

CURRENT AFFAIRS for UPSC

23RD TO 29TH JANUARY, 2022

DreamIAS



INTERNATIONAL

SEEDS OF SUSPICION

As Russia stands poised on the edge of a military invasion of Ukraine and tensions are at an all-time high between Moscow and the West, it is evident that the seeds of deep-rooted suspicion between the U.S. and Russia were sown during the second term of the Barack Obama administration. As the U.S. correspondent for this newspaper during 2010-15, it was obvious to me that what could loosely be described as ‘Cold War 2.0’ was gaining traction during those years, and the interregnum of the Trump years thereafter did little to mitigate the bilateral malaise. Mr. Obama began, as most idealistic leaders do, with good intentions, to bring about a “reset” in relations with Russia. At the time, Vladimir Putin had stepped back from the Russian presidency to the role of Prime Minister, ceding the top post to Dmitri Medvedev. Yet within the politics of Washington’s beltway, it was hardly a secret that Mr. Medvedev was considered Robin to Mr. Putin’s Batman. Nevertheless, Mr. Obama and Mr. Medvedev, it was clear, shared a decent amount of personal chemistry and that allowed them to earnestly embark on tackling some of the big bilateral policy issues of the day. In early 2010, they signed the New START Treaty, which restricted both nations to 1,550 deployed strategic nuclear warheads, nearly two-thirds less than what the original START treaty permitted. Russia entered the World Trade Organization in 2012. However, by that time, Mr. Putin had re-entered the presidency and then the troubles began again. The irony was that it was not bilateral issues as such that generated the most tension. Rather, Russian involvement – or lack thereof – in third countries such as Libya and Syria had a destabilising effect on what little ‘reset momentum’ had been carefully built so far. In Libya, Russia along with China allowed the passage of a UN resolution in 2011 setting up a no-fly zone, an action that did not win support of the U.S., U.K., France, and others, which continued air operations in the country. In Syria, while civil war escalated around 2012, it was again Moscow and Beijing that blocked numerous UN resolutions critical of Bashar al Assad, even as the U.S. and Western European powers chose to recognise the Syrian opposition’s National Coalition. Petty bickering over specific individuals then muddied the bilateral waters further, including the cases of Sergei Magnitsky, a Russian lawyer who died in prison in 2009 after accusing certain Russian authorities of corruption and after whom the U.S. Congress named a sanctions law that it passed in 2012; and of Edward Snowden, the former NSA contractor who revealed the depth and breadth of U.S. intelligence agencies’ surveillance of domestic and foreign targets, and then fled to Russia evading Espionage Act charges in the U.S. The last straw came in 2014, when Mr. Putin annexed Crimea in Ukraine – yet the Obama administration’s response was timid. It included a bevy of sanctions in coordination with the European Union and an attempt to strengthen NATO’s eastern flank, the European Reassurance Initiative. In part Mr. Obama faced domestic political constraints in terms of not being able to embark on any military adventurism to contain Russian territorial aggression. However, more pertinent was the fact that Mr. Obama likely believed that rather than fomenting Cold War 2.0, Russian actions only represented the weak ambition of a “regional power” – an assessment that subsequent developments have shown to be poorly made. Thus, by the time intelligence reports of interference in U.S. elections, including those linking Russian groups to Democratic Party server hacking and targeted undermining of the Hillary Clinton campaign, began to surface in early 2016, it was too late for a hard push back. This legacy of tepid response will perhaps continue to shape the decisions of U.S. President Joe Biden as he manoeuvres to answer Mr. Putin’s challenge.

UKRAINE CRISIS: INDIA CALLS FOR ‘PEACEFUL RESOLUTION’



In its first statement on the ongoing crisis between Russia and the West led by the US over Ukraine, India on Friday broke its silence and called for a “peaceful resolution” of the situation through “sustained diplomatic efforts” for “long-term peace and stability” in the region and beyond. The Indian government’s position was articulated by Ministry of External Affairs’ official spokesperson Arindam Bagchi at the weekly briefing on Friday. In response to questions, the MEA spokesperson said, “We have been closely following the developments relating to Ukraine, including the ongoing high-level discussions between Russia and the US. Our Embassy in Kyiv is also monitoring local developments. We call for a peaceful resolution of the situation through sustained diplomatic efforts for long-term peace and stability in the region and beyond.” More than a week ago, on January 19, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman called up Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla and the two discussed “Russia’s concerning military build-up on Ukraine’s borders”. However, New Delhi, which did not issue an official statement on the matter, choosing to closely monitor the developments before breaking its silence on Friday. With key strategic partners on both sides, India cannot afford any hasty moves hurting its vital stakes. Sources said while there is concern about Russia’s “muscle-flexing” and external intervention in national matters, New Delhi does not want to jeopardise the close military ties with Moscow. Almost 60 per cent of India’s military supplies are Russian manufactured, which means it cannot afford to alienate Moscow, particularly at a time when Indian and Chinese troops continue to be in a stand-off on the eastern border. At the same time, the US and Europe, which are pushing back against Russia over Ukraine, are both important partners from India’s strategic calculus. Many American platforms have been used for reconnaissance and surveillance along the India-China border. Winter clothing for 50,000 troops has been sourced from these western strategic partners. India is also conscious that the hostility between the West and Russia, with talks of sanctions being considered, is likely to push Moscow in the direction of Beijing, hence strengthening the Chinese. Another concern for Delhi is the small Indian community in Ukraine, comprising mostly students in medical colleges. The Indian Embassy in Kyiv has started collating information on the students as part of preparations for any hostilities. According to government estimates, 18,000 Indian students were in Ukraine in 2020, but the numbers may have dipped since due to Covid and classes moving online at many places. Sources in the strategic establishment recall that when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, and the West lined up against President Vladimir Putin, India had expressed “concern” but also qualified it by talking of “legitimate Russian interests”. The view was articulated at the time, under the UPA government, by then NSA Shiv Shankar Menon. In fact, Putin had thanked India for the “restrained and objective” stand, and called up PM Manmohan Singh to express gratitude.

REMEMBERING THE HOLOCAUST

Marked by the United Nations each year on the 27th of January, International Holocaust Remembrance Day provides an opportunity to recount the atrocities of the Holocaust that resulted in the death of an estimated 6 million Jews. The day marks the anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi German concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau in January 1945. The aphorism for Holocaust remembrance remains unchanged: Never Again. A turning point in history, the Holocaust is one of the most visible acts of violence and discrimination. Yet, lessons of the past seem to fade in the mists of time. Are those who do not remember the past condemned to repeat it?

Holocaust distortion and denial



As the Holocaust recedes in time, the forces of antisemitism, racial and religious intolerance, and discrimination and hate speech pose new challenges to global civilisational values, thereby running the risk of repetition of the crimes of the past. Holocaust ignorance, distortion and denial are growing at an alarming rate. The Anti-Defamation League Global 100, an index on antisemitism, found that antisemitic sentiments are disturbingly pervasive, with more than a quarter of the people surveyed, an estimated 1.09 billion people, harbouring antisemitic attitudes around the world. Across Asia, only 23% of persons surveyed had heard of the Holocaust and believe the historical account. Data from North America and Europe show that younger people are less likely to be aware of the historical accounts of the Holocaust, with less than half of those surveyed under the age of 35 having ever heard of the Holocaust. Considering India's youthful demography, these statistics are important. The youth proved to be particularly vulnerable to the techniques employed by extremists to spread hateful and racist ideologies, which underscores the importance of empowering the youth with the knowledge, capacities, and agency to reject hate. Engaging the youth with the painful history of the Holocaust and the ethical and moral issues it highlights has contemporary relevance as a tool to help fight hatred and prompt discussion of the societal contexts that enable exclusionary policies to divide communities. With an ever more globalised young generation, capitalising on the power of education, communication and connectivity is important as they are effective tools to galvanise people into action. India's growing global influence and efforts towards digitisation provide further impetus to expand youth networks so that young people across the world can connect, share experiences, and negate extremist mindsets, ultimately strengthening efforts to disavow violence and discrimination. However, this needs to be carefully monitored as the lack of critical skills to filter out or navigate misinformation or disinformation on social media can leave the youth vulnerable to hate speech online. According to a publication by the Center for Countering Digital Hatred, antisemitism can be found on all social media platforms. The situation is worse in languages other than English, as social media companies including Facebook and YouTube lack global content moderation teams. This is important to note especially in the Indian context, as the youth make up a greater portion of the Internet user base. Malicious words have the power to spark a wildfire, for it is words that started the Holocaust. Therefore, to prevent Indian youth from disseminating various forms of hate speech, both online and offline, we must educate them about the Holocaust and antisemitism today to deepen reflection about contemporary issues that affect societies around the world, such as the power of extremist ideologies, propaganda, the abuse of official power, and group-targeted hate and violence.

Addressing antisemitism

India's vision to create inclusive and equitable education that includes more detailed knowledge of various cultures, religions, languages, and gender identities to develop respect for diversity through the National Educational Policy 2020 already creates a fertile ground for working on Holocaust education programmes. To further this vision and strengthen the resilience of Indian society against antisemitic discourses, the Embassies of Israel and Germany, with the support of UNESCO, are organising a workshop on antisemitism for policymakers, school principals and educators this February. Using existing training resources, experts from UNESCO, Israel and Germany will equip educators with the knowledge and approaches needed to use the history of the Holocaust to make 'Never Again' an actionable promise emanating from our classrooms. With the community of Holocaust survivors dwindling, we need the youth to take forward the lessons of the past. It is imperative that they are empowered with knowledge to combat myths and falsehoods, and to be able to withstand influence from violent extremism and hate speech.



COUP IN BURKINA FASO

Burkina Faso, once known as one of the most stable countries in West Africa, has been mired in a deadly cycle of jihadist violence since 2015. Monday's coup, in which mutinous soldiers overthrew the democratically elected government of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, was a direct result of this growing instability which the government failed miserably to tackle. Mr. Kaboré was elected President in 2015 almost at the same time jihadists, belonging to al Qaeda and the Islamic State, were expanding across the Sahel region. They turned the vast countryside of this landlocked country bounded by Mali and Niger — both rocked by Islamist violence — into ungovernable territories. Over the last seven years, at least 2,000 people have been killed and over one million displaced in this country of 22 million people. The military and large sections of civilians saw the Kaboré government as ineffective, corrupt and out of touch with the ground reality. The coronavirus pandemic and the associated economic woes have also pushed the Burkinabe people further into misery. An uprising, touched off in the streets of Ouagadougou, the capital city, a few days ago, was followed by the mutiny. The soldiers moved in quickly, surrounding the presidential palace. West Africa has seen a series of successful coups in recent months. In September 2021, special forces in Guinea ousted the government and captured power. In Mali, the military staged a coup for the second time in less than a year, in May 2021. While in Chad, the President was killed in conflict in April, Sudan saw the military throwing out a power-sharing agreement it had reached with civilian revolutionaries and taking the levers of the state in its hands. The ease with which the generals captured power in all these countries should be a warning to other elected governments in the continent. While taking power, all these military leaders promised elections, but soon their focus shifted to tightening their grip on power rather than resolving the crises that they used to justify their power grab or allowing a transition to a legitimate government. The story of Burkina Faso is not different. The coup was reportedly welcomed by protesters in the streets of Ouagadougou. It is understandable because the people, fed up with the jihadist violence and the state's inability in tackling it, may have thought the men in uniform could at least provide them better security. But this support could be short-lived as the power-hungry junta faces a terrorist machinery spread across the Sahel along with the post-coup political divisions and instability at home. Coups are hardly a solution to the many crises these countries face. Rather, the juntas, which lack political legitimacy, end up making them worse.

KEEPING FAITH

At a time when most other India-Pakistan exchanges are suspended, even a simple proposal by the Pakistan Hindu Council, forwarded by Pakistan to India, to allow pilgrims of both countries to travel by air to avoid cumbersome journeys seems a leap. Islamabad-Delhi ties now are possibly at their worst ever in peace times, with no political dialogue at a bilateral or multilateral level for over five years. After many terror attacks, India has stopped normal communications and cultural exchanges, and after the Government's moves on Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan stopped all trade ties. Both sides have downsized their diplomatic missions. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has ensured that the borders have been virtually sealed for two years, with few direct routes operating between them. Even the movement of pilgrims may have been cancelled but for the conscious attempt by the two governments to make an exception for faith-based travel — as was done for the Kartarpur corridor that came up in 2019, the same year the two countries nearly went to war over the Pulwama attack. Religious exchanges, of mainly Muslim pilgrims from Pakistan, and Hindus and Sikhs from India, are governed by a protocol signed in 1974, and allowed to continue. While the routes for Sikh pilgrims, from Indian Punjab to the



Pakistani Punjab province, are relatively easy, hundreds of Indian and Pakistani pilgrims crossing over at the Wagah/Atari border to travel further to the Hinglaj Mata Mandir in Balochistan, the Paramhans Mandir in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Ajmer Sharif dargah in Rajasthan, the Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi and other such shrines, face more circuitous routes. To avoid the extra time in travel, the Pakistan Hindu Council, which has now signed an MoU with Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) to facilitate faith-based tour groups, has asked that PIA charters from Karachi and Lahore be allowed to fly direct to Indian cities this week, with a view to also allowing reciprocal air charters from India. This would be the first time such air travel has taken place in years, and the first time ever that pilgrimages would be accorded this facility. As pilgrim groups on both sides are vetted before being allowed to travel, the precedent is unlikely to pose any additional security threat. In an atmosphere fraught with tensions, such people-to-people initiatives can only help build some modicum of goodwill. No evident harm to national interests has come from other such recent moves embarked on by the two governments, such as the LoC ceasefire announcement in February, or the decision to reopen the Kartarpur corridor in November, or the Government's nod for cricket under the T20 World Cup as well as other sporting events. While the Government's reflex position may be to deny the request, it may prove wiser to give the proposal some deliberate consideration.



DreamIAS



NATION

AT THE CENTRE

As the joint statement at the end of the India-Central Asia virtual summit on Thursday noted, ties between India and the region have been historically close, with “civilisational, cultural, trade and people-to-people linkages”, but the lack of access to land routes, and the situation in Afghanistan are among the biggest challenges. Hosted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the Presidents of the five Central Asian Republics (CARs), it was a first, building on years of dialogue. The summit also came after the meeting of NSAs in Delhi, where they built on several common themes of concern and priority. To begin with, there is the problem of routing trade — a paltry \$2 billion, spent mostly on Kazakhstan’s energy exports to India. In comparison, China’s CAR trade figures have exceeded \$41 billion — they could double by 2030 — apart from the billions of dollars invested in the Belt and Road Initiative. With Pakistan denying India transit trade, New Delhi’s other option is to smoothen the route through Iran’s Chabahar port, but that will involve greater investment in rail and road routes to Iran’s northern boundaries with the CARs, something India is hesitant to do in the face of U.S. sanctions. A third option is to use the Russia-Iran International North-South Transport Corridor via Bandar Abbas port, but this is not fully operational and at least two CARs (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) are not members. India too, has dragged its feet over TAPI gas pipeline plans (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India), due to supply guarantees, given the tensions with Pakistan. Finally, there is Afghanistan: the tenuous link between Central Asia and South Asia, where after the Taliban takeover, there is no official government, a humanitarian crisis is building, and there are worries of terrorism and radicalism spilling over its boundaries. Each theme has been outlined in the summit joint statement as areas to work upon. They have also agreed to more structured engagement, including the setting up of joint working groups, on Afghanistan and Chabahar, and more educational and cultural opportunities. While the attempt by India to institutionalise exchanges and press the pedal on trade, investment and development partnerships with the CARs is timely, it is by no means the only country strengthening its ties here. While Russia is the most strategic player, China is now the biggest development and infrastructure partner to the countries. The CAR Presidents held a similar virtual summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping earlier. Pakistan has also increased its outreach to the CARs, signing transit trade agreements, offering trade access to the Indian Ocean at Gwadar and Karachi. India will need to move nimbly to ensure it stays in step with the changes, and to make certain the future of ties more closely resembles the deep ties of the distant past.

CENTRAL ASIA MEET FORMS AFGHAN GROUP

Overcoming the lack of land connectivity between India and Central Asia’s landlocked countries was one of the “main issues of discussion” during the first India-Central Asia Summit hosted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, officials said on Thursday. The leaders also spoke at length about concerns over Afghanistan, sharing the “same concerns and same objectives” in broader terms and agreed to setting up a Joint Working Group (JWG) of senior officials, said Reenat Sandhu, Secretary (West) in the Ministry of External Affairs, listing those concerns as the need for immediate humanitarian assistance, ensuring the formation of a truly representative and inclusive government, combating terrorism and drug trafficking, and preserving the rights of women, children and minorities. Mr. Modi tweeted that all countries at the summit were



“concerned about the developments in Afghanistan”. “In this context, our mutual cooperation has become even more important for regional security and stability,” he said.

More meetings proposed

Mr. Modi also proposed a number of high-level exchanges between the two sides, including biannual summits and annual meetings of the Foreign, Trade and Cultural Ministers and Secretaries of Security (National Security Advisers) to “strengthen cooperation in the areas of political and development, partnership, trade and connectivity, culture and tourism and security”, the officials said, adding that these proposals were accepted, along with a plan to build a “Central Asia Centre” in New Delhi. They also announced two “Joint Working Groups” on Afghanistan and the Chabahar port project. “Further development of mutual connectivity is essential for enhanced trade and commerce between India and Central Asian countries in the context of their landlocked nature and lack of overland connectivity with India,” said the “Delhi Declaration” joint statement issued at the end of the 90-minute summit. “The leaders emphasised that connectivity projects deserve priority attention and could be a force-multiplier for trade and economic cooperation and contacts between countries and people,” it added, but did not directly refer to the blocks on transit trade imposed by Pakistan. The leaders discussed possibilities of increasing Indian trade with the region beyond the currently low levels of about \$2 billion, welcoming options over sea provided by Iranian ports including the Chabahar port terminal managed by India and the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) through Bandar Abbas that is promoted by Russia and Iran, and which is due to include both Chabahar and Turkmenistan’s Turkmenbashi port. Notably, the statement recorded that President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov had “stressed on the importance of TAPI gas pipeline project” that runs from Turkmenistan’s Galknyshk oil fields near Mary (Marv) through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India, but did not record any support from India on the project. The TAPI project, inaugurated in 2015, has run into issues over India-Pakistan tensions and the situation in Afghanistan, though the Taliban officials recently said they hope to restart work on the pipeline in September 2022.

THE COMMENTS IN INDIA THAT LED TO THE REMOVAL OF GERMANY’S NAVY CHIEF

The head of the German navy, Vice Admiral Kay-Achim Schönbach, resigned on Saturday (January 22) evening after certain comments made by him while on an official visit to India drew criticism in Germany and triggered a diplomatic situation in Ukraine.

What exactly happened here?

Vice Admiral Schönbach, who was speaking at an event organised by the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) in New Delhi, said on Friday that Russia’s President Vladimir Putin deserved “respect”, and that Ukraine would never get back the Crimean peninsula which Moscow annexed in March 2014. The comments came at an especially dangerous and sensitive moment, with tens of thousands of Russian troops amassed threateningly at Ukraine’s borders, NATO’s negotiations with Russia stalemated, and President Joe Biden of the United States having predicted this week that Putin would “move in” and invade Ukraine. The German Defence Ministry asked the navy chief for an explanation, and on Saturday evening, Schönbach posted on his official Twitter handle that his “security policy statements in a talk show at a think tank in India” were his “personal opinion for that moment on the spot”. He added that he had “carelessly, misjudged in the situation”, and he “shouldn’t have done it like that... it was a clear mistake”, according to a translation of the tweet in German. This, however, was not enough, and the officer submitted his resignation later that evening.



But what did Schönbach really say?

“The Crimean Peninsula is gone. It’s never coming back. This is a fact.” Schönbach said. “Is Russia really interested in a small tiny strip of Ukraine soil to integrate into their country? No, this is nonsense. Putin is probably putting pressure because he can do it, and he knows he splits us, he splits the European Union.” What Putin “really wants is respect”, Schönbach said. And that, he added, was not only easy to offer, it was also something that the President probably deserved. “On eye level, he wants respect. And my God, giving him respect is low-cost, even no-cost. It is easy to give him the respect he demands, and probably deserves.” Schönbach also mentioned that he is a Roman Catholic, and believes “in God and I believe in Christianity”, and it was important to have Russia on the side of the West against China. “...And there we have a Christian country, even Putin, he’s an atheist but it doesn’t matter. I think having this big country, even if it is not a democracy, on our side [is important]... probably keeps Russia away from China”.

What is the situation with Ukraine and Russia right now?

According to Western nations, Russia and Ukraine could be on the brink of war. Russia has positioned more than 100,000 troops along the border, and an invasion is considered a clear possibility. British officials said on Saturday that Putin plans to instal a pro-Russian leadership in Kyiv. On January 19, President Biden delivered a grim prognosis of the situation. “Do I think he’ll (Putin) test the West, test the United States and NATO, as significantly as he can? Yes, I think he will,” Biden told reporters at the White House. “But I think he will pay a serious and dear price for it that he doesn’t think now will cost him what it’s going to cost him. And I think he will regret having done it.” Asked if he believed Russia would invade Ukraine, Biden said: “My guess is he will move in. He has to do something.” US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken met Russian Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov in Geneva on Friday in a bid to ward off what the West thinks could be the imminent invasion of Ukraine. Russia has been asking the US to stop the expansion of NATO to the east, and to not establish military bases in former Soviet states, or develop bilateral military cooperation with them. Russia considers the former Soviet nations as its own area of influence.

And where does Germany stand on this issue?

While nations like the United Kingdom and the US have sent weapons to Ukraine to arm it against a possible Russian attack, Germany has so far not done this, despite appeals from Kyiv. Defence Minister Lambrecht sought to explain the position of Germany in an interview to Welt am Sonntag, a Sunday newspaper: “We are standing on Kyiv’s side. We have to do everything to de-escalate. Currently, arms deliveries would not be helpful in this respect; there is agreement on this in the German government.”

How has Ukraine responded to Schönbach’s comments?

Kyiv has been very upset, and the German ambassador, Anka Feldhusen, was called in to receive its “categorical unacceptability” of Schönbach’s comments. The Ukrainians also demanded that the Germans publicly disown Schönbach’s statements. On Saturday, Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba tweeted his country’s position, though without specifically referring to Schönbach’s statements. “Recent statements by Germany about the impossibility of transferring defence weapons to Ukraine, in particular due to permission to third parties, the futility of returning Crimea, hesitations to disconnect Russia from SWIFT — do not correspond to the level of our relations and the current security situation,” Kuleba said. He mentioned in two more tweets that “the unity of the West with Russia is more important than ever” today, and to “achieve it and deter the Russian Federation, we are all working together. German partners must stop such words



and actions to undermine unity and encourage Vladimir Putin to a new attack on Ukraine.” Kuleba thanked Germany for its support over the last seven year. “Ukraine is grateful to Germany for its support since 2014, as well as for its diplomatic efforts to resolve the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict. But Germany’s current statements are disappointing and run counter to this support and effort,” he said.

Was Schönbach speaking specifically about Russia and Ukraine in New Delhi?

He was not. He was delivering a talk at MP-IDSAs on Germany’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, and spoke about a range of topics, including China. India and Germany must work together to promote defence and security ties in the region, he said.

INDIA BOUGHT PEGASUS AS PART OF DEFENCE DEAL WITH ISRAEL IN 2017

The Indian government bought Israeli spyware Pegasus in 2017 as part of a \$2-billion package for weapons including a missile system, The New York Times reported Friday. The year-long investigation, the newspaper reported, revealed that the Federal Bureau of Investigation, too, had bought and tested the spyware “for years with plans to use it for domestic surveillance until the agency finally decided last year not to deploy the tools.” The report details how the spyware was used globally, by Mexico to target journalists and dissidents, and by Saudi Arabia against women’s rights activists and associates of columnist Jamal Khashoggi who was killed by Saudi operatives. It says that under a set of new deals licensed by the Israeli Ministry of Defence, Pegasus was provided to Poland, Hungary and India, and other countries. Flagging Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s landmark visit to Israel in July 2017 – the first by an Indian Prime Minister to that country – the NYT report said that visit came even as “India had maintained a policy” of what it called “commitment to the Palestinian cause,” and “relations with Israel were frosty.” “The Modi visit, however, was notably cordial, complete with a carefully staged moment of him and Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu walking together barefoot on a local beach. They had reason for the warm feelings. Their countries had agreed on the sale of a package of sophisticated weapons and intelligence gear worth roughly \$2 billion — with Pegasus and a missile system as the centerpieces.” The report mentioned that months later Netanyahu, Israeli Prime Minister at that time, “made a rare state visit to India” and in June 2019 “India voted in support of Israel at the U.N.’s Economic and Social Council to deny observer status to a Palestinian human rights organization, a first for the nation.” Until now, neither the Indian Government nor the Israeli Government has admitted that India bought Pegasus. A global consortium of media groups had revealed in July 2021 that the spyware had been used by several governments around the world to snoop on opponents, journalists, businessmen etc. The Indian leg of the investigation, conducted by The Wire, had reported that among the potential list of targets were Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, political strategist Prashant Kishor, the then Election Commissioner Ashok Lavasa, now Information and Technology Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw (who was not the minister then), along with several other prominent names. The list also mentioned numbers of around 40 journalists, including three editors of The Indian Express — two current and one former. Responding to the controversy in Parliament on July 18, Vaishnaw said the report was a “sensational” attempt “to malign Indian democracy and its well established institutions”. He had said that India had established protocols when it comes to surveillance which were robust and had “stood the test of time.” “I highlight...that NSO (the maker of the spyware) has also said that the list of countries shown using Pegasus is incorrect. Many countries mentioned are not even our clients. It also said that most of its clients are western countries. It is evident that NSO has also clearly rubbished the claims in the report,” the minister had stated. In an interaction with The



Indian Express at Idea Exchange, Israel's Ambassador to India, Naor Gilon had said that "the export of NSO, a private company, is under supervision" of the Israeli government. Asked if the Israeli government would know if NSO sold the software to the Indian government, he had said: "Every export of this private company's technology has to go under licence." He said that NSO is a "private Israeli company, which developed a tool for countering terrorism and probably saved lives. Understanding the gravity of the tool, Israel put export control measures on the tool. So, they are limited in their export to only government players and only certain government players. About all the rumours or claims around it, I have no knowledge about it. When it comes to India, it's an internal political fight." After around a dozen petitions filed against the alleged snooping by the government, the Supreme Court in October 27 appointed an independent committee headed by retired Justice RV Raveendran, along with two experts. The three-judge bench, headed by Chief Justice NV Ramana had said that the state cannot get "a free pass every time the spectre of 'national security' is raised", as it ordered a "thorough inquiry" into allegations of unauthorised surveillance using Pegasus. Earlier this month, the committee had requested "any citizen of India who has reasonable cause to suspect that his/her mobile has been compromised due to specific usage of NSO Group Israel's Pegasus software" to contact them.

INDIA RANKS 85 IN TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL'S CORRUPTION INDEX

Underlining that some of the mechanisms that could help reign in corruption are weakening, Transparency International ranked India at 85 among 180 countries in its Corruption Perception Index report released on Tuesday. "The case of India is particularly worrying. While the country's score has remained stagnant over the past decade, some of the mechanisms that could help reign in corruption are weakening. There are concerns over the country's democratic status, as fundamental freedoms and institutional checks and balances decay," the report said. The index, which ranks 180 countries and territories by their perceived levels of public sector corruption according to experts and business people, uses a scale of 0 to 100 to rank Corruption Perception Index (CPI), where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean. Transparency International gave India a CPI score of 40. In 2021, India ranked 86th with the same CPI score of 40. The report highlighted concerns over the risk to journalists and activists who have been "victims of attacks by the police, political militants, criminal gangs and corrupt local officials." "Civil society organisations that speak up against the government have been targeted with security, defamation, sedition, hate speech and contempt-of-court charges, and with regulations on foreign funding," the report said.

