world continues to be that rather than focus on the novelty of Omicron, it is wiser to double up on efforts to completely vaccinate people and then, based on the evidence, consider booster or subsequent doses.

DETECTING OMICRON

The Omicron variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus has been confirmed in India and in at least 30 other countries by the World Health Organization (WHO). While the variant can only be reliably confirmed with genome sequencing, the WHO has also recommended that certain commonly used COVID-19 detection tests, with 'S-gene dropout' capabilities, can be used to quickly screen for an Omicron infection.

What is the S-gene drop out?

Tests usually look for three target genes related to parts of the virus: S (spike), N2 (nucleocapsid or inner area) and E (envelope or outer shell). The S-gene refers to the gene that codes for the spike protein, or the most distinctive part of the coronavirus. The SARS-CoV-2, like many other coronaviruses, has key protein-regions that define its structure: The envelope protein (E), thenucleocapsid protein(N), the membrane protein (M) and the spike protein (S). To accurately identify the virus, diagnostic tests are made that can identify characteristic genes that make these proteins. To maintain the balance between cost, turn-around time and efficiency, makers of diagnostic kits usually target 1-3 genes on these regions. The SARS-CoV-2 virus incidentally has one of the largest genomes in the coronavirus family. One popular kit, called the TaqPath COVID-19 assays, identifies three gene targets from three regions one of which is the S region to confirm or rule out the presence of the coronavirus. Some versions of the coronavirus, notably B.1.1.7, known as the Alpha variant, and the Omicron variant (B.1.1.529), have characteristic amino acids missing on the S protein. Amino acids are the building blocks of protein. When tests designed to look for the 'S' gene encounter these coronaviruses with the missing amino acids, they show up as negative for the S gene and this is called the S Gene Targeted Failure or popularly S-gene drop out. Despite the negative 'S', the test will return positive in case of the presence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus because the genes on the 'E' and 'N' will likely signal a match. Some parts of the coronavirus are more conserved, or don't change too much, and make for more reliable test targets. The spike protein can change a lot—the coronavirus is continually evolving, trying to adapt to antibodies created from vaccines or prior infections—and tests too must keep changing to find appropriate targets.

How is this useful in the case of Omicron?

On November 26, the WHO declared Omicron as a variant of concern, practically the highest level of risk that it attributes to specific variants. It noted that several labs from around the world indicated that for "one widely used PCR test", one of the three target genes is not detected and this therefore could be used as a marker for this variant, pending sequencing confirmation. Using this approach, this variant had been detected at faster rates than previous surges in infection, suggesting that this variant may have a growth advantage. The WHO appeared to be referencing the TaqPath test but this by no means is the most widely used test in India. A challenge with RT-PCR tests is that companies often don't reveal what primers, or chemical tools, they employ to

look for specific viral genes. Therefore, it is hard to determine which test is best for certain variants and which can fail. "The TaqPath is one of the few that looks for three genes whereas India's official rules are that they must only be equipped to detect at least two," said a genome scientist, who declined to be identified. "Their test is a useful surrogate and a quick fix. Other variants and mutations can also cause a dropout and it is possible that the TaqPath doesn't pick it up." If a person manifests symptoms and is returning positive on a RT-PCR test, that also returns negative on the S gene, then it's a sign that the sample ought to be sent for a genome scan. India only scans a small percentage of positive samples to ascertain genomes and so a test that throws up intriguing results such as an S-gene dropout, may be prioritised for a more thorough genome scan.

What is the most reliable way to check for the new variant?

The Union Health Ministry has stated that all of the standardised RT-PCR tests coupled with genome sequencing are effective at detecting Omicron. While factors such as clinical symptoms and viral loads help in determining the virus, a variant can only be confirmed by genome sequencing which means waiting for a day or even weeks depending on available facilities.

WAS OMICRON DESIGNATED A VARIANT OF CONCERN IN HASTE?

On November 26, the World Health Organization designated the newly identified SARS-CoV-2 lineage B.1.1.529 with a whooping 32 mutations in the spike protein alone a variant of concern and named it 'Omicron', making it the 13th lineage to receive a Greek letter under its nomenclature system. The Greek letter nomenclature of variants was introduced by the WHO in 2021 as a uniform system of naming variants of interest and concern. This nomenclature system unifies the different systems of nomenclature that have existed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. These largely include the scientific names assigned by GISAID, the largest open-access global database of genome sequences and related data of SARS-CoV-2, Nextstrain, which provides a phylogenetic context of the genome sequences available in the public domain, and Pango, a network of researchers for dynamically identifying and naming lineages of SARS-CoV-2.

