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INTERNATIONAL

COUNTRIES WILL HAVE TO 'JUSTIFY' VETO VOTES AT UN

The move mandates that the General Assembly convene within 10 days after a veto.

The 193 members of the United Nations General Assembly adopted by consensus on Tuesday a resolution requiring the five permanent members of the Security Council to justify their use of the veto.

The push for reform, which was greeted with applause in the chamber, was revived by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The measure is intended to make veto-holders United States, China, Russia, France and Britain "pay a higher political price" when they use the veto to strike down a Security Council resolution, said an ambassador who asked to remain anonymous.

It is unclear if the five permanent members will use the veto less, or more — as they could propose controversial texts they know their rivals will veto only to force them to justify their stance publicly.

First proposed more than two years ago, the measure provides for the General Assembly to be convened within 10 working days after a veto "to hold a debate on the situation as to which the veto was cast".

Almost 100 countries joined Liechtenstein in co-sponsoring the reform, including the United States, Britain and France.

Neither Russia nor China were among the sponsors, though. A diplomat from one of the two countries, who asked not to be named, criticised the move, saying it will "divide" the UN even further.

VICTORY AND CHALLENGE

The re-election of Emmanuel Macron in Sunday's presidential race is a relief not just for France's political centrists but also for its allies in Europe and America. The election took place amid crises — high inflation; Russia's invasion of Ukraine that pushed France into a difficult choice of imposing sanctions on Moscow even at the cost of higher energy prices; and growing political disillusionment among the country's youth. The first round had seen the far-right rising to its highest ever levels — Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour together gathered more than 30% of votes. Yet, Mr. Macron secured a decisive victory in Sunday's run-off, with 58.5% vote share against Ms. Le Pen's 41.5%, showing that the centre can still hold in France. The banker-turned politician, who emerged as the surprise champion of French Republican values against an upsurge of far-right populism five years ago, managed to rally the anti-populist base once more. He went to the voters with three broad themes: his administration's economic performance, a defence of France's Republican values and support for European sovereignty. While France's quick return to growth and low unemployment rate helped him project a convincing macroeconomic picture, his attack on Ms. Le Pen as a threat to the French Republican values and the tough line he took on Ukraine allowed him to mobilise the liberal, centre-right and pro-European sections of voters.



Mr. Macron's victory offers stability for both France and the EU. But a closer look at the two rounds of elections provides a more complicated picture. The French political landscape, historically dominated by the centre-right conservatives and centre-left socialists, has undergone a major transformation. Mr. Macron has emerged as the poster boy of the centrist bloc, the largely status-quoist voters. And his key challengers are from the far-right, which has anti-Semitic and Islamophobic roots. The third bloc is led by leftist Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who finished third in the first round. The surge of the far-right and leftist candidates suggests that there is widespread voter anger towards the establishment. And the far-right populists, with their cocktail of anti-establishment welfarism and anti-immigrant rhetoric, seem to be better-equipped to tap this anger than the leftists. Ms. Le Pen may not be strong enough, as of now, to capture power, but she was strong enough to pose a credible challenge to Mr. Macron. In his victory speech, Mr. Macron admitted that there is growing anger among sections of the voters towards the political establishment and promised to tackle it. Going forward, his biggest challenge would be to reach out to the disaffected sections of society, address the growing anger in the underbelly of the working classes, and build credible alternatives to the far-right problem.

THE QUARREL OVER KURIL ISLANDS

The story so far: The Russian invasion of Ukraine seems to have brought to the forefront some other disputes that Russia has with the West's allies. On April 22, Japan's Diplomatic Bluebook for 2022 described the Kuril Islands (which Japan calls the Northern Territories and Russia as the South Kurils) as being under Russia's "illegal occupation". This is the first time in about two decades that Japan has used this phrase to describe the dispute over the Kuril Islands. Japan had been using softer language since 2003, saying that the dispute over the islands was the greatest concern in Russia-Japan bilateral ties.

What are the Kuril Islands/ Northern Territories?

These are a set of four islands situated between the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific Ocean near the north of Japan's northernmost prefecture, Hokkaido. Both Moscow and Tokyo claim sovereignty over them though the islands have been under Russian control since the end of World War II. The Soviet Union had seized the islands at the end of World War II and by 1949 had expelled its Japanese residents. Tokyo claims that the disputed islands have been part of Japan since the early 19th century.

What lies behind the dispute?

According to Tokyo, Japan's sovereignty over the islands is confirmed by several treaties like the Shimoda Treaty of 1855, the 1875 Treaty for the exchange of Sakhalin for the Kuril Islands (Treaty of St. Petersburg), and the Portsmouth Treaty of 1905 signed after the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05 which Japan had won. Russia, on the other hand, claims the Yalta Agreement (1945) and the Potsdam Declaration (1945) as proof of its sovereignty and argues that the San Francisco Treaty of 1951 is legal evidence that Japan had acknowledged Russian sovereignty over the islands. Under Article 2 of the treaty, Japan had "renounced all right, title and claim to the Kuril Islands."

However, Japan argues that the San Francisco Treaty cannot be used here as the Soviet Union never signed the peace treaty. Japan also refuses to concede that the four disputed islands were in fact part of the Kuril chain. In fact, Japan and Russia are technically still at war because they have not signed a peace treaty after World War II. In 1956, during Japanese Prime Minister Ichiro



Hatoyama's visit to the Soviet Union, it was suggested that two of the four islands would be returned to Japan once a peace treaty was signed. However, persisting differences prevented the signing of a peace treaty though the two countries signed the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration, which restored diplomatic relations between the two nations. The Soviet Union later hardened its position, even refusing to recognise that a territorial dispute existed with Japan. It was only in 1991 during Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to Japan that the USSR recognised that the islands were the subject of a territorial dispute.

Have there been attempts at resolution?

Since 1991, there have been many attempts to resolve the dispute and sign a peace treaty. The most recent attempt was under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe when joint economic development of the disputed islands was explored. In fact, both countries had agreed to have bilateral negotiations based on the 1956 Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration. Russia was even willing to give back two islands, the Shikotan Island and the Habomai islets, to Japan after the conclusion of a peace treaty as per the 1956 declaration. Japan's attempt to improve ties with Russia was driven by its need to diversify energy sources and Russia by its need to diversify its basket of buyers and bring in foreign investments. But nationalist sentiments on both sides prevented resolution of the dispute.

What next?

Soon after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Japan made its unhappiness with Russia clear with its Foreign Minister Hideki Uyama, saying that Russia had "occupied" the southern part of the Kuril Islands, thereby violating international law.

Japan has been among the most steadfast of Western allies in denouncing Russian aggression and punishing it with sanctions. The April 22 statement in its Diplomatic Bluebook will further damage relations between the two countries. Japan has probably been spurred by its fears of a Russia-China alliance as Japan itself has territorial disputes and an uneasy history with China.

Secondly, Japan might have felt that this is a good opportunity to further isolate Russia and paint it as a "habitual offender" of international law.

Finally, Tokyo might have been prompted to take this position as it feels that the invasion of Ukraine proves that getting back the Kuril Islands is a lost cause.

Japan's policy shift on the Kuril Islands will only embitter bilateral relations with Russia while advancing the possibility of its two neighbours, China and Russia, coming together against it.

RUSSIAN ROULETTE WITH GAS SUPPLIES

The story so far: Russian energy company Gazprom has stopped gas supplies to Bulgaria and Poland citing their failure to pay in roubles. In a statement on April 27, it announced that it has "completely suspended gas supplies" to Poland's PGNiG and Bulgaria's Bulgargaz. Poland and Bulgaria have accused Russia of breach of contract, according to which payments were to be made in euros and dollars only. Towards the end of March, Russian President Vladimir Putin had signed a decree that from April 1, "unfriendly foreign buyers" would have to pay for gas supplies in roubles. He had also added that defaults would result in suspension of contracts.



How will the stoppage of gas supplies affect Poland and Bulgaria?

The gas cuts do not immediately put the two countries in any dire trouble. Russian gas deliveries to both Poland and Bulgaria were anyway expected to end later this year. Poland, which gets 40% of its natural gas from Russia, has been working on alternatives for many years. In the immediate scenario, however, it will lose out on the five billion cubic metres of gas it was set to get from Gazprom. It will likely make up for it with supplies from Germany. Bulgaria, which gets 77% of its natural gas from Russia, has a bigger problem. While its energy minister has said that the country has enough reserves for another month, it needs to urgently look for alternatives, with additional supplies via pipelines from Greece being a distinct possibility.

Why has Russia targeted Poland and Bulgaria with this move?

Poland has been a major gateway for supply of military hardware to Ukraine. It also confirmed earlier this week that it will be sending tanks to Ukraine. Just hours before Gazprom's action, it had announced a fresh set of sanctions against the company and other Russian businesses and oligarchs. As for Bulgaria, after a new liberal government took office last fall, it has cut many of its old ties to Moscow. Not only has it supported the West's sanctions against Russia, it has also hosted Western fighter jets at a new NATO outpost on its Black Sea coast. It is also a major producer of non-NATO weapons that it's considering sending to Kyiv.

Will other countries be hit with similar stoppages?

Russia supplies gas via pipelines to 23 countries in Europe. Among EU members, so far, only Hungary has officially agreed to make rouble payments, with the rest rejecting the demand. However, even if no other country agrees to Russia's rouble payment mechanism, there won't be any further cuts in supplies at least until the second half of May, which is when the next tranche of payments are due. Meanwhile, according to reports, four European buyers have already started making gas payments in roubles, while 10 European companies have opened accounts with Gazprombank to make rouble payments.

How have the EU, Poland, and Bulgaria reacted to the gas supply suspension?

The 27-member European Union has described Russia's decision as "blackmail" and accused Moscow of trying to divide the West over its support for Ukraine. "It comes as no surprise that the Kremlin uses fossil fuels to try to blackmail us," said EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, adding, "Today, the Kremlin failed once again in his attempt to sow division amongst member states. The era of Russian fossil fuel in Europe is coming to an end."

Describing Russia's move as blackmail, Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov said, "We will not succumb to such a racket." The Polish Prime Minister has informed his country's Parliament that he believes Poland's support for Ukraine — and the new sanctions imposed by Warsaw on Tuesday — were the real reasons behind the gas cutoff.

What could happen if Russia shuts gas supplies to more countries?

Europe's natural gas comes from only three sources: Russia, Norway and Algeria. Until the Ukraine invasion, Russia accounted for almost 40% of Europe's gas imports.

While the dependence on Russian gas varies from country to country — ranging from 94% for Finland to 11% for the Netherlands — there is little doubt that disruption in supplies would fuel



inflation and damage economic activity, with strong possibilities of energy rationing and even a major recession in the continent's industrial powerhouse, Germany.

What has been the EU's strategy to reduce dependence on Russian gas?