GRAFT TALK AND THE TOP COURT'S INEXPLICABLE SILENCE

December 10, 2021, was a dark day in the history of the Indian judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court of India's. In a televised interview, where the pointed question was on whether there is corruption in the Supreme Court of India, the former Chief Justice of India, Justice Ranjan Gogoi, said: "Corruption is as old as society. Corruption has become an acceptable way of life and judges don't fall from heaven."

It weakens confidence

Justice Gogoi's attack was against the entire Supreme Court and scandalised the entire institution of the Supreme Court, which demands immediate redress. Wilmot, C.J. in R. vs Almon, had as early as 1765 observed: "...and whenever men's allegiance to the law is so fundamentally shaken, it is the most fatal and most dangerous obstruction of justice and, in my opinion, calls out for a more



rapid and immediate redress than any other obstruction whatsoever; not for the sake of the Judges, as private individuals, but because they are the channels by which King's Justice is conveyed to the people." The Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court in *Brahma Prakash Sharma vs State of U.P.* (1953) said: "It would be only repeating what has been said so often by various Judges that the object of contempt proceedings is not to afford protection to Judges, personally from imputations to which they may be exposed as individuals; it is intended to be a protection to the public whose interests would be very much affected if by the act or conduct of any party, the authority of the court is lowered and the sense of confidence which people have in the administration of justice by it is weakened." The Supreme Court found advocate Prashant Bhushan guilty of contempt of court, in 2020, "for shaking the confidence of the public in the institution as a whole" and for creating an "impression that ... Judges who have presided in the Supreme Court in the period of last six years have a particular role in the destruction of Indian democracy". The Court found that the attending circumstance to be taken into consideration was about the "person who makes the statement"; it held that "it is not expected of a person who is a part of the system of administration of justice and who owes a duty to the said system, to make such tweets which are capable of shaking the confidence of general public," the judgment read. A bench presided by the now former CJI, Justice Gogoi, had in fact initiated contempt proceedings against a former Supreme Court judge, Justice Markandey Katju for similar utterances (against judges in a blog), but these were dropped after his unconditional apology . So what happens when a scurrilous attack is made and the Court is scandalised by a former CJI?

A top judge and his conduct

Justice Gogoi's conduct raises serious questions. During his tenure as CJI, as many as eight cases of a particular business group were assigned to the Benches presided by Justice Arun Mishra, former judge of the Supreme Court. These cases were all decided in favour of the said business house, giving it relief running into thousands of crores of rupees. Interestingly, in one such case, C.A. No. 11133/2011, the said business house has settled the matter with the Gujarat Urja Vikas Nigam Limited recently, according to reports, forgoing a claim of ₹ 11,000 crore but only after a five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court decided to rectify the judgment in favour of the business house under an extraordinary curative power. Sadly, other States or authorities have not come forward with similar curative petitions for the Court to act. One gets the impression that States or authorities are happy to accept even decisions against them running into crores of rupees which are made in questionable circumstances. Thus, what they could not do directly they are allowing it to be done indirectly — by their silence. Interestingly, this case — C.A. No. 11133/2011 was taken up during the summer vacation in 2019. Another matter of the same business group (C.A. No. 9023/2018), which was also not an urgent vacation matter, was listed on May 21, 2019 when the following order was made: "Heard the arguments of Mr. Ranjit Kumar, learned Senior Counsel appearing for the appellant. List tomorrow, i.e. Wednesday, the 22nd May, 2019 for further arguments." On May 22, the matter was concluded and judgment reserved with the following order: "Heard Mr. Ranjit Kumar, learned senior counsel appearing on behalf of the appellant and Mr. Tushar Mehta, learned Solicitor General appearing on behalf of the respondent. Arguments concluded. Judgment reserved." Pertinently, on April 8, 2019, the Registrar Judicial of the Supreme Court had passed the order stating that "regular hearing matters will be taken up as per guidelines and norms approved by the Hon'ble The Chief Justice of India", that was, CJI Gogoi. So, has he self-incriminated himself? On this issue, I had addressed a letter on August 16, 2019 to the then CJI, Justice Gogoi, and other judges of the Supreme Court pointing out the gross abuse of the judicial process, with this request: "I do hope and trust that you would look into the matter and take corrective steps as deemed appropriate to protect this institution." Sadly, my letter though



received was not even acknowledged. A Constitution Bench of Supreme Court, to which Justice Arun Mishra was a party has held in 2018 “that the Chief Justice is the Master of the Roster; he alone has prerogative to the constitute Benches of the Court and allocate cases to the Benches so constituted”, and that, “In view of the aforesaid, any order passed which is contrary to this order be treated as ineffective in law and not binding on the Chief Justice of India.” Why would the now former CJI, Justice Gogoi, allow matters of one business group to be heard by a Bench presided by a particular judge? Why would he not take any action after his attention was drawn to the irregularities? At his book launch on December 8, 2021, the now former CJI welcomed the industrialist concerned and his family as guests. It has happened only once in the history of the Supreme Court when a Bench presided by (now former) CJI Justice K.N. Singh had heard and decided matters pertaining to a particular business group giving it substantial relief. But then perhaps following the outcry from Members of the Bar and the then Attorney General, the (now former) CJI H.J. Kania acted swiftly and decisively to recall those orders and restore the image and the reputation of the Supreme Court, thereby sub serving the rule of law.

The Court must act

Crony capitalism is a curse on this nation. The Supreme Court itself has come down heavily on corruption in public life and has directed time and again that action be taken against bureaucrats and politicians found guilty of corruption. Corruption is indeed a bane as far as our democracy is concerned. The judiciary must be fiercely independent and free from any kind of influence. It is indeed so, generally and by and large. It has served the nation well. The former CJI, Justice Gogoi, has done great disservice to the institution that he purportedly served. So, one wonders why there is an absolute silence on the part of this great institution. Surely, actions are needed against the former CJI, Justice Gogoi, and his actions or inactions. The Court has itself held that in such a situation, it must act on its own without waiting for the Attorney General or any person to move the Court. If not done, citizens’ faith in the integrity of the institution will be seriously eroded — perhaps irreparably.

TO THE POLL BOOTH, WITH NO DONOR KNOWLEDGE

Late last year, the Union government authorised the State Bank of India to issue and encash a new tranche of electoral bonds, the 19th such parcel since the scheme’s notification in 2018. The timing of the announcement was predictable, with elections slated to be held to five different State Assemblies beginning next month. Now, as a result, voters in those States will go to the ballot box with no knowledge about the donors backing the various contestants.

Anything but transparent

Ensuring citizens have access to information, especially material on political funding, one would think, is an essential feature of a democracy. But ever since its introduction, the electoral bond scheme has envenomed the democratic process, by destroying altogether any notion of transparency in political funding. In this time, the Supreme Court of India has paid scant attention to the issue. It has allowed the scheme to continue unabated and has denied an interim stay on its operation without so much as conducting a full-fledged hearing. In one such provisional order, the Court asserted that the bonds were not, in fact, anonymous. Voters interested in finding out the identity of political donors, the Bench said, could simply perform what the order described as “match the following.” According to the Court, since both the purchase and the encashment of bonds are made through banking channels, all it would take for a person to glean the identity of a



donor was for her to look through every corporation's financial statement — these records, the Court said, ought to be available with the Registrar of Companies.

Parties have no obligation

Even assuming for a moment that voters have the resources to go through annual returns filed by every corporation in India, what the order ignored was that there is no attendant obligation on political parties to provide details to the public on each donation received by them through electoral bonds. Companies are also under no obligation to disclose the name of the party to whom they made the donation. Therefore, this “match the following” exercise apart, from being impossible to perform, will also do nothing to pierce the veil concealing the bonds. This is because anonymity is written into the programme's ideals; it represents the basic leitmotif of the system. When he explained the contours of the electoral bond scheme to the Lok Sabha, the then Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley stressed on this very feature. “The donor will know, which party he is depositing money to,” he said. “The political party will file return with the Election Commission [of India]. Now, which donor gave to which political party, that is the only thing which will not be known.” This avowed objective runs athwart one of the most basic features of a democracy, that the right to freedom of expression, which the Constitution guarantees, includes within it a right to know. The electoral bond scheme is designed to allow an individual, or any “artificial juridical person”, including body corporates, to purchase bonds issued by the State Bank of India during notified periods of time. These instruments are issued in the form of promissory notes, and in denominations ranging from ₹1,000 to ₹1 crore. Once purchased, the buyer can donate the bond to any political party of their choice and the party can then encash it on demand. The purchasers are not obliged to disclose to whom they presented the bond, and a political party encashing a bond is compelled to keep the donor's identity secret.

Untenable arguments

What is more, a series of restrictions that were in place before the scheme's introduction have now been done away with. For example, amendments have been made removing a previous prohibition that disallowed a company from donating anything more than 7.5% of its net profits over the course of the preceding three years. Similarly, a mandate that a company had to have been in existence for at least three years before it could make donations (a requirement that was aimed at discouraging persons from using shell corporations to funnel money into politics) was also lifted. Thus, through its very architecture, the electoral bond scheme permits unlimited and anonymous corporate funding of political parties. In its defence, the Government says two things: one, that voters have no fundamental right to know how political parties are funded and two, that the scheme helps eliminate the role of black money in funding elections. On any reasonable examination, it ought to be clear that neither of these arguments is tenable. First, the Supreme Court has consistently held that voters have a right to freely express themselves during an election and that they are entitled to all pieces of information that give purpose and vigour to this right. Surely, to participate in the electoral process in a meaningful manner and to choose one's votes carefully, a citizen must know the identity of those backing the candidates. Second, as affidavits filed by the Election Commission of India in the Supreme Court have demonstrated, the scheme, if anything, augments the potential role of black money in elections — it does so by, among other things, removing existing barriers against shell entities and dying concerns from donating to political parties. Moreover, even if the bonds were meant to eliminate the presence of unaccounted currency, it is difficult to see what nexus the decision to provide complete anonymity of the donor bears to this objective. Indeed, it is for this reason that the Reserve Bank of India reportedly advised the Government against the scheme's introduction.



For the higher judiciary

The worries over the electoral bond scheme, however, go beyond its patent unconstitutionality. This is because in allowing anonymity it befools the basis of our democracy and prevents our elections from being truly free and fair. There are, therefore, few issues of greater moral urgency than this that are awaiting the Supreme Court's consideration. Yet, despite challenges to the scheme having been launched quickly on the heels of its notification in 2018, the Court has failed to hear and decide on the programme's validity. A delay in adjudication, as we have seen in a plethora of cases that are pending consideration, invariably presents a *fait accompli*. In this case, the damage from the pendency is all the starker, because the integrity of the electoral process is at stake. Judges of yore warned as far back as in 1957 of the threats posed by limitless corporate funding of elections. Chief Justice M.C. Chagla of the Bombay High Court predicted that any decision to allow companies to fund political parties might "ultimately overwhelm and even throttle democracy in this country". Justice P.B. Mukharji of the Calcutta High Court used language that was stronger still. "To induce the Government of the day by contributing money to the political funds of political parties, is to adopt the most sinister principle fraught with grave dangers to commercial as well as public standards of administration," he wrote. "...The individual citizens although in name equal will be gravely handicapped in their voice because the length of their contribution cannot ever hope to equal the length of the contribution of the big companies." Today, those dangers are heightened by individual voters not only being in a position where they are unable to match contributions made by corporations but also find themselves in a position where they have no knowledge over the identity of the donors bankrolling the political establishment. Can there be a greater threat to our democracy?

SC ISSUES NOTICE TO CENTRE, EC ON PLEA AGAINST FREEBIES

Supreme Court on Tuesday issued notice on a plea seeking directions to Election Commission (EC) to frame guidelines to stop political parties from promising or distributing "irrational freebies from public fund". A bench headed by Chief Justice of India N V Ramana and also comprising Justices A S Bopanna and Hima Kohli issued notice to the central government and EC on the plea by Advocate Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay after Senior Advocate Vikas Singh, appearing for the petitioner, pointed out that states were already facing huge debt burdens and such freebies will only put stress on people more as the money ultimately has to come from them. The bench agreed that the issue raised in Upadhyay's plea is "serious" and referred to the 2013 judgment in the S Subramaniam Balaji vs State of Tamil Nadu and Others case, in which the top court said that "although, the law is obvious that the promises in the election manifesto cannot be construed as 'corrupt practice' under Section 123 of Representation of People Act, the reality cannot be ruled out that distribution of freebies of any kind, undoubtedly, influences all people". Noting that there is no law governing manifestos, the court could have also asked the EC to frame guidelines and stressed the need "for a separate legislation to be passed by the legislature in this regard for governing the political parties in our democratic society". The CJI wondered what more could the court do but said "within limited scope, we can ask the ECI to respond" on what happened after its directions in 2013. Incidentally, the apex court had already issued notice to the Centre, EC and some states on another plea against direct cash transfer schemes and freebies on July 2, 2019. The EC had responded to the notice on January 8, 2020. In its response, the EC said the court had held that its plenary powers under Article 324 of the Constitution with regard to conduct of elections "can be exercised only in areas left unoccupied by legislation". It said it "is bound to comply with existing statutory enactments including Appropriation Acts" and that it is, therefore, clear that it "may only regulate the manner of disbursement of cash subsidies to ensure that it does not skew the level playing



field in any election". The EC said it "has formulated and uniformly enforced... instructions which create constitutionally permissible checks on the schemes involving cash disbursement and other benefits". The central government is yet to file its reply to the petition by Pentapati Pulla Rao, who contested as a candidate of Janasena Party from Eluru constituency in Andhra Pradesh in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The court, too, is yet to hear the matter after the notices were issued. Rao's counsel Hitendra Nath Rath said the matter was last listed on January 10, 2020 when an SC Registrar directed that it be placed before the court for further hearing after four weeks.

STATES MUST DECIDE ON SC/ST QUOTA IN PROMOTIONS

The Supreme Court on Friday refused to lay down the "yardstick" for determining the inadequacy of representation for granting reservation in promotions for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe candidates in government jobs. It held 'cadre', and not class or group or the entire service, as the unit for the purpose of collection of quantifiable data for giving promotion quotas. The court stuck firm by the decisions of its Constitution Benches in the Jarnail Singh and M. Nagaraj cases that the question of adequate representation of SC/ST communities ought to be left to the respective States to determine. "Determination of inadequate representation of SCs and STs in services under a State is left to the discretion of the State, as it depends upon myriad factors which this Court cannot envisage... Laying down of criteria for determining the inadequacy of representation would result in curtailing the discretion given to the State governments," a Bench of Justices L. Nageswara Rao, Sanjiv Khanna and B.R. Gavai noted. "In addition, the prevailing local conditions, which may require to be factored in, might not be uniform... In the light of Jarnail Singh and Nagaraj, we cannot lay down any yardstick for determining the inadequacy of representation," the Bench said. In respect of the unit of collection of quantifiable data, the court held that the State is "obligated to collect quantifiable data on the inadequacy of representation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes" for reservation in promotions in public employment. The court underscored that the "collection of information on inadequacy of representation of SC/ST communities cannot be with reference to the entire service or class/group, but it should be relatable to the grade/category of posts to which the promotion is sought". Explaining why 'cadre' should be the unit for the purpose of collection of quantifiable data in relation to promotional posts, the court said otherwise the entire exercise of reservation in promotions would be rendered meaningless if data pertaining to the representation of SCs and STs is done with reference to the entire service. The term 'cadre' means the strength of a service or part of a service sanctioned as a separate unit. It is the choice of a State to constitute cadres. The entire service cannot be considered to be a cadre for the purpose of promotion from one post to a higher post in a different grade. Promotion is made from one grade to the next higher grade, in relation to which cadres are constituted. "Before providing for reservation in promotions to a cadre, the State is obligated to collect quantifiable data regarding inadequacy of representation of SCs and STs. Collection of information regarding inadequacy of representation of SCs and STs cannot be with reference to the entire service or 'class'/'group'. It should be relatable to the grade/category of posts to which promotion is sought," Justice Rao, who authored the 68-page judgment, reasoned. The court set aside its earlier judgment in the B.K. Pavithra II case.

IS SUSPENSION OF MLAS UP FOR JUDICIAL REVIEW?

Twelve BJP legislators were suspended for one year by the Maharashtra Assembly last July for alleged disorderly conduct. The unusually long period of suspension has been questioned by the Supreme Court, which is hearing a challenge to the Assembly's action. The court has reserved its



judgment after hearing elaborate arguments. The main question before the court is whether suspension for a whole year is valid.

What happened on July 5, 2021?

There was a ruckus in the Assembly when the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government introduced a resolution seeking empirical data on OBCs (other backward classes) from the Union government. The House was adjourned for a few times before the resolution was passed, as BJP members rushed to the well of the House and were accused of damaging the presiding officer's microphone and grabbing the mace. Later, Bhaskar Jadhav, a Shiv Sena MLA who was in the Chair during the incidents, said when he was in the Deputy Speaker's chamber, some members rushed inside and abused him. A resolution moved by the Parliamentary Affairs Minister was subsequently adopted by the House suspending 12 MLAs —Dr. Sanjay Kute, Ashish Shelar, Abhimanyu Pawar, Girish Mahajan, Atul Bhatkalkar, Harish Pimple, Jaykumar Rawal, Yogesh Sagar, Narayan Kuche, Buntty Bhangdiya, Parag Alavani and Ram Satpute. They were barred from entering the legislative premises for 12 months.

What questions has the Supreme Court raised?

In the course of the hearing, a Bench, comprising Justice A.M. Khanwilkar, Justice Dinesh Maheshwari and Justice C.T. Ravikumar, questioned the rationality of suspending members beyond an ongoing session. The Bench also cited Article 190(4) of the Constitution, which stipulates that the House may declare vacant the seat of a member who is absent for 60 days without permission, to wonder whether any suspension could traverse beyond this 60-day limit. Also, the Representation of the People Act, 1951, says any vacancy in the House has to be filled up through a by-election within six months of its occurrence, the Bench pointed out, and wondered if a constituency can be unrepresented in the Assembly for a whole year in the light of this six-month limit. Further, suspension seemed to have worse consequences than outright expulsion from the legislature, as a by-election will be held within six months; whereas, a one-year suspension does not entail mandatory filling up of the vacancy. The Bench also wondered about the likely consequences of an unlimited power of suspension for democracy, as it could be misused to alter the composition of a House in which a Government has only a slender majority.

What does the State government say?

Counsel for the State government has argued that there is no limitation on the power of the legislature to punish for breach of privilege or disorderly conduct in the course of its proceedings. Once the power to punish a member for disorderly conduct is recognised, there can be no judicial review of the manner in which it is exercised. Under Rule 53 of the Maharashtra Assembly Rules, the Speaker could direct a Member to withdraw from the Assembly for disorderly conduct for the day, or the remainder of the Session. However, there is no such limitation when the whole House decides to impose suspension. In this context, counsel contended that when the power to expel a member is available, the power to suspend, being a lesser punishment, is also available to the House at all times. On the provision for declaring a seat vacant if the member is absent for 60 days, the Government has argued that it is the House that declares the seat vacant, and it is not a necessary consequence of a member's absence for 60 days on which the House met. Further, during suspension, a member continues to hold office, but only loses their voice in the legislature.



CURBS TO RESTRICT TIME SLOTS FOR MP SPEECHES

Detailed COVID protocol has been put in place for the upcoming Budget session of Parliament, which will involve time restrictions on parliamentary speeches and also restricting access to the central hall beyond the working hours. The time restrictions have come in place because both Houses of Parliament are going to be working in shifts. Rajya Sabha will function from 10 a.m. till 3 p.m. and Lok Sabha from 4 p.m. till adjournment.

Three minutes

As per the detailed guidelines issued by the Rajya Sabha Secretariat, during the Zero Hour, when the parliamentarians are allowed to raise matters of national importance, the members can speak for only three minutes. No member will be allowed to make a submission more than once a week. A similar instruction has gone out to the Lok Sabha members too. To maintain social distancing the members will be sitting spread out between both the chambers of the House. As per the sitting arrangement, out of 237 Rajya Sabha members (there are eight vacancies) only 111 members will be sitting in the chamber spread out in their usual seats and also the visitors' galleries. The remaining 129 members will have to sit in the Lok Sabha chamber. Instructions have also been issued to the Rajya Sabha members not to use the central hall beyond working hours. "It has been decided that during the 256th session, the Central Hall may be used by the sitting members of Rajya Sabha during the sitting hours of the Rajya Sabha only," a bulletin issued by the RS Seretariat read. The first part of the Budget session will be held from January 31 to 11 February.

NGOS AND FOREIGN FUNDING

The Supreme Court on Tuesday turned down a plea from an NGO that sought quashing of the Centre's decision that resulted in 5,789 organisations losing their Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) registration. The FCRA registration is mandatory for any association and NGO to receive foreign funding. Justice AM Khanwilkar said that if these NGOs have not applied for an extension, then they don't want to continue in the present regime. The plea was filed by US-based NGO 'Global Peace Initiative'. Advocate Sanjay Hegde, appearing for Global Peace Initiative told the three-judge bench headed by Justice Khanwilkar they are seeking a direction from the court to extend the FCRA licences of NGOs if they applied for it within the next two weeks. Hegde claimed that there are 6,000 NGOs for which the licence has not been extended, including the temple Tirupati Devasthanam and others. The plea said the sudden and arbitrary cancellation of FCRA registration of thousands of NGOs violates the rights of the organisations, their workers as well as the millions of Indians who they serve. However, the bench refused any interim relief and directed Global Peace Initiative to approach the authorities with suggestions. Appearing for the Centre, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta said that FCRA licences of 11,594 NGOS, which had sought renewal, within a cut-off date, had been renewed. The plea had argued that the NGOs are doing good work and should be given an extension until Covid remains notified as a national disaster. It said the NGOs were playing a part in the fight against Covid. The bench, also comprising Justices Dinesh Maheshwari and C T Ravikumar, said the petitioners are free to make representation to the concerned authorities which may be considered on its merits in accordance with law. The FCRA registration is mandatory for any association and NGO to receive foreign funding. Mehta told the top court that 11,594 NGOs had applied within the cut-off date and their registrations have been extended for the time being. The apex court, which is seized of a plea filed by a US-based NGO seeking quashing of the Centre's alleged decision by which 5,789 entities lost their FCRA registration, was dealing with arguments regarding interim relief in the matter. While referring



to Mehta's submission, the top court said that in light of the stand taken by the authorities, it doesn't intend to pass such interim direction as prayed. The bench said the petition would be listed after the judgement is pronounced on a batch of pleas, including those which have raised issues concerning the Foreign Contribution Regulation (Amendment) Act, 2020. During the arguments, the bench asked Mehta whether the names of those, who have applied for FCRA registration, are displayed online in the public domain. Mehta said he doesn't have instruction regarding this. He said the petitioner organisation is based in Houston. Senior advocate Sanjay Hegde, appearing for the petitioners, said they have the information which is available in public domain as per which there are around 6,000 NGOs whose registrations have not been extended for whatever reasons. The bench told Hegde that the Solicitor General has submitted that those who have applied, their registration has been extended. "If those 6,000 NGOs have chosen not to apply for registration, that means they do not want to continue in the present regime," the bench observed. Mehta told the bench how a Houston-based association is concerned with this. "Please forget Houston-based," Hegde said. When Hegde said the court could make clear that for next two weeks or so, people can apply, the bench said, "That we will not grant here". The bench said the petitioners can make representation before the authorities which may be considered by them. There were 22,762 FCRA-registered organisations till December 31, 2021. On January 1, the number came down to 16,829. These are considered "live" organisations. The officials had said the FCRA licences of 18,778 organisations were expiring between September 29, 2020 and December 31, 2021. Out of them, as many as 12,989 organisations have applied for renewal of the FCRA licence between September 30, 2020 and December 31, 2021. Since 5,789 organisations did not apply for the renewal of the FCRA licence, they were deemed to have ceased to be registered organisations, an official had said. In addition to them, renewal application of 179 organisations were also rejected by the Home Ministry due to different reasons.

CADRE RULES PLAN

The Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) sent a communication to all States on January 12 seeking their opinion on the proposal to amend Rule 6 (deputation of cadre officers) of the Indian Administrative Service (Cadre) Rules 1954. Similar letters were also sent proposing changes in cadre rules of the other two All India Services (AIS): the Indian Police Service (IPS) and the Indian Forest Service (IFoS). Through the amendments, the Union government plans to acquire powers to depute IAS/IPS and IFoS officers to the Central Government and Ministries without necessarily taking the State government's nod. After the All India Services Act, 1951 came into existence, the IAS cadre rules were framed in 1954.

What are the changes proposed?

Four amendments including two new insertions are proposed. First, the States should make available the names of such officers, part of a central deputation reserve (CDR), who can be deputed to the Centre. "The actual number of officers to be deputed to the Central government shall be decided by the Central government in consultation with the State government concerned," the proposed amendment says. The CDR cannot be more than 40% of the actual strength at any point. According to existing norms, States have to depute AIS officers to the Union government offices. The second change is in case of any disagreement between the Centre and the State, the matter shall be decided by the Central government and the State shall give effect to the decision of the Centre "within a specified time." The "specified time" clause is a new insertion. The third and one of the major changes proposed is if the State government delays posting a State cadre officer to the Centre and does not give effect to the Central government's decision within the



specified time, “the officer shall stand relieved from cadre from the date as may be specified by the Central government.” Presently, officers have to get a no-objection clearance from the State government. The fourth change is that in a specific situation where services of cadre officers are required by the Central government in “public interest” the State shall give effect to its decisions, within a specified time.

What triggered the move?

In its January 12 letter, DoPT said in spite of existing provisions, States are not sponsoring adequate numbers of officers for Central deputation and the available officers are not sufficient to meet requirements. The letter was preceded by similar communications sent on December 20, December 27 and January 6 where DoPT sought comments from the States. Half-a-dozen States opposed the move and the rest did not respond; it revised the proposal and States have been given time till January 25 to reply. In 2021 and 2020, DoPT sent letters cautioning States that not sending enough officers may affect the future cadre review proposals and that it was unable to fill vacancies at director and joint secretary levels in various Central ministries.

Is the problem acute?

According to 2021 data, of the total 6,709 IAS officers in the country, 445 were posted with the Union —only 6.6%. In 2014, of the 4,605 officers, 651 were posted with the Union (14 %). In 2021, only 10% mid-level IAS officers (deputy secretary/director, 9-14 years experience) were posted with the Centre in 2021, a sharp fall from 19% in 2014, even though the total pool of such officers at this rank expanded from 621 in 2014 to 1130 in 2021, an increase of around 80%.

Why are States opposed to the changes?

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has written two letters to Prime Minister Narendra Modi saying it was against the “spirit of cooperative federalism”. The Chief Ministers of Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Jharkhand— Bhupesh Baghel, Ashok Gehlot and Hemant Soren have also written to Mr. Modi. Before any AIS officer is called for Central deputation, his or her concurrence is required. The Establishment Officer in DoPT invites nominations from State governments. Once the nomination is received, their eligibility is scrutinised by a panel and then an offer list is prepared, usually done with the State government on board. Central ministries and offices can then choose from the list of officers on offer. AIS officers are recruited by the Union and they are lent to States. The publication of the offer list on DoPT’s website was discontinued by the Government in 2018 amid reports that not many State government officers were willing to move to the Centre.

BUDDHADEB BHATTACHARYA REFUSED PADMA AWARD – IS THE RECIPIENT’S CONSENT SOUGHT?

As many as 128 people ranging from veteran politicians, businessmen, scientists and doctors to artists and ordinary people engaged in public service were announced to have been selected for conferment of Padma awards this year on Tuesday. While most accepted the awards gracefully, former West Bengal CM Buddhadeb Bhattacharya refused to accept it. Singer Sandhya Mukhopadhyay’s family claimed she was offered the award but did not accept it. The award list did not have her name.

What are Padma awards?