Bypassing stages

With the designation of Omicron as a variant under monitoring and further as a vaariant of concern (VOC) within a short span of two days, the WHO bypassed the stage of initially designating it as a variant of interest (VOI), which is a significant departure from the precedence followed for other variants of concern in the past. For context, while the designation of Delta took about six weeks from the reporting of the lineage to the Pango network to the designation of the lineage as a VOC, Omicron was designated within a week of detection of the lineage (B.1.1.529). Delta, in contrast, was first designated a VOI in April this year and was further upgraded to a VOC on May 11, taking into consideration the emerging evidence on the transmissibility, epidemiological correlations from India as well as experimental evidence from across the globe. Omicron, in contrast, was designated as a variant under monitoring on November 24 and was classified as a VOC two days later. The rapid pace at which WHO designated Omicron a VOC was a decision that did not come out of haste but was based on concrete scientific evidence which came early from Africa, although further efforts for evaluating the variant shall continue to gain more evidence. The timely detection of Omicron is predominantly attributable to the routine genome sequencing efforts of Network for Genomic Surveillance in South Africa (NGS-SA), an elaborate genomic and epidemiological surveillance network in South Africa comprising over 10 laboratories and

academic institutions having a rich experience of having dealt with previous waves of COVID-19, including the detection of the VOC Beta late in 2020.

Three factors

Typically, a variant is designated a VOC if it has evidence that supports one of the three possible factors – increase in transmissibility or a detrimental change in COVID-19 epidemiology, increase in virulence or change in clinical disease presentation, or decrease in effectiveness of public health and social measures including vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics. The early evidence for Omicron suggested a detrimental change in COVID-19 epidemiology, along with possible increase in transmissibility and decreased effectiveness of vaccines. The detection of the variant epidemiologically coincided with an outbreak and a further uptick in the number of COVID-19 cases in Gauteng, South Africa, which was previously affected by the Delta wave and was expected to have high community immunity. There were multiple instances of fully vaccinated cases, including where a booster dose had been received. This suggested that the variant poses a higher risk of reinfection and vaccination breakthrough. In contrast with the previous VOCs, a significant corpus of datasets having functional annotations of mutations in the virus based on evidence gathered from in-depth experiments from across the world is now available to help gain a deeper understanding of mutations in the context of transmission, immune escape and impact on current diagnostic tools and therapeutics. Of the 32 mutations identified in the Spike protein, a significant large number were associated with immune escape, cell entry as well as better binding to the human receptor proteins. Early structural analysis was also suggestive of better binding to the host receptors, which provided added confidence in the preliminary assessments. The early reports of a number of Omicron cases from different countries in Europe also suggested that the variant was indeed spreading fast. Apart from this, scientific evidence gathered, lessons learnt and wisdom gained while dealing with the previously designated VOCs – Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta also helped in the assessment.

Convergence of evidence

The rapid designation of Omicron as a VOC is therefore the convergence of a number of factors, scientific evidence of all the above-mentioned factors. A cluster of genome sequencing originating from Botswana, South Africa, as well as a traveller from Hong Kong, all met the eyes of researchers in South Africa, which led to the designation of the cluster as the lineage B.1.1.529 by the Pango network. While a part of the world prepares itself to combat the new variant with booster doses of vaccines and augmented healthcare preparedness, it is a grim reality that a large number in another part of the world are yet to receive their first dose of vaccine. The emergence of Omicron is thus a reminder that the virus will continue to evolve and prevail as long as a large part of the population lacks vaccines. The world should be reminded of the researchers in Africa, where under 7% of the population is currently vaccinated, who worked in not the best of infrastructure, funding and support systems that the world can offer, but have faithfully contributed to presenting with evidence that allows the world to be better prepared to handle the next wave. It is thus a shame that the healthcare workers in Africa would have to grapple with an upcoming wave of infection without access to vaccines, therapeutics and support essential for combating the new variant. With the emergence of Omicron as a variant of concern, that we may lose many of our brave African frontline warriors, for want of vaccines to the very threat they helped alert the world should indeed be a concern.