Europe's energy mix comprises of oil (43%), natural gas (24%), nuclear energy (14%), and hydroelectric (4%), with renewables such as wind and solar making up the rest. With climate change a major political issue in Europe, coal — of which there are abundant reserves on the continent — is off the table, and given public hostility to nuclear energy, EU is left with natural gas as the cleanest source of energy. So, for the short-term, the EU is preparing for the heating requirements of the coming winter by tanking up on its gas storage facilities at 80-90% capacity and substituting Russian supplies, as much as possible, with piped gas from Norway and North Africa. But these won't be adequate to reduce Russian dependence to zero. So, the longer-term strategy is centred on importing liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the U.S. and the Middle East.

Will it be feasible for Europe to transition from Russian natural gas to LNG?

It will be tough challenge, primarily because it is easier and cheaper to transport natural gas via pipeline. LNG requires massive facilities and container ships that require huge capital investments. And yet, over the past decade, the EU has beefed up its LNG infrastructure, building several large terminals. Nonetheless, LNG transported from the U.S. by container ships would be much more expensive than Russian gas received via pipeline. Achieving strategic autonomy, as it were, by replacing Russian gas with American LNG would mean higher prices for the average European consumer, who is currently the primary beneficiary of cheap Russian gas that he uses for household heating purposes.

How will the gas suspension impact Russia?

Western analysts believe that Russia has taken a gamble by cutting off supplies to Poland and Bulgaria. The Russian economy is heavily dependent on gas exports, deriving 40% of its revenue coming from it. If the move forces more EU countries to pay for gas in roubles, it will help shore up its currency and offer some relief for its sanction-hit economy. But at the same time, it could also backfire, if it ends up accelerating the decoupling of the energy 'partnership' between Europe and Russia. Since it is difficult to reroute piped natural gas to different markets, Russia, which doesn't have elaborate storage infrastructure, may well find itself desperate for buyers as well as hard currency, let alone buyers ready to pay in roubles.

TACKLING STRONTIUM: A CYBER-ESPIONAGE GROUP

The story so far: On April 7, Microsoft said it had disrupted cyberattacks from a Russian nation-state hacking group. The group called 'Strontium' by the software company targeted Ukrainian firms, media organisations, government bodies, and think tanks in the U.S. and the EU. The Richmond-based company took control of seven Internet domains used by the group to launch their attacks after a court order permitted it to seize the infrastructure. In the past, Microsoft had performed 15 similar seizures to take control of over 100 Strontium-controlled domains. Apart from Microsoft, security firms, government agencies and individual researchers have been watching the attack group, which has been active for over one and a half decades deploying different attack methods to target individuals and organisations across multiple sectors globally.



What is Strontium?

Strontium, also known as Fancy Bear, Tsar Team, Pawn Storm, Sofacy, Sednit or Advanced Persistent Threat 28 (APT28) group, is a highly active and prolific cyber-espionage group. It is one of the most active APT groups and has been operating since at least the mid-2000s, making it one of the world's oldest cyber-spy groups. It has access to highly sophisticated tools to conduct spy operations, and has been attacking targets in the U.S., Europe, Central Asia and West Asia. The group is said to be connected to the GRU, the Russian Armed Forces' main military intelligence wing. The GRU's cyber units are believed to have been responsible for several cyberattacks over the years and its unit 26165 is identified as Fancy Bear.

MYANMAR'S WOES

The conviction of Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's deposed State Counsellor and pro-democracy leader, in a corruption case, shows nothing but the desperation of the junta to silence her. For the military, which seems determined to destroy the Southeast Asian nation's popular democracy, Ms. Suu Kyi, under house arrest ever since the February 2021 coup, remains the enemy number one. The conviction, in a kangaroo court, was based on the testimony of the former Chief Minister of Yangon who claimed that he had handed over to her \$6,00,000 and gold in return for favours. The prosecution has presented no evidence. She was convicted earlier on five other charges and sentenced to six years in jail. In the corruption case, the court jailed her for five years. The junta has slapped more cases on her, with the clear objective of keeping the 76-year-old leader in prison. Since the coup, it has arrested 10,300 political prisoners, including most of the elected lawmakers of Ms. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. The forces have also killed at least 1,798 civilians and threatened to "annihilate" all opponents.

Myanmar's military is one of the most stubborn enemies of democracy and basic human freedoms, having ruled for nearly 50 years using brute force. But even in the darkest moments of Myanmar's past, there was popular resistance. And over the past three decades, Ms. Kyi has been the embodiment of that resistance. Between 1989 and 2010, she spent 15 years under house arrest. The military, faced with international isolation and growing domestic anger, agreed to release her and share power with civilians through a quasi-democratic arrangement. They barred her from becoming President and reserved key portfolios, including the Defence Ministry, for the Generals. Still, the 2015 and 2020 elections saw overwhelming public support for her party, and the country witnessed, barring the military crackdown on Rohingya Muslims, relative stability and growing economic opportunities. But the military was worried whether an increasingly popular and powerful Ms. Suu Kyi, after her second consecutive election, would clip its privileges. It was this fear that prompted the Generals to stage another coup. They may have succeeded in reversing Myanmar's limited experiment with democracy, but the coup has also wreaked havoc on the country. The Opposition has taken up arms, pushing the country to the brink of civil war. A nationwide strike has crippled the country's economy. The political opponents of the coup have also formed an alternative unity government. So far, the military has managed to cling on to power through sheer repression. But it is not a sustainable model. Even silencing Ms. Suu Kyi would not help the junta tighten its control over a divided, impoverished, and rebellious country.



EXPLAINED: THE BALOCH GROUP BEHIND KARACHI BOMBING

On Tuesday, three Chinese nationals and their Pakistani driver were killed in a suicide bombing at Karachi University, outside its Confucius Institute, a Chinese culture and education outreach centre supported by the Chinese Ministry of Education. The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for the attack, also claiming that it was carried out by a female suicide bomber.

The BLA, which announced itself in 2005 with a rocket attack on a paramilitary camp in Balochistan Kohlu during a visit by then President Pervez Musharraf, is a nationalist militant group that has been waging an insurgency for Baloch self-determination and a separate homeland for the Baloch people.

Balochistan borders Afghanistan and Iran. With gas, oil, copper and gold deposits, it is the most resource-rich of Pakistan's four provinces. It makes up half of Pakistan's area, but has only 3.6% of its population.

Much before Pakistan bought into Chinese President Xi Jinping's BRI initiative and the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Musharraf had handed over Gwadar, a fishing village on the Baloch coastline, to the Chinese for development of a deep-water port that would provide China access from the Karokoram Pass to the Arabian Sea.

Baloch nationalism

While the BLA's armed insurgency is about two decades old, demands of Baloch nationalists for political autonomy and threats of secession date back to 1947 when the Khan of Kalat (who claimed sovereignty over the four princely states of Kalat, Lasbela, Kharan and Makran) held out for independence, and the Pakistan Army forced his accession in March 1948. Between 1973 and 1977, the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto-led government sent in the Pakistan Army to crush a leftist guerilla war inspired by the liberation of Bangladesh.

The tribal sardars of Balochistan, who had been at the forefront of Baloch nationalism, and were co-opted by the state in the late 1970s, grew rebellious again in the early years of this century as Musharraf bypassed them in his vision of Balochistan as strategic territory that would bring China and Pakistan closer. The insurgency gathered momentum from 2006, after the Pakistan Army killed the Bugti sardar, Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, who had been also been a chief minister and governor of the province. His grandson Brahmdagh Bugti is said to be based in Afghanistan.

Another tribal sardar, Khair Baksh Marri, who was among the early rebels against the Pakistan state, is considered the founder of the BLA, and after he died of old age in 2014, the leadership is alleged by Pakistan to have passed to his son Hyrbairr. He lives in self-exile in London where he campaigns for an independent Balochistan, but denies links to the BLA.

The Pakistan Army's operations against Baloch militancy over the last two decades have seen hundreds of disappearances, and other alleged human rights violations. Baloch nationalists also see the sudden influx of jihadist groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Lashkar-e-Toiba in the province as a move by the Pakistan security establishment to counter their nationalist demands.

According to journalist Malik Siraj Akbar in Huffpost, this phase of the Baloch armed struggle posed challenges to the Pakistani state because it "reached the breadth and width of Balochistan... (the) movement involved Baloch women and children who supported the armed groups through



regular protest rallies... In 2012, the US Congress convened a hearing on Balochistan and supported the demand for a free Baloch land”.

Pakistan has long alleged that the insurgency is backed by India. It alleges that India had training camps for Baloch rebels in Afghanistan. As Pakistan put pressure on Afghanistan to crack down on Baloch militants on its territory, there were reports in 2017 that Brahumdagh Bugti had applied for Indian citizenship. New Delhi did not confirm or deny the reports. Other reports said he had applied for asylum in Switzerland. The 2019 US designation of the BLA, at a time when the Trump administration wanted Pakistan’s help for talks with the Taliban, put further pressure on the Baloch insurgency.

China target in 2nd wind

After a lull in the middle of the last decade, the BLA made a sudden return in 2017, with a drive-by shooting of 10 workers building a Chinese road project that was part of the CPEC. From then on, BLA has claimed several attacks on Chinese targets in Balochistan and outside.

A November 2018 attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi, in which four Pakistanis were killed, was claimed by the BLA. In May 2019, another attack claimed by the BLA targeted a five-star hotel in Gwadar, where Chinese delegations stayed. In July 2020, BLA gunmen attacked the Pakistan Stock Exchange in Karachi – the bourse had sold 40% stake to a Chinese consortium in 2016.

Suicide bombers & BLA

It is rare that the BLA has deployed suicide bombers. Two previous instances have been an attack in Dalbandin on a bus carrying Chinese engineers, and an attack on the home of the Baloch politician Naseer Mengal, which he survived but in which 13 others were killed. Tuesday marked the first time the group had deployed a woman on a suicide attack.

Shari Baloch, who carried out the attack, was a mother of two. Her husband is a dentist and her father a government employee. She had degrees in Zoology and Philosophy. Although her motivations are not clear, the BLA claimed in a statement that she had voluntarily signed up to the “self-sacrificing” mission after enlisting in the Majeed Brigade, a sub-group of the BLA, two years ago.

The Majeed Brigade is named after Abdul Majeed Baloch, who is said to have tried to make an attempt on the life of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto at a public meeting in Quetta in 1974 and was shot down on the spot.

This is also the first time that a non-jihadist ethno-nationalist group has deployed a woman suicide bomber in the manner of Sri Lanka’s LTTE. According to security experts familiar with the Baloch insurgency, it marks a worsening security situation, and points to a growing anger in the Baloch population against the Chinese presence. As the training camps are alleged by Pakistan to be in Afghanistan, the incident may also be a pointer to Pakistan’s loss of control in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.



NATION

CHINA TO EASE CURBS ON ENTRY OF INDIAN STUDENTS

China will allow some Indian students to return to resume their studies — after a two-year pandemic-induced gap — on a “need-assessed basis”, Indian officials said on Friday.