The Padma awards are the highest civilian honour of India after the Bharat Ratna. They are announced every year on the eve of Republic Day. The awards are given in three categories: Padma Vibhushan (for exceptional and distinguished service), Padma Bhushan (distinguished service of higher order) and Padma Shri (distinguished service). The award seeks to recognise achievements in all fields of activities or disciplines where an element of public service is involved. The awards are given in certain select categories which include Art, Social Work, Public Affairs, Science & Engineering, Trade & Industry, Medicine, Literature & Education, Civil Service and Sports. Awards are also given for propagation of Indian culture, protection of human rights, wild life protection among others. The PADMA Awards Were instituted in 1954 along with Bharat Ratna. At that time only Padma Vibhushan existed with three sub-categories - Pahela Varg, Dusra Varg and Tisra Varg. These were subsequently renamed as Padma Vibhushan, Padma Bhushan and Padma Shri vide Presidential Notification issued on January 8, 1955. During the years 1978 and 1979 and 1993 to 1997, Padma awards were not announced. The awardees do not get any cash reward but a certificate signed by the President apart from a medallion which they can wear at public and government functions. The awards are, however, not a conferment of title and the awardees are expected to not use them as prefix or suffix to their names. A Padma awardee can be given a higher award only after five years of the conferment of the earlier award. Not more than 120 awards can be given in a year but this does not include posthumous awards or awards given to NRIs and foreigners. The award is normally not conferred posthumously. However, in highly deserving cases, the Government could consider giving an award posthumously.

Who is eligible for Padma awards?

All persons without distinction of race, occupation, position or sex are eligible for these awards. However, government servants including those working with PSUs, except doctors and scientists, are not eligible for these awards. The award seeks to recognise works of distinction and is given for distinguished and exceptional achievements or service in all fields of activities and disciplines. According to Padma awards selection criteria, the award is given for “special services” and not just for “long service”. “It should not be merely excellence in a particular field, but the criteria has to be ‘excellence plus’.

Who nominates the awardees?

Any citizen of India can nominate a potential recipient. One can even nominate one’s own self. All nominations are to be done online where a form is to be filled along with details of the person or the organisation being nominated. An 800-word essay detailing the work done by the potential awardee is also to be submitted for the nomination to be considered. The government opens the Padma awards portal for nominations between May 1 and September 15 every year. It also writes to various state governments, governors, Union territories, central ministries and various departments to send nominations. There is also no rigid criteria or trenchant formula for selection, according to MHA. However, the lifetime achievement of an individual is among the main considerations.

Who selects the awardees?

All nominations received for Padma awards are placed before the Padma Awards Committee, which is constituted by the Prime Minister every year. The Padma Awards Committee is headed by the Cabinet Secretary and includes Home Secretary, Secretary to the President and four to six eminent persons as members. The recommendations of the committee are submitted to the Prime Minister and the President of India for approval. Sources said once a preliminary selection is



made, the antecedents of the selected awardees are verified using the services of central agencies to ensure nothing untoward has been reported or come on record about them. A final list is then prepared and announced.

Is the recipient's consent sought?

There is no provision for seeking a written or formal consent of the recipient before announcement of the award. However, before the announcement, every recipient receives a call from the Ministry of Home Affairs informing him or her about the selection. In case the recipient expresses a desire to be excluded from the award list, the name is removed, sources said. In the case of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, MHA sources said, a call was made to his residence on Tuesday morning. "However, since he was unwell, his wife picked up the call and she was informed about the conferment of the award. If he did not want it, he should have informed us," a home ministry official said.

HONOURABLE RIVALS

This year's Padma honours are not an unmixed bag. Covid vaccine makers who have helped the nation step up to an unprecedented health emergency and saved countless lives awkwardly rub shoulders with a former BJP chief minister who presided over an indelible stain on constitutional democracy in India, the demolition of Babri Masjid. But the day after, the BJP-led government's list of 128 seems to be touching off ripples, most of all, for the award to Congress veteran Ghulam Nabi Azad and CPM senior Buddhadeb Bhattacharya — the former has accepted it even as his party appears divided on the matter, while the latter declined within hours of the announcement, in keeping with his party line on state awards. This is not the first time, of course, that a government's awards list includes names from the Opposition. The Narasimha Rao government, for example, honoured Morarji Desai with Bharat Ratna and Atal Bihari Vajpayee with Padma Vibhushan. The Narendra Modi government itself has earlier honoured Pranab Mukherjee with Bharat Ratna and Sharad Pawar with Padma Vibhushan. And yet, such is the growing political polarisation today that the awards to Azad and Bhattacharya stand out. For the same reason, they are also welcome. Of course, the Modi government's reasons for this outreach may be more than a little tactical. In honouring Azad, for instance, the ruling party at the Centre may be acknowledging not just the J&K leader's undoubted political eminence but also his growing and visible estrangement from his own party — the PM's emotional tribute to Azad when he retired from the Rajya Sabha last year may have been a prelude. By seeking to award Bhattacharya, it may also be showing down the TMC. Or, rubbing it in to the CPM that the Communist to be applauded is the one who tried to chart his own course and was sent out into the cold. And yet, in a political climate where it often seems that the BJP, seven years in power, is contesting elections 24X7, locked in a fight to the finish with the Congress and the Left, the gesture is still heartening. Such is the BJP's unrelenting aggression, even when it is winning, that even a bare acknowledgement of the political opponent seems a welcome departure from the hardening hostilities. During elections, but also in peace time in between polls, the party is perpetually othering its opposition and calling it names, with its government using the law and the agencies at its command to intimidate or target those who dissent and disagree. In this context, in their best version, the awards to Azad and Bhattacharya mark a moment. As another crucial round of elections draws closer, the battle lines are sharpening once again. As they face off, all parties would do well to remember that the democracy game is bigger than its players, who must play with humility and abide by its rules and its courtesies. To expect the BJP to abandon its not-so-secret fantasy of an "Opposition-mukt" nation may itself be a fantasy. But reaching out across the aisle is what



enriches a democracy and it will be regrettable if the NDA's attempt to do so, in the Padma honours list, ends up being just yesterday's headline.

A BEAUTIFUL SECRET: GARCIA MÁRQUEZ AND THE DAUGHTER HE NAMED INDIRA

During the course of conversations with his biographer Gerald Martin, whose *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life* (1998) chronicles the extraordinary life and career of the Nobel Prize-winning Colombian writer, Márquez once remarked, "All human beings have three lives: public, private, and secret." Eight years after his death in April 2014 at the age of 87 years, Márquez's own secret life came to light recently when the Colombian newspaper *El Universal de Cartagena* published a news report, confirmed to The Associated Press by two relatives of the writer, about a closely guarded family secret — Márquez's child with Mexican writer and journalist Susana Cato, with whom he had an extra-marital relationship in the 1990s. The daughter, Indira Cato, now in her 30s, is a documentary film producer based out of Mexico City. Márquez, who was married to Mercedes Barcha for over 57 years, also had two sons with her, Rodrigo and Gonzalo García Barcha.

The confirmation

In an article published in *El País*, Gustavo Tatis Guerra, the journalist who broke the identity of Gabo's daughter, wrote, "On the day of Gabriel García Márquez's death, on Maundy Thursday, during that April of brilliant light and omens near the ocean in San Antero, someone alluded to an unconfirmed rumour that the author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) had a daughter, and that it was a closely guarded secret...It was a rumour that resurfaced suspiciously during García Márquez's funeral and memorial at the Palacio de las Bellas Artes in Mexico City, and remained in the air like a wind that opens and closes doors, without bringing credible reason or verifiable information." Guerra went about confirming the news with Márquez's trusted biographers Martin and Dasso Saldívar, and it would be the latter who would offer the proof, courtesy Márquez's long-time friend, Guillermo Angulo. Yet, when Guerra approached immediate members of the family for confirmation, he was met with a wall of silence. It would only be after the death of Barcha in 2020, that the family would confirm that they knew of and kept in touch with Indira — and had not spoken of it in Barcha's lifetime to spare her the heartbreak.

Who is Susana Cato?

Susana Cato first met Márquez, one of the most significant literary figures of the 20th century and the writer of novels such as *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981), *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985) and *Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), when she enrolled for the screenwriting workshop that he taught at the International Film and TV School of San Antonio de los Baños in Cuba in the early Nineties. Márquez had already won the Nobel Prize by then and was feted the world over for his exposition of magic realism. Over 30 years his junior, Cato was a talented student and aspiring scriptwriter who, according to the *El País* article, worked on the plot for Carlos García Agraz's short film, *El espejo de dos lunar* (*The Two-Moon Mirror*), that had a screenplay by Márquez. The Nobel laureate also partnered with Cato and Eliseo Alberto Diego to co-write the script of *Con el amor no se juega* (*Don't Play with Love*, 1991), directed by Carlos García Agraz, José Luis García Agraz, and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. Guerra writes that Cato also interviewed Márquez for the Mexican magazine *Cambio* in 1996. Even though Márquez never publicly acknowledged his relationship with her or Indira, he kept in touch with the Catos till the end of his life. Now 61, Cato, the author of two books, both published during the pandemic, lives in Mexico City.



Indira, the lost daughter

In his article, Guerra recalls Saldívar speaking of a photograph of Márquez with Indira that he had come across. “The smile of happiness he had with the girl on his knees, I’ll never forget it,” he had confided in Guerra. Even though Indira adopted her mother’s surname and never mentioned her father, in private, Márquez was deeply invested in his daughter’s life. It was he who gave her the name Indira, a tribute to former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, with whom he shared a bond of mutual admiration, and at whose invitation Márquez had accompanied his friend and Cuban President Fidel Castro to the Non-Aligned summit in New Delhi in 1983. Guerra writes in the El Pais article, “In choosing a name for her, he ruled out Virginia, which had been on the edges of his conscience since the 1970s, and instead chose Indira, in honour of Indira Gandhi, who he met in 1983 and who was the first head of state to call and congratulate him when he won the Nobel Prize in October 1982.” In studying dramatic literature and theatre at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, Indira Cato shares the creative interests of her parents. After working as a feature writer with an online publication, in 2020, she debuted as a documentary film producer with Arturo González Villaseñor’s *Llévate mis amores* (Take my love with you), that looks at Mexican women volunteers who stand by railroads to offer food to migrants across train windows. The film, for which she had also co-written the screenplay with Villaseñor, won several awards. Indira is now working on another documentary called *Las hijas del maíz* (Daughters of the corn).

WHY REPUBLIC DAY IS CELEBRATED

The Preamble to the Constitution declares that India is a ‘Republic’. This self-description must be taken seriously: being a republic is integral to India’s political identity. Moreover, this is not just a descriptive but also a strong, ethical, normative claim. Being republican is an ideal to which we are meant to consistently aspire, and when we go astray, we should know that we have done something wrong, feel remorse, and make amends. If our political identity loses its republican character, we must quickly act to restore it. It is because we cherish being a republic that on every January 26 since 1950, we celebrate this founding moment. The parade and the ritual surrounding it are meaningless unless we get the spirit behind the event.

Against monarchy

What is meant by a republic and what is its significance? For a start, the primary collective intent behind a republic is anti-monarchical. The Greeks defined monarchy as the ‘rule of one (mono)’, a form of government where one person rules and all others obey; one is sovereign, all others his subjects. We usually associate it with the hereditary rule of Maharajas and Maharanis but in the Greek definition of the term, it also covers rule by modern dictators (autocracy). But what is wrong with the rule of one person? Why fear rule by one person? Perhaps the most pernicious quality about monarchy is that it subjects people to the whim and fancy of one person, to his arbitrary will. One day he likes us and gives us, say a land grant. The next day, he withdraws the grant and puts us in jail. All powers are vested in him. God-like, he becomes judge and jury, makes and executes laws, decides when they are violated, and rewards and punishes as he pleases. All these decisions affecting us are taken without discussion, mysteriously, privately, and expressed as revealed truth. The entire decision-making process remains close to his chest. Hidden from everyone, it brooks neither transparency nor accountability. It is this tyrannical potential of the rule of one person, the absolute and arbitrary use of power that we dread.



Government by discussion

What alternative does a republic offer? The English word 'republic' is derived from the Latin 'Res publica' — the public thing. This translates in the political domain into decision-making in the open, in full view of all. A republic then is associated with what we today call the 'public sphere', an open space where people put forward claims about what is good for the community, what is in collective interest. After discussing, debating and deliberating upon them, they reach decisions about which laws to have and what course of action to take. A republic is 'government by free and open discussion'. The contrast between monarchical and republican forms of government could not be sharper. Monarchy entails surrender to the arbitrary power of another person, allowing whimsical intrusion in our choices, living at the mercy of the master. It breeds slavery. Those who live for long periods under subjection of others tend to develop slavishness, a mental torpor difficult to dispel. Silenced, they lose a vibrant sense of their own agency, are rendered without the capacity to think for themselves or take decisions about their own lives. For this reason, Gandhi used the idea of Swaraj to challenge not only political colonisation by the British, but the colonisation of our minds. It is because rule by one makes people unfree and enslaves them that the republic, its alternative, is strongly associated with freedom. To have a republic is to have a free people. This is why Gandhi's swaraj is an important republican idea. And also why the republican tradition emphasises the importance of citizenship. After all, to be a citizen is to belong to a political community where one can express oneself and act freely. Citizens alone have political liberty. Without it, we are mere subjects. For republic-lovers, political liberty means not unbridled freedom to do whatever one pleases (negative liberty), but to live by laws made by citizens themselves, that are a product of their own will, not the arbitrary will of others. This explains why republics have a constitution generated by a deliberative body of citizens which provides the basic law of the land, the fundamental framework of governance. The phrase "We, the People" in the Constitution is not a mere literary embellishment but central to a republican constitution. The willingness to live by self-made regulations but enforced by public power or the state also means that those who value a republic are not against states per se but against those that take away our political freedom.

'Republic' and 'democratic'

It appears from what is said above that the word 'republic' covers all that is meant by the term 'democratic'. Our own Constituent Assembly initially took the view that since the word 'republic' contains the word 'democratic', it may be unnecessary to use both. This would have been in keeping with the French republican tradition where the two terms are used interchangeably. Yet, after announcing its commitment to sever its links with an external, imperial monarch, and with all existing and future claims of local rajas and make India a republic, B.R. Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru conceded that since an undemocratic republic is conceivable, a separate commitment to democratic institutions is necessary. This decision was correct. It was wise to keep both terms in the Preamble. The idea of the republic conveys that decisions shall be made not by a single individual but by citizens after due deliberation in an open forum. But this is consistent with a narrow criterion of who counts as a citizen. Ancient Roman republics were not inclusive. Ancient India probably had aristocratic clan-republics which were far from democratic. In ancient Greece, slaves, women, and foreigners were not considered citizens and excluded from decision-making. Indeed, for many Greek thinkers, democracy had a negative connotation precisely because it was believed to involve everyone, including plebeians, what we contemptuously call 'the mob'. What the term 'democratic' brings to our Constitution is that citizenship be available to everyone, regardless of their wealth, education, gender, perceived social ranking, religion, race, or ideological beliefs. The word 'democracy' makes the republic inclusive. No one is excluded from



citizenship. For example, all have the right to vote. At the same time, if voting, for practical reasons, is restricted only to choosing representatives who, in the name of the people, make laws and policies, then citizens must at least have the right to be properly informed, seek transparency and accountability from their government. A republic must, at the very least, have perpetually vigilant citizens who act as watchdogs, monitor their representatives, and retain the right to contest any law or policy made on their behalf. By going beyond mere counting of heads, the term 'republic' brings free public discussion to our democratic constitution. It gives depth to our democracy. It is mandatory that decisions taken by the representatives of the people be properly deliberated, remain open to scrutiny, and be publicly, legally contested even after they have been made. When the farmers came out on the streets to peacefully challenge the three farm laws made by the current government, they exercised not only their democratic rights but also exhibited the highest of republican virtues. It is to celebrate such political acts of citizens that we have the Republic Day.

ONLY INDIAN TUNES AT BEATING RETREAT

Responding to criticism over the dropping of the hymn Abide with me from the Beating Retreat event this year, government sources said this year being the 75th year of Independence, playing of Indian tunes is considered more appropriate. "This year, only Indian origin or indigenous tunes are on the list," a government source said on Sunday. Abide with me will not be played so as to include the maximum number of Indian tunes, the source said. 'Ae mere watan ke logon' is an Indian tune and pays respect to all who laid down their lives for the safety and integrity of the nation, the source added. Phasing out of tunes handed down from a colonial past and including tunes that have a deeper connect with the people of India is an exercise, another government source said. Former Union Minister and senior Congress leader P. Chidambaram said Abide with me was a Christian hymn written in 1847 but no longer "only" a Christian hymn. "The hymn was part of the Beating Retreat ceremony since 1950," he said in a post on Twitter.

'Intolerance of govt.'

"The intolerance of the BJP government has reached such proportions that there are no words to condemn their attitude and outrageous actions," he added. At the Republic Day parade this year, there will be 16 marching contingents, said Major General Alok Kacker, Chief of Staff, Delhi Area, in a briefing on the Army's participation at the parade. Due to COVID-19, like last year, this year too, the parade will end at National Stadium and not go to the Red Fort, he said. In view of this, the size of the marching contingents, too, has been reduced from 144 to 96 individuals per contingent, another officer said. The number of attendees at the parade is significantly reduced in view of the large number of cases. At the parade, the Army will showcase the evolution of its various uniforms and weapon systems over the decades, with new and modern weapon systems displayed alongside their legacy counterparts, Major General Kacker said.

THE APPEAL OF HYMN 'ABIDE WITH ME' IN INDIA

A day after the eternal flame at Amar Jawan Jyoti was shifted to the National War Memorial, the government has dropped Abide With Me, the sombre highpoint of the conclusion of the Republic Day celebrations. Penned in the pre-modern world by Henry Francis Lyte, a Scottish Anglican minister and son of a naval captain, the hymn, which is known for its simplicity and sombre theme, is often sung to English composer William Henry Monk's evocative tune Eventide, and has been a fixture in the Indian Beating Retreat ceremony since 1950. It is always the last piece to be played by the brass bands before the troops recede up Raisina Hill to the tune of poet Allama Iqbal's Saare



jahan se achha. Played at dusk, this is also the last piece before the retreat buglers bring down the Indian flag. In 2020, reports had emerged about the hymn being dropped from the Beating Retreat Ceremony and being replaced by poet Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Vande Mataram. Following criticism, the hymn was played in 2020 and retained in 2021. At the ceremony, the hymn creates a sombre moment when the tubular bells ring from the North and the South blocks, followed by an echo effect created by musicians posted atop the two buildings.

Abide With Me

Lyte wrote the hymn in 1820 after visiting a friend, who in his last moments continually uttered "abide with me", a request to ease his pain. But he kept the piece to himself until his own death in 1847. Paradoxically, the first time the hymn was actually sung was at Lyte's own funeral in Nice years after it was originally written. The hymn, which is popular across Christian denominations, was also played at the wedding of Queen Elizabeth II. It was played by musicians as the Titanic went down. The piece also became significant and popular during World War I. Edith Cavell, a British nurse, would go on to sing it the night before she was shot by a German squad for helping British soldiers escape from occupied Belgium. It is still sung during various military services in Australia and New Zealand.

Significance in India

Abide With Me was one of Mahatma Gandhi's personal favourites. The Father of the Nation first heard the piece played by Mysore Palace Band, and could not forget its tenderness and serenity. At Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, the ashram bhajanavali — the first and probably the only cross-religion hymnal anywhere — with the bhajans 'Vaishnav Jan Toh' and the well-known Ram Dhun by Tulsidas, 'Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram' in it, Abide With Me, along with Lead Kindly Light, was put together under Gandhi's watch. The hymnal is sung regularly in church choirs, and in schools and educational institutions in the country. It has been translated into various Indian languages. There is also an Usha Uthup version of the hymn in a Bangla film titled 'Madly Bengali'.

In place of the hymn

Abide With Me has been replaced by Kavi Pradeep's seminal piece Aye Mere Watan Ke Logon, which was written in the wake of the Sino-Indian War, and went on to become a tableau of Indian nationalism. The song was first sung on January 27, 1963. Composed by C Ramachandra and sung by Lata Mangeshkar, it was first performed at Delhi's National Stadium in a fundraiser organised by the film industry for Indian war widows. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru welled up as the six-and-a-half-minute song was sung.

Other changes

Quite a few changes have happened in the playlist of the Beating Retreat ceremony in the last few years. 2016 saw a focus on popular music and less on traditional western and Indian martial tunes, the mainstay of the ceremony. A version of A R Rahman's Bharat Humko Jaan Se Pyaara Hai, Ma Tujhe Salaam, and Dil Diya Hai Jaan Bhi Denge were experimented with. This year, a Kumaoni tune from Uttarakhand, Channa Billauri, has made it to the list. The folk piece, which was first sung by singer Beena Tiwari on radio, is a gentle ditty about a woman asking her father to not marry her in a village named Channa Billauri because she feels that it's unusually hot there.



DISTORTING HISTORY THROUGH A CALENDAR

Built at the site of an infamous detention centre set up by the British government, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)-Kharagpur was the first IIT to be commissioned. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who gave a memorable convocation address at IIT-Kharagpur in 1956, said: "Here in the place of that Hijli Detention Camp stands the fine monument of India, representing India's urges, India's future in the making. This picture seems to me symbolical of the changes that are coming to India." Notwithstanding the criticism of encouraging brain drain and generating intense admission competition among schoolgoing students, leading to the entrenchment of an unhealthy tuition culture, the premier IITs continue to have a transformative presence in India's technical and science education system. Nehru was indeed right in saying that the IITs are India's future in the making. But strangely, IIT-Kharagpur is in the news not for its role in shaping the future but for distorting our past to advance a particular social agenda.

An unscientific narrative

In its new calendar for 2022, IIT-Kharagpur's new Centre of Excellence for Indian Knowledge System has propagated an unscientific narrative on the beginnings of our ancestry. Titled 'Recovery of the Foundations of Indian Knowledge Systems', this calendar presents a very confusing collage of symbols and images with patently distorted ideas. The intention of the calendar is to establish an alternate premise that the Aryans, the carriers of Vedic culture, were indigenous to the Indus Valley and surrounding regions. This premise advances the theme that these people were the custodians of the Indus Valley Civilization that had been active for more than 10,000 years and that eventually spread its cultural influence westwards from India. This is called the 'out of India' theory. As the historian Charles Allen stated in his book, such revisionism flies in the face of all the evidence — archaeogenetics, archaeological, linguistic, zoological, botanical, geographical and theological. The evidence informs us that the pre-Indian state's civilizational beginnings are associated with the Harappans, the earliest settlers and belonging to a greater Indus Valley Civilization, whose culture extends from 7,000 to 2,000 BCE. The remnants of their settlements are located around the Indus River, Kutch, Saurashtra and parts of Balochistan and the Makran Coast. Engaged in agriculture and trade, they were adept at designing well-laid-out townships with a good system of water management. They used bullock-drawn carts. Predominantly centred on farming, these communities slowly declined as a result of increasing aridity and declining summer rainfall. The archaeological evidence also suggests that during the late Harappan period, the Rigvedic people entered the Indian subcontinent through present-day Iran and Afghanistan. These pastoral migrants and their grazing animals including horses came in from the Eurasian steppes into the Indus Valley region, in batches, to mingle with the dark-skinned settlers of the Indus Valley. Although not an 'invasion' in the classical sense, as the American archaeologist George Dales had noted, "Harappans met their end not with an Aryan bang, but with an Indus expatriate's whimper". But the 'in-group-out-group' dynamics that may have played out in such a cultural landscape may have encouraged caste-based social hierarchy, allowing the resourceful newcomers to dominate and forcing the earlier settlers to be marginalised and migrate possibly southwards. The results of excavations from Keezhadi in Tamil Nadu provide further evidence of the extended spread of the non-Vedic culture towards south India until 2,200 years ago. Recent archaeogenetic studies provide us a firmer scientific foundation to the theory of Aryan migration from the Eurasian steppes. For instance, the mitochondrial DNA (designated haplogroup R1a1a) of some of the social groups in India share a common genetic ancestral lineage with eastern Europeans. It is suggested that haplogroup R1a1a mutated out of haplogroup R1a in the Eurasian Steppe about 14,000 years ago. Thus, these studies



support the 'Out of the East European Steppes' theory. It also means that the original form of Indo-European languages was first spoken in Eastern Europe, the 'original' homeland. It is likely that a group of nomads who shared the genomic subclade R1a1a left their homeland and moved east towards the Caspian grasslands, where they tamed horses, goats and dogs and learned to build horse-drawn chariots, essential for a nomadic life. Around 1,900 BCE, these people broke up and one group proceeded towards what is now Iran, and the other to India. Those who entered India, around 1,500 BCE, established the dominant civilization in the north-west. By then, much of the older Harappan settlers had either become marginalised or had moved to southern and central India, and even to parts of Balochistan. The newly settled people, the so-called Aryans, who worshipped fire, were not builders like the Harappans but are likely to have been better storytellers. Two recently published scientific papers, reporting the archaeogenomic studies of the early settlers of central and south Asia, chart the genetic trail of the hunter-gatherers, Iranian farmers and pastoralists from the Caspian steppes, and explain how they may have intermingled to become the makers of some of the world's earliest civilizations. Obtained from a skeleton of a woman from a 5,000-year-old Indus Valley Civilization settlement in the village of Rakhigarhi, in the Hisar District of Haryana, the companion paper tracks the lineage of the people who settled in the Indus Valley. The DNA from the skeleton shows no detectable ancestry from the "steppe pastoralists or from Anatolian and Iranian farmers, suggesting farming in South Asia arose from local foragers rather than from large-scale migration from the west". This conclusion, with a caveat that a single sample cannot fully characterise the entire population, reinforces the prevailing notion on the origins of the Harappan settlers. It is also likely that there could be more genetic commonality between earlier settlers from Africa and the Harappan people.

Retreat of reason

The January page of the IIT calendar starts with a statement: "The tributaries of Indus as mentioned in the Rig Veda are sourced to the Siwalik ranges in the Central-Eastern Himalayas". The Siwaliks are the low-altitude southern-most hill ranges of the Himalayas from where no major rivers are sourced. If this is not a deliberate distortion for the ease of false messaging, this apparent lack of geographical understanding for those who are pioneering the studies of Indian Knowledge Systems is shocking. That the calendar-makers resort to obfuscation of facts becomes obvious in other pages. For instance, as Meera Nanda pointed out, 'Karmic' retribution and the idea of rebirth are not part of early Vedic tradition but derived from the Buddha-Jaina streams of thought that was later incorporated in the Upanishads. If the IIT-Kharagpur 2022 calendar is an indication of how the Indian Knowledge System is going to be deliberated in our higher learning centres, we need to be wary of its impact on the future generations. Such a Centre signals the retreat of reason and free inquiry in education.

FOR AN INCLUSIVE LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

Over the last couple of months, the pushback by some Kannada activist groups against the "hegemony" of Sanskrit has seen a renewed vigour. The BJP government in Karnataka stands accused of providing "step-motherly treatment" towards Kannada academic research, while promoting Karnataka Samskrit University, which was started by the BJP government during its previous regime. The controversy centres around a grant of ₹320 crore given to Samskrit University at a time when Kannada University at Hampi has been paralysed for want of funds. Kannada University's financial condition has been so precarious that it has not admitted a single new student in three years, and it has been several months since it has paid all its employees. The government is pushing it to become "self-reliant". The plight of Kannada University, earlier funded



by the government, has triggered many campaigns in the last two years. It is in this context that the government's promotion of Sanskrit University has caused consternation. This also comes on the heels of a PIL filed by several organisations, including an RSS affiliate, promoting Sanskrit learning and opposing the making of Kannada mandatory in undergraduate courses, a government order which the Karnataka High Court ordered to be set aside. One of the mostly unstated reasons behind the opposition to make Kannada mandatory is that doing so would reduce the number of students opting for Sanskrit, as most would opt for English as the other language under the two-language policy. The defence of the need to promote Sanskrit as the "mother of all languages", apparently at the cost of Kannada, has made the State government's affirmation that it is committed to the Kannada cause seem less credible. At the same time, an online campaign for 'Ellara Kannada' (everyone's Kannada) to simplify the Kannada alphabet by dropping features that it had borrowed from Sanskrit has picked up steam. First proposed by grammarian Shankara Bhat in the 2000s, it has now been re-articulated as a pushback against "Sanskrit hegemony" that has made the language "elitist and Brahminical". Many spearheading the campaign this time come from the Dalit Bahujan communities. This renewed push against Sanskrit and "Brahminism" also comes in the backdrop of assertions by Brahmins in recent times. For instance, Brahmin organisations, including the government body Brahmin Development Board, ensured that criminal cases were booked against two Kannada film personalities for their criticism of "Brahminism." This has led to polarisation among communities. However, these articulations for a regional identity seem to lack political bite as there is no regional party in the State that champions this plank consistently. The JD(S), which comes closest to it, has not identified itself wholeheartedly as a regional party. Though Congress leader Siddaramaiah tried to project a federal plank against the ruling BJP back in 2017, with a State flag, anthem and an argument that the State has been financially victimised by the Union government, it did not go very far given that he is also from a national party. The emergence of the BJP as the single-largest party, just shy of majority in the 2018 Assembly polls, also implies it did not garner popular support. Some academics have argued that even on the cultural front, the Kannada movement has always had its roots in Hindutva. Many early stalwarts who articulated a Kannada identity were conservative, upper caste Hindus. However, forces that have argued for a more inclusive articulation of Kannada identity have always resisted the tide. The present debate is the latest instance of such resistance.

HER RIGHT TO WEAR

For over a month, seven students of a government college in Udupi, Karnataka, have not been allowed to attend classes because they wear the hijab. The college authorities argue that wearing head-scarves violates the dress code, even though the young women turned up for classes in the college uniform. The Karnataka education minister has called it an act of "indiscipline", arguing that there is no place for religion in an educational institution. The principal of the college has said that "uniformity" does not allow him to make exceptions. Both are flimsy arguments given the penalty they wish to justify — shutting the doors of education to students. They are particularly indefensible given how both Indian law and cultural common sense deal with the diversity of religious expression. The Constitution guarantees citizens the fundamental right to practise their religion, which can be curtailed only if it violates public order or demands of public health or morality. The Kerala High Court in 2016 had allowed students to take an all-India medical entrance test while wearing the hijab on the grounds that it was an "essential part" of the petitioners' religious practice. The everyday secularism practised in the country is largely unperturbed by the multiplicity of religious symbols; rare is the school or college that does not celebrate multiple religious festivals or sees, say, a Sikh boy in a turban or sacred threads on the



wrist of another student as defiance of discipline. In this, Indian social life is far from the rigidity of western ideas of secularism such as France's laicite, which insists on a monotone uniformity in public life. It is important to see the disproportionate reaction to hijab in a classroom in the context of the disturbing tide of attacks against minorities in Karnataka by emboldened Hindutva vigilantes, from raids on churches to the targeting of Muslim men in inter-faith relationships. The assertion of a violent majoritarianism draws oxygen from the ruling BJP government's divisive laws on cow slaughter, inter-faith marriage and conversion. The binding of the state, closer and closer, to an identification with the majority religion spills over into the social sphere, leading to demands for the public sphere to be purged of all markers of Muslim identity. To argue that discouraging the practice of hijab, in this instance, is a feminist act is duplicitous. Such conversations are possible in an atmosphere of trust and equality, when all religions are open to the critique of reason, not when minority faiths are being daily demonised. It is discrimination that violates the law of the land. The Udupi government college must desist in conspiring in such violation, and allow the girls back into the classroom.

A RENEWED PUSH FOR HINDUTVA

BJP leaders in Tamil Nadu appear to be zealously working to spot issues that could be woven into their Hindutva narrative. They have come a long way from the time the old guard would only sell the BJP "as a party with a difference and shorn of lumpen elements" and be reluctant to declare its pro-Hindu agenda. Back then, State politics was dominated by Jayalalithaa and Karunanidhi. The present crop of leaders is losing no opportunity to posture itself as a guardian of the Hindus, whose interests, it claims, are being compromised by the ruling DMK. Presently it has latched on to the death by suicide of a Class 12 girl, who was studying in a Christian missionary-run institution as a resident inmate in Thanjavur district. Though the police arrested a sexagenarian warden under the Juvenile Justice Act, as the girl alleged she was forced to do chores in the hostel, the issue took a political turn when a 45-second video clip surfaced. In the clip, the girl is heard saying that "two years ago", her parents were asked if they would convert her to Christianity. A male voice is heard asking "so because you did not convert, they troubled you?" To this she responds, "could be". Citing the video, the BJP has launched State-wide protests alleging that the school attempted to "forcibly convert" the girl and is "seeking justice" for a "Tamil Nadu Hindu girl". BJP State president K. Annamalai has rejected Thanjavur Superintendent of Police Ravali Priya's statement that there is no religious angle to the girl's death. Party leaders want the school, where many Hindu students study, shut down. The issue is sub judice with the girl's parents moving the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court seeking a CB-CID probe. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, acting on a BJP member's complaint, has sought a report from the Director General of Police. Incidentally, three days before the girl died, BJP leaders were outraged over a satirical show on a Tamil television channel in which two children, donning the roles of a king and minister, mocked demonetisation and disinvestment. Mr. Annamalai said L. Murugan, his predecessor and now Minister for Information and Broadcasting (I&B), had assured him of action as the show "demeaned" the Prime Minister. The I&B Ministry issued notice to the TV channel citing a complaint from a BJP functionary. The credit for giving a renewed push to the Hindutva agenda goes to Mr. Murugan. Shortly after being appointed BJP State president during the COVID-19 pandemic, he had raked up the issue of a little-known Tamil YouTube channel insulting the Kanda Sashti Kavasam, a holy hymn sung in praise of Lord Muruga, regarded as a "Tamil Hindu God". He launched a 'Vetri Vel Yatra,' going from one abode of Lord Muruga to another, hoping to consolidate "Hindu votes". Many BJP leaders shared photos and videos of them performing 'pooja' for their newly purchased 'Vel' (Lord Muruga's spear) in their households. Essentially, Lord Muruga replaced Lord Ram in Tamil Nadu for a limited purpose in the BJP's

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



scheme of things. Its ally, the AIADMK, in power then, declared a holiday for Thai Poomam (a festival when Lord Muruga is propitiated). Incidentally, the DMK has not tinkered with this religious holiday, perhaps not wanting to give the BJP another opportunity to accuse it of bias against Hindus. Given that the electorate had rejected attempts by Jayalalithaa to polarise Hindu votes and forced her to repeal an anti-conversion law and a ban on animal sacrifice in temples, it remains to be seen if the BJP's efforts would pay political dividends now.

MGNREGA IRREGULARITIES: CENTRE ASKS JHARKHAND TO SUBMIT REPORT

Days after The Indian Express reported on irregularities found in the latest social audit of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Jharkhand, the central government on Monday wrote to the state asking it to “ensure that action is taken with full force” in all such cases. Dharmvir Jha, Director, MGNREGA, under the Union Rural Development Ministry, wrote to Jharkhand MGNREGA Commissioner Rajeshwari B, asking for an action taken report, including information on FIR registered in the matter and disciplinary action against officials. Asking the state to furnish the details by February 7 “without fail”, the Union ministry sought the state's response in a manner which showed its “seriousness” in taking strict action. On January 14, The Indian Express reported on key irregularities found by the Social Audit Unit of the Jharkhand Rural Development Department in its latest MGNREGA concurrent audit. According to the findings, more than 1.59 lakh workers were listed in the records but around 75 per cent of them were missing from work sites. Also, machines were used for work meant to generate jobs for people and beneficiaries were found to have struck deals with contractors to use their names on muster rolls in return for a cut from direct money transfers. Contractors were found to be using contract labour instead of local work-seekers. In his letter, Jha wrote, “Please refer to email on this subject from GOI in reference to the news article ‘Missing workers, dodgy roles, wage diversion: NREG audit in Jharkhand’ published in The Indian Express dated 14 January 2022 on the concurrent audit conducted in various districts of the state. In this regard, you have been requested to ensure that action is taken in all such cases with full force for the Gram Panchayat.”

FOR A CIVIC SOLIDARITY

The NHRC has done the right thing in directing the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Arunachal Pradesh government to submit an action taken report against the racial profiling and relocation of the Chakma and Hajong communities in the northeastern State. They had fled their homes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in erstwhile East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) after losing land to the construction of the Kaptai dam on the Karnaphuli river in the early 1960s. They had sought asylum in India and were settled in relief camps in Arunachal Pradesh. Since then they have been well integrated in villages in the southern and south-eastern parts of the State. In 2015, the Supreme Court directed the State to grant them citizenship, but this had not yet been implemented. In a judgment in 1996, the Court had stated that the “life and personal liberty of every Chakma residing within the State shall be protected”. In light of these orders and given that most of the Chakma/Hajong community members were born in the State and have been living peacefully, the Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister's announcement, in August 2021, that they would be relocated outside the State and that steps would be taken for a “census” of the communities was clearly unwarranted. The so-called State-driven census would have amounted to a racial profiling of the two communities that have also been the subject of an antagonist and nativist campaign by organisations such as the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union. The issue has not been helped either by statements made earlier by the Union Minister of State for Home, Kiren Rijiju, about relocation. It is difficult, but not impossible, for any State government in the



northeast to balance the interests of native tribal communities and those of legitimately settled refugees and their progeny. Special rights guaranteed in the Indian Constitution in these States in order to protect the tribal people, their habitat and their livelihoods, have more than occasionally been misinterpreted as favouring tribal nativism with overblown demographic fears fanning hatred for communities such as the Chakma/Hajong in Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. Unfortunately, political forces have also limited themselves to using ethnic fissures for power and sustenance. Uprooting communities that fled their homelands under duress and have since been well settled in their adopted areas, contributing to the diversity of culture and the economy, would be a violation of their rights and repeating a historic wrong. A dialogue between the State government, civil society and those of the Chakma/Hajong communities would go a long way in addressing concerns in implementing the Court judgment of 2015, rather than the course currently adopted by Itanagar. Implementing the NHRC directive should be a step in the process to reverse that course.

SOLVING THE STERLITE PROBLEM

Sterlite Copper of Thoothukudi in Tamil Nadu has become a moral issue after the police firing on protesters resulted in the deaths of 13 people in May 2018. Over some 20 years of plant operation, the company had violated many pollution regulations and faced at least two major allegations of excessive emissions. It also faced consistent protests against pollution from the plant. It had been ordered shut many times only to reopen and expand capacity.

Complaints against the plant

Residents around Sterlite say that when the plant was operating, there would be release of gas at 3 a.m. every day. They would wake up short of breath and to a foul smell. Even cattle were refusing to drink groundwater since it was contaminated by Sterlite effluents, they say. Now, the air is cleaner, they contend. The business community complains that Sterlite did not employ enough local people and did not give enough contracts for local businessmen. It was a high-handed management that talked down to them. Though Sterlite has constructed toilets, water tanks and community centers, it has not invested much in serving the educational or health needs of the local population. Distrust of Sterlite is so much that many people now credit good rains in the last few years to the shuttering of the plant. During the 2018 protests, WhatsApp videos of a grieving widow of a cancer patient demanding shutting of Sterlite went viral. There has not been any study to link cancer with Sterlite emissions. But people were only eager to believe the talk. Sterlite representatives have faulted protesters for spreading rumours and serving hostile vested interests. But the company's record has not been above board. Sterlite's product, copper, is a strategic metal. Important applications are energy, electrical equipment and electronics. Nations are switching more and more to wind and solar due to global warming constraints. This means new projects and transmission lines. There is a push for electrical vehicles. Globally, and in India, copper demand is only set to ramp up. Imports can cause supply bottlenecks. End consumers such as electrical equipment manufacturers sometimes pay a high premium as a result. There are more than 120 copper smelters across the world. All major copper-consuming countries have copper smelters within their country. Copper production provides strategic balance and price stability. The shuttering of the Sterlite plant quickly made India, a copper exporter, an importer. Domestic copper price is typically higher than the landed price of imported copper, increasing forex outgo. India now imports copper at the rate of 3 lakh of tonnes a year and the figure is only likely to grow. Volatile global copper prices are now at least 50% more than what they were when the plant shut. A copper smelter would serve India well. The only other major smelter in India is Hindalco.



Thousands of jobs were lost when Sterlite shut. Real estate and local businesses serving the employees were hit. Imports through the Thoothukudi port fell by 25% the year Sterlite was shut and have only slid further since then. The port lost some 120 calls of vessels every year carrying copper concentrate. Port dues, berth charges, wharfage, etc. took a hit. In 2018-19, the operating income of the port fell by 15% and operating surplus reduced by 20% compared to the previous year. Without Sterlite's copper exports, the port's container terminal has been struggling. The business of some 20 stevedores and 100 clearing and forwarding agents came to zero. On average, 5,000 lorry trips were needed to transport the concentrate import from each ship to the plant. A whole lorry ecosystem had developed in Thoothukudi sustaining thousands of families. In 2020, the Madras High Court, while upholding the 2018 State government order closing the plant, said, "when economy is pitted against the environment, environment will reign supreme." Sterlite has gone on appeal to the Supreme Court.

An opportunity

While the economic and national interest case for a copper smelter is proven, the trust deficit between Vedanta and the people of Thoothukudi needs to be bridged if the smelter has to restart. The framework for a solution could focus on adherence to norms and creating harmony between the company, government and the people. Sterlite presents an opportunity for the people of Thoothukudi to move forward in national and local economic interest. It is an opportunity for a corporate group to act responsibly and take people along while conducting its business. The process, however, needs someone who can help bridge the trust deficit. An assurance from him, her or an agency should guarantee any settlement. And it's not something governments can do.

DECOMMISSIONED INS KHUKRI TO BE CONVERTED INTO MUSEUM

INS Khukri, the lead ship of the Indian Navy's Khukri class missile corvettes which was decommissioned last December, was on Wednesday handed over to the Diu administration to be converted into a museum. The ship is planned to be developed as a full-scale museum, the Navy said in a statement. As part of developing and revitalising the Khukri Memorial, the Diu administration had approached the Defence Ministry in 2019 for gifting to it, for public display, a decommissioned naval vessel, the Navy said. "The ship commenced her last journey under tow by Navy ships from Visakhapatnam and arrived at Diu on January 14, it stated. Built by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders, Khukri was commissioned on August 23, 1989 in Mumbai by the then Defence Minister Krishna Chandra Pant and Ms. Sudha Mulla, wife of late Capt. Mahendra Nath Mulla, MVC. After over 32 years of service and having participated in all forms of naval operations, the ship was decommissioned in a solemn ceremony on December 23, 2021 when the national flag, naval ensign and decommissioning pennant were lowered at sunset in the presence of Vice-Admiral Biswajit Dasgupta, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command, the statement said.

PHILIPPINES INKS \$375 MN BRAHMOS MISSILE DEAL

The Philippines on Friday signed a \$374.96-million deal with BrahMos Aerospace Private Ltd. for the supply of shore-based anti-ship variant of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile. This is the first export order for the missile, a joint product of India and Russia. The contract was signed by Delfin N. Lorenzana, Defence Secretary of the Philippines, and Atul Dinkar Rane, Director General of BrahMos Aerospace Pvt. Ltd., in a virtual ceremony. Speaking at the signing ceremony, Mr. Lorenzana said it was an absolute honour to be the first foreign nation to acquire the supersonic



cruise missile system. “As the world’s fastest supersonic cruise missiles, the BrahMos missiles will provide deterrence against any attempt to undermine their sovereignty and sovereign rights, especially in the West Philippine Sea,” he said. “Equipping our Navy with this vital asset is imperative as the Philippines continues to protect the integrity of its territory and defend its national interests.” Stating that BrahMos missiles would certainly beef up the firepower of the Philippine Navy, particularly the Philippine Marine Corps coastal defence regiment, Mr. Lorenzana said the system would provide counter-attack capabilities within the Philippine exclusive economic zone.

WHAT CAN CAUSE AN AIRCRAFT TO FLY INTO TERRAIN?

Earlier this month, the Indian Air Force announced that the preliminary findings of a tri-services inquiry into the Mi-17 V5 helicopter crash that killed Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) Gen. Bipin Rawat and 13 others in December had established that an “unexpected change” in weather conditions had led to the spatial disorientation of the aircraft’s pilot resulting in Controlled Flight into Terrain (CFIT).

What is Controlled Flight into Terrain?

The International Air Transport Association (IATA), the airline industry’s trade association that supports aviation with global standards including for airline safety and security, defines a Controlled Flight into Terrain incident as an accident in which there is a collision with terrain, water, or obstacle during the course of a flight, without indication of loss of control. IATA stresses that the critical distinction in these incidents versus other types of aviation accidents is the fact that the aircraft remains under the control of the flight crew till the occurrence of the incident.

How does a CFIT incident occur?

An IATA analysis of CFIT accidents involving commercial flights between 2008-2017 established several factors that could contribute including: ‘Latent Conditions or conditions present in the system before the accident and triggered by various possible factors; Environmental Threats where an event or error occurs outside the influence of the flight crew, but which requires crew attention and management if safety margins are to be maintained; Flight Crew Errors where an observed flight crew deviation from organisational expectations or crew intentions occurs; and Undesired Aircraft States where a flight-crew-induced aircraft state clearly compromises safety of the aircraft. The study also found that the approach-cum-landing phase of an aircraft’s flight accounted for two-thirds of all CFIT accidents and contributed to 62% of fatal CFIT incidents.

What exactly happened in the case of Gen. Rawat’s flight?

Specifically, in the case of the military helicopter that crashed while flying over the Nilgiris to its destination at the Defence Services Staff College’s helipad in Wellington, the court of inquiry found that an unexpected change in weather conditions in the valley resulted in the aircraft flying into clouds that in turn caused the helicopter’s pilot to experience sudden spatial disorientation—a condition where the pilot loses the ability to correctly interpret aircraft attitude, altitude or airspeed in relation to the Earth or other points of reference—and made him fly into terrain.

How often do CFIT accidents occur?

While the breakdown of such incidents concerning military aircraft is hard to find in the public domain, the IATA ‘Accident Analysis Report’ for the 2008-2017 period found that while CFIT



incidents accounted for 6% of 837 commercial aviation accidents recorded in the IATA Accident Database, disproportionately CFIT was the second most frequent category of fatal accidents, representing 42 fatal accidents or almost 28% of total fatal accidents. The only category of accidents with a higher level of fatalities was Loss of Control In-flight (LOC-I). Also, CFIT accidents tend to be severe in terms of the number of fatalities and the extent of damage to the airframe. Forty six out of the 47 CFIT accidents in the IATA study resulted in a hull loss—in other words the aircraft was a complete write-off. For the majority of CFIT incidents relating to commercial flights, 70% involved turboprop aircraft, with planes with jet engines only accounting for 30% of such accidents.

How can such incidents be avoided?

A combination of the use of technology and appropriate and adequate pilot training, including in simulators, can help minimise/avoid CFIT incidents. Particularly, installation of Ground Proximity Warning System (GPWS) / Terrain Awareness and Warning System (TAWS) in aircraft help generate the requisite alerts to the flight crew and if the pilots are adequately trained to respond to these alerts, maintain situational awareness and make the right interventions, CFIT accidents can be mostly avoided.

THREE-FOURTH INJURED AUTO WORKERS LOST TWO FINGERS ON AN AVERAGE

Around three-fourth of the auto-sector workers who sustained injuries over the past five years have lost almost two fingers on an average to crush injuries, according to a Safe In India (SII) Foundation annual report. It is based on data of around 2,500 workers who suffered non-fatal injuries at factories in Faridabad-Gurugram-Neemrana auto belt. Almost 80% of them were employed in the supply chains of some of the largest auto-sector brands. Titled “Crushed 2021”, the report, third in a series on the state of auto sector workers safety in India, claimed that over 50% of the injuries reported to the SII occurred on power press machines with 2.04 fingers lost on an average and many losing whole hands. “A majority of the workers injured on power presses are inadequately trained and have low education levels. Young and old workers lose fingers equally on power presses. A majority of the crush injuries were on power presses that should have had safety sensors but did not. Most factories violate many extant regulations; potential criminal offences,” said the report released during a two-hour-long online event on Wednesday.

‘Safety steps bypassed’

More than a hundred auto workers who suffered the injuries also joined the event from 11 locations in Gurugram and Faridabad to share their experiences. They claimed that safety measures were bypassed by the companies to ensure increased production and also that they were not provided any safety gears such as ear plugs and helmets, except during audit inspections. Most of them conceded that they were not given any formal training in operating the machines and had learnt it from their seniors. Unfortunately, the proportion of workers with severe injuries—loss of body parts and bone fractures—has not reduced in the past five years indicating continuing underlying dangerous working conditions, the report said. Maruti-Suzuki, Hero, Honda suppliers remain largest contributors to accidents in Gurugram (93%) and Faridabad (75%), as per the report with Bajaj, Eicher, JCB, Tata Motors, TVS, Yamaha suppliers are also significant contributors in Gurugram, Faridabad, Rudrapur and Neemrana. Almost one-fifth of the member companies of the Automotive Component Manufacturers Association of India also reported accidents, stressing the fact that the problem was not confined to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, the report claimed. Quoting the report, Sandeep Sachdeva, Co-founder and CEO, SII,



said the lower the salary and the education, the worse was the injury received. As many as 92% of those injured were migrants, 81% educated only up to grade 10 and 71% earned less than ₹10,000 a month with no overtime pay for many despite a 12-hour shift, said Mr. Sachdeva. The injured workers had not received their ESIC e-Pehchaan Card on the day of joining their jobs, as per ESIC regulations requirement. Interestingly, all the injured workers did receive their card a few days after the accident. The report claimed the government data had grossly under-reported factory injuries, inspections had come down and the new Labour Occupational Safety, Health And Working Conditions Code might make matters worse. Kamal Jaswal, IAS (retd.), also present at the event, said it was the moral responsibility of the original equipment makers to ensure that the safety measures were adhered to in their supply chains and the “bloodied” spare parts should not be accepted by them. He said the safety environment at workplace was a right guaranteed in the Constitution and there were various Acts and rules for it.

Recommendations

The 78-page report also made certain recommendations and suggestions to the OEMs, auto companies associations and the Central and State governments to reduce the accidents. Anil Swarup, IAS (retd.), lauded the efforts of the Foundation in bringing out the detailed report and said the suggestions were “practical” and “doable”.

35K POSTS, 1.25 CR ASPIRANTS: RLY RECRUITMENT PROCESS, AND CONTROVERSY

Thousands of candidates who had appeared for the Railway Recruitment Board’s Non-Technical Popular Category (NTPC) recruitment exam blocked trains in Bihar in protest against the results released earlier this month. Even as aspirants, mainly in Bihar and also on social media, continued to protest, the Railways said all processes took place as per rules and no one group of aspirants would get any unfair advantage over others in landing a railway job.

What posts was the examination for?

Railways is recruiting in 35,281 vacant posts in various categories ranging from junior clerk, train assistant, guard, time keeper etc to station master across its verticals in its zones. Around 11,000 of these vacancies require 10+2 (Class 12 pass) as the minimum qualification to apply. The rest are higher-pay posts that require graduation as the minimum qualification. The posts are spread across five pay grades— from level 2 to level 6. For instance, Junior Clerk is a level 2 post (starting pay Rs 19,900) for which being a Class 12 pass is the minimum qualification. Station Master is a level 6 post (starting pay Rs 35,400) for which a candidate must be at least a graduate.

How were the tests conducted?

Since 1.25 crore candidates had applied for these jobs, Railways held a common test, called Computer Based Test-1 (CTBT-1), for all candidates as a screening process. Railways says that this was done since nothing would have legally stopped a graduate from sitting for an exam meant for a Class 12 pass anyway. After these vacancies were announced in 2019, the exams were to be tentatively held in September 2019, but were postponed to March 2020 — and then the Covid-induced lockdown hit in. Eventually, CTBT-1 was held over 68 days in 133 shifts with two shifts each day between April-July 2020. The results for CBT-1 were declared on January 14, 2022. The real test will be in the next stage, called CBT-2, scheduled in mid-February. Railways says CBT-2 will be as per “graded difficulty” wherein every level will have a separate exam fit for that level’s qualification. For instance in Level 2, which has posts like Junior Time Keeper, Accounts Clerk etc,



the exam will be of a difficulty level meant for Class 12 pass candidates. And for Level 5, which has posts like Senior Clerk, Goods Guard etc, the exam will be of a difficulty level meant for graduate aspirants.

So, what is the controversy?

To ensure more people compete for these jobs, Railways has this time made a rule that for each level, the number of qualifying candidates it shortlists for CBT-2 will be 20 times the number of available posts vacant. In the 2016 recruitment, it shortlisted 15 times the vacancy. Earlier than that, the rule was to shortlist 10 times the vacancy. That's why this time, for 35,281 vacancies, the total number of "applications" shortlisted for the next round is over 7 lakh. But the real number of candidates who have been shortlisted for second round is not really 7 lakh, but 3.84 lakh. For example, a Class 12 pass candidate, based on his choice and test score, may have been shortlisted for both Level 2 and 3 vacancies. Similarly, a graduate candidate may have been shortlisted for all the vacancies in all levels. That's how the number of the shortlisted for CBT-2 stands at 7,05,446. The Railways say shortlisting would be based on applications, which means: if person A has applied for level 2 and also level 5, then, based on the person's scores, he or she will be counted in both categories when the shortlist is made with 20 times the number of posts. The agitators are claiming that those with higher qualification will get a shot at cracking jobs meant for those with lower qualifications and spoil their chances.

What is the Railways' argument?

The Railways says it is not that simple. The Railways has decided that while someone shortlisted for CBT-2 at multiple levels may be able to sit for the tests, that will not translate into that person actually getting multiple jobs. This is because in the final round, called document verification, Railways will hold the process for the top level posts, that is Level 6 first, followed by Level 5 and so on. No person who is empanelled to get a job at one level will be considered for the subsequent level. In effect, no one person can "hold" two confirmed railway job offers in two different levels at a time. "We will hold the document verification for the higher levels first. That way, if someone qualifies for the job of, say Station Master, will no longer be considered for the subsequent lower level jobs, like that of a TTE or others," said the Chairman of an RRB who did not wish to be named. "But if someone says that he does not want a higher pay job and would rather go for a lower level job, then that's their choice, but that is highly unlikely."

How is Railways addressing the protesters' concerns?

Railways has taken to social media multiple times to explain that everything is happening according to the rules. Moreover, all the conditions governing the recruitment and screening are always published in the detailed notification for the recruitment drive concerned, it says. To negate any controversy, Railways discloses the answered papers of the screening exam to all its candidates. Candidates are also allowed to raise objections which Railway Recruitment Boards clarify. It is only after this process is over that the result is declared and candidates are shortlisted for the next round. In the earlier days, each Railway Recruitment Board would carry out its exam separately. That practice was stopped eventually to start centralised recruitment. The last exam on this scale was held in 2016, when Railways set out to fill around 18,000 vacancies. But at that time, the posts being filled required graduation as the minimum qualification.



INDIA AMONG TOP 5 NATIONS TO ASK TWITTER TO REMOVE CONTENT

Twitter said governments around the world made requests to remove content from a record number of user accounts between January and June last year, in data to be released by the social media company on Tuesday. The platform said governments made 43,387 legal demands for the removal of content from 196,878 accounts in the six-month period, according to data in its latest transparency report seen by Reuters. Twitter said this was the largest number of accounts ever targeted with government removal requests in a reporting period since the company started releasing transparency reports in 2012. It was also the largest number of government removal requests in a reporting period. Ninety-five percent of these legal demands came from five countries, with the most coming from Japan, followed by Russia, Turkey, India, and South Korea, it said. The site is blocked in several countries including China and North Korea. Twitter said it either "withheld" access to content in certain countries or required account holders to remove some or all of the reported content in response to 54% of the global legal demands in this period. "We're facing unprecedented challenges as governments around the world increasingly attempt to intervene and remove content," Twitter's vice president of global public policy and philanthropy Sinead McSweeney said in a statement. "This threat to privacy and freedom of expression is a deeply worrying trend that requires our full attention." The number of accounts specified in the legal requests was up almost 50% from 131,933 accounts from the previous six months, according to the data. The number of government removal requests increased 14% from 38,524 in the last reporting period and was up about 2.8% year-over-year, Twitter said.