An agreement to allow their return was reached following the meeting of External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on March 25 in New Delhi, the Indian Embassy in Beijing said in a statement.

India accounts for among the highest number of foreign students in China with more than 20,000 enrolled in universities there, mostly in medical colleges. They returned home when COVID-19 broke out in December 2019 and could not return due to entry curbs.

‘On need-assessed basis’

The Chinese side “has expressed its willingness to consider facilitating the return of Indian students to China on a need-assessed basis,” the Embassy said, adding that to facilitate the process, it was compiling a list of students who wish to return. Students have been asked to provide information about their cases by filling up a form made available on the website of the Indian Embassy in Beijing.

Confirming the agreement, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said China had “shared with the Indian side the procedures and experience of other countries’ students returning to China.”

Sri Lanka last week said it had reached an agreement with China for some students to return. Previously, both South Korea and Pakistan have also indicated they had been given the green light for their students to return.

“The work for Indian students’ return has already been started,” Mr. Zhao said.

“We understand there is a large number of Indian students studying in China. India may need sometime to collect the names. China is ready to receive some of the Indian students under the current complicated severe epidemic situation,” Mr. Zhao added, referring to the current spread of Omicron cases in China which has led to a harsh lockdown in Shanghai. China has not, however, provided a timeline for when it might open up and when the students will be able to return.

ARGENTINA TO REVIVE FALKLANDS ISSUE IN INDIA

The Government of Argentina will launch a campaign in India on Sunday demanding negotiation with the United Kingdom to settle the territorial dispute over the Islas Malvinas that are known as the Falkland Islands in the United Kingdom.

The initiative, which comes two days after the visit of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, coincides with the 40th anniversary of the conflict between the U.K. and Argentina, which ended with the re-establishment of British control over the archipelago.

“The Commission for the Dialogue on the Question of the Malvinas Islands in India” will be launched by Santiago Cafiero, Argentina’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and



Worship. The Ministry of External Affairs has announced that Mr. Cafiero is among the leading international figures scheduled to participate in the annual Raisina Dialogue.

In an article published on April 2 in The Guardian, Mr. Cafiero claimed that the dispute was not settled with the “cessation of hostilities” in 1982 and urged for resumption of bilateral dialogue. Argentina claims that the outcome of an armed conflict cannot settle a territorial dispute like the Malvinas/Falkland Islands.

Resume dialogue

“The Commission seeks to promote compliance with the resolutions of the United Nations and the declarations of other international fora on the Question of the Malvinas Islands, which call for the resumption of negotiations between Argentina and the United Kingdom,” declared a statement shared by the organisers of the event with The Hindu.

The members of the Commission will include former Union Minister Suresh Prabhu, BJP leader Shazia Ilmi, Congress Lok Sabha member Shashi Tharoor and veteran peacemaker Tara Gandhi Bhattacharjee. “India has been supportive of a negotiated settlement of the dispute for many years and we will continue to support that,” said Ms. Ilmi, who also referred to India’s historic role in achieving decolonisation in the Global South

The event, however, has drawn attention as it is being organised just two days after the visit of the Mr. Johnson, who travelled to Gujarat and held talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on a broad range of bilateral and global issues.

The Falklands War began on April 2, 1982 when the Argentine forces invaded the U.K.-controlled islands. The government of Margaret Thatcher responded by sending a naval task force.

As a post-colonial state, India has consistently supported a negotiated settlement to the question of the Malvinas.

Informed official sources said they were aware of Argentina’s plans to flag the Falkland issue at the international level taking advantage of the 40th anniversary of the war but maintained that there was no official consultation with the Indian side regarding Argentina’s plan to start the Commission in India. “It is entirely an initiative from their side,” said a source.

INDIA’S DESIGNATION BY THE USCIRF

The story so far: In its 2022 Annual report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has recommended that India be designated a ‘Country of Particular Concern’ (CPC), i.e., the category of governments performing most poorly on religious freedom criteria. It has also called for “targeted sanctions” on individuals and entities responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ or entities’ assets and/or barring their entry” into the U.S.

What is the USCIRF and how is it constituted?

The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan body created by the International Religious Freedom Act, 1998 (IRFA) with a mandate to monitor religious freedom violations globally and make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and the Congress. It is a congressionally created entity and not an NGO or advocacy organisation. It is led by nine part-time commissioners appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the House and the Senate.

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



According to the IRFA, commissioners are “selected among distinguished individuals noted for their knowledge and experience in fields relevant to the issue of international religious freedom, including foreign affairs, direct experience abroad, human rights, and international law.”

What does a ‘Country of Particular Concern’ (CPC) designation mean?

IRFA requires the USCIRF to annually identify countries that merit a CPC designation. As per IRFA, CPCs are countries whose governments either engage in or tolerate “particularly severe violations” of religious freedom, which are defined as “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion”.

The other designation, for less serious violations, is Special Watch List (SWL)

Which other countries have been designated as CPCs?

For 2022, based on religious freedom conditions in 2021, a total of 15 countries have been recommended for the CPC designation. They include India, Pakistan, Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Syria and Vietnam. Countries recommended for a SWL designation include Algeria, Cuba, Nicaragua, Azerbaijan, Central African Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Turkey, and Uzbekistan.

Why does USCIRF want India to be designated as a CPC?

The USCIRF, in its annual report, states that in 2021, “religious freedom conditions in India significantly worsened.”

Noting that the “Indian government escalated its promotion and enforcement of policies — including those promoting a Hindu-nationalist agenda — that negatively affect Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, and other religious minorities,” the report observed that “the government continued to systemise its ideological vision of a Hindu state at both the national and State levels through the use of both existing and new laws and structural changes hostile to the country’s religious minorities.”

It highlighted the use of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) against those documenting religious persecution and violence, detailed the creation of “hurdles against the licensure and receipt of international funding” by religious and charitable NGOs, and observed that “numerous attacks were made on religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians, and their neighbourhoods, businesses, homes, and houses of worship”. It also criticised the spate of fresh anti-conversion legislations, noting that “national, State and local governments demonised and attacked the conversion of Hindus to Christianity or Islam.”

Taking into account all these aspects, it concluded that India met the criteria of “systematic, ongoing, egregious” violations of religious freedom and therefore deserved a CPC designation.

Are USCIRF recommendations binding on the U.S. government?

No, they are not. The USCIRF typically recommends more countries for a CPC label than the State Department will designate. This happens because the USCIRF is concerned solely with the state of religious freedom when it makes a recommendation, but the State Department and its Office of International Freedom (IRF), although mandated by IRFA to factor in religious freedom in the framing of foreign policy, also takes into account other diplomatic, bilateral and strategic concerns before making a decision on a CPC designation.



Is this the first time India is being designated as a CPC by the USCIRF? What has been India's reaction?

This is the third year in a row that India has received a CPC recommendation. India has in the past pushed back against the grading, questioning the locus standi of USCIRF. In 2020, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar called the Commission an "Organisation of Particular Concern."

What is the likely impact of the USCIRF's recommendation?

The U.S. State Department hasn't acted on such recommendations so far. But India may come under greater pressure this time, given its divergence from the American position on the Ukraine war and refusal to endorse U.S.-backed resolutions against Russia at the UN.

While the USCIRF's suggestion of targeted sanctions may be a non-starter, its other recommendation — that the "U.S. Congress should raise religious freedom issues in the U.S.-India bilateral relationship and highlight concerns through hearings, briefings, letters and congressional delegations" seems more likely to fructify.

SIDE-STEPPING IRRITANTS

After two last-minute cancellations due to waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2021, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was in Delhi last week, committing to more cooperation with India on trade, defence, combating climate change and cyber security. But it was a visit surprisingly short on actual agreements. While an early harvest agreement on trade had to be shelved — the plan was to announce it by Easter (April) this year — Mr. Johnson and Prime Minister Narendra Modi said they have pushed a deadline to complete the full FTA by October-end or Deepavali, with a view to doubling bilateral trade by 2030. It is not clear whether the respective trade delegations are on track for the final agreement, but Mr. Johnson sounded optimistic, with India fast-tracking its FTAs with the UAE and Australia. Of concern to the U.K. is the lifting of Indian tariffs on Scotch whisky, which might make some headway, as India has accepted lower tariffs on Australian wine and the U.K. seems more flexible in increasing visas to Indian professionals. Both Prime Ministers discussed strengthening defence ties and cooperating strategically in the Indo-Pacific. The two leaders also discussed green technology transfers and international climate finance, although India has yet to commit in writing to the Nationally Determined Contributions that Mr. Modi had described at COP26 in Glasgow.

Mr. Johnson did tread lightly on issues that the Modi government is sensitive about, such as Ukraine and human rights violations. He referred to India's long-standing relationship with Russia, expressing understanding of India's position, in stark contrast to the visit of his Foreign Minister two weeks ago. He brushed aside a question on human rights concerns in India, despite facing criticism over posing with a bulldozer while inaugurating a factory on the same day the Supreme Court of India was deliberating over the Government's controversial new policy of using bulldozers to demolish shops and homes. A sub-group is to be set up to study "extremism" inside India and the U.K., which Mr. Johnson suggested would be used to monitor Khalistani groups (as New Delhi desires), but has a broader mandate to counter all groups and individuals "seeking to incite violent extremism and terrorism". In return, New Delhi chose not to press the point too hard on why economic fugitives (Vijay Mallya, Nirav Modi) have still not been extradited. However, while side-stepping irritants in the relationship can increase the prospects for agreements, it cannot replace the actual work and elbow-grease needed to give ties some momentum after years of stasis. Both New Delhi and London must ensure more concerted efforts to bring those



agreements to a finale in the near future, to reach their ambitious goals under “Roadmap 2030” agreed to at the last summit in 2021.

REVISITING DEATH PENALTY JURISPRUDENCE

On April 22, a Bench of the Supreme Court of India, led by Justice U.U. Lalit, decided to critically examine the routine and abrupt way in which trial judges often impose the death penalty on convicts. The challenge before the Court in the instant case of *Irfan vs State of Madhya Pradesh* was to identify the mitigating circumstances and to ensure a convict-centric approach so that the imposition of capital punishment becomes rarer, fairer, and principled.

The Court seemed to think that an individualistic approach that examines the social, economic, emotional, and genetic components that constituted the offender rather than the offence, would go a long way in evolving a just and judicious sentencing policy. According to the Court, “a ‘one size fit for all’ approach while considering mitigating factors during sentencing should end”. The Bench indicated the need for mitigation experts to assist trial courts in reaching a correct conclusion on whether one should be sent to the gallows or not.

Recent verdicts as pointers

This is a significant development that can radically alter India’s death penalty jurisprudence, by a comprehensive examination of the multi-disciplinary wisdom relating to the crime, the criminal, and the punishment.

An analysis of the possible reasons to avert the death penalty is reflected in a series of recent verdicts such as *Lochan Shrivastava vs State of Chhattisgarh (2021)* and *Bhagchandra vs State of Madhya Pradesh (2021)*. These reasons might include socio-economic backwardness, mental health, heredity, parenting, socialisation, education, etc.