OPEN THE SCHOOLS

India continues to record over 2,80,000 cases every day, which on its own is an uncomfortable statistic. These are not too far from that observed during the second wave and it is understandable why State administrators continue to impose lockdowns. However, numbers are meaningless without context and the data from States show that what was most feared about Omicron — an upsurge of hospitalisations and indiscriminate mortality — has not come to pass. The States that are in the throes of the wave now report, on average, that more than 95% of their available beds are unoccupied. By no means does this suggest that an Omicron infection is mild or that those vaccinated can be assured of pre-2020 nonchalance. However, the evidence is unequivocal that the odds of requiring hospitalisation are low in the doubly vaccinated and the vaccines, so far, continue to deliver on their promise of staving off severe illness. These observations are no doubt accounted for by various State governments which are now easing restrictions and allowing business establishments and public places to open up. However, schools continue to be shut in most places and administrators are reluctant to open them because most children are unvaccinated. Serology surveys by the ICMR and independent experts have found that greater than 70% of children displayed COVID-19 antibodies — which is no different from adults. Other lines of research also establish that while children are likely to contract the infection and be carriers, they are less likely to fall severely ill. Placing this in context with the disruption that has taken place in schools, the years of quality teaching time that have been lost and, the entrenching of inequality among well-off children and those who are dependent on schools not only for learning but also a nutritious meal, it is clear that schools, in good conscience, cannot be allowed to remain shut. The COVID-19 pandemic has not ended but societies are better prepared and aware of the reasonable measures that can be undertaken to save lives. Lockdowns are effective as a temporary measure and give time to stock up, but they come with huge costs and are not sustainable over the longer term. Thus, States should prioritise expanding vaccine coverage, insist



on masks when children are in close confines, undertake periodic testing to gauge transmission and monitor hospitalisation trends while fully reopening schools. Experience from other countries such as the U.K. and the U.S. suggests that the reopening of schools hardly impacted transmission trends. India must incorporate these lessons.

A PORTABLE, NON-INVASIVE WAY TO DETECT ORAL CANCER

Scientists from IIT Kharagpur have developed a portable, user-friendly, and non-invasive device for detecting oral cancer in resource-constrained clinical settings. Experts from the Guru Nanak Institute of Dental Sciences and Research in West Bengal supervised the clinical trials, and have established the efficacy of the new method in differentiating cancerous and precancerous stages of suspected oral abnormalities, as verified by high-standard biopsy reports. The research has been published recently in the prestigious Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), USA. ("Portable, handheld, and affordable blood perfusion imager for screening of subsurface cancer in resource-limited settings": Arka Bhowmik, Suman Chakraborty, and others). "This is a low-cost, handheld imaging device to screen oral cancer and precancer based on measured change in blood flow rate of the tissue from thermal imaging and analytics. The blood perfusion imager, which combines a miniature far-infrared camera and a humidity sensor, are electronically controlled and interfaced with a combined physics-based and data-driven software engine," Prof Suman Chakraborty of the Department of Mechanical Engineering at IIT-Kharagpur told The Indian Express. "The handheld unit combines various sensors and controllers that feed the measured data to a computer simulation engine to classify normal, precancer and cancer cases in the oral cavity without needing referral to specialised medical centres for resource-intensive diagnostic procedures," he said. Cancer of the oral cavity remains one of the major causes of morbidity and mortality in socially-challenged and underserved communities. There is an 80 per cent chance on average of a five-year survival rate if diagnosed early; the survival rate drops to 65 per cent or less in more advanced stages of the disease. In reality, most oral cancers remain undetected until they have reached an advanced stage. In resource-limited settings, there is a serious dearth of accurate yet affordable diagnostic tools to arrive at a decisive recommendation during the first possible clinical examination of the patient, when the disease may otherwise be in precancer or early cancer stage. "The new technology offers the possibility of detecting potential vulnerable cases early enough, during a first examination by a clinician in a community health centre. As an inexpensive co-option to standard and established clinical practices, this value-added tool is likely to strengthen the confidence of doctors in preliminary decision making," Prof Chakraborty said. The technology is currently available for ready licensing to companies for commercial adaptation. It may be subjected to more extensive statutory field trials before clinical use, which could take about two years from now, Prof Chakraborty said. The estimated cost per device is within \$500, he said.

INTRANASAL BOOSTER TRIALS GET DCGI NOD

The Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) has given vaccine manufacturer Bharat Biotech approval for conducting Phase 3 clinical trials of an intranasal booster dose for those who have received both doses of Covaxin. Only the batches certified by the Central Drugs Laboratory, Kasauli, shall be used in the clinical trials, which will be conducted at nine sites, including the All India Institutes of Medical Sciences in New Delhi and Patna. Other trial sites include institutes in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. The chimpanzee adenovirus vectored COVID-19 vaccine (BBV154) will be administered through an intranasal route, and each single dose is 0.5 ml. The DCGI has stated that this permission is subject to the conditions prescribed in Part A of

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



Chapter V of the New Drugs and Clinical Trials Rules, 2019 under the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940. “Merely granting permission to conduct clinical trials with the vaccine does not convey or imply that, based on the clinical trial data generated with the vaccine, permission to market this vaccine in the country will automatically be granted to you,” the DCGI said.

WHAT DOES ‘CONDITIONAL MARKET AUTHORISATION’ FOR COVISHIELD AND COVAXIN MEAN?

The drug regulator on Thursday granted Serum Institute of India’s Covishield and Bharat Biotech’s Covaxin Covid-19 vaccines “conditional market authorisation” for the country’s adult population.

What does conditional market authorisation mean?

Since January last year, the two vaccines have been available under “Emergency Use Authorisation” (EUA), under which 140.89 crore doses of Covishield and 22.95 crore doses of Covaxin have been administered so far. Not every vaccine is granted EUA before it receives full approval. The EUA route, referred to in India as restricted use in emergency situations, is invoked in public health emergencies like the pandemic — provided the regulator, based on initial data from phase 3 of clinical trials, determines that the potential benefits of the vaccine, when used to prevent Covid-19, outweigh its potential risks. For a year, Serum Institute and Bharat Biotech have been submitting rolling data related to product efficacy and safety in batches, as they have become available. However, since the two vaccines now meet the high standards of safety, effectiveness, and manufacturing quality that the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940 requires of a new vaccine, they have been upgraded to “conditional market authorisation”. This, however, is still not full market authorisation, sources in the government said.

Do international regulators also grant conditional market authorisation?

The European Medicines Agency (EMA), the European Union agency tasked with the evaluation and supervision of medicinal products, grants conditional marketing authorisation if four key criteria are met: The benefit-risk balance of the vaccine is positive; it is likely that the applicant will be able to provide comprehensive data post-authorisation; the vaccine fulfills an unmet medical need; and the benefit of the immediate availability of the vaccine to patients is greater than the risk inherent in non-availability of additional data. Such an approval is valid for one year, and can be renewed annually, the EMA says.

How does India’s conditional market authorisation differ from full market authorisation?

The Union Health Ministry said on Thursday that conditional market authorisation is a new category of authorisation that has emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic. “The approval pathways through this route are fast-tracked with certain conditions to enhance the access to certain pharmaceuticals for meeting the emerging needs of drugs or vaccines,” the ministry said. The conditional market authorisation for Covishield and Covaxin will be similar to the conditional market authorisation that, say, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has granted to Pfizer’s mRNA Covid-19 vaccine, or the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) in the United Kingdom has granted to AstraZeneca’s Covid-19 vaccine.

**What will change for ordinary recipients of the two vaccines with the grant of conditional market authorisation?**

Not much. A drug or vaccine that has received full or general market authorisation would be available in pharmacies or chemist shops for purchase — either as an over-the-counter product, or against a doctor’s prescription. However, Covishield and Covaxin will still not be available in regular pharmacies, and you will not be able to buy them as a retail product, with or without a prescription. The vaccines will be available for private hospitals and private clinics to procure though, against required documentation and payment, government sources said. However, the sources said, as and when a private hospital or clinic administers a dose, it will still have to capture it on CoWin, the government’s digital vaccination platform.

Will the grant of conditional market authorisation open up the ‘precautionary’ booster dose to all double-vaccinated people?

No. The two vaccines will be supplied under “programmatically setting”, which means only those whom the government has made eligible for the precautionary dose — frontline workers, healthcare workers, and the elderly population with comorbidities — can access the third dose. Hospitals will be able to administer the third dose of Covishield or Covaxin to others only after the government makes a change in its policy.

How then is this stage of conditional market authorisation different from the existing EUA for the vaccines?

For individual recipients of the vaccines, not much changes. But conditional market authorisation relaxes somewhat the regulatory requirements on monitoring the safety of the vaccines. Under EUA, manufacturers have to submit safety and efficacy data every 15 days or a month. Under the conditional market authorisation, the Health Ministry said, they have to submit the data every six months. Also, the ministry said, while adverse event following immunisation (AEFI) and adverse event of special interest (AESI) shall continue to be monitored, the two companies will have to submit AEFI and AESI data with due analysis on a six-monthly basis or as and when available, whichever is earlier as per the New Drugs and Clinical Trial Rules, 2019. This means hospitals will need to still have all AEFI monitoring systems in place, and will have to continue to systematically record and report adverse events to the vaccine manufacturer.

SPREAD IN THE COMMUNITY

In the third wave of the coronavirus epidemic, India has acknowledged that the disease is now in the community transmission stage. While it is no more than a statement of the obvious, and has little operational implication at this stage of the epidemic, this acknowledgment has attracted attention because this is the first time India has officially done so.

What it means

In all regions except the origin of the outbreak, the virus is introduced into the population by travellers. In the initial stages of an epidemic, all further transmissions of the disease can be linked, directly or through a chain, to these travellers. But after some time, as more and more people get infected, they pass on the virus to many more, several of whom are never detected because they might be asymptomatic or did not get tested. But even these undetected cases would have transmitted the disease to others. Very soon, it results in a situation where the chain of infections can no longer be traced to the original travellers, and most of the infections become locally



acquired. It is this stage of the epidemic that is classified as one of community transmission. In simple terms, it is a stage where it becomes difficult to establish the chain of infections, or determine who infected whom. This has implications for deciding containment strategies and response measures to deal with the epidemic. Community transmission is the final stage of classification of the epidemic on this basis. The World Health Organization (WHO) has three more classifications ahead of community transmission — no active cases, sporadic cases and cluster of cases. If no new cases are detected in 28 days, a country or region is said to have no new active cases. A situation where all the known infections in the previous two weeks can be linked to an imported case is classified as being in the second category. India had so far been maintaining that the epidemic in the country was in the stage where it was witnessing a cluster of cases. According to the WHO classification, this is the stage where cases detected in the previous two weeks are “predominantly limited to well-defined clusters that are not directly linked to imported cases, but which are all linked by time, geographic location and common exposures”. It is assumed that there are a large number of unidentified cases, but this is still considered a low-risk situation.

Implications

The manner in which the transmissions are happening is key to deciding actions to be taken to contain further spread of the disease. In the initial stage for example, when only sporadic cases are detected, aggressive testing and contact tracing is supposed to be among the most effective strategies to halt or slow down the spread of the disease. As all direct contacts of an infected person are identified, tested and isolated, the number of virus-carrying people in the population gets reduced significantly, and so does the number of transmissions. However, such a strategy might not yield much in terms of slowing down the spread in the community transmission stage. In such a situation, it is considered more beneficial to focus attention on measures like hospital management, access to critical care facilities or genomic surveillance.

Current situation

The recent acknowledgment, made in the latest bulletins released by INSACOG, a network of laboratories that is tasked with genome surveillance, does not reveal anything new. India is known to have entered the community transmission phase within a couple of months of the start of the pandemic in 2020 itself. From the speed at which the Omicron variant has spread, there never was any doubt that community transmission was taking place. Even before Omicron, India was detecting only one of about 30 infections. Now, this ratio would have shot up even further. At this stage of the epidemic, a discussion on community transmission is largely an academic one, and is unlikely to trigger any change in the kind of response measures that are being taken at the central, state or local levels.

Looking ahead

Since the current wave is producing mostly mild disease, experts argue that a containment strategy might not yield much, especially since the infection was spreading at such a fast rate, and mainly through asymptomatic cases. Instead, it would be better to focus attention on surveillance, with the objective of keeping an eye on future dangerous mutations. “We should change the strategy of sample collection for genome sequencing. There is no point in focusing on airports. A close watch should, instead, be kept on clinical samples from the ICU or those with serious symptoms to check if there is further mutation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and whether it is changing a bit. There is a need to keep an eye on clusters at localities or parties or any gathering in case



there is a sudden eruption of cases and also ensure a randomised sampling in large areas,” said Rakesh Mishra, former director of Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology.

Implications

Mishra said testing and tracking contacts could not prevent the further spread of the Omicron variant at this stage, even though it was still important to test as many as possible. “But the main focus must be on the hospitalised cases, and those who have developed severe illnesses,” said Mishra, who is director of Tata Institute of Genetics and Society. Several states have already changed their testing strategy and have not been aggressively doing contact tracing, especially those who are not showing symptoms. Dr Shashank Joshi, member of Maharashtra’s Covid-19 task force, said the focus must be on saving lives, because such a large number of cases can overwhelm hospitals. “What is known from the current wave is that it has come in a very explosive and tsunami-like proportion. It is more like a cyclone and not a wave. As 80-90% people are asymptomatic, our focus is directed on symptomatic patients. Those who are unvaccinated, or only partially vaccinated, are in the high-risk category. And so are people with chronic underlying diseases like cancer, heart transplantation or lung disease. The focus clearly is to save lives and ensure health systems are prepared,” Dr Joshi said. Maharashtra surveillance officer Dr Pradeep Awate said health authorities were no longer tracking every contact of an infected person. “We are already moving on to the endemic stage. Genomic sequencing however will be necessary as Omicron may not be the last variant,” he said.

NOT MILD FOR ALL

Even at the peak of the second wave in India last year, when no contact tracing was done or was possible, not a word was said about the Delta variant being in community transmission — where the source of infection cannot be traced. But with extremely transmissible Omicron becoming the dominant variant across major cities, INSACOG, the consortium meant to monitor the genomic variations in the SARS-CoV-2 virus, has for the first time officially mentioned that India has entered community transmission; daily fresh cases have been over 0.3 million since January 19. Even as on June 15 last year, when the second wave had peaked here, India claimed to have only a ‘cluster of cases’ as reflected in WHO’s last epidemiological report (weekly) mentioning the stage of transmission in member-States. In contrast, the U.S. declared community transmission in February 2020 when the source of infection was untraceable in one instance; only 15 cases were detected then. The closest India came to admitting community transmission was in October 2020, when then Health Minister Dr. Harsh Vardhan said it was restricted to “certain districts in limited States”. The deep reluctance to acknowledge community transmission was based on the premise that it marked the Government’s inability to control the virus spread and the failure of the harsh national lockdown. As the Government tried in vain to obfuscate the stage of transmission, it only reflected its resistance to acknowledge reality and an unwillingness to be transparent. INSACOG’s weekly bulletin also mentions that the BA.2 sub-lineage of Omicron forms a substantial fraction of cases detected in India. This sub-lineage was detected a month after WHO had designated Omicron to be a variant of concern on November 26, 2021. Though the Omicron variant causes less disease severity intrinsically and most of those who are fully vaccinated have only mild disease, the number of people hospitalised and requiring intensive care has been increasing in the third wave in India. As WHO recently warned, people infected with Omicron can display the “full spectrum of disease” — from asymptomatic infection to severe disease and death. This is especially true in older people, those with comorbidities, and people not fully vaccinated. Though over 67% of adults have been fully vaccinated, and nearly 8.2 million booster doses administered



as on January 23, nearly 5.5% of health-care workers, 6.8% of frontline workers, and 16.2% of those older than 60 years have not received their second dose. Fully vaccinating these vulnerable groups should be a high priority. Meanwhile, the need for strict adherence to COVID-appropriate behaviour cannot be overemphasised.

A STELLAR FALLACY

A move by the Union Environment Ministry to implement a 'star-rating system' has sparked controversy after one of its official communiqués became public. Under this scheme, State-level environment committees that appraise industrial projects on their potential environmental risk would be incentivised with points for "transparency, efficiency and accountability". This idea followed a Union Cabinet meeting this month to facilitate the Government's broader commitment to 'Ease of Doing Business'. The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is one of the cornerstones of ensuring that the ecological costs of infrastructure development are minimal. Prospective projects above a certain size and with a potential to significantly alter the natural environment must be first approved by the State Environment Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA) comprising State officers and independent experts. Projects that are even bigger or involve forest land — category A — must be cleared by an expert committee formed by the Centre. SEIAA projects make up the bulk of projects for approval including building and construction, small mining, small industry projects, and are considered 'less polluting'. The star rating system proposed is to "rank" and "incentivise" States on how quickly and "efficiently" they can accord environmental clearances. It spells out seven criteria to rate SEIAAs on "transparency, efficiency and accountability". On a scale of 7, an SEIAA, for instance, gets more points for granting a clearance in less than 80 days than for within 105 days and no marks for more. A score of seven or more would be rated 'five star'. However, a reading of the order gives the impression that States, in the quest for more stars, would logically vie for speedily clearing projects rather than ensure a thorough appraisal. The Environment Ministry, has said, in response to criticism, that the intention is not to hasten clearances but accelerate the pace of decision making. Rather than files being sent back for every query, all objections must be compiled and addressed at one go, it contends. While quicker decision-making benefits everyone, State committees are currently hampered by having too few independent experts and decision-making being left to bureaucrats than to environment specialists. Both industrialists and States gain from projects and, therefore, the tendency is always to elide environmental concerns. In many instances, site visits are critical to understand the potential environmental challenges. Calculating the risks and the benefits of industrial projects vis-à-vis their environmental impact is understandably hard. The way forward is to take steps to increase trust in the system and ensure that all States have competent experts who can conduct appraisals without fear or favour. A list of empty rankings is the least advisable way to bring about this.

'INACCURACIES, PROCEDURAL VIOLATIONS' IN GREAT NICOBAR EIA REPORT

The details of the recently released draft environment impact assessment (EIA) report for the mega development project in the Great Nicobar Island have raised serious questions related to submission of incorrect or incomplete information, scientific inaccuracy and failure to follow appropriate procedure. A public hearing to discuss the report has been scheduled for Thursday at Campbell Bay, the administrative headquarters. The matter is related to the NITI Aayog-piloted ₹72,000-crore integrated project in Great Nicobar that includes construction of a mega port, an airport complex, a township spread over 130 sq. km of pristine forest and a solar and gas-based power plant. Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Ltd. (ANIIDCO)

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



is the project proponent. The pre-feasibility report for the project was prepared in March 2021 by the Gurugram-based consultant AECOM India Pvt. Ltd. A committee of the Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) issued terms of reference (ToR) to prepare the EIA report in May 2021.

Concerns raised

Ecologists and researchers have been raising concerns about this project for over a year (“NITI Aayog vision for Great Nicobar ignores tribal, ecological concerns”, The Hindu, March 21, 2021), and the recent draft EIA has not been able to allay those fears. Concerns begin with the role of the Hyderabad-based Vimta Labs Ltd. hired for conducting the EIA. While the ToR for preparing the EIA was finalised only in May 2021, the report itself lists many instances of Vimta staff being in the field and conducting studies as early as December 2020. How is it possible that Vimta knew the details of the projects and the needs of the EIA months before the contract was awarded and even the project details were finalised? This could have only been through the project proponent or the DPR consultant and appears a violation of the ToR, which had stated that the DPR consultant should be independent of the EIA consultant. “The consultants appointed to carry out the draft EIA have only one empanelled expert on ecology and biodiversity in its team — and it is not clear what his area of expertise is. It is also clear that several of the ToRs have not been complied with, as admitted in the draft EIA Report itself,” says Debi Goenka, veteran environmental campaigner and executive trustee of the Conservation Action Trust. He also points out that the rapid assessment study carried out by the Wildlife Institute of India and the baseline survey by the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), both appended as annexures, too were commissioned before the issue of the ToR.

‘Incomplete data’

There are also serious issues of scientific accuracy and integrity where the data presented is concerned. Large parts of Section 3.9, which is on ecology and biodiversity, have in-text citations but no references. Tables with lists of plants and animals found in the island are incomplete and with no sources provided. The information in other places is internally inconsistent and/or incorrect. The area of the island is mentioned in one place as 1,045 sq. km, while it is 910 sq. km (the current official figure) in another. The executive summary mentions that the Galathea port area does not record any coral reefs, whereas the ZSI study appended to the EIA, reports a coral reef spread over 116 hectares in Galathea Bay. Chapter 3 similarly says 330 species of fauna are recorded in the island, while the same ZSI study puts the number at more than double at 695.

Institutional callousness

The EIA says in another place no migratory birds have been reported from Great Nicobar, whereas it is well known that these islands are located along two globally significant bird flyways and more than 40 species of migratory birds have been recorded from Great Nicobar. The callousness continues in the approach of the statutory authorities. The EIA report was expected to have details of the project proponent’s environment policy such as its standard operating process, procedures for highlighting violation of environmental and forest norms and for ensuring compliance with environmental clearance conditions. All that the project proponent, ANIIDCO, has said in response is that no such policy exists and that they undertake to comply with all laws of the country related to the environment, forests and coastal regulation zone. A statutorily mandated set of requirements is being given the go-by, raising further questions on the validity of the EIA. Equally illustrative is the undertaking issued by the Directorate of Tribal Welfare, the agency tasked with



the primary job of securing the rights of the indigenous people on the islands. It first assures that “the right of the tribal shall be well protected and taken care of” and then goes on to conclude that “whenever any exemption from the existing regulations/policies/law of the land are required to be provided for the execution of the project, this Directorate will seek required exemptions(s) from the competent authority to that effect”.

‘Tick box exercise’

“Can there be bigger evidence that this EIA has been approached less as a document to ask important questions and more as an exercise in merely facilitating clearances and ensuring that the project goes ahead,” asks a senior tribal researcher who did not wish to be named. Environmental lawyer Sreeja Chakraborty says, “It is evident that there are serious procedural lapses, lack of transparency and a lack of any seriousness in this EIA process. The EIA has been reduced to a mere ‘tick box’ exercise and inspires no confidence at all.”

WHY THIS WINTER HAS BEEN COLDER, WETTER AND LESS FOGGY THAN USUAL

For many people, especially in North India, the winter of 2021-22 is appearing to be unusually cold and unusually long. The days, in particular, have felt colder and chillier than normal. Is the popular impression borne out by data? Why is this happening?

Have the days indeed been colder?

Since December 2021, maximum temperatures across the North, Northwest and Central India regions have persistently remained below normal, resulting in “cold day” conditions. Technically, this means more than just a day that is cold. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) defines a “cold day” as one in which the maximum temperature falls below 16 degrees Celsius, a phenomenon that is commonly seen during the winter months in the northern plains of India. This winter, the national capital Delhi witnessed eight days in January (until January 25) when the maximum temperature remained below 16 degrees, with the lowest maximum temperature recorded at 12.2 degrees Celsius on Tuesday (January 25). Similarly cold Januaries in recent years were felt in 2003, which saw 19 “cold days” in January, 2015 (11 days), and 2010, 2013, and 2004 (9 days each). There are several days still to go in January 2022. It isn’t just Delhi either. Since late last week, many places in Maharashtra have experienced “cold day” conditions as well. Maximum temperatures at several places in Madhya Maharashtra and Konkan, including Mahabaleshwar, Pune, Mumbai, and Nashik have been 6 to 8 degrees Celsius below normal. “Cold days” often mean warmer nights. “Persistent clouding blocks out the rays of the Sun and heating during the day, but keeps the nights warmer than normal,” R K Jenamani, senior scientist at the National Weather Forecasting Centre, Delhi, said.

What weather systems have been active over the country?

Winters over India are directly affected by the intensity and frequency of western disturbances — eastward propagating wind streams as a cyclonic circulation or trough, capable of inducing rain or snow-bearing weather systems along their path of movement. Until January 25, seven western disturbances had passed over India — nearly all of them strong enough to cause widespread rain, snowfall, and squally weather across large geographical areas between Pakistan and Northeast India. These systems caused hailstorms in northern Maharashtra, and heavy rainfall in Tamil Nadu. “Frequent and higher numbers of western disturbances are associated with La Niña,” D Sivanand Pai, head, Climate Monitoring and Services at IMD, Pune said. At present, moderate



intensity La Niña conditions — which manifests itself as cooler than normal sea surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific Ocean — are prevailing. After a western disturbance crosses India, cold winds from the far north of the country penetrate to lower latitudes, and can reach up to even Telangana and Maharashtra, leading to colder weather, and sometimes to cold wave conditions. Back-to-back western disturbances separated by 10 days earlier this month caused a prolonged cold spell in Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, and Bihar between January 11 and 20. “The presence of low-lying clouds and the availability of moisture along the Indo-Gangetic plains made it favourable for cold day conditions and the additional chill factor experienced during the day time. This was the longest and most intense spell of the season so far,” Jenamani said. This has also been a rather wet winter. Precipitation, mostly in the form of snow, is common during winter over Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Uttarakhand, and Himachal Pradesh. Light to moderate intensity rainfall is also commonly seen during winters in neighbouring regions of North India. This January, however, has seen widespread rain across the central, northwestern, northern, eastern, and northeastern regions of India. As many as 24 states or Union Territories have recorded rainfall varying from excess to large excess this month. The only exceptions have been Arunachal Pradesh (minus 26 per cent), Mizoram (minus 43 per cent), Goa (minus 44 per cent), Karnataka (minus 80 per cent), Kerala (minus 76 per cent) and Lakshadweep (minus 99 per cent). January has been significantly wet over Delhi, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Punjab, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, and Rajasthan, taking the all-India rainfall figure to 38.1 mm so far, which is 196 per cent above normal. Delhi is witnessing the wettest January in 122 years. The national capital’s monthly rainfall recorded at the Safdarjung (88.2 mm) and Palam (110 mm) stations are already 72 per cent and 99 per cent above normal respectively. Other states and Union Territories with large surpluses of rainfall during this month include Uttarakhand (102.3 mm), Chandigarh (207.7 mm), Himachal Pradesh (170 mm), Jammu and Kashmir (165.8 mm), and Punjab (104.6 mm).

The winter has been less foggy than normal.

Yes. December and January are known for the formation of dense fog across North India. Delhi in December normally witnesses 278 hours of fog — during which visibility falls below 1,000 metres — over 26 days, but December 2021 saw only 75 hours of fog spread over 22 days. This was the lowest for December since 1982. In January too, the national capital remained affected by fog for 252 hours against a normal of 292 hours — the lowest since 2008. IMD officials said the ongoing winter has recorded the lowest fog hours since 1991-92 over Delhi. Conditions for the development of fog are not forecast for the rest of January. Strong northern and north-westerly winds have been dominant during the past six weeks. This winter saw an unusual duststorm reaching parts of Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Delhi over the last weekend. The strong winds associated with the duststorm originated above Saudi Arabia, and picked up local dust along its course from the desert regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

FREE POWER TRANSMISSION FOR GREEN HYDROGEN

A national green hydrogen policy which will provide free power transmission for production of green hydrogen is set to be announced soon, Power Minister RK Singh said Thursday. The Centre aims to swap use of grey hydrogen produced using fossil fuels with green hydrogen produced from renewable energy. The petroleum refining and fertiliser sectors are among the largest users of hydrogen in India. In the green hydrogen policy, “we are saying that we will give free transmission ... for 25 years,” Singh said, noting that one could generate power in Rajasthan and



can transport it to Guwahati and produce green hydrogen there. Singh was addressing a conference by Confederation of Indian Industry on raising the use of smart metering. He noted that the policy would provide land in renewable energy parks and bunkers at ports for storage of green hydrogen and green ammonia to producers, adding that the Centre aims to make India a key destination for green hydrogen export. The Power Ministry noted that production of smart metering in India would be a great opportunity as the government would come out with an approved list of models and manufacturers that would only include smart meters made in India. In another interaction with renewable energy producers and hydro pumped storage developers, Singh discussed a draft policy on Energy Storage Systems.