Needed, a different acumen

According to Section 354(3) in the Code of Criminal Procedure, while imposing the capital punishment, the judge should specify “the special reasons” for doing so. It was in *Bachan Singh vs State of Punjab (1980)* that the Constitution Bench suggested a humane and reformist framework in the matter. It said that the gallows could be resorted to only in the rarest of rare cases, that too when “the alternate option is unquestionably foreclosed”. Thus, *Bachan Singh* requires the trial courts not only to examine the gravity of the offence but also the condition and the ‘reformability’ of the accused. The Court, in *Bachan Singh*, refused to declare the death penalty as unconstitutional. It, nevertheless, tried to reduce the rigour of capital punishment by trying to do away with the indiscriminate use of the penal provisions. It abundantly implied that no person is indubitably ‘irreformable’. It had the effect of practically undoing the death penalty provision, if taken in its letter and spirit. The need to have ‘unquestionable foreclosure’ of ‘alternate option’ (in the matter of punishment, such as life imprisonment) sets the benchmark for the sentencing court very high and even unattainable. This person-centric approach, for its materialisation, needs a different judicial acumen that recognises the convict in her multitudes.

But the *Bachan Singh* principle was followed more in its breach than in compliance even by the Supreme Court. In *Ravji vs State of Rajasthan (1995)*, the Supreme Court said that it is the nature of the crime and not the criminal which is germane for deciding the punishment. This is diametrically opposite to what was laid down in *Bachan Singh*. In *Machhi Singh vs State of Punjab (1983)*, the Court indicated that inadequacy of other punishments could justify the death penalty.



This too negated the humanistic liberalism in Bachan Singh. Several other cases also were decided by ignoring the Bachan Singh doctrine, as noted by the Supreme Court itself in Santhosh Kumar Satishbhushan Bariyar vs State of Maharashtra (2009) and Rajesh Kumar vs State (2011). The Hindu's Frontline magazine ("A case against the death penalty", issue dated September 7, 2012) had a list of 13 convicts who were directed to be hanged in different reported cases decided by the Supreme Court itself, illegally and erroneously, by discarding the Bachan Singh philosophy.

This egregious judicial error will have to be kept in mind while the Court revisits the issues related to mitigating factors and individual-centered sentencing policy in the Irfan case. In the process, it may need to consider concrete guidelines for such policy.

Overuse and misuse

But the Indian experience shows that whenever the Court tries to dilute the harshness of penal provisions by a balancing approach, instead of striking down the provision, the instrumentalities of the state (including the police, the prosecution and the court) continue to overuse or misuse the provisions. The judgment of the top court in Kedar Nath Singh vs State of Bihar (1962) is a case in point. The Supreme Court endorsed the validity of the sedition law (Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code) with a rider that it could be invoked only when there is an incitement to violence. But the state seldom acts based on interpretation of the law. Many were booked for the charge of sedition since then for mere words, innocent tweets or harmless jokes. The top court is now seriously considering the need to revisit Kedar Nath Singh itself.

It is true that Bachan Singh did not, in concrete terms, elaborate on the mitigating factors and the methods to gather them to avert the death penalty. Nor did it explain the issues such as burden of proof and standard of proof in detail. As argued by Anup Surendranath, Neetika Vishwanath, and Preeti Pratishruti Dash in a recent paper, there could be "gaps within Bachan Singh itself". The point, however, is that going by the Indian experience, it may not be enough to provide clarity with respect to the mitigative elements in the matter of sentencing or the method of invoking them. Taking empirical lessons from the fate of Bachan Singh, the Supreme Court may have to now ask the more fundamental question posed and negated in Bachan Singh — the question of the constitutional validity of death penalty. The judiciary needs to learn a lot from history.

The poor are most affected

In India, as elsewhere, the poor, rather than the rich, are sent to the gallows. The numbers of the uneducated and the illiterate sentenced to death outweigh those who are educated and literate. In Williams vs Taylor (2000), the U.S. Supreme Court said that failure of the defence lawyer in highlighting the mitigating factors that could lead to avoidance of capital punishment makes the legal assistance ineffective. Therefore, it infringes constitutionally guaranteed rights. In the Indian scenario, the legal assistance received by the poor facing serious charges is far from satisfactory. Lack of proper defence results in conviction. And in the matter of sentencing too, the mitigating factors are either not placed before the trial court or not persuaded adequately to convince the trial judge to avoid the death penalty. There is a marked contradiction between the Indian legal plutocracy and the marginalised.

Revisiting the case

The Court, in the instant case, will have to evolve a legal device for procurement of a comprehensive report dealing with the socio-economic and hereditary backgrounds of the accused from experts in the fields of social work, psychiatry, psychology, anthropology, etc. Yet,



there could be inherent inequality and arbitrariness in applying the principles because of multiple factors such as failure of the judges, incapacity or backwardness of the parties, inadequacy of defence, deficits in the reports of experts, disparity in practical application of the doctrine, etc. As such, there is a possibility for the new juridical device also meeting the unfortunate fate which the Bachan Singh verdict faced. Therefore, the true way ahead is not merely to fill up the blanks in Bachan Singh by laying down concrete propositions for assessment of mitigating factors, determination of standard of proof, burden of proof etc. The Court may have to revisit Bachan Singh itself in so far as it refused to declare the death penalty as violative of the right to life envisaged under Article 21 of the Constitution. Across the world, 108 nations have abolished death penalty in law and 144 countries have done so in law or practice, according to the Amnesty Report of 2021.

In the Indian context, where judgmental error is quite frequent and the quality of adjudication is not ensured, what is required is a judicial abolition of death penalty. For this, the present matter will have to be referred to a larger Bench, with a view to rectify the foundational omission in Bachan Singh — of not explicitly declaring capital punishment as unconstitutional.

WITH DUE RESPECT

On Wednesday, hearing the bail application of student and activist Umar Khalid in the larger conspiracy case of the 2020 Northeast Delhi riots, the Delhi High Court asked if it is “proper” to use the term “jumla” for the Prime Minister of India. The day after, that is not the question. It is: What does it mean when a high court asks what it did? That the Division Bench of Justice Siddharth Mridul and Justice Rajnish Bhatnagar should be so easily offended on the PM’s behalf, that it should speak of a “laxman rekha” for criticism of government, points to more disturbing things. These are times when the ruling establishment has made a dismal habit of labelling dissenters and political opponents as “anti-national”, and harsh laws like the UAPA are being weaponised to target critics. These are times, too, when the courts are not as vigilant against the misuse of law to cramp citizens’ freedoms, and when they all too often give the executive the benefit of doubt. In times like these, especially, Delhi HC’s objections to words used by Umar Khalid in a speech in Amravati in February 2020 strike a jarring note.

The Delhi HC has also flagged “oont pahad ke neeche aa gaya (idiomatic Hindi for cutting the arrogant down to size)” and the use of expressions like “inquilabi” and “krantikari (revolutionary)” in the speech. The court’s picking on satirical or polemical words and innocuous phrases underlines a deepening worry about the Delhi riots cases — that dots are being joined loosely and indiscriminately, between legitimate protests against a law, CAA-NRC, in which Khalid also participated, and the communal violence that broke out in Northeast Delhi which left 53 dead. The central pillar that holds the prosecution’s edifice is the criminalisation of the protest by linking it to the violence and, by invoking the UAPA, even to terror. Another bench of the Delhi HC, last year, spoke wisely and sharply against this, while granting bail to Khalid’s co-accused, Natasha Narwal, Devangana Kalita and Asif Tanha: “... it seems that in its anxiety to suppress dissent, in the mind of the state, the line between the constitutionally guaranteed right to protest and terrorist activity seems to be getting somewhat blurred. If this mindset gains traction, it would be a sad day for democracy”. The Supreme Court intervened within days of that HC order, though, and while it did not cancel the bail, it said that the reading down of the anti-terror law is “not to be treated as precedent by any court”.

But that reading down of the harsh law, the underlining of crucial distinctions between “protest”, “law and order”, “security of the state” and “terror”, and the court’s warning that “wanton use of



serious penal provisions would only trivialise them” is a judicial moment to hold on to. It gives reason to hope that the excesses of the executive will be checked by the court. One hopes, with due respect, that the court, through its remarks on Khalid’s vocabulary, was merely being provocative in the back-and-forth that marks the adversarial process of justice. Because when citizens’ freedoms are threatened, the only bulwark is a judiciary that will speak up without ambivalence or delay, on substance rather than style. To flag what can, or cannot, offend the PM is not the responsibility of an independent judiciary.

CUT AND PASTE BJP

Rewind, for a moment, to this: A few days ago, in a spectacular show of overzealousness, Assam Police flew to another state to arrest a legislator over a tweet. The arrest of Gujarat MLA Jignesh Mevani — he has been rearrested since, after a Kokrajhar court gave him bail on Monday — for a tweet critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi under severe sections of the IPC and the IT Act is theatre of the absurd at its best, or worst. It raises, yet again, serious questions of police excess, and its abject servility to political bosses. It reiterates that BJP governments, at the Centre and in the states, are not above weaponising the harsh law against dissenters and political opponents. It underlines that at risk are constitutionally protected fundamental freedoms, and that playing fast and loose with due process to target some potentially affects everyone. The continuing drama over Mevani is chilling for another reason as well — it shows how supine the Opposition has become.

It may be necessary to cast a wider look to see why the non-BJP parties are looking so effete in the face of transgressions of citizens’ rights and freedoms by the state. When these parties are in power, where they get the opportunity, they are complicit in the very acts they accuse the BJP of. Or, they simply lack the conviction to take a principled stand. The response of the AAP, after the bulldozers rolled into Northwest Delhi’s Jahangirpuri, affected by communal violence only days ago, is illustrative. Both Deputy CM Manish Sisodia and MLA Atishi sought to lay the blame on two groups — Bangladeshi nationals and Rohingya — that the BJP had also sought to target. They were being settled across India by the BJP to stage riots, the AAP leaders said. From Shaheen Bagh to Jahangirpuri, the AAP either stayed silent, or stayed away, or as it has done now, taken the BJP’s cue. It is not just in Delhi, however, that the AAP plays by the BJP’s book. Last heard, its newly elected government in Punjab had sent the Punjab Police to the doorsteps of at least three critics of AAP convenor and Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal — former AAP leader Kumar Vishwas, Congress leader (also formerly AAP) Alka Lamba, and Delhi BJP’s Naveen Jindal.

It’s not just the AAP. In Maharashtra, ruled by the Shiv Sena-led Maha Vikas Aghadi government, Mumbai Police has arrested and slapped a sedition charge on Ravi and Navneet Rana, MLA and MP respectively, for apparently nothing more than raising the ante against CM Uddhav Thackeray on the Hanuman Chalisa-Azaan row. And in Chhattisgarh, the Supreme Court had to step in last year to reprimand the Congress government for its alleged misuse of the sedition law — it pointed to the “disturbing trend” of filing sedition cases against officials seen to be loyal to preceding regimes after a change of government. The non-BJP parties may or may not pay an electoral price for this politics. But their many concessions and abdications are taking a wider toll — they are shrinking the space for an alternative politics, they are constricting its possibilities.

PREVENTING HARM



The value of proactive judicial intervention cannot be understated. After the Supreme Court called for “corrective measures” against the peddling of communal hate from supposedly religious platforms, the authorities in Uttarakhand have prevented the holding of a ‘dharam sansad’ in Roorkee by imposing prohibitory orders against such gatherings. At a time when communally motivated gatherings are becoming conspicuous in their frequency and vociferous in their fulminations against minorities, one would have expected the police to be more sensitive to the situation and prevent hate speeches. Counsel for Himachal Pradesh has said preventive steps were taken when one such gathering took place a few days ago, and that the participants were warned against any incitement, but those who have approached the Court against the trend of hate speeches at such meets, accuse the local authorities of inaction. It was one such religious conclave in Haridwar in December that witnessed extraordinarily inflammatory speeches being made against Muslims, some of them having a shockingly genocidal tenor. After dithering, the Uttarakhand police had then arrested Yati Narsinghanand, a controversial priest and Hindutva leader, who was among those who had allegedly called for armed violence against minorities. Even after obtaining bail, under a condition that he would not make any provocative speeches, he had participated in a similar event in Delhi. Instances of controversial religious figures making unacceptable comments at different places and occasions have emerged as a disturbing pattern, one that the Court may have to arrest by stern action.

One way of looking at this phenomenon is to dismiss it as not being representative of the silent majority and as the activity of a few fringe elements. However, it cannot be gainsaid that the provocateurs are seeking to foster a collective fear among the majority that their interests are not being protected by an allegedly minority-friendly Constitution, and feeding off the same fear to spread their message of hate. The possible damage to the social fabric is incalculable, as the language of hatred may seep into the public consciousness as an acceptable thought process. The result may be an atmosphere in which communal harmony and public tranquillity will be at perennial risk. It is in this backdrop that modern democracies make a clear distinction between freedom of expression and speech that tends to incite hatred against a public group or section of society. The Supreme Court has recognised the potential for a wider societal impact beyond the distress caused to individual members of the targeted group. In cases relating to lynching and ‘khap panchayats’, the Court laid down guidelines on preventive, remedial and punitive measures. While these are to be followed without exceptions, there is also a need for considering new criminal and penal provisions to combat hate speech.

ADDRESSING DISCONTENT

In addressing the residents of Jammu for the first time since the removal of special status for Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid out a rosy picture of increased connectivity of the Union Territory with the nation’s capital, promised more investments, and hailed the boom in tourism as a harbinger of progress. The UT, conflict-ridden for decades, had fared better on several development indicators compared to the rest of India, except in per capita net State GDP. Data from FY2017 showed that J&K ranked 21st among States then. The investment proposals and development projects inaugurated by the Prime Minister, in particular the connectivity projects between Jammu and Srinagar and Jammu and Delhi should help shore up the UT’s economy. After a period of harsh lockdowns and communication restrictions, the UT went through a tough period, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic between 2019 and 2021. But significantly, the Kashmir Valley has seen a substantial increase in footfalls with a revival of the tourism industry during the recent winter despite security concerns, with its natural beauty proving a magnetic attraction for international travellers in particular, who



had been affected by global travel bans. This has come as a balm to the residents of the Valley, with political forces cutting across mainstream and separatist sections calling for unhindered access for tourists in the region.

Does this mean that there is an unequivocal acceptance of the status imposed on the erstwhile unified State of J&K (that included the present day UT of Ladakh), among the people in the Valley and beyond? That certainly does not seem to be the case in the Kashmir Valley, at least if recent events such as the district development council elections in late 2020 are any indication. The Gupkar Alliance, which has steadfastly demanded a return to status quo prior to 2019, had decisively won in the Valley and the group has also vociferously protested the delimitation exercise whose proposals clearly seek to repurpose the politics of J&K through arbitrarily providing greater electoral prospects for Jammu-based parties over Kashmir-based ones. Notwithstanding the recent uptick in economic activity after the prolonged turmoil post-August 2019, there is no indication that the resultant discontent has diminished; security risks continue to remain preponderant as the spurt of terrorist violence shows including the killing of two “fidayeen” militants barely 14 km from Palli village, where the Prime Minister made his address on National Panchayati Raj Day. Beyond doubt, New Delhi must engage in substantive outreach in the form of gestures that reverse the hostility towards the political representatives in the Valley. The return of J&K to statehood will be a good beginning.

EXPLAINED: SHAH FAESAL WILL RETURN TO IAS; WHAT ARE THE RULES FOR RESIGNATION AND REINSTATEMENT OF AN OFFICER?

Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer Shah Faesal, who resigned from the service in protest against the “unabated” killings in Kashmir in 2019, has been reinstated.

The return to service of Faesal, the first Kashmiri to top the Civil Services Examination (2010 batch), had been indicated back in August 2020, when he stepped down as president of the Jammu and Kashmir People’s Movement (JKPM), the party that he had founded after leaving the IAS, and announced that he was quitting politics altogether.

Faesal’s resignation, in January 2019, had not been accepted by the government pending investigation into some of his posts on social media. In 2020, a senior government official had told The Indian Express that the fact his resignation was never accepted meant that “the door is still open” for him to come back to the IAS.

Following the constitutional changes of August 2019 in Jammu and Kashmir, Faesal was stopped from flying to Istanbul, and was detained under Section 107 CrPC. He was ultimately released in June 2020. No cases are pending against him at the moment.

What rules apply when an IAS officer chooses to resign?

A resignation is a formal intimation in writing by an officer of his/her intention or a proposal to leave the IAS, either immediately or at a specified date in the future. Guidelines of the Department of Personnel, the cadre controlling department for the IAS, say that a resignation has to be clear and unconditional.

The resignation of an officer of any of the three All-India Services — IAS, the Indian Police Service (IPS) and Indian Forest Service — is governed by Rules 5(1) and 5(1)(A) of the All India Services (Death-cum-Retirement Benefits) Rules, 1958. There are similar rules for resignation of officers belonging to the other central services as well.



Resignation from service is entirely different from accepting the government's Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS). Those who take VRS are entitled to pension, whereas those who resign are not. Rule 5 of the DCRB Rules say, "No retirement benefits may be granted to a person who has been dismissed or removed from the Service or who has resigned from the Service."

To whom must the resignation of an IAS officer be submitted?

An officer serving in a cadre (state) must submit his/her resignation to the chief secretary of the state. An officer who is on central deputation is required to submit his/her resignation to the secretary of the concerned Ministry or Department. The Ministry/Department then forwards the officer's resignation to the concerned state cadre, along with its comments or recommendations.

What happens after the resignation is submitted?

The state checks to see if any dues are outstanding against the officer, as well as the vigilance status of the officer or whether any cases of corruption etc. are pending against him/her. In case there is such a case, the resignation is normally rejected.

Before forwarding the resignation to the central government, the concerned state is supposed to send information on the issues of dues and vigilance status, along with its recommendation.

The resignation of the officer is considered by the competent authority, i.e., the central government, only after the recommendation of the concerned cadre has been received. The competent authorities are: Minister of State at the Department of Personnel & Training (DoPT) in respect of the IAS, the Minister for Home Affairs in respect of the IPS, and the Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change in respect of the Forest Service.

Being the minister in charge of the DoPT, the Prime Minister himself takes decisions currently in respect of the IAS.

Under what circumstances is a resignation accepted or rejected?

A circular issued by the DoPT on February 15, 1988 regarding resignation says that it is not in the interest of the government to retain an officer who is unwilling to serve. The general rule, therefore, is that the resignation of an officer should be accepted — except in certain circumstances.

The circular says: "Where a Government servant who is under suspension submits a resignation the competent authority should examine, with reference to the merit of the disciplinary case pending against the Government servant, whether it would be in the public interest to accept the resignation."

In some cases, resignations have been rejected because disciplinary cases were pending against officers. In such cases, concurrence of the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) is obtained.

The government also checks whether the concerned officer had executed any bond to serve the government for a specified number of years on account of having received specialised training, a fellowship, or scholarship for studies.

The circular also says: "Where the Government servant concerned is engaged on work of importance and it would take time to make alternative arrangements for filling the post, the



resignation should not be accepted straightway but only when alternative arrangements for filling the post have been made.”

Is an officer allowed to withdraw a resignation that has already been submitted?

Rule 5(1A)(i) of the amended DCRB Rules says the central government may permit an officer to withdraw his/her resignation “in the public interest”. An amendment in the Rules in 2011 states “that the period of absence from duty between the date on which the resignation became effective and the date on which the member is allowed to resume duty as a result of permission to withdraw the resignation is not more than ninety days”.

The same amendment in the Rules said, “Request for withdrawal of resignation shall not be accepted by the Central Government where a member of the Service resigns from his/her service or post with a view to be associated with any political parties or any organisation which takes part in politics, or to take part in, or subscribe in aid of, or assist in any other manner, any political movement or political activity or to canvass or otherwise interfere with, or use his/her influence in connection with, or take part in, an election to any legislature or local authority.”

And under what circumstances is the withdrawal of an officer’s resignation accepted?

The guidelines say that if an officer who has submitted his/her resignation sends an intimation in writing withdrawing it before its acceptance by the competent authority, the resignation will be deemed to have been automatically withdrawn.

Shah Faesal resigned on January 9, 2019, but his resignation was not processed. His Executive Record Sheet on the DoPT website has no details of his posting. The latest Civil List of IAS officers available on the DoPT website is that of 2021 — and Faesal is listed as a serving officer, but whose posting details say “N.A.” (not available).

The Immovable Property Return (IPR), which every officer is required to declare every year and which is posted on the DoPT website, was last declared by Faesal on January 30, 2017. However, since his resignation itself was not accepted, his request for the withdrawal of resignation was accepted. This, despite the fact that he tried his luck in politics for a year and a half.

UNDERSTANDING THE OLGA TELLIS JUDGMENT

The story so far: A 37-year-old Constitution Bench judgment of the Supreme Court which held that pavement dwellers are different from trespassers may become a game-changer in the Jahangirpuri case. The apex court ruled that pavement dwellers live on “filthy footpaths out of sheer helplessness” and not with the object of offending, insulting, intimidating or annoying anyone. They live and earn on footpaths because they have “small jobs to nurse in the city and there is nowhere else to live.”

What is the Olga Tellis judgment?

The judgment, *Olga Tellis vs Bombay Municipal Corporation*, in 1985 by a five-judge Bench led by then Chief Justice of India Y.V. Chandrachud agrees that pavement dwellers do occupy public spaces unauthorised. However, the court maintained they should be given a chance to be heard and a reasonable opportunity to depart “before force is used to expel them.”

The Supreme Court reasoned that eviction using unreasonable force, without giving them a chance to explain is unconstitutional. Pavement dwellers, too, have a right to life and dignity. The right to



life included the right to livelihood. They earn a meagre livelihood by living and working on the footpaths. A welfare state and its authorities should not use its powers of eviction as a means to deprive pavement dwellers of their livelihood.

What led to the judgment?

Sometime in 1981, the State of Maharashtra and the Bombay Municipal Corporation decided that pavement and slum dwellers in Bombay city should be evicted and “deported to their respective places of origin or places outside the city of Bombay.” Some demolitions were carried out before the case was brought to the Bombay High Court by pavement dwellers, residents of slums across the city, NGOs and journalists. While they conceded that they did not have “any fundamental right to put up huts on pavements or public roads”, the case came up before the Supreme Court on larger questions of law.

What were the questions discussed before the Supreme Court?

One of the main questions was whether eviction of a pavement dweller would amount to depriving him/her of their livelihood guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution. The Article mandates that “no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law.” The Constitution Bench was also asked to determine if provisions in the Bombay Municipal Corporation Act, 1888, allowing the removal of encroachments without prior notice, were arbitrary and unreasonable. The Supreme Court also decided to examine the question whether it was constitutionally impermissible to characterise pavement dwellers as trespassers.

What was the State government’s defence?

The State government and the corporation countered that pavement dwellers should be estopped (estoppel is a judicial device whereby a court may prevent or “estop” a person from making assertions. Estoppel may prevent someone from bringing a particular claim) from contending that the shacks constructed by them on the pavements cannot be demolished because of their right to livelihood. They cannot claim any fundamental right to encroach and put up huts on pavements or public roads over which the public has a ‘right of way.’

How did the Supreme Court rule?

The Bench threw out the government’s argument of estoppel, saying “there can be no estoppel against the Constitution.” The court held that the right to life of pavement dwellers were at stake here. The right to livelihood was an “integral component” of the right to life. They can come to court to assert their right. “If the right to livelihood is not treated as a part of the constitutional right to live, the easiest way of depriving a person of his right to life would be to deprive him of his means of livelihood to the point of abrogation... Any person who is deprived of his right to livelihood except according to just and fair procedure established by law, can challenge the deprivation as offending the right to life,” the Constitution Bench observed.

Again, on the second question whether provisions in law allowing statutory authorities to remove encroachments without prior notice was arbitrary, the court held that such powers are designed to operate as an “exception” and not the “general rule.” The procedure of eviction should lean in favour of procedural safeguards which follow the natural principles of justice like giving the other side an opportunity to be heard. The right to be heard gives affected persons an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process and also provides them with a chance to express themselves with dignity, the court had observed.



Finally, the court emphatically objected to authorities treating pavement dwellers as mere trespassers. “They (pavement dwellers) manage to find a habitat in places which are mostly filthy or marshy, out of sheer helplessness. It is not as if they have a free choice to exercise as to whether to commit an encroachment and if so, where. The encroachment committed by these persons are involuntary acts in the sense that those acts are compelled by inevitable circumstances and are not guided by choice,” the Supreme Court had reasoned. Besides, the court noted, even trespassers should not be evicted by using force greater than what is reasonable and appropriate. What is more, the court had said, a trespasser “should be asked and given a reasonable opportunity to depart before force is used to expel him.”

EX-GOVERNOR SATYA PAL MALIK’S BRIBERY ALLEGATIONS: WHAT CBI IS PROBING IN J&K

Six months after former Jammu & Kashmir Governor Satya Pal Malik claimed that he was offered Rs 300 crore in bribes to clear two files, including one related to an RSS leader, the CBI last week registered two cases and conducted searches at 14 locations. The CBI has booked Anil Ambani’s Reliance General Insurance Company (RGIC) and officials of Chenab Valley Power Projects Pvt Ltd (CVPPPL).

What has Satya Pal Malik alleged?

Malik, currently Governor of Meghalaya, alleged last year that when he was J&K Governor, he had received two files, one pertaining to “Ambani” and the other to an “RSS functionary”. “One of the secretaries told me that these are shady deals, but he can get Rs 150 crore each... I alerted Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who told me that there should be no compromise on corruption,” Malik said, speaking at an event at Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan.

While Malik did not specify what files those were, one of these pertained to the government’s deal with Reliance General Insurance for providing health insurance to government employees. Malik had cancelled the deal in October 2018. The other matter referred to civil works relating to the Kiru Hydel Power Project.

What happened after his allegations?

Last month, J&K Lieutenant-Governor Manoj Sinha announced that the UT administration had decided to hand over the probe to the CBI.

The two cases were referred to the CBI on March 23. “There had been allegations of malpractices in awarding contract of J&K Government Employees Health Care Insurance Scheme to Reliance General Insurance Company Ltd and awarding of contract with respect to civil works of Kiru Hydroelectric Power project to a private firm. Reports in these matters were sought from Finance Department and Anti Corruption Bureau... the competent authority in the J&K government has decided to refer these cases to CBI for investigation,” the UT administration’s letter to CBI said.

What is the case against Reliance?

One of the two FIRs names Reliance General Insurance Company and Trinity Reinsurance Brokers Ltd as accused. It says the allegations as mentioned by the UT administration “prima facie disclose that unknown officials of Finance Department of Govt of J&K by abusing their official position in conspiracy and connivance with Trinity Reinsurance Brokers Ltd, Reliance General Insurance Company Ltd and other unknown public servants and private persons have committed the



offences of criminal conspiracy and criminal misconduct to cause pecuniary advantage to themselves and caused wrongful loss to the state exchequer during the period 2017 and 2018..."

The government had floated tenders for group health insurance to government employees, but only one bid was received. The government then hired insurance broker Trinity to float tenders on its behalf. Seven insurance companies bid and Reliance qualified. It was disbursed a premium of over Rs 61 crore by the state administration.

After Malik raised a red flag, the matter was examined by the state Anti Corruption Bureau and Finance Department.

What did these probes find?

After examining all issues relating to the award of the contract to Reliance — which included eligibility criteria being changed in the middle of tendering process, non-transparent selection of the insurance broker, and the number of employees being artificially jacked up to provide benefits to Reliance — the ACB in its report dated November 27, 2021 held that "no irregularity has been found out during the course of verification by the ACB".

It only recommended recovery of Rs 44 crore from Reliance as excess premium since the contract was cancelled.

But the Finance Department, in a report on February 10, held that there were irregularities in the award of the contract. These included the e-tendering process not being followed, change of criteria for re-tender after only one response was received to the first tender, changes in agreement with Trinity after it was already signed, and release of the first instalment of premium before the agreement was signed with Reliance.

What is the Kiru Hydel case?

It pertains to award of civil works to the tune of Rs 22,000 crore in the Kiru Hydroelectric Project in Jammu by CVPPPL to Patel Engineering Ltd in 2019.

The CBI has booked then CVPPP chairman and IAS officer Naveen Choudhary, MD MS Babu, and Directors M K Mittal and Arun Mishra, apart from Patel Engineering. The FIR says an investigation had been conducted by the J&K ACB and the Power Department in the matter.

"Perusal of these reports reveals that in award of civil works package of Kiru Hydroelectric Power Project, guidelines regarding e-tendering were not followed and though a decision was taken in the 47th Board Meeting of CVPPPL for re-tender through e-tendering with reverse auction, after cancellation of ongoing tendering process, same was not implemented and the tender was finally awarded to M/s Patel Engineering," the FIR says.

The project, whose cost is estimated at Rs 4,287 crore, has been marred by allegations of substandard work and failure to provide jobs to local youth. The ACB probe had observed that the tender for the project had been cancelled in the 47th board meeting of CVPPPL, but was revived in the 48th and awarded to Patel Engineering.



STATES VS CENTRE ON VC SELECTION: RULES, FRICTION

The Tamil Nadu Assembly passed two Bills on Monday that seek to transfer the Governor's power in appointing Vice-Chancellors of 13 state universities to the state government, currently led by the DMK. Chief Minister MK Stalin said the Bills were required as the Governor was disregarding the state government's opinion on the appointments of VCs, an argument also made by states such as Maharashtra and West Bengal in the past.

A look at the rules guiding the appointments of VCs across states reveal wide variations, leaving the field open for dispute, particularly in cases where there are sharp political differences between the state and the Centre, which appoints the Governors.

What are the highlights of the two Bills?

The Bills passed in Tamil Nadu stress that "every appointment of the Vice-Chancellor shall be made by the Government from out of a panel of three names" recommended by a search-cum-selection committee. Currently, the Governor, in his capacity as the Chancellor of state universities, has the power to pick a VC from the shortlisted names. The Bills also seek to empower the state government to have the final word on the removal of VCs, if needed. Removal will be carried out based on inquiries by a retired High Court judge or a bureaucrat who has served at least as a Chief Secretary, according to one of the Bills.

Yes. In December, the Maharashtra Assembly passed a Bill amending the Maharashtra Public Universities Act, 2016. Under the original Act, the Maharashtra government had no say in appointment of VCs. If the changes take effect, the Governor will be given two names to choose from by the state government, currently ruled by the Shiv Sena-NCP-Congress, following a panel's suggestions.

In 2019, the West Bengal government, led by the Trinamool Congress, took away the Governor's authority in appointing VCs to state universities. It has also hinted at removing the Governor as the Chancellor of the universities.

In Left-ruled Kerala, the Governor alleged that the appointment of the Vice-Chancellor of Kannur University was done against his wishes. The BJD government in Odisha has also tried to bring appointments to state universities under its control. But it has been challenged by the University Grants Commission (UGC).

What is at the root of the differences?

In West Bengal, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, the elected governments have repeatedly accused the Governors of acting at the behest of the Centre on various subjects, including education. The regulations, which differ from state to state, are often open to interpretation and disputes are routine.

In fact, the Tamil Nadu Bills make a case for giving the state government the upper hand in the VC appointment process by citing the examples of Gujarat and Telangana. "It is considered that in line with the aforesaid (Gujarat, Telangana) State University Laws, the Government of Tamil Nadu should be empowered to appoint the Vice-Chancellors of the State Universities," both Bills state.



In Karnataka, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, state laws underline the need for concurrence between the state and the Governor. The terms “concurrence” or “consultation” are absent from state legislation in most cases.

What is the UGC’s role in this?

Education comes under the Concurrent List, but entry 66 of the Union List — “coordination and determination of standards in institutions for higher education or research and scientific and technical institutions” — gives the Centre substantial authority over higher education. The UGC plays that standard-setting role, even in the case of appointments in universities and colleges. According to the UGC (Minimum Qualifications for Appointment of Teachers and other Academic Staff in Universities and Colleges and other Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education) Regulations, 2018, the “Visitor/Chancellor” — mostly the Governor in states — shall appoint the VC out of the panel of names recommended by search-cum-selection committees. Higher educational institutions, particularly those that get UGC funds, are mandated to follow its regulations. These are usually followed without friction in the case of central universities, but are sometimes resisted by the states in the case of state universities.

What are the rules in Gujarat and Telangana?

The Gujarat University Act, 1949 states that “the Vice-Chancellor shall be appointed by the State Government from amongst three persons recommended by a (search-cum-selection) committee”. The Telangana Universities Act, 1991 states that the search committee shall “submit a panel of three persons to the Government in alphabetical order and the Government shall appoint the Vice-Chancellor from out of the said panel”.

Last month, setting aside the appointment of the Vice-Chancellor of Gujarat’s SP University by the state government, the Supreme Court made some key observations.

What were these observations?

A Bench of Justices M R Shah and B V Nagarathna said “any appointment as a Vice Chancellor contrary to the provisions of the UGC Regulations can be said to be in violation of the statutory provisions, warranting a writ of quo warranto”. It said every subordinate legislation of the UGC, in this case the one on minimum standards on appointments, flows from the parent UGC Act, 1956. “Therefore, being a subordinate legislation, UGC Regulations become part of the Act. In case of any conflict between state legislation and central legislation, central legislation shall prevail by applying the rule/principle of repugnancy as enunciated in Article 254 of the Constitution as the subject ‘education’ is in the Concurrent List of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution,” it ruled.

AGAINST 91ST AMENDMENT: PIL TARGETS CABINET STATUS FOR GOA’S RANE

The High Court of Bombay at Goa on Monday (April 25) said “arguable issues have been raised” in a PIL challenging the “lifetime status of the rank of Cabinet minister” accorded to Pratapsingh Rane, a six-time Chief Minister of Goa and a legislator for a full 50 years.

The unprecedented status was conferred on the octogenarian Congress leader this January by the state’s earlier BJP government. Days after the announcement, Rane backed out of the Legislative Assembly election, even though he had already been declared the Congress candidate from his bastion of Poriem.



His daughter-in-law Deviya Rane debuted from the seat on a BJP ticket and won by the highest margin in the state.

Lawyer Aires Rodrigues, who has filed the PIL challenging the decision to grant such a status to Rane, said that this is the first time in the country that any state government had taken such a step. The PIL was admitted on Monday, and a division bench of Justices M S Sonak and R N Laddha will hear the case on May 2.

What is the “lifetime status of the rank of Cabinet minister” granted to Pratapsingh Rane?

On January 6, Chief Minister Pramod Sawant had announced that the state Cabinet had taken a decision to accord this special status to Rane. “Mr Pratapsingh Raoji Rane, former Chief Minister and former Speaker (of the Goa Legislative Assembly) has completed 50 years as a legislator. The Cabinet has decided that in future also, those who complete 50 years and hold posts like CM and Speaker, like Pratapsingh Rane, will be given the Cabinet status even after their retirement,” Sawant had said.

The previous government led by Sawant, in which Rane’s son Vishwajit Rane too was a Minister, took this decision a little more than a month before the February 14 Assembly elections. Last year, a congratulatory motion had been passed in the Assembly, and MLAs from all parties had felicitated Rane, who first won the Sattari seat in 1972 and never lost an election thereafter.

On March 24, 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had tweeted: “Congratulations to Shri Pratapsingh Rane Ji on this momentous feat of completing 50 years as MLA. His passion for public service and Goa’s progress is reflected in his work. I remember our interactions when we both served as Chief Ministers of our respective states.”

So what is it that the PIL filed in the High Court of Bombay at Goa has challenged?

Lawyer Rodrigues has urged the High Court to quash the January 7 notification of the government under which Rane was conferred with the “lifetime status of the rank of cabinet minister”. Rodrigues has contended that Goa has a 12-member Cabinet, and the conferment of Cabinet status on Rane results in the number of Cabinet ranks rising to 13, which exceeds the ceiling mandated by the Constitution.

Stating that the very purpose of the 91st Amendment was to prevent jumbo Cabinets and the resultant drain on the public exchequer, Rodrigues contended that the lifetime status granted to Rane was a “back door entry in wilful disobedience of the mandate of law”.

The Constitution (91st Amendment) Act, 2003 inserted clause 1A in Article 164, which says “the total number of Ministers, including the Chief Minister, in the Council of Ministers in a State shall not exceed fifteen per cent of the total number of members of the Legislative Assembly of that State... provided that the number of Ministers, including the Chief Minister in a State shall not be less than twelve”. There are 40 seats in the unicameral Goa Assembly.

Rodrigues told the court on Monday that as a Cabinet minister for life, Rane would be entitled to 12 staff members – OSDs, support staff, peons, driver – which would cost the exchequer Rs 90 lakh a year. Although Rane has not availed of it, the ‘Cabinet’ rank would also entitle him to government accommodation, vehicle and unlimited free travel for him and his spouse, Rodrigues told The Indian Express.



Why did the BJP take this decision for a politician who had spent 45 of his 50 years as MLA in the Congress?

There is a backstory to the decision, announced ahead of the Assembly elections.

In December 2021, the Congress had declared Rane as its candidate from the Poriem seat. Soon afterward, Rane's son and then state Health Minister Vishwajit Rane (who retains the portfolio in the current Pramod Sawant government), said that he would contest against his father on the BJP ticket and would defeat him by a record margin. Vishwajit, an undefeated five-time lawmaker from the neighbouring Valpoi seat, had left the Congress in 2017 to join the BJP.

At a public rally that same month, former Maharashtra Chief Minister and the BJP's Goa election incharge Devendra Fadnavis had said that his party would soon receive "blessings" from the senior Rane. Fadnavis had earlier met Rane at his residence, and had sought the "blessing" that he should leave the Poriem seat for Vishwajit and the BJP.

The Ranes, who are among the politically most influential families in Goa, hold sway in the Sattari taluka, of which both the seats of Valpoi and Poriem are part.

Over several days, there was speculation about a possible father-son poll duel in Poriem. Eventually, Pratapsingh Rane's decision to back out was seen as Vishwajit having prevailed over his father. While Vishwajit himself remained in Valpoi, his wife Deviya made a sensational debut in Poriem, bringing the seat to the BJP for the first time.

Rodrigues's PIL states that since Rane, a Congress candidate at the time he was granted lifetime Cabinet status, "was capable of toppling the ruling party's apple cart in Poriem, a malafide strategy was adopted by the BJP to offer him a carrot not to contest elections".

Deviya's victory in Poriem also strengthened Vishwajit's position in the BJP. While he lost out in the race to become CM after the BJP returned to power in March, he effectively functions as the Number 2 in a Cabinet that includes legislators who are senior to him.

What were the political reactions to the decision to grant Rane status of a Cabinet minister for life?

Rane himself had said he had not asked for anything. "They have recognised my 50 years' service. Perhaps, the government thought it best to do it. I have not asked for it," he had said. On Monday, his lawyer Joao Dias declined to comment on the PIL before the court.

Vishwajit, however, had profusely thanked his Cabinet colleagues. He had tweeted on January 6, "I am grateful to the Hon'ble Chief Minister @DrPramodSawant & entire cabinet for according a lifetime cabinet status to my father Shri Pratapsingh Raoji Rane. There is no greater way to honour his 50 years of public service as Chief Minister, Speaker and MLA."

Girish Chodankar, then president of the Goa Pradesh Congress Committee, had said that the BJP was "desperate" before the election, but that Rane would not "fall prey" to the party's move.

"This is a new move. This is unheard of. We don't know what they have announced is legal or illegal, constitutional or unconstitutional. But BJP is desperate and it can do anything. He (Pratapsingh Rane) commands the respect of people like no one else and he has a place in the hearts of the people of Goa. In 50 years he has an unblemished record. His loyalty to the party is undoubted. He is a royal and upright man. These things are too small for a man of his stature. He will not fall prey to these things," Chodankar had said.



TOWARDS A RESOLUTION OF THE ARUNACHAL-ASSAM BORDER DISPUTE

Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu and his Assam counterpart Himanta Biswa Sarma have decided to form district-level committees for settling their inter-state boundary disputes.

The issue started with a 1951 report which transferred 3,648 sq. km of the “plain” area of Balipara and Sadiya foothills to the Darrang and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. Arunachal Pradesh claims the transfer was done without consulting its tribes who had customary rights over these lands.

The two States have decided to form 12 committees involving the districts sharing the boundary in order to come up with a solution.

The story so far: Less than a month after the Union government gave the seal of approval to an agreement to partially resolve the disputed sectors on the Assam-Meghalaya border, Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu and his Assam counterpart Himanta Biswa Sarma decided to form district-level committees for settling their inter-state boundary disputes. This has set the ball rolling for the two States to address the issue on the basis of the “fifty-fifty” or “give-and-take” model Assam and Meghalaya followed for closure of the disputes in six of its 12 troublesome sectors.

Why does Arunachal Pradesh have a boundary dispute with Assam?

Assam has had boundary disputes with all the north-eastern States that were carved out of it. While Nagaland became a State in 1963, Meghalaya first became an Autonomous State in 1970 and a full-fledged State in 1972. Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram were separated from Assam as Union Territories in 1972 and as States in 1987. None of the new States accepted the “constitutional boundary” that they said was dictated by the partisan administration of undivided Assam without consulting the tribal stakeholders. They also claimed that the disputed areas were traditionally under the control of tribal chieftains before Assam, post-India's independence, inherited the “imaginary boundaries” drawn during British rule. The issue with Arunachal Pradesh has more to do with a 1951 report prepared by a sub-committee headed by Assam's first Chief Minister, Gopinath Bordoloi.

What is the genesis of the dispute?

Arunachal Pradesh and Assam have disputes at about 1,200 points along their 804 km boundary. The disputes cropped up in the 1970s and intensified in the 1990s with frequent flare-ups along the border. However, the issue dates back to 1873 when the British government introduced the inner-line regulation vaguely separating the plains from the frontier hills that were later designated as the North-East Frontier Tracts in 1915. This area became the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in 1954, three years after a notification based on the 1951 report saw 3,648 sq. km of the “plain” area of Balipara and Sadiya foothills being transferred to the Darrang and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. Arunachal Pradesh has been celebrating its statehood on a grand scale with an eye on China since 1987, but what has been causing resentment is the inability of the people living in the transferred patches to join in the celebration. Leaders in Arunachal Pradesh claim the transfer was done arbitrarily without consulting its tribes who had customary rights over these lands. Their counterparts in Assam say the 1951 demarcation is constitutional and legal.



Did the two States try settling the boundary dispute earlier?

There were several efforts to demarcate the boundary between Assam and NEFA/Arunachal Pradesh between 1971 and 1974. To end the stalemate, a high-powered tripartite committee involving the Centre and the two States was formed in April 1979 to delineate the boundary based on Survey of India maps. About 489 km of the inter-state boundary north of the Brahmaputra River was demarcated by 1984, but Arunachal Pradesh did not accept the recommendations and staked claim to much of the areas transferred in 1951. Assam objected and approached the Supreme Court in 1989, accusing Arunachal Pradesh of “encroachment”. The apex court appointed a local boundary commission in 2006 headed by one of its retired judges.

In its September 2014 report, this commission recommended that Arunachal Pradesh should get back some of the areas transferred in 1951 besides advising both the States to find a middle path through discussions. This did not work out.

What are the chances of a solution emerging this time?

The Assam-Meghalaya boundary agreement has raised hopes of the Assam-Arunachal boundary dispute being resolved, especially with the Centre egging the north-eastern States to end their territorial issues once and for all by August 15, 2022, when the country celebrates 75 years of independence. Moreover, there is a general belief that the region’s sister-States are in a better position to fast-track the resolution since they are ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party with the same dispensation at the Centre. Following the model adopted in the exercise to resolve the dispute with Meghalaya, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have agreed to form district-level committees that will be tasked with undertaking joint surveys in the disputed sectors to find tangible solutions to the long-pending issue based on historical perspective, ethnicity, contiguity, people’s will and administrative convenience of both the States.

The two States have decided to form 12 such committees involving the districts sharing the boundary. Assam has eight districts touching the boundary with Arunachal Pradesh, which has 12 such districts.

LET THEM LEARN

Kerala’s Pinarayi Vijayan-led government has done well to ignore the Opposition’s barbs on sending the chief secretary, V P Joy, to Gujarat to study the latter’s “dashboard” scheme. Joy, who arrived in Ahmedabad on Wednesday, praised the scheme that allows the chief minister to monitor progress of public works and programmes across ministries and the working of bureaucrats in real time from his office.

It is a sign of polarised times that even a courteous exchange of views or the sharing of ideas that can benefit citizens get caught up in political polemic. Institutions such as the National Development Council (NDC) — presided over by the prime minister, with Union ministers, chief ministers, members of the Planning Commission, now NITI Aayog, ministers of state with independent charge, as members — were built in the 1950s as a platform for states to share ideas and learn from each other. The NDC ceased to be a lively platform long ago and the Narendra Modi government had proposed to wind up the Nehru-era institution. Instead, the Modi government reconstituted the Planning Commission as NITI Aayog and re-imagined it as a resource centre — “a repository of research on good governance and best practices in sustainable and equitable development...” — for states. However, political rhetoric and showmanship often gets in the way.



State governments should showcase their success stories and invite other governments to learn from them. Gujarat could learn ways to improve school education from Kerala while Tamil Nadu should be a model for states such as UP in optimising welfare schemes and building a robust public health system. Jammu and Kashmir's record on land reforms, working of Panchayati Raj institutions in Karnataka, and rural cooperatives of Maharashtra could be profitably studied by other states. Of course, political considerations will remain. For instance, the CPM expelled two-time MP, AP Abdullakutty, from the party in 2009 for praising the "Gujarat model" — he has since joined the BJP. The Congress seems to have taken the baton from the CPM in censuring engagements with the "enemy" — recently, it threatened disciplinary action against party leaders speaking at the CPM party congress. But all parties must recognise when the drawing of rigid political lines becomes counter-productive, when it starts looking like a self-goal.

EXPLAINED: HOW FAR COULD A BAN ON MENTHOL CIGARETTES HELP REDUCE SMOKING IN INDIA?

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on Thursday proposed rules for banning menthol cigarettes and all flavoured cigars, a move likely to have the deepest impact on Black smokers and young adults.

In its fact sheet, the FDA said nearly 85% of Black smokers use menthol cigarettes as compared to 30% white smokers, and that modelling studies estimate a 15% overall reduction in smoking over age 40 if menthol cigarettes were unavailable.

How would a similar ban be likely to play out in India?

If India were to ban menthol and other flavoured cigarettes, the impact might be limited, given that chewing tobacco and bidi are the most common forms of tobacco use.

India has 26.7 crore tobacco users aged 15 and above, as per the last available Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS 2016-17) — 18% of the population uses smokeless tobacco, 7% smoke, and 4% use both.

Even among smokers, "the impact of such a step would only be on young adults and women who are just starting to smoke. Apart from giving tobacco a pleasant flavour, menthol reduces the harshness, irritation, and somewhat the smell, making it appealing to those who have just started smoking or those who need to hide the smell from family members", said Dr S K Arora, a chest physician, a former head of Delhi's Tobacco Control Cell, and winner of a World Health Organization (WHO) award for his role in controlling tobacco use in India.

"However, once a person continues smoking for two weeks to a month, the flavour is of no consequence. If we ban menthol flavour, they will just continue smoking regular cigarettes," he said.

Monika Arora, Director of the Public Health Promotion Division, Public Health Foundation of India, said, "Menthol cigarettes usually attract adolescents who initiate with a flavoured product, then switch to regular cigarettes. Banning it could prevent new users" from beginning smoking.

Banning products has logistical issues as well. "Banning is not the solution. How much can you ban? Things will be smuggled in," said Dr G K Rath, former head of the National Cancer Institute. Gutkha and e-cigarettes, which are banned in India, are still available.



India has no official estimate on the number of people who use menthol or other flavoured cigarettes, but availability of various flavours has increased over the years.

How many young Indians are tobacco users?

Tobacco use among 15-24-year-olds has been reducing in India, from 18.4% in GATS-1 (2009-10) to 12.4% in GATs-2 (2016-17), a relative reduction of 33%.

On the other hand, there has been an increase in tobacco use among American youth, driven mostly by e-cigarettes. More than 1 in 4 high school students used tobacco product in the previous 30 days in 2018, with e-cigarette use increasing from 11.7% to 20.8% among high school students from 2017 to 2018, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In India, e-cigarettes are banned.

“If such a step is taken by India, there will likely be a proportion of current users who will stop smoking. But it is likely to reduce initiation to smoking. There are several studies from across the world that show this,” said Dr Jagdish Kaur, regional advisor to WHO’s Tobacco Free Initiative.

A recent study from Canada shows that after menthol cigarettes were banned, 8% more menthol smokers quit smoking than non-menthol smokers.

Another modelling based study from Singapore, where use of flavoured cigarettes is predominant, showed that in 50 years, smoking prevalence will increase from 12.7% to 15.2% if flavoured cigarettes are not banned, go down by 10.6% if there is a complete ban, and remain the same if there is a partial ban.

What additional measures need to be taken for tobacco control?

Other than banning tobacco products that draw in young new users, experts stressed a need for oversight on social media platforms, content streaming websites, and web based shopping portals.

“These websites not only advertise a tobacco product, which is against the law, they also make misleading claims such as menthol cigarettes being less harmful than regular cigarettes... These are the avenues that need to be regulated...,” Dr Monika Arora said.

A STEP THAT WOULD TRIGGER LANGUAGE PHONOCIDE

The Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, recently urged the use of Hindi as the lingua franca, rather than English, in inter-State communication. He suggested (reportedly at the Parliamentary Official Language Committee) that when citizens of States who speak other languages communicate with each other, it should be in the “language of India”. It is quite natural that a leader of a political stream that raised the slogan, ‘Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan’ would air such a quixotic idea. It was V.D. Savarkar, the Hindutva icon, who first advocated the idea of Hindi to be declared the national language and articulated the slogan, ‘Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan’. R.V. Dhulekar, a member of the Constituent Assembly, bluntly stated in the Assembly, “You may belong – to another nation but I belong to Indian nation, the Hindi Nation, the Hindu Nation, the Hindustani Nation.”

In the neighbourhood

The imposition of one language in neglect of the others in a multilingual state is disastrous. Pakistan and Sri Lanka are textbook examples of how stubbornness over language ruined nations. After Partition and Pakistan was formed, Pakistan became a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic



state. In 1948, the Government of Pakistan ordained the Islamisation of East Pakistan, with Urdu as the sole national language. “There can only be one state language if the component parts of this state are to march forward in unison, and in my opinion, that can only be Urdu,” asserted Jinnah. This arrogance of the West Pakistan elite ignited the violent Bengali language movement or Bhasha Andolan in East Pakistan, advocating the recognition of the Bengali language as an official language of the then Dominion of Pakistan in order to allow its use in government transactions, in education, in media, in currency and to maintain its writing in the Bengali script. The Language Movement catalysed Bengali nationalism and the eventual separation of East Pakistan from Pakistan. The Sinhala Only Act (the Official Language Act) of 1956 was a high point in Sri Lanka’s history. It triggered intense enmity and distrust between the Sinhalis and the Tamils. The Act replaced English with Sinhala as the sole official language of the nation with the exclusion of Tamil. Sinhalese was the language of Sinhalese people who formed 70% of the population. Tamil was spoken by Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils (and most Muslims) who together constituted around 29% of the country’s population. The Act was discriminatory and alienated the Tamil community from the mainstream. The Act also symbolised the Sinhalese majority’s zeal to assert Sri Lanka’s identity as a Sinhala nation state; for Tamils, it epitomised minority oppression and a justification for the demand for a separate Tamil nation. This friction sparked the decades-long civil war and ruined the nation.

A place for diversity

In contrast, the nations that accommodated linguistic diversity prospered. Singapore has a multi-ethnic population (Chinese, Malay and Indian). In its formative years, there was immense pressure to declare Chinese as the official language of Singapore. But Lee Kuan Yew, the architect of modern Singapore, quelled the demand and opted for English. English language proficiency made the city state a global business hub. In an article in *The Straits Times* (2004) he had said, “When we became independent in 1965, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce committee came to see me in my office, then at City Hall. They urged me to have Chinese as our national and official language. I looked them in the eye and said, ‘You must be mad, and I don’t want to hear any more of that from you. If you do, you are entering the political arena. I have to fight you. Because, Singapore will come apart.’ Supposing I had been otherwise inclined, which my colleagues would not have allowed, and had said, ‘Yes, okay.’ What would have happened to Singapore? Where would the Malays be, and the Indians, what future would they have? The English-educated Chinese would also be against us. The country would fall apart. Let us assume that we were all Chinese, no Malays, no Indians. Could we make a living with Chinese as our language of government and our national language? Who is going to trade with us? What do we do? How do we get access to knowledge? There was no choice.”

In South Africa, the national anthem of this Rainbow Nation, since 1997, is a five-language lyrical composition, making it the most unique anthem in the world in this regard. The languages are Xhosa, Zulu, Sesotho, Afrikaans and English. South Africa is an emerging leader of the African continent and its accommodative linguistic policy helped them a lot.

India should emulate the multi-linguistic accommodative policy of Singapore and South Africa; not the disastrous linguistic chauvinism of Pakistan or Sri Lanka. Imposing Hindi, which is the first language of the residents of only 12 of the 35 States and Union Territories (in the 2011 Language Census of India, and where Andhra Pradesh and Telangana figure together in the 2011 data) as a lingua franca would initiate the phonocide of other Indian languages. And it would prove to be catastrophic.



SETTLING INDIA'S COVID-19 MORTALITY DATA

Over the last year, the World Health Organization (WHO) has been busy, in an unprecedented effort, to calculate the global death toll from COVID-19. This effort, however, has India's health establishment up in arms. Globally