TOWARDS LOW EMISSIONS GROWTH

Climate change is one of the defining challenges of this century. Without a global effort to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, average global temperatures are likely to exceed 2°C even with current policies in place. While many developing countries made net-zero pledges at COP26, they face enormous challenges in their attempts to grow in a climate-constrained world. In India, there is high youth unemployment and hunger for substantial investments in hard infrastructure to industrialise and urbanise. Unlike the energy-intensive growth trajectories of the industrialised world, India's economic growth in the last three decades, led by growth in the services sector, has come at a significantly lower emissions footprint. But in the coming decades, India will have to move to an investment-led and manufacturing-intensive growth model. Can India do this with a low emissions footprint?

A green industrialisation strategy

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement that India will strive to reach net-zero emissions by 2070 is commendable, it is essential to follow through with short-, medium- and long-term guiding strategies to ensure that India can maximize developmental gains in this transition. What India needs is a green industrialisation strategy that combines laws, policy instruments, and implementing institutions to steer its decentralised economic activities to become climate-friendly and resilient. A market-steering approach rather than a hands-off approach would encourage private sector investments in technologies needed to industrialise under climate constraints. While India has provided high level of policy support to deploy renewable energy, its industrial policy efforts to increase the domestic manufacturing of renewable energy technology components have been affected by policy incoherence, poor management of economic rents, and contradictory policy objectives. Academic research provides evidence that policies to develop local innovation capabilities alongside linking with global production networks create the most job opportunities. China's techno-industrial policy strategy to strategically align RD&D, manufacturing, and deployment of solar and wind technologies paid off not only in its global competitiveness to produce clean energy technologies but also in creating more domestic job opportunities than India's approach to prioritising only deployment. China has created more jobs in manufacturing solar and wind components for exports than domestic deployment. India could have retained some of those jobs if it were strategic in promoting these technologies. Besides China, Korea's green growth strategy and the U.S.'s Endless Frontier Act, passed in the Senate in 2021 to make significant RD&D investments in emerging future technologies, are examples of techno-industrial policy strategies. Recent decarbonisation modeling studies point to a significant role for battery, green hydrogen, carbon capture and storage technologies to decarbonise India's transport and industry sectors. While India may have lost the bus in terms of catching up on solar PV innovations, technologies needed to decarbonise



the transport and industry sectors provide a significant opportunity. However, India's R&D investments in these emerging green technologies are non-existent. The production-linked incentives (PLIs) under 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' are a step in the right direction for localising clean energy manufacturing activities. Nevertheless, they still do not address Aatmanirbhar's economic goal to move from incremental changes to quantum jumps in economic activities. Aligning existing RD&D investments with the technologies needed for green industrialisation is crucial for realising quantum jumps. Besides, India also needs to nurture private entrepreneurship and experimentation in clean energy technologies. An industrial policy approach is necessary for gaining development co-benefits from the structural transition that climate change demands.

The way forward

India's energy transition should be development-focused and aim to extract economic and employment rents from decarbonisation. The government should neither succumb to international pressure to decarbonise soon nor should it postpone its investment in decarbonisation technologies. Instead, India should set its pace based on its ability to capitalise on the opportunities to create wealth through green industrialisation. India should follow a path where it can negotiate carbon space to grow, buying time for the hard-to-abate sectors; push against counterproductive WTO trade litigations on decarbonisation technologies; all while making R&D investments in those technologies.

ELEPHANT CORRIDORS TO BE RESTORED IN SOUTH BENGAL

The fragmented and patchy forests of south Bengal have emerged as one of the hotspots of human-elephant conflict in the country, resulting in loss of lives of both humans and pachyderms. At times, the conflict results in law and order problems. In November 2021, a herd of 50 elephants came within 5 km of east Burdwan town, prompting the district administration to impose prohibitory orders in several gram panchayats in the region. Between 2014 and 2019, as many as 2,381 human deaths were recorded in elephant attacks across the country, of which 403 (over 16%) were reported from West Bengal. The State, however, is home to less than 3% of the elephant population and records a high death count of pachyderms in conflicts. Minimising elephant-human conflict is the pressing need of the region and wildlife organisations and experts have now taken up the task of undertaking ecological restoration of elephant corridors in south Bengal.

'Degradation of forests'

"The degradation started not just with increased agricultural activities in the region but also participatory joint forest management such as community forestry, which changed the very nature of the forest to make it commercially viable, not considering the biodiversity of the region," said Diya Banerjee, an ecologist from Uttarayan Wildlife, who is leading the five-year restoration project. It is also aimed at creating a balanced ecosystem so that humans and animals can coexist in consonance with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Abhishek Ghosh, who is associated with the project, said there are 180 to 200 elephants in the region, but due to fragmentation of forests these herds are no longer following traditional migration. "This is the reason that sometimes we see elephants entering towns in Burdwan, Bankura and Medinpur," Mr. Ghosh said.



REPAIRED, RETOUCHE, REBORN

A huge oil painting, said to be the second largest in the world, is currently on display in the Royal Gallery of Kolkata's Victoria Memorial Hall (VMH). Titled Jaipur Procession, this painting from 1876 by Russian painter Vasily Vereshchagin freezes a moment in the Prince of Wales' tour of the Indian subcontinent. The pomp of the royal visit — the painting shows the prince seated on a bedizened elephant, followed by a large retinue — is as evident today as it was when the canvas was painted. And the credit for this goes to the VMH staff, who have painstakingly restored the painting over months. In Kolkata, VMH is possibly the only institution where one can learn the ropes of art conservation and restoration. Yet art restoration is in vogue, with a high demand for experts. So, Anamika Kala Sangam Trust (AKST) organised a three-month training course on conservation of oil paintings at the Kolkata Institute of Art Conservation (KIAC) from September to December 2021. Supported by the Tata Trusts Art Conservation Initiative, the course was mentored by Sanjay Dhar, a leading art conservator-restorer. With the programme's focus on current thinking on conservation of canvas paintings, the interns were oriented with the science, art and ethics of conservation. The stress was on "critical thinking, on problem-solving, on figuring out what can be done safely given certain limitations," says Dhar.

Innovative use

The trainees were encouraged to look for answers in different places. Investigations don't always require heavy equipment or expenses, and a lot of time was devoted to showing how a microscope and ultraviolet or infra red imaging can be just as helpful. Or how the expensive cold-lining process can be replaced by innovative use of easily available material. "Around the world, conservators generally do the retouching. In India, artists do it. We taught the trainees various retouching techniques such as chromatic selection, where pure colours are applied in layers. In this technique, colours remain fresh," says Dhar. In a paper on the history of conservation in the subcontinent, Dhar writes that Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religious and cultural material has survived for ages because there are elaborate instructions on their upkeep in religious texts. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Public Works Department laid the foundation of scientific conservation in the 19th century, stressing the need for a separate wing for the care of monuments and antiquities. The ASI set up its first chemical branch at Kolkata's Indian Museum in 1917, later shifting it to Dehradun and establishing other centres under archaeologist Brij Basi Lal.

Inadequate outcome

After Independence, when the government sought help from international experts and UNESCO, the ASI provided human resources and technical advice to the many museums being built all over India. A conservation laboratory under T.R. Gairola was created by National Museum in 1958. The first long-term course in conservation was also introduced around this time when the National Gallery of Modern Art set up a laboratory under conservator and painter Sukanta Basu. In 1985, Indian National Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage (Intach) established a conservation laboratory in Delhi under Basu, who trained an entire brigade of experts, including Dhar. However, as Dhar points out, in spite of the introduction of courses all over the country, "the outcome is inadequate and good conservation is the exception rather than the rule." Conservation began to be taken seriously only when the Calcutta Tercentenary Trust, created in 1989 and chaired by British high commissioners in India, assembled a project team of the best restorers from Victoria & Albert Museum, British Museum, the National Gallery, and several other institutions in the U.K. to train the VMH staff. The results show in the restored Jaipur Procession, to cite just one example. The

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



Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya Museum Art Conservation Centre, Mumbai, is also being acknowledged globally as an upcoming premier facility for heritage conservation, research and training. It offers its services to various museums, cultural institutions and private collectors.

Explained lucidly

One of the most remarkable projects of successful restoration in recent times is that of Zoffany's Last Supper (1787), which hangs in St. John's Church, Kolkata. It was restored in the church over five months in 2010 by a team of conservators from Intach headed by Renate Kant, a Singapore-based German conservator. Kant says the "vandalised" painting was "hanging and sagging", with numerous gashes at the bottom, when they started. But now everything is "consolidated and structurally stabilised" — the restored painting is a treat for conservators and lay persons alike. The Tata Trusts Art Conservation Initiative proposes to establish, develop and strengthen art conservation centres across India, and to create a cohort of trained art conservators. KIAC was selected as the zonal centre of the eastern region for the project, with an outreach in West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and the Northeast. A small exhibition was held as part of the training course. Conservation work on oil paintings done by five trainees — Kartik Kayal, Glen Fernandes, Upasya Ghosh, Arpita Das, and Shreya Chakraborty — was presented for evaluation. It was instructive to look at the before-after images, which came with detailed texts and graphics. Kayal, Fernandes and Ghosh, along with Sumanta Biswas, laboratory technician at KIAC, explained the complicated processes and techniques in lucid, comprehensible terms. The case studies were oil and mixed-media paintings damaged in different ways. The participants were taught the processes of extending canvas edges by using suitable material, mending tears and holes, as well as filling, texturing and visual reintegration.

ZEN MASTER, WHO BROUGHT MINDFULNESS TO WEST, DIES

Vietnamese monk-turned-peace-activist Thich Nhat Hanh, a hugely influential Buddhist credited with bringing mindfulness to the West, has died aged 95. The Zen master, whose reach within Buddhism is seen as second only to the Dalai Lama, spent nearly four decades in exile after being banished from his homeland for calling for an end to the Vietnam-American War. Thich Nhat Hanh "passed away peacefully" at the Tu Hieu Temple in the city of Hue, Vietnam's Buddhist heartland, his Zen teaching organisation, the Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism, said. Before his return to Vietnam in 2018, he set up retreats around the world and wrote over 100 books including on mindfulness and meditation — a cornerstone of a \$4.2 trillion global wellness industry espoused by Oprah Winfrey, Arianna Huffington and tech billionaire Marc Benioff. Born in 1926, Thich Nhat Hanh was ordained aged 16 and went on to found a youth school which trained volunteers to build clinics and infrastructure in villages blighted by war. In the early 1960s he travelled to the U.S., where he taught at Columbia and Princeton universities, but after one trip in 1966 to meet U.S. civil rights icon Martin Luther King — who joined his calls to end the Vietnam War — he was barred from returning home. Believing that war was fundamentally wrong, the monk refused to take sides in the conflict and was consequently persecuted by the governments of both North and South Vietnam.

SPOT-BILLED PELICANS DYING EN MASSE IN ANDHRA PRADESH

A nematode infestation has led to mass mortality of spot-billed pelicans (*Pelicanus philippensis*) at Telineelapuram Important Bird Area (IBA) in Naupada swamp of Srikakulam district in Andhra



Pradesh. Over 150 spot-billed pelicans have succumbed to the infestation since December, according to Forest officials, with 21 birds dying in the past 72 hours alone. As of Wednesday, nearly 200 adult spot-billed pelicans are surviving in the habitat, where they are breeding during their annual sojourn in the swamp. If the mortality rate continues unchecked, the species is likely to disappear completely from the swamp in a matter of days. Only adult birds have succumbed to the infestation till date. Until now, in South India, the Telineelapuram IBA is the prime winter sojourn for the spot-billed pelican for breeding. The same IBA is also a breeding habitat for the painted stork (*Mycteria leucocephala*).

Preliminary inquiry

Wildlife Institute of India (WII-Dehradun) expert in animal ecology, migration, and movement studies Dr. R. Suresh Kumar spoke to The Hindu regarding the mass deaths. "Preliminary inquiry suggests that nematode infestation is the cause for the death of the spot-billed pelicans that prey on nearby water bodies. The nematode parasite is suspected to be transferred through fish and snails in particular, when the birds prey in the aqua ponds. At Telineelapuram IBA, the death rate is a case of mass mortality," he said. Dr. Suresh Kumar had studied the mortality of spot-billed pelicans in Karnataka State between 2017-19. "In Karnataka, the nematode infestation has started taking a toll on spot-billed pelicans since 2017. Post-2019, the death toll had fallen. In all the affected habitats, only the spot-billed pelican is dying due to the infestation. No other species has been affected," he observed.

Locals alerted

"Until now, the mortality of spot-billed pelican has been reported in groups. There is no impact on painted stork which breeds in the same habitat. The post-mortem reports have certified parasitic (nematode) infestation as the cause of death," said Srikakulam In-Charge District Forest Officer S. Venkatesh. "Aquaculture management practices surrounding the habitat are said to be the source for the parasite. We have alerted the locals and steps are being taken to prevent further death toll of the migrant bird species," added Mr. Venkatesh. The nematode infestation would not spread from one species to another species as per the studies carried out by the experts in Karnataka State. "The way the infestation transfers from the fish, snails, and invertebrates is complex. It is purely related to water and aqua ponds," said Dr. Suresh Kumar. The spot-billed pelican is capable of hunting huge fish from the water bodies and swamps and thus, it is vulnerable to infestation. Thousands of spot-billed pelicans and a few hundred painted storks migrate from the Siberian region to breed in the Telineelapuram IBA and a majority of them prefer to stay here instead of going back home.

KERALA GETS ITS FIRST EVER SCIENTIFIC BIRD ATLAS

The Kerala Bird Atlas (KBA), the first-of-its-kind State-level bird atlas in India, has created solid baseline data about the distribution and abundance of bird species across all major habitats, giving an impetus to futuristic studies. Conducted as a citizen science-driven exercise with the participation of over 1,000 volunteers of the birdwatching community, the KBA has been prepared based on systematic surveys held twice over 60 days a year during the wet (July to September) and dry (January to March) seasons between 2015 and 2020. The KBA accounts for nearly three lakh records of 361 species, including 94 very rare species, 103 rare species, 110 common species, 44 very common species, and 10 most abundant species. "The KBA offers authentic, consistent and comparable data through random sampling from the geographical terrain split into nearly 4,000 grids. We are in the process of bringing out papers on interesting trends based on a scientific

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



analysis of solid data besides making futuristic predictions. It will be exciting to undertake a similar exercise between 2025 and 2030, giving an insight into the changes in the decade since the first KBA,” says P.O. Nameer, one of the State-level coordinators of the KBA. It is arguably Asia’s largest bird atlas in terms of geographical extent, sampling effort and species coverage derived from the aggregation of 25,000 checklists. It was found that the species count was higher during the dry season than in the wet season while species richness and evenness were higher in the northern and central districts than in the southern districts. Most of the endemics were concentrated in the Western Ghats while the threatened species were mostly along the coast. The KBA is considered to be a valuable resource for testing various ecological hypotheses and suggesting science-backed conservation measures. Volunteers were divided into survey teams of two to five members. They were deployed across all 14 districts armed with technological tools such as Locus Free, an Android GPS application, and eBird platform for seamless conduct of the survey and documentation. The survey ignored the short duration passage of migrant species.

‘STATUE OF EQUALITY’ GETS FINAL TOUCHES

Work is going apace on the 216-ft tall statue of the 11th century reformer and Vaishnavite saint, Sri Ramanuja, to be unveiled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the sprawling 40-acre ashram of Sri Tridandi Chinna Jeer Swamy in Muchintal on the outskirts of Hyderabad on February 5. The ‘Statue of Equality’, as it is called, is being installed to mark the 1,000th birth anniversary of Sri Ramanuja. It was built of panchaloha, a combination of gold, silver, copper, brass and zinc, by the Aerospun Corporation in China and shipped to India. It is the second largest in the world in sitting position of the saint. The monument will be surrounded by 108 “Divya Desams” of Sri Vaishnavite tradition (model temples) like Tirumala, Srirangam, Kanchi, Ahobhila, Badrinath, Mukthinath, Ayodhya, Brindavan, Kumbakonam and others. The idols of deities and structures were constructed in the shape at the existing temples. The base building, which is 16.5 metres tall, has a meditation hall where a 54-inch statue of Sri Ramanuja made of 120 kg gold, representing the years he lived, will be inaugurated by President Ramnath Kovind by performing the first puja on February 13. The deity at the inner sanctorum is meant for daily worship by people.

Laser show planned

The beautification works at “Sriram Nagar” where the ashram is located are in full swing. A 45-ft tall dynamic water fountain in front of the statue is being painted in myriad hues. Work on the fountain, laser show, modern lighting and sound system are nearing completion. The road widening works to Sriram Nagar from the Bengaluru highway are on at a brisk pace.

**BUSINESS & ECONOMICS****FOR THE RICH AND POWERFUL**

The rich and the famous gather each year at the Swiss resort of Davos for the World Economic Forum to discuss major challenges facing the world. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi's briefly disrupted address at the WEF this year gained attention in India, the event itself has not been without its fair share of controversies in the past. Critics call the annual meeting a popular networking event for the rich and the powerful held under the pretence of saving the world. The organisers of the WEF, however, have argued strongly that the forum is open to a far wider range of people who would not meet each other if not for the annual event. The WEF, which was founded in 1971 by German economist Klaus Schwab, claims to work to "improve the state of the world". The first meeting of the WEF was held as a management forum that brought together European businessmen to discuss how to compete against U.S. businesses. Over the years, the event has been thrown open to personalities from other fields of life as well, perhaps in a bid to increase its overall appeal. It is now attended by politicians from both developing and developed countries, CEOs of large corporations, and members of civil society working on a variety of development issues. Diplomats, journalists, movie stars and other kinds of celebrities are also part of the event each year. This year, for instance, the event was attended by heads of state from India and China, billionaires such as Bill Gates and Sunil Bharti Mittal, and technocrats including Janet Yellen and Christine Lagarde.

Entry fee

Participants must pay an expensive entry fee, which varies based on benefits, unless they are invited to the event by the organisers. Last year, the WEF earned 241 million Swiss Francs (about \$260 million) in membership and partnership fees. Why would over 3,000 people pay to attend an event like Davos? Is it all really with the aim to "improve the state of the world"? Critics of the WEF argue that businessmen in particular pay hefty fees to attend the event because it gives them access to top political leaders they may not be able to meet as easily otherwise. Businessmen use the WEF as a platform to discuss and finalise business deals behind closed doors. Whether such deals benefit the wider economy or simply benefit a few billionaires with privileged access to decision-makers is another relevant issue raised by critics. Attending the event also adds to the image of the attendees as members of high society. Given these benefits, the high entry fee may not seem that exorbitant to the guests. It should be noted that the WEF itself is funded by over a 1,000 large corporations each with an annual turnover of at least \$5 billion. Others who attend the event, such as politicians and members of civil society, may enjoy the attention and influence that it offers them. Climate activist Greta Thunberg's speeches at the WEF, for instance, have made headlines across the world. The WEF's sympathisers say the annual meeting is an opportunity for leaders who can influence global affairs to exchange views and launch important initiatives. They point to the supposed role the forum played in persuading South African leader Nelson Mandela in 1992 to embrace markets and globalisation, for instance. The WEF has also tried to shed its elitist image by pointing to the wide range of guests, other than billionaires, who have attended the event in recent years. Each year, the Davos meeting is driven by a set agenda based on global trends and challenges that face the world. Whether the WEF really cares about these agendas or not, they certainly help project the image of the WEF as being a forum to discuss global challenges that affect people across the world. Issues such as climate change and inequality have been on the WEF's agenda recently. This year, a group of millionaires signed an open letter stating that they were taxed too little by governments despite the significant growth of their wealth during the



pandemic. Critics, however, view these pledges as useless lip service by the elite that does not really change realities on the ground. Other critics, meanwhile, have argued that the elite businessmen and technocrats who gather at Davos are a threat to global freedom as they wish to exclusively shape policy that would affect billions of people across the world.

FED MOVE AND INDIAN MARKETS

The US Federal Reserve announced the final round of its asset purchases. It will thus conclude its balance sheet expansion in March, much ahead of its initial plan. The Fed will subsequently start to increase interest rates in the economy beginning March. Both these measures are aimed at taming inflation, currently at a four-decade high of around 7%. Asian markets have reacted nervously to the decision, with premier indices in Japan and Hong Kong falling 3.15% and 2% respectively on Thursday, and the benchmark Sensex and Nifty at BSE and NSE too falling by up to 2.4% before recovering to close the day with a fall of 1%. Over the last seven trading sessions, the Sensex has lost over 4,000 points or 6.57%.

What has the Federal Reserve announced?

The Fed announced the final round of asset purchases in February, with balance sheet expansion concluding by early March, with indications that interest rates would soon be hiked given the backdrop. Fed Chair Jerome Powell noted that the Fed would have to be nimble in assessing the appropriate path for future policy. He was asked about the potential for a 50 bps rate hike and did not dismiss the idea outright, saying those kinds of decisions have not been addressed yet. He underscored that this period is nothing like the end of the last expansion as inflation is much higher. "He is implying that they will need to move faster than back then. Since the Fed started with a one-year lag and then shifted to quarterly lag, this may or may not mean hikes at every meeting become likely later in the cycle," said a Bank of America Global Research report. "... The bottom line is that the risks are skewed to more than 4 hikes this year, as we have been flagging," the report said. According to IFA Global Research, the general understanding is that the Fed has prepared the market for a 25 bps hike in March. Powell said there is quite a bit of room to raise rates without hurting jobs. He did not rule out raising rates at every Fed meeting in 2022. He did not rule out hikes happening in increments of more than 25 bps at a time either.

Why are the markets falling?

The Dow Jones in the US closed with a fall of 0.4% on Wednesday, while the fall in the Indian markets was 1%. If a strong labour market and taming of inflation is seen as a medium-term positive development from the perspective of US economy and markets, emerging economies including India are viewing it from the perspective of fund outflows from equity markets, and expected rise in cost of funds in the economy and its impact on growth. This has therefore resulted in a sharper reaction in stock markets across emerging economies including India. Over the last couple of months, already anticipating the rate hike and stimulus withdrawal in the US, Indian equity markets have been witnessing a sharp outflow of FPI money — Rs 64,000 crore since November 23. Experts feel the outflow can gather pace if there is an aggressive rate hike in the US. "Market volatility could persist in the near term owing to the US Fed and other global central banks' tapering programme along with potential rate hike. Apart from these, domestic factors such as the Budget and corporate earnings too are likely to hold sway in the near term," said S Naren, ED and CIO, ICICI Prudential AMC.



How will the Fed action impact the economy?

The Fed tightening is likely to impact the cost of financing in emerging market economies and, sooner or later, the interest rate cycle will turn across countries, said an analyst. Taking into account the combination of rising prices and strong employment, analysts have projected the Fed's benchmark overnight interest rate would need to rise from its current near-zero level to 0.90% by the end of 2022. That would kick off a hiking cycle that would see the policy rate climb to 1.6% in 2023 and 2.1% in 2024. The run-up to the first Fed meeting has already seen a sharp correction in equity prices and rise in treasury yields in the US. Indian stocks and yields are now following the US trend. When interest rates rise in the US, the gap between those and rates in countries such as India reduces, giving less incentive for foreign investors to pump money into overseas markets. This means foreign capital outflows can happen not only from equity but also from debt. In January so far, foreign investors have pulled out a net of Rs 22,722 crore from equity markets anticipating a hike in US fed rates. Another impact will be on the rupee, whose value against the dollar will come under pressure due to capital outflows. The rise in rates also means higher cost of funds, and fund mobilisation in overseas markets will be costly. For India, the upward pressure on interest rates comes at a time when the Covid-hit economy is on a comeback trail in an uneven manner. There's also a significant gap in both private consumption and investment, relative to pre-pandemic levels in 2019-20. The increase in cost of funds may not only increase the cost of capital expenditure for India Inc and increase the cost of developing infrastructure for the government, but will also strain the profit margins of companies.

What other factors could impact Indian markets?

These include the growing geopolitical tension between Russia and Ukraine, and a spike in crude oil prices to levels of \$89 per barrel. With Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman set to present the Budget next week, markets would be keenly watching the government's reform agenda, fiscal roadmap and demand and growth push in the economy. Experts say that if the government goes for a populist Budget ahead of elections in five states including the key Uttar Pradesh, it could have a negative impact on the markets.

What should investors do?

Although the markets are expected to remain volatile in the near term, investors should not panic if they see a 1,000-1,500 point fall in Sensex. But it is also important to avoid mid- and small-cap companies while picking their investments as these could be more vulnerable to a rise in interest rates and input costs among other factors. While equity-overweight investors would be wise not to aggressively invest in equities and should redeploy some of the funds in hybrid schemes, experts say investors who are underweight in equities can utilise dips in the market to increase their equity portfolio. "The optimal investment approach in such a scenario is to stay focused on asset allocation and opt for a combination of active management and multi-asset strategies. In case you are considering equity-related investment, invest with a long-term view and opt for business-cycle-based funds as India's business cycle remains robust. Another option is to consider scheme categories which have the flexibility to invest across market capitalisation and themes and use features like Booster STP," Naren said.

**BAD BANK READY, 15 CASES ADDING UP TO RS 50,000 CRORE TO BE SHIFTED BY MARCH 31**

With just three days for Union Budget 2022-23, a proposition by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman February 1 last year to set up a 'terrible bank' has been cleared. State Bank of India Chairman Dinesh Khara Friday said the proposed 'terrible bank' has "presently" got all essential consents including from the Reserve Bank of India. It is prepared to start activities with 15 cases worth Rs 50,335 crore to be moved by March 31, he said. Khara said public area banks will have a greater part stake in the National Asset Reconstruction Company Limited (NARCL) while private banks will significantly possess the India Debt Resolution Company Limited (IDRCL). Sitharaman had in her February 1, 2021, Budget discourse proposed another construction for goal of focused on resources. "The significant degree of provisioning by open area banks of their focused on resources calls for measures to tidy up the bank books. An Asset Reconstruction Company and Asset Management Company would be set up to solidify and assume control over the current focused on obligation and afterward oversee and discard the resources for Alternate Investment Funds and other expected financial backers for possible worth acknowledgment," she had said. SBI's Khara said specific worries were being raised however in the end both NARCL and IDRCL have imperative endorsement. NARCL will secure and total distinguished non-performing resource (NPA) accounts from banks while IDRCL will deal with the obligation goal process, he said. To a question on why there was to and fro on the awful bank structure with the RBI, Khara said: "I think there is no distinction in unique build and what has at last appeared. This is a construction which has been conceived interestingly, and anything time has been taken, it is basically to figure out a portion of the issues which might have conceivably come up in future. Along these lines, they have all been figured out and they have been properly tended to. Thus, that the working of the two elements should be smooth, and they ought to be in a situation to accomplish the goal for which they're brought into reality." Concerns essentially emerged on the double proprietorship structure and functional component with the setting up of two separate substances NARCL and IDRCL. NARCL will secure and total the distinguished NPA accounts from Banks while IDRCL under a select game plan will deal with the obligation goal process. This elite plan will be according to the extension characterized in the 'Obligation Management Agreement' to be executed between the two elements, Khara said. "This game plan will be on a 'Head Agent' premise and last endorsements and proprietorship for the goal will lie with NARCL as the Principal. This is according to the construction initially conceived," he said. Regularly, a solitary element to be responsible as proprietor and for recuperation of the resources is practically speaking. The Indian Banks Association (IBA) is figured out how to have needed to have the double construction with AMC as a secretly held element, to be out of the domain of the administrative elements. However, presently 'Head and Agent component' has been set up to address administrative worries, wherein last endorsements will be finished by NARCL as the Principal. The resource goal will be done in a staged way. While a sum of 38 records accumulating Rs 82,845 crore have been distinguished for move to NARCL, it will be done in a staged way. In the main stage, somewhere around 15 records worth Rs 50,335 crore will be moved to the proposed terrible bank by March 31. At first, an expected Rs 2 lakh crore worth of terrible resources was wanted to be moved to the 'awful bank'. Nonetheless, Khara said a portion of these records have as of now been settled. J Swaminathan, Managing Director, for the focused on resources the board bunch at SBI said, "We will take a choice on whether more resources should be moved to the NARCL, or on the other hand in the event that they can be settled by banks themselves by the following year." On the functional design, Khara said the NARCL will buy these terrible advances through a 15:85 construction, where it will pay 15% of the deal thought in real



money and issue security receipts (SRs) for the excess 85%. The SRs will be ensured by the public authority, Khara said. "This interesting public-private association will bring the advantage of total, mastery to determine focused on resources. I anticipate that quicker resource goal should occur in the financial area with the setting up of the terrible bank," he said. In a press proclamation, SBI said IDRCL is relied upon to acquire prevalent goal strategies, save the worth, feature brownfield resources and draw in homegrown just as unfamiliar financial backers, Alternate Investment Funds, and so on This will let loose capital for additional bank loaning, it said. Padmakumar Nair, a Chief General Manager from SBI's Stressed Assets vertical will oversee NARCL while Manish Makharia, Head of Alternate Investment Fund, SBI Funds Management Pvt Ltd will head IDRCL. Subrata Biswas, the chosen one chief on the Board of NARCL will be the between time Chairman and Diwakar Gupta proceeds as the Chairman of IDRCL.

STAGE SET FOR REVERSE REPO NORMALISATION

The stage is set for a reverse repo normalisation, given that the Triparty Repo Dealing and Settlement (TREPS) and call money rates are ruling higher than the reverse repo rate, a research report said. "Interestingly for India, with TREPS and call rate currently at much higher than reverse repo rate, the stage is set for a reverse repo normalization," according to SBI's Ecowrap report. In the Indian context, during the growth boom for the three-year period ended 2008, when the signalling rate/ repo rate jumped by 275 basis points (bps), the NSE Index had jumped by 79.1 per cent, it said. The RBI's reverse repo rate is now 3.35 per cent. This can go up to 3.75 per cent as part of the normalisation. "We however still expect only a gradual unwinding of the liquidity overhang in the banking system by the RBI. The RBI has been conscious of the multi paced recovery and is unlikely to change its rate stance any time soon, though it might clearly move towards a liquidity neutral strategy," the SBI report said. It added that the FY23 government borrowing programme needs to be managed very adroitly and orderly by putting a cap on the size of gross borrowing programme. Interestingly, the government may prefer more switches this year in FY22 itself to adjust the net borrowing programme in FY23 to reduce the redemption in this regard, it said. Global recovery has started losing momentum, impacted by resurgence of infections in several parts of the world, supply disruptions and the persistent inflationary pressures. The report said yields in India have steadily risen in narrow band. Surprisingly, the market participant, as gauged from latest RBI professional forecaster survey under-priced the impact of rise in yield in response to Fed announcement. The yield is expected to continue northwards in Q4, the report said. "We believe G-sec rates could move in the range of 6.4-6.8% (pre pandemic level). We expect that even though signalling repo rate may be capped at 4% by the RBI, through much of FY23, a spread of 275 points over repo rate may be risk spread given the demand supply inequality." "It is expected that crude price might stay high in near future at current levels. However, amidst all this, there is a silver lining. The markets may have factored in that the current omicron will result in an endemic stage in the covid cycle and thus a faster normalization of economic activities," it added. "Additionally, in any rate hike cycle, the financial markets actually do better as any material risk is factored in the prices," the report said. Interestingly, for the two-year period ended 2011, when rates jumped by 375 bps, the NSE Index did jump by a staggering 54 per cent, it said. Clearly, better risk pricing always results in better price discovery in markets. "We believe that the redemption pressures of the government are going to be significantly large and will peak in FY27 at Rs 6.25 lakh crore. The redemption of G-secs is particularly large beginning FY23. What is more significant is that average oil bond redemption at Rs 35,000 crore will be an added headache from FY24 onwards," the report said. "Considering all this, the RBI and the government in conjunction will have to do large switches in next couple of years to manage the redemption as a part of signalling," it said.



PMC BANK AMALGAMATION WITH UNITY SFB GETS GOVT NOD

The Central government on Tuesday sanctioned and notified the scheme for the amalgamation of Punjab and Maharashtra Co-operative Bank Ltd (PMC Bank) with Unity Small Finance Bank Ltd. (USFBL). The amalgamation will come into force with effect from the date of the notification of the scheme — January 25, 2022. All the branches of the PMC Bank will function as branches of Unity Small Finance Bank Ltd with effect from this date, the RBI said. “USFBL is making necessary arrangements to implement the provisions of the scheme,” it said. Unity SFB is a joint venture between Centrum Group and BharatPe. It commenced operations as a small finance bank (SFB) with effect from November 1. The Scheme of Amalgamation notified on Tuesday envisages takeover of the assets and liabilities of PMC Bank, including deposits, by the USFBL in terms of the provisions of the scheme. Following the amalgamation, depositors of PMC Bank will get their money back over a period of 3-10 years. It said the transferee bank (Unity) will first make the payment of up to Rs 5 lakh or less received from DICGC to eligible depositors. For the remaining amount, the bank will pay up to Rs 50,000 above the payment already made at the end of two years, followed by an amount of up to Rs 1 lakh at the end of three years, Rs 3 lakh at the end of four years and Rs 5.5 lakh at the end five years. The RBI said the entire remaining amount will be paid after 10 years.

ROLL BACK ZERO MERCHANT DISCOUNT RATE ON UPI, RUPAY DEBIT CARD PAYMENTS

The Payments Council of India (PCI) has sought rollback of zero merchant discount rate (MDR) regime for payments made through Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and RuPay debit cards. In a communication to the Finance Ministry, the PCI — the largest industry body for digital payment aggregators — said it expects a loss of Rs 5,500 crore from UPI and RuPay debit card payments as the MDR on payment from these two options is capped at zero. This, the industry body said, limits the aggregators’ ability to “invest in and maintain the financial infrastructure” the payment ecosystem that they have built. “The payments industry hopes to have some relief which can then be used by them to further expand the digital payments infrastructure of the country and work on some new innovative initiatives to further the digital financial inclusion in the country,” the PCI said. MDR is a fee charged to merchants for processing of payments made through UPI, digital wallets, debit, and credit card. (Removed transactions from here). With the proliferation of digital payments, most merchants that have set up the payments service facility and agree to a fee, which is often between 1 and 3 per cent. Digital payments, especially through UPI and digital wallets have shot up over the last year, in terms of value and volume. Between January and December 2021, over 38 billion transactions worth nearly Rs 72 trillion were done just through UPI. Though payments through UPI and RuPay debit cards do not attract any MDR, it is capped at 0.9 per cent for all other debit cards. The Union Cabinet had recently approved a package of Rs 1,300 crore as reimbursement to banks as compensation for the zero MDR, as well as to boost digital payments.

AMID AMAZON-FRL ROW, FUTURE MOVING SC OVER REPAYMENTS ADDS A FRESH TWIST

Cash-strapped future Retail (FRL) on Tuesday moved the Supreme Court to challenge potential insolvency proceedings over missing loan repayments, even as independent directors of the company rejected a Rs7,000-crore offer by US-based private equity firm Samara Capital backed by Amazon. Litigation by Amazon has become the key road block in the completion of the sale of Future Group’s retail, wholesale and warehousing assets to Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL), with the US e-commerce giant claiming that the proposed sale violates an agreement that it signed with



FRL in 2019. The fresh developments in the case add to the web of legal challenges and twists in the three-way fight for control over the retail major.

Why is FRL challenging potential insolvency proceedings?

FRL missed a payment of Rs 3,494.6 crore due to lenders on December 31 as part of a one-time resolution (OTR) plan to resolve liabilities. The company had sought a 30-day review period to complete the payment but has now sought a relaxation in the review period and sought to restrain lenders from declaring the company a non-performing asset (NPA), which may open it up to insolvency proceedings. Experts noted that FRL would likely rely on past cases in which courts had held that lenders should look at the overall health and standing of a corporation and that large corporations in particular should not be forced into insolvency proceedings just because they have defaulted. Prashanth Shivadass, partner at law firm Shivadass & Shivadass, said, “There are instances where courts have held that just because they have defaulted doesn’t mean you can bring a large corporation which is a going concern to insolvency proceedings. You have to see balance sheets, financial performance, standing in the market.”

Why has FRL failed to make payments to lenders in line with the OTR?

The company said in a regulatory filing that “due to ongoing litigations with Amazon.com NV Investment Holdings LLC, the company was not able to complete the planned monetisation of the specified business as contemplated in OTR Plan.” The case has undergone multiple twists. Amazon, in 2019, signed a pact where by it acquired 49 per cent stake in Future Coupons Private Ltd. (FCPL). Then, Amazon-backed Samara Capital, in June 2020, signed a non-binding term sheet to acquire Future Retail’s businesses for Rs7,000 crore. Two months later, in August 2020, the Future group announced a Rs 24,713-crore deal for sale of the retail and wholesale business and the logistics and warehousing arms to Reliance Retail Ventures Ltd (RRVL), a subsidiary of RIL. Amazon then moved the Singapore International Arbitration Centre (SIAC) opposing the proposed sale of the retail businesses to RIL and wonastay, which was later upheld by the Supreme Court. Amazon had cited covenants in the agreement it signed when it bought 49 percent stake in Future Coupons in 2019, which gave it a call option on acquiring Future Retail — promoted by FCPL—within 3-10 years. FCPL holds about 10 percent stake in FRL. The Competition Commission of India (CCI), however, in December 2021, withdrew the approval for the original 2019 deal, claiming that Amazon “misled” the regulator to believe that its purpose was its interest in the business of FCPL and “suppressed” that the purpose of establishing a strategic interest in Future Retail and to get a “foot-in-the-door” in India’s retail sector. The order by the CCI may void the agreement which Amazon has cited to oppose Future Group’s plans to sell retail assets to RIL. Amazon has challenged the CCI order before the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT). It has also proposed to assist FRL raise funds to pay lenders through a Rs 7,000-crore deal from Samara Capital and asked the company to abandon its proposed deal with Reliance. Amazon had sent a proposal to the independent directors of FRL, who have since rejected the offer “as an attempt to buy the company’s assets on the cheap”, noting that the offer would not be sufficient to cover Future Retail’s outstanding liabilities. Directors at FRL also raised concerns about the time it may take to finalise any deal with Samara Capital highlighting that the company needs funds to pay lenders urgently.

MIS-SELLING IN HEALTH INSURANCE

Insurance is unique among products, especially financial products, in that the contract is based on a few underlying principles that are immutable. They include Insurable Interest, Indemnity and



Subrogation and one of the important principles is that of Utmost Good Faith. This principle, *uberrimae fidei* in Latin, says that BOTH the insurer and the insured must disclose all material facts before the policy inception. A Material Fact is one that has a bearing on the risk proposed to be covered and hence the insurer's decision whether to cover it, and if so, at what (premium) rate and terms. If the principle were binding only on the insured, we can brush it away with cynicism that the big, bad corporate will always have the upper-hand and the buyer will just have to beware. But Utmost Good Faith is binding upon the insurer also making it a more equitable contract. Arguably the most customer interest is for health insurance. It is also the type of insurance that makes for quite some embittered customers. Part of the reason lies with misleading or partial information from the seller's side, and part with the casual approach of the buyer and his presumptions. Let us see typical examples of mis-selling and mis-buying in health insurance and how you can steer clear.

Expectation, reality

By far the biggest gap between expectations and reality in health insurance is that many insureds think everything is covered and that it will be an all expenses paid in full deal up to the sum insured. If you are one of them, stop and see your policy document. It clearly spells out what is covered and what is excluded and never covered. It also spells out what is covered after a specified waiting period of unbroken coverage. No claims in the first 30 days except if due to an accident, pre-existing diseases are covered after a waiting period of 48 months of unbroken coverage, some procedures and treatments are covered after a waiting period of 12 or 24 months... these are the broad parameters of typical hospitalisation insurance covers.

Sub-limits

A second type of mislead is the sum insured itself. Insurers usually start you off with a lower sum insured and you can enhance it later on. Each enhancement has the same waiting period conditions tagged to it. But the devil is in the details and this one is called sub-limits. It will be clearly spelt out in the policy document that you will be eligible for only 1% of your sum insured as daily hospital room rent. So, with a ₹3 lakh policy you can opt for a ₹3,000 room and get reimbursed in full. Or, you can upgrade yourself to a ₹4,000 room but the policy will pay only ₹3,000. Still sounds ok to you? There is more. Actually, there is less. Almost all hospital costs like medical professionals' fees and ICU charges are linked to your room rent. So, you will get only three fourths of each of these expenses. This is rarely spelt out at the point of sale and so, we buy a policy and enter a zone of false comfort. If this is not spelt out to you when you buy, that is mis-selling. To protect against that, regulations require you to sign an undertaking that details have been explained to you and you have understood them. You should take this undertaking seriously since you are signing your assent. Another point you must seek clarity on is, who is covered by the sum insured. Family policies are attractive as they are packages and have a lower premium rate with a discount. But do see if it is a floater sum insured or individual sum insured because that can make all the difference. Floater sum insured offers the entire amount across family members, and hence the premium is lower, while individual sum insured is the opposite. It is your view to take on which will work better for you. Don't go by the seller's focus on lower premium alone. If there is a lower premium, there will be a reason for it. Find it, own it and then buy the policy.

Indemnity, benefit policies

Similar issues will arise if you buy without clarity on indemnity and benefit policies. Indemnity policies make good your expenses on hospitalisation. Benefit policies pay on diagnosis and you



can make a claim on it in addition to your indemnity policy claim as payment is not against actuals. Buying health insurance is a one time decision but requires your total attention. Just as you would choose your hospital or surgeon!

INDIA'S RELIANCE ON CHINESE GOODS SURGED IN 2021

India imported \$16 billion more of its key top 100 imports from China in the last year, an increase of almost two-thirds from the previous year, an analysis of trade figures shows, underlining deepening dependencies on many crucial imports. India's total imports from China crossed a record \$97.5 billion last year, making up a large chunk of the bilateral trade that reached \$125 billion, for the first time crossing the \$100 billion-mark, figures released earlier this month by China's General Administration of Customs (GAC) showed. Of the 8,455 different types of items imported from China between January and November of last year, a staggeringly diverse list covering everything from a range of chemicals and electronics to auto components and textiles, 4,591 showed an increase, according to an analysis of India's Ministry of Commerce data. The top 100 items by value accounted for \$41 billion, up from \$25 billion in 2020, according to a study of the numbers by Santosh Pai, an Honorary Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies in New Delhi. Most of the top 100 items — each of which accounted for more than \$100 million in trade, and included a range of electronic products, chemicals, and auto components — showed sharp growth. The list included both finished and intermediate goods. Of the former category, integrated circuits were up by 147%, laptops and personal computers by 77%, and oxygen therapy apparatus by more than fourfold. Intermediate products, particularly chemicals, also recorded striking growth. One of those, acetic acid, was up by more than eightfold. Among the reasons for the rising imports are a recovery in domestic demand for finished products from China, and an industrial recovery. Growth in India's exports worldwide has also pushed up the need for many crucial intermediate inputs, and disruptions elsewhere have led to greater sourcing from China in the short-term, for instance in the case of coking coal previously sourced from Australia and Indonesia. India's record imports from China in 2021, amid a continuing political impasse over the as-yet-unresolved crisis along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), have reignited a debate on whether the trade relationship and a growing deficit is sustainable. In the past 12 months, according to GAC data, the value of India's imports exceeded total two-way trade in 2019 before the pandemic.

'Need to differentiate'

India is sourcing both finished goods for the Indian market, such as electronics, in record numbers, while also relying on China for a range of intermediate industrial products, many of which cannot be sourced from elsewhere and are not made in India in sufficient quantities. If dependencies on China had overall increased substantially in the past year, Mr. Pai observed that there was a need to differentiate between the different categories. "If the growth in imports of finished items such as toys, electronics, or furniture, which we could be manufacturing in India, is not a good dependency, the fact that we are acquiring new intermediate goods, for instance, is probably a good development in the broader picture as it means we are emerging as a manufacturing hub and need new inputs to match the global demand for a finished Indian product," Mr. Pai observed. "The other question is which of these are short-term changes because of disruption during the pandemic, and which are longer-term trends that we need to consider and deal with, and ask whether we can start manufacturing in India rather than still buying from China," he added.



GOOGLE TO INVEST UP TO \$1 BN IN AIRTEL

Google will invest up to \$1 billion in Indian telecom giant Bharti Airtel, including \$700 million for a 1.28% equity stake, the two companies said on Friday. The U.S.-based tech firm, which acquired a 7.73% stake in Bharti's rival Jio Platforms for \$4.5 billion in 2020, will acquire 71.18 million shares of Bharti at ₹734 per share, subject to shareholder and regulatory approvals. The two companies said they would focus on enabling affordable access to smartphones. They would also continue to explore building on their existing partnerships to potentially co-create India-specific, network domain use cases for 5G and other standards, and help accelerate the cloud ecosystem for businesses across India. Bharti shares gained 1.23% to close at ₹715.90 on the BSE as investors cheered the investment plan. As part of its first commercial agreement, Bharti and Google will work together to build on the Indian firm's extensive offerings that cover a range of Android-enabled devices to consumers via innovative affordability programmes. Together, the companies would continue to explore further opportunities to bring down the barriers of owning a smartphone across a range of price points, in partnership with various device manufacturers. "Today, we announced a deepening of our already very strong partnership with Google," Gopal Vittal, MD & CEO, Bharti Airtel (India and South Asia), told analysts. "Our partnership is really related to strengthening what we have been already working on for over a decade and, in specific, on three broad areas to fire up the digital ecosystem — devices, networks and cloud adoption." Mr Vittal, however, clarified that Bharti Airtel has no plans to build its own device but instead intends to partner across the ecosystem to accelerate the adoption of smartphones from feature phones. Replying to a query on conflict of interest given that Google had also invested in Jio, Mr. Vittal said that digitally connecting a large market like India with 1.3 billion people, required a "multi-pronged approach".

'TELCOS, STAKEHOLDERS AGREE ON 5GI, 5G MERGER

Telecom service providers and other stakeholders across the board on Friday agreed on an action plan merge to 5Gi with the global standard on 5G, the Telecommunications Development Society of India (TSDSI) said. "With the broad support from many TSDSI member companies, as well as global cellular vendors and multiple operators, the key requirements and the next steps that will culminate in the merger of 5Gi into 5G, was endorsed as part of the 3GPP 5G standards," the society said in a statement. 5Gi, an initiative of the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) was planned as an indigenous technology that was to be developed jointly by the Indian Institutes of Technology at Madras and Hyderabad. Private telecom service providers had, however, opposed the plan and said it would be difficult to adopt a separate India standard for the technology as it would inflate their costs. The telcos had in their objections also said that adopting a separate 5G standard just for India would also result in increased costs of devices as specifically designed chip, which may not be compatible with global standards, would have to be installed.

**LIFE & SCIENCE****WHY IS 5G ROLLOUT A PROBLEM NEAR U.S. AIRPORTS?**

The rollout of the 5G C-band spectrum (3.7 GHz-3.98 GHz) in the U.S., on January 19, 2022 — after a pushback since December 2021 (the original roll-out date) — led to several major airlines, including Air India, temporarily cancelling their flights to the U.S. over fears of spectrum interference with crucial aircraft navigation systems. An aircraft type largely affected in this was the Boeing 777. The two major telecom firms concerned, Verizon and AT&T, also took cognisance of appeals by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and airlines about their worries, leading U.S. President Joe Biden to put out a statement on January 18, 2022. Called the “Statement by [U.S.] President [Joe] Biden on 5G Agreement”, he “wanted to thank Verizon and AT&T for agreeing to delay 5G deployment around key airports and to continue working with the Department of Transportation on safe 5G deployment at this limited set of locations.”

The issue has led to a comparison of how 5G services in Europe and parts of Asia have hardly led to any disruptions to aviation in these parts of the world unlike the near panic that has set in the U.S. How is this so?

An aviation expert said the main worry is of ‘radio emissions’ at the top of the C-band’s 3.98 GHz frequency ‘bleeding over’ into the 4.2 GHz-4.4 GHz band used by civil aircraft radio altimeters. The FAA has said that there are differences in the way 5G technology has been deployed in other countries. These include lower power levels; frequencies that are ‘of a different proximity to frequencies that are used by aviation equipment’ and a different placement of antennas in the vicinity of airports. In Europe, 5G services are in the 3.4 GHz-3.8 GHz range. In Korea, they are in the 3.42 GHz-3.7 GHz range. In U.S. airspace, which the FAA calls ‘the most complex in the world’, the initial stages of 5G use will try and mirror the safeguards used in France. But even here, there are differences. In France, for example, the 5G power level (on average, 631 Watts) is still lower than what it would be in the U.S. (on average, 1,585 Watts). Also the planned buffer zones around airports in the U.S. will protect only the last 20 seconds of the flight. France has a permanent safeguard of protecting the last 96 seconds of a flight. It also has a condition that the antenna angle has to have a downward tilt to limit potential interference. The height of a 5G antenna and the power of the signal are the factors that determine how close it can be allowed near an airport or a flight path. The buffer zones around an estimated 50 U.S. airports will be designed to try and keep 5G signals and aircraft separate. In Japan, three frequency bands have been allocated for 5G: the 3.7 GHz band (3.6 GHz-4.1 GHz), 4.5 GHz band (4.5 GHz-4.6 GHz), and the 28 GHz band (27.0 GHz-29.5 GHz), according to a special article published in 2020 in the NTT Docomo Technical Journal. Another report in a leading technology news publication says the Electronic Navigation Research Institute, National Institute of Maritime, Port and Aviation Technology, Japan had conducted a study on 5G interference with radio altimeters, and submitted its findings to the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) in March 2021. The detailed experiments used altimeters manufactured by Rockwell Collins and Honeywell, which are the key suppliers to aircraft manufacturers, Airbus and Boeing. One of the findings was that there would need to be “at least 60 MHz” of what was called a ‘guard band’ to avoid interference with radio altimeters. It also made a finding of locating the high-power 5G base station 200 metres away from the approach path of an aircraft. The findings were made after ensuring that the antennas were pointed downwards.

What has the FAA been doing?

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

64

Telegram: http://t.me/DreamIAS_Jamshedpur



It says that the delays to the 5G rollout have helped it in ‘processing 5G transmitter location and power level information’. Further, under what is called an Alternative Method of Compliance (AMOC) process, it has collaborated with airlines ‘on how they can demonstrate altimeters are safe and reliable in certain 5G C-band environments’. Between January 16 and January 20, 2022, the FAA issued approvals clearing 78% of the commercial fleet of airlines to perform low-visibility landings at airports where the 5G C-band is in use. These are aircraft models with one of the 13 cleared altimeters — a range of Boeing aircraft (including the Boeing 777 and Boeing 787), most Airbus planes and some models of regional jets.

ISRO’S SSLV, A SMALL SATELLITE LAUNCHER WITH BIG PROSPECTS AHEAD

The new chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation Dr S Somanath indicated at a meeting with the minister of state for space Jitendra Singh Tuesday that ISRO’s indigenous new launch rockets, called the Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV), will have its much-delayed, maiden development flight this April. The ISRO chairman has mentioned the launch of an “SSLV-D1 Micro SAT in April 2022” the Press Information Bureau said in an official statement on the meeting between the new ISRO chairman and the Space Minister on Tuesday. The SSLV is intended to cater to a market for the launch of small satellites into low earth orbits which has emerged in recent years on account of the need for developing countries, private corporations, and universities for small satellites. The launch of small satellites has until now been dependent on ‘piggy-back’ rides with big satellite launches on ISRO’s work-horse – the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle which has had over 50 successful launches so far. The launch of small satellites as a consequence has been dependent on the finalising of launch contracts for the larger satellites by ISRO. Somanath himself is credited with the design and development of the SSLV during his time as director of the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre in Thiruvananthapuram since 2018. The launch of the maiden flight of the SSLV was scheduled for July 2019 but has been delayed due to setbacks from the Covid 19 crisis and other issues. The SSLV can carry satellites weighing up to 500 kg to a low earth orbit while the tried and tested PSLV can launch satellites weighing in the range of 1000 kg. “The SSLV is the smallest vehicle at 110-ton mass at ISRO. It will take only 72 hours to integrate, unlike the 70 days taken now for a launch vehicle. Only six people will be required to do the job, instead of 60 people. The entire job will be done in a very short time and the cost will be only around Rs 30 crore. It will be an on-demand vehicle,” former ISRO chairman K Sivan had stated in 2019 at the ISRO headquarters during an annual press conference. The former chairman Sivan said in an industry meeting that year that about 15 to 20 SSLVs would be required every year to meet the national demand alone. The SSLV received a commercial booking in 2019 itself from the US space launch services intermediary Spaceflight Inc. Spaceflight announced on August 8, 2019, that it has clinched a deal with an ISRO commercial arm for using the second developmental flight of the SSLV rocket to launch a spacecraft for an “undisclosed US-based satellite constellation” customer. “SSLV is perfectly suited for launching multiple microsatellites at a time and supports multiple orbital drop-offs. We are excited to add SSLV to our launch portfolio and manage many launches together — first to LEO (low earth orbit) mid-inclinations this year and SSO missions starting in the fall of 2020,” Spaceflight CEO and president Curt Blake said in 2019. The development and manufacture of the SSLV are expected to create greater synergy between the space sector and private Indian industries – a key aim of the space ministry. Indian industry has a consortium for the production of PSLV and should come together to produce the SSLV as well once it is tested, ISRO has stated in the past. One of the aims of the newly-created ISRO commercial arm, New Space India Limited (NSIL), is to use research and development carried out by ISRO over the years for commercial purposes through Indian industry partners. “Manufacturing and production of Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) and Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) through

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



technology transfer,” is one of the mandates of the new firm. There are more than 500 industries contributing to ISRO programs at present, and more than half of the project budget outlay for space programs flows to these industries.

AFTER MILLION-MILE JOURNEY, JAMES WEBB TELESCOPE REACHES DESTINATION

After traveling nearly one million miles, the James Webb Space Telescope arrived at its new home on Monday. The spacecraft’s arrival checks off another tricky step as scientists on Earth prepare to spend at least a decade using the observatory to study distant light from the beginning of time. The telescope launched to space on Dec. 25, with astronomers all over the world holding their breaths. But the \$10 billion telescope still needed to power through the first leg of its setup phase. Earlier this month, astronomers resumed breathing when the observatory unfurled its heat shield and deployed its mirrors and other instruments with few surprises — a remarkable feat given the telescope’s novel design and engineering complexity. And on Monday around 2:05 p.m. Eastern time, engineers confirmed that the James Webb Space Telescope successfully reached its final destination. The telescope arrived at a location beyond the moon after a final, roughly five-minute firing of the spacecraft’s main thruster, sweeping itself into a small pocket of stability where the gravitational forces of the sun and Earth commingle. From this outpost, called the second Lagrange Point or L2, the Webb telescope will be dragged around the sun alongside Earth for years to keep a steady eye on outer space without spending much fuel to maintain its position. “We’re one step closer to uncovering the mysteries of the universe,” Bill Nelson, the administrator of NASA, said in a statement. “And I can’t wait to see Webb’s first new views of the universe this summer!” The James Webb Space Telescope, named after a former NASA administrator who oversaw the formative years of the Apollo program, is seven times more sensitive than the nearly 32-year-old Hubble Space Telescope and three times its size. A follow-up to Hubble, the Webb is designed to see further into the past than its celebrated predecessor in order to study the first stars and galaxies that twinkled alive in the dawn of time, 13.7 billion years ago. Webb’s launch on Christmas morning capped a risky 25-year development timeline dotted with engineering challenges, mistakes and cost overruns that made its voyage to space all the more nerve-racking for astronomers and space agency administrators. The telescope, tightly bundled up to fit inside a European Ariane rocket, unfurled dozens of mechanical limbs and instruments. These included five layers of a thin foil-like plastic that were stretched taut to the size of a tennis court to shield Webb’s instruments from the sun’s heat. Later, the telescope unfolded a 21-foot-wide array of 18 gold-plated mirrors that will help bounce light from the cosmos into its ultrasensitive infrared sensors. The instrument side of the telescope, facing away from the sun, will be cloaked in frigid darkness, while the other side, or the outermost layer of the sun shield, will deflect temperatures as hot as 230 degrees Fahrenheit. This helps accomplish a key challenge in Webb’s design of keeping the telescope’s sensors cool so that stray heat doesn’t interfere with its infrared scans of ancient galaxies, distant black holes and planets orbiting other stars. Deploying the telescope to the L2 neighborhood also helps keep the temperatures low while providing enough sunlight for the Webb’s solar panels, which generate electricity. But the telescope isn’t parked at precisely L2 — it will revolve around the point’s center once every 180 days in an orbital ring some 500,000 miles wide to expose its solar arrays to sunlight. “If we were perfectly there, we would be blocked by the Earth, such that we wouldn’t get our electricity,” said Scott Willoughby, the telescope’s program manager at Northrop Grumman, the primary contractor for the observatory. “So we do this halo orbit.” Stationing the spacecraft at this distance from Earth will also help conserve its limited fuel supplies.



ADDING RADIOACTIVE SUBSTANCES IN WEARABLES UNJUSTIFIED

Over a year ago, alert press reporters found a device hanging around Congress M.P. Shashi Tharoor's neck. Was it a GPS device, Translator or a small dictionary? He tweeted that it was "An air purifier (negative ioniser)." Its sellers claim that the device emits two million healthy negative ions per sec from the black brush on its top. These ions may impinge on pollutants, make them negatively charged and get them collected on surfaces of tables, windows, bed etc. Whether it helps to reduce pollution in real life, or not needs scientific validation. Is copious emission of negative ions from it a red flag? On December 16, 2021, the Authority for Nuclear Safety and Radiation Protection (ANVS), Netherland issued a statement identifying ten products such as (Magnetix Magnetic necklace, Magnetix Sport boost bracelet, Smiley Kids bracelet, Athletic necklace among others) as containing more radioactivity than legally permitted. The agency cautioned the public against using "Quantum Pendant," "anti-5G pendant" or "negative ion" jewellery items or sleep mask. Often, "negative ion products" may contain radioactive substances. The ANVS clarified that their warning does not apply to ionic air purifiers, "as they are known not to contain radioactive materials." Obviously, Dr Tharoor need not worry over any red flag!

Radioactive products

Sellers of "negative ion" consumer products and "scalar energy products" claim that these products improve the user's health. They may state that they are composed of volcanic ash, minerals etc. These can contain radioactive substances, which emit ionising radiation, which can cause tissue damage and are bad for the user's health. Popular online platforms have been offering such products, often in the form of pendants, necklaces, bracelets, sleep masks etc. for many years now. Manufacturing and selling products containing radioactive substances is not a justified practice. The ANVS found that the level of radiation in these products is low and the risk of health problems is also low. The agency informed all known vendors of these products in the Netherlands that it has prohibited their sale and that they must stop trading in these products immediately. Wearing such products for a long period (a year, 24 hours a day) could expose the wearer to a dose of radiation that exceeds the limit for skin exposure prescribed in the Netherlands.

Above dose limit

Malaysian researchers led by H.L. Hassan, Department of Physics, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia found that eight out of the 20 pendants, they evaluated, by using state-of-the-art methods were capable of exposing the wearers to an annual effective dose above the dose limit of one mSv for public (PLOS ONE June 1, 2021). The dose from the most radioactive pendant was 2.8 mSv/year. (When the physical energy absorbed by tissues from x-rays, gamma rays or electrons is one Joule per kg, the biologically effective dose is considered to be one Sv. Since Sv is a huge unit, specialists use milliSv - one thousandth of a Sv - as a unit; skin dose in a chest x-ray exam is about 0.1 mSv).

Undergarment samples

In another IAEA supported project, Hassan and others from Malaysia, the U.K. and Spain found that the undergarment industry in Malaysia and elsewhere advertised that their "negative ion undergarments" contain tourmaline, monazite and zircon, all known to contain uranium and thorium. Among the 13 samples of undergarments they assessed, three were capable of exposing their wearers to annual effective doses above one mSv, the IAEA reference level (Applied Sciences, June 10, 2021). Realising the safety significance of Naturally Occurring Radioactive Materials



(NORM), IAEA and member countries provided guidance on the matter. In “Radiation Protection and Safety of radiation Sources: International Basic Safety Standards” (2014), the IAEA considers that the frivolous use of radiation or radioactive substances in toys and personal jewellery or adornments, which result in an increase in activity, is unjustified. The IAEA also published a specific safety guide titled “Radiation Safety for Consumer Products (2016).” The Atomic Energy (Radiation Protection) Rules, 2004 contains provisions consistent with those of the IAEA. Be aware of the facts before using consumer products containing radioactive substances or presenting them to anyone!

GAME FOR A BIG BET

In the late 1970s, four programmers David Crane, Larry Kaplan, Alan Miller and Bob Whitehead bid goodbye to Atari, a pioneer in home video consoles, disappointed that they weren't getting paid enough despite being responsible for bringing in a lot of money for the company. They started a new venture, which they initially called Computer Arts but whose name was changed pretty soon to Activision. The latest avatar of this company, Activision Blizzard, is what Microsoft agreed to buy last week in an all-cash deal for nearly \$69 billion. This is not just the biggest deal in the gaming industry but also the biggest acquisition by Microsoft till date, being more than one-and-a-half times what it paid to buy professional network LinkedIn in 2016. The Microsoft announcement came just days after Take-Two Interactive, the publisher of Grand Theft Auto, announced that it would acquire Zynga, the name behind 'FarmVille,' for \$12.7 billion. The journey from Computer Arts to Activision Blizzard over the decades has involved the acquisition of many studios and, more importantly in 2008, the merger with Vivendi Games that gave the company its current name. Over these years, the company has come to own some of the most prominent titles in the gaming realm, from 'Pitfall!' in its initial years to 'Call of Duty', and from 'World of Warcraft' to 'Candy Crush'. It has nearly 400 million monthly active players, with 'Call of Duty' itself accounting for about a fourth of it. The deal has come at a time when Activision was struggling with the weight of allegations of sexual harassment at the workplace. Its business had, however, grown to over \$8 billion in revenues during the first year of the pandemic.

Under pressure

“The deal comes at a time of weakness for Activision,” said a Reuters story, which noted that its shares have fallen more than a third since hitting a record high last year. The Wall Street Journal had reported that Activision's CEO Bobby Kotick knew about the allegations but didn't tell the board. There was pressure on the company. And that's when Microsoft rushed in. For a tech behemoth that is almost always identified with product categories such as Windows and its Azure cloud computing offerings, it needs to be emphasised that the company is also a major player in gaming. Its gaming division clocked revenues of over \$15 billion last year, mostly flowing from its Xbox business and gaming subscription service. Speaking with his colleague and CEO of Microsoft Gaming Phil Spencer, Chairman and CEO Satya Nadella said last year: “Gaming has been key to Microsoft from our earliest days. Our oldest currently supported franchise is in fact our game Microsoft Flight Simulator, which we released three years before the first version of Windows.” Just a year-and-a-half ago, it bought ZeniMax Media, which owns franchises such as The Elder Scrolls and Fallout, for \$7.5 billion. And prior to that, it snapped up 'Minecraft'-maker Mojang Studios. The acquisition of Activision Blizzard, which is expected to take over a year to complete, will put Microsoft at No. 3 behind Tencent and Sony in the video gaming market. Mr. Nadella, in a conference call after the deal, said: “Gaming is the largest and fastest-growing category in entertainment. Today, 3 billion consumers around the world play games, and we expect this



number will reach 4.5 billion by 2030.” The deal gives Microsoft a lot of content, a bigger mobile play, as also a much more clout in its console wars with Sony. At the same time, this also lends itself to the evolution of the gaming experience, as Microsoft likes to put it, from being device-centric to being player-centric. Building metaverses, virtual reality spaces, for gaming communities could be another goal. Research projects a bullish phase for gaming coming up, with advanced network connectivity and 5G being the likely drivers. The global gaming industry, valued at \$173.7 billion in 2021, is likely to grow to \$314 billion by 2027, according to market research firm Mordor Intelligence. How Activision, under its new owners, deals with the allegations that has haunted it since last year, and whether Microsoft can get past any regulatory concerns will be questions that are key to this mega deal’s future.

REINING IN THE POWER OF TECH GIANTS

On January 20, the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary approved a bill that would prohibit Big Tech platforms, such as Amazon.com Inc., Facebook-owner Meta Platforms Inc., Apple Inc. and Alphabet Inc.’s Google, from favouring their products and services or ‘self-preferencing’. The committee’s 16-6 majority vote to pass the bill aimed at weakening the dominance of Big Tech, exhibited bipartisan support for the antitrust legislation and moved it closer to the floor of the full Senate for consideration. The bill, however, faces strong resistance from tech firms and their lobbying activities, with still a long road ahead before it becomes a law.

Why did the lawmakers introduce the bill?

The American Innovation and Choice Online Act was introduced in Senate on October 18, 2021, by Senators Amy Klobuchar and Chuck Grassley, and co-sponsored by Senator Richard Durbin, Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee, and nine other Senators. Part of a list of bills aimed at reining in the outsized market power of tech giants, the legislation would bar dominant platforms from unfairly preferencing their “own products, services, or lines of business” over those of other businesses that depend on their platforms. That means, Google would not be able to give preference to Maps or YouTube in its search results, Apple iPhones would not come with its pre-loaded apps like iMessage or FaceTime, and Amazon would no longer be allowed to highlight its Basics brand products and services like Prime. Then there is also the question of data. Dominant digital platforms would not be allowed to use non-public data from other businesses to compete with them on their platforms. The world’s largest online retailer has been accused of doing this — using third-party sellers’ data to develop some of its products. The idea is to create a more level playing field that would help products from other companies, including small businesses and entrepreneurs to reach more consumers, instead of the ones pushed by the dominant firms, who have been alleged of crowding out other players in their domains. Lawmakers have stated that the bill would give more choices to the consumers. However, there were counterarguments and concerns about the bill from tech firms, their lobbying groups, as well as lawmakers.

What is the likelihood of the bill becoming a law?

The bill, which now advances out of the Judiciary Committee to the full Senate, needs 60 votes to pass the Senate floor, superseding the legislative filibuster, a political tactic to stop a legislation’s final approval. During this round of approval, the six votes against the bill were all from Republican Senators. But going forward the markup would need significant Republican support as well. The committee’s Ranking Member Senator Grassley, a Republican, said that he’s looking forward to continued collaboration with Senator Klobuchar and others to get this bill passed in the full Senate. The legislation also received endorsement from firms like Roku, DuckDuckGo, Yelp,



Spotify, and Match Group, who sent a letter to the committee urging it to advance legislation, along with over 30 small and medium tech companies. During the committee's meeting, some concerns were raised about the bill, including "the broad scope and the vague language" it contains, as well as "privacy and security", and "global competitiveness". The Senators also presented over 100 amendments to the bill. An amendment, which was adopted, addressed national security concerns by clarifying that the legislation doesn't require data to be shared with bad actors, a statement said, adding that "foreign companies, including Chinese Big Tech companies such as TikTok, are subject to the same rules." Their counterparts in the U.S., however, don't want to be bound by the rules and have started massive lobbying operations. Senator Ted Cruz, who voted for the legislation, stated that he had a 40-minute phone call with Apple CEO Tim Cook, who "expressed significant concerns about the bill." Other Big Tech platforms have also voiced their concerns. With mixed views about the bill, including some who wish to ensure "robust competition on dominant tech platforms", with some others supporting the tech firms for political or personal reasons, and taking into account external forces like lobbying, the final passage of the legislation could become an uphill task for the sponsors.

Are other countries doing something similar?

Yes. The European Commissioner for Competition Margrethe Vestager has made the 27-country bloc's stance clear about U.S. tech firms with proposals for two sets of rules —the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) —meant to take on U.S. tech giants. The DSA proposal defines clear responsibilities and accountability for providers of intermediary services, and in particular online platforms, such as social media and marketplaces. It would force Amazon, Apple, Google and Meta to remove illegal products, services or content on their platforms or risk fines up to 6% of global turnover. The DMA proposal blacklists certain practices used by large platforms acting as "gatekeepers" and enables the commission to carry out market investigations and sanction non-compliant behaviours, with fines of up to 10% of global turnover. While the European Parliament had approved the DMA proposal in December last year, the DSA was approved on January 20. The negotiations on the new rules are expected to begin this year, with the rules likely to be adopted in 2023.

JUMPING LARVAE

A team of researchers from North Carolina State University's Plant Disease and Insect Clinic has discovered a jumping behaviour that is entirely new to insect larvae, and there is evidence that it is occurring in a range of species. The previously unrecorded behaviour occurs in the larvae of a species of lined flat bark beetle (*Laemophloeus biguttatus*). Specifically, the larvae are able to spring into the air, with each larva curling itself into a loop as it leaps forward. While there are other insect species that are capable of making prodigious leaps, they rely on something called a "latch-mediated spring actuation mechanism". This means that they essentially have two parts of their body latch onto each other while the insect exerts force, building up a significant amount of energy. The insect then unlatches the two parts, releasing all of that energy at once, allowing it to spring off the ground. What makes the *L. biguttatus* so remarkable is that it makes these leaps without latching two parts of its body together. It uses claws on its legs to grip the ground while it builds up that potential energy — and once those claws release their hold on the ground, that potential energy is converted into kinetic energy, launching it skyward. To determine how *L. biguttatus* was able to execute its acrobatics, the researchers filmed the jumps at speeds of up to 60,000 frames per second.



TWO SPECIES OF FUNGI ASSOCIATED WITH BASAL STEM ROT FOUND

Researchers from Kerala have identified two new species of fungi from the genus *Ganoderma* that are associated with coconut stem rot. They have also genotyped the two fungi species, named *Ganoderma keralense* and *G. pseudoapplanatum* and identified genetic biomarkers. The DNA barcodes have been made publicly available in DNA sequence repositories so that future studies can use it for early detection of the pathogen. The research was published in the journal *Mycologia*.

Basal stem rot

The butt rot or basal stem rot of coconut is known by several names in different parts of India: *Ganoderma* wilt (Andhra Pradesh), *Anaberoga* (Karnataka) and *Thanjavur wilt* (Tamil Nadu), to mention a few. The infection begins at the roots, but symptoms include discolouration and rotting of stem and leaves. In the later stages, flowering and nut set decreases and finally the coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*) dies. A reddish brown oozing is seen. This oozing has been reported only in India. Once infected, recovery of the plants is not likely. Not surprising then, that this causes a huge loss: By some estimates made in 2017, in India, around 12 million people are said to depend on coconut farming.

Late signs

Another sign of infection is presence of shelf-like “basidiomata,” which are the fruiting or reproductive structures of the fungus, on the tree trunks. “Although microscopic, many fungi... produce macroscopic fruiting structures on the substrates where they grow [for example, *Ganoderma*],” says T.K. Arun Kumar of Zamorin’s Guruvayurappan College, Kohikode, who led this research, in an email. He further explains that the basidiomata of *Ganoderma* bear reproductive propagules (called spores) which are dispersed through wind and sometimes with the help of insects. “That is how the pathogen spreads from one host to the other,” he adds. Since the fungus is microscopic, it is only detected after the symptoms start manifesting or when the reproductive structures are borne, which can be too late.

Lack of taxonomy

Surprisingly, before this study, the disease was commonly attributed to the genus *Ganoderma* and the specific species involved were not identified correctly. One reason for this could be the lack of studies focusing on taxonomy. “Plant pathologists may be very good at identifying diseases based on disease symptoms, devising strategies to prevent disease occurrence and even in developing disease resistant plants. However, there is a dearth of fungal taxonomists among plant pathologists who are able to identify fungal pathogens with accuracy,” says Dr Arun Kumar. The two-member team collected the material for their research during the years 2015 to 2019. “There was a large-scale outbreak of the disease in Kozhikode district, Kerala, a few years back and our examination of the collected fungal specimens along with collections [over many years] from plantations throughout Kerala revealed that the identity of pathogenic species was hitherto unrecognised,” says Dr Arun Kumar. This led him and PhD student N. Vinjusha to study the specimens further, first morphologically and then through genome sequencing. The two species seemed to be new to science. “This discovery was based on morphological characters, DNA sequences of the Kerala collections and phylogenetic analyses by comparing DNA of all *Ganoderma* species known worldwide,” says Dr Arun Kumar. The research has revealed the identity of the pathogenic species associated with butt rot. Hence, species-specific disease prevention strategies can now be developed. As Dr Arun Kumar says: “So far, scientists and



farmers had to solely rely on the visible symptoms of the disease [which appear only at a later stage, after complete colonization], but now they can easily detect the presence of the pathogen much earlier by analysing plant extracts which can be easily obtained at any stage of growth.”

WHY MODERNA’S EXPERIMENTAL HIV VACCINE MAY BE SIGNIFICANT

Forty years since HIV was discovered, the development of a vaccine against the virus has remained a challenge. Now, the biotech firm Moderna has started trials on an mRNA vaccine, which uses a novel approach to elicit broadly neutralising HIV-1 antibodies (bNAbs) and eventually target multiple HIV strains. First doses of the experimental HIV vaccine antigens were administered at George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences in Washington DC this week.

The technology

The vaccine uses the same technology as Moderna’s Covid 19 vaccine. It uses mRNA, or messenger RNA, which teaches the body’s cells how to make proteins that trigger immune response. BNABs are produced by certain types of B cells, which are rare: one in 300,000 B cells have this capability. The vaccine aims to stimulate production of bnAbs that can act against many variants of HIV. The immunogens being tested were developed by scientific teams at the non-profit International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI) and Scripps Research, and delivered via Moderna’s mRNA technology. “While the proof-of-principle study was encouraging, it used a protein with an adjuvant to induce a response that was as was hoped — capable of neutralising and preventing infection with neutralisation of susceptible HIV strains. It did not use mRNA, but there is no reason to suppose that the mRNA that has been designed will not lead to the production of the expected protein and broadly neutralising antibodies,” leading virologist Dr Gagandeep Kang said.

The vaccine challenge

Several vaccine candidates entered clinical trials but failed, said Dr Sanjay Pujari, infectious diseases consultant closely involved in treating HIV patients. One of the challenges was to identify the correlates of immune protection. Previous vaccine studies in HIV have shown that antibodies produced were either ineffective or partially effective, and contributed to failure of trials. Over the last decade, studies have narrowed down on bNAbs that are more potent than reactive antibodies produced after HIV infection. “These bNAbs can overcome the genetic variability of HIV by targeting the conserved regions of the envelope protein – can penetrate the ‘glycan shield’ that HIV uses to shield its envelope protein,” Dr Pujari said. In naturally acquired HIV infection, only a small proportion of individuals produces bNAbs. By that time, it is quite late to have any impact on the natural course of HIV infection. So, the key is to use it as treatment (early on during acute HIV infection) or prevention. |The closest positive effectiveness was achieved in the THAI (RV144) trial i.e. around 30%. Recently, Johnson & Johnson’s vector platform vaccine trial in South Africa (Imbokodo) was stopped due to disappointing results. Hence an mRNA platform to deliver immunogens capable of inducing bNAbs is promising technology that needs to be explored in trials,” Dr Pujari said.

Early days yet

Results from this phase 1 study will dictate the future of this platform for HIV vaccine development. “This is a start and we do not know how it will go, but we hope that using good science will move us further along,” Dr Kang said. According to Dr K Madan Gopal, Senior



Consultant-Health, NITI Aayog, “mRNA technology has a distinct advantage and the platform can be easily adapted to develop a vaccine against HIV variants. It can be designed to elicit neutralising antibodies and let’s hope for the best.”

HOW TO MANAGE COVID IN KIDS: NEW GUIDELINES

Last week, the Health Ministry released revised guidelines for management of Covid-19 in children and adolescents below 18 years, superseding the previous version of June 2021. Among the key updates, the revised guidelines advise against the use of antivirals or monoclonal antibodies in children and adolescents, irrespective of the severity of infection, and against the use of masks in children below the age of 5. ‘The Comprehensive Guidelines for Management of COVID-19 in Children and Adolescents Below 18 Years’ were reviewed by a group of experts in view of the current surge of cases, attributed mainly to the Omicron variant of the coronavirus.

What to give, not give

The guidelines note that Covid-19 is a viral infection and say antimicrobials have no role in the management of uncomplicated Covid-19 infection. “As of now in the absence of efficacy and safety data, the use of antivirals such as Remdesivir, Molnupiravir, Favipiravir, Fluvoxamine and monoclonal antibodies such as Sotrovimab, Casirivimab +Imdevimab are not recommended for children less than 18 years of age irrespective of severity of illness,” the guidelines say. Overall, the management of children remains the same. The mainstay of treatment for fever is to give paracetamol. For cough, the guidelines advise throat soothing agents and warm saline gargles in older children and adolescents. They recommend ensuring oral fluids to maintain hydration and a nutritious diet. “No other Covid-19 specific medication is needed for mild cases,” said Dr Aarti Kinikar, member of the Maharashtra paediatric Covid task force. Leading paediatrician Dr Umesh Vaidya said that in children, the main symptoms are cough, cold and fever; sore throat symptoms are more prominent than wheezing. Most paediatricians check for circumstantial evidence whether anyone in the family is symptomatic. For mild cases, RT-PCR tests are not being advised. Several paediatricians said that they have instructed families to stay in isolation for a week. However, Covid tests are required for those who need to be hospitalised.

Masks

The reason masks are not recommended for children aged 5 and under, experts said, is that young children do not wear the mask properly and may have issues with breathing if there is underlying asthma or when they are playing. Some parents can be obsessed and force the child to wear a mask, but it is not mandatory for the child below 5 to wear one, experts said. Children aged 6-11 may wear a mask depending on the ability of the child to use a mask safely and appropriately under direct supervision of parents/guardians. Children aged 12 years and over should wear a mask under the same conditions as adults. It is important to ensure hands are kept clean with soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand rub, while handling masks.

MIS-C

Multi System Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C) is a new syndrome in children characterised by unremitting fever and epidemiological linkage with SARS-CoV-2. For diagnosing MIS-C, the guidelines say caution should be exercised while interpreting an isolated increase in COVID antibodies.

Post-Covid Care

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



Children with asymptomatic infection or mild disease should receive routine childcare, appropriate vaccination, nutrition counselling, and psychological support on follow up, the guidelines say. For children with moderate to severe Covid, the guidelines say that on discharge from hospital, parents/caregivers should be counselled regarding monitoring for persistence/worsening respiratory difficulty and the indications for bringing the child back to the facility.

Anticoagulants & steroids

The recommendations for use of anticoagulants have been revised. If steroids are used, they should be tapered over 10-14 days, subject to clinical improvement. Steroids are indicated only in hospitalised severe and critically ill cases under strict supervision. Corticosteroids may be used in rapidly progressive moderate and all severe cases; the guidelines recommend 5-7 days and tapering up to 10-14 days depending on clinical assessment. Steroids are to be avoided the first 3-5 days since onset of symptoms as it prolongs viral shedding, the guidelines say.

OMICRON SPREAD COULD END 'EMERGENCY PHASE' OF PANDEMIC: WHO

The pandemic that has convulsed the world for more than two years is entering a “new phase” globally, and the rapid spread of the omicron variant of the coronavirus offers “plausible hope” for a return to normality in the months ahead, the World Health Organisation’s top official in Europe said in a statement released Monday. Hans Kluge, the director for the WHO’s European region, warned that it was too early for nations to drop their guard, but said that between vaccination and natural immunity through infection, “omicron offers plausible hope for stabilisation and normalisation”. His comments echoed the optimism of other leading public health officials around the world, including Anthony S. Fauci, US President Joe Biden’s top medical adviser for the coronavirus. Fauci said on Sunday that while there would be pain in the weeks ahead, especially as omicron moves through the unvaccinated, the hope was that the continued spread of omicron would not disrupt society to the same degree as other variants of the coronavirus have done over the past two years. The statement from Kluge offered a similar mix of caution and optimism. The pandemic is far from over, but I am hopeful we can end the emergency phase in 2022 and address other health threats that urgently require our attention,” Kluge wrote.

AMID SPIKE, SPOTLIGHT ONOMICRON SUB-VARIANT

In the last couple of weeks, there has been a noticeable increase in the discovery of BA.2 sub-variant of Omicron from several countries, leading to fresh worries about the possibility of another surge in cases. Last week, the UK Health Security Agency flagged this sub-variant and designated it as a ‘variant under investigation’. And, in its latest weekly bulletin, the World Health Organisation noted that a number of countries had reported an increase in the BA.2 sub-variant in the last seven days. This sub-variant has been present in substantial numbers in India as well, but India is not amongst the countries where the recent increase has been noticed. The BA.2 could possibly be more infectious than the more commonly found BA.1 variety but there is no evidence to suggest that it is more harmful.

Not new, a sub-variant of Omicron

BA.2 is one of the several sub-variants of the Omicron which has spread rapidly across the world since November. The Omicron name was given to the B.1.1.529 lineage after it was designated as a variant of concern. Later, it was found that this lineage had small variations of its own, and the



three most common were named B.1.1.529.1, B.1.1.529.2, and B.1.1.529.3. For ease of reference, however, these sub-lineages were later re-classified as BA.1, BA.2 and BA.3. The Omicron sub-variant that has been most common in circulation till now is BA.1. This continues to be the case even now, though the proportion of BA.2 is on the rise. According to the WHO, 98.8 per cent of all Omicron genetic sequences submitted in global databases till January 25 were that of BA.1 variety. BA.2 retains most of the characteristics of BA.1 but has some more mutations that can give it a distinctive characteristic. "...the BA.2 descendent lineage, which differs from BA.1 in some of the mutations, including in the spike protein, is increasing in many countries. Investigations into the characteristics of BA.2, including immune escape properties and virulence, should be prioritised independently (and comparatively) to BA.1," the WHO has said. So far, studies have not showed any distinct advantage of BA.2 over BA.1, particularly in the nature of disease that they cause, but the recent rise in BA.2 cases is likely to put a more intense spotlight on this sub-variant.

Rise mainly in Europe

The increase in proportion of the BA.2 has been noticed mainly in Europe, most prominently in Denmark, where over 8,300 genetic sequences of this Omicron sub-variant have been identified so far. In fact, in Denmark, BA.2 now comprises almost half of all Omicron cases. The United Kingdom has found 607 samples with this sub-variant, while India has discovered 711 till now. The other countries where BA.2 has been found in abundance are the United States, Norway, Sweden and Singapore. According to the outbreak.info website, that tracks the prevalence of the different lineages of this virus across the world, BA.2 has so far been discovered in 49 countries.

No evidence that it is more harmful

The BA.2 sub-variant is known to be more transmissible than the BA.1 variety, which could possibly explain its surge in recent days. But as of now, researchers have not noticed any difference in the nature of disease that it causes. Though these are sister lineages, there are important genetic differences between BA.1 and BA.2. In fact, Statens Serum Institut, Denmark's main institution on infection diseases, said the difference between BA.1 and BA.2 was greater than the difference between the original Wuhan variant which started the epidemic and the Alpha variant, the first major variant that had become dominant in 2020. "Such differences can lead to different properties, for instance concerning infectiousness, vaccine efficiency or severity. So far, there is no information as to whether BA.1 and BA.2 have different properties..." the institute said in a note last week. "Initial analysis shows no differences in hospitalisations for BA.2 compared to BA.1. Analyses regarding infectiousness and vaccine efficiency etc. are ongoing, including attempts to cultivate BA.2 in order to perform antibody neutralization studies. It is expected that vaccines also have an effect against severe illness upon BA.2 infection," the note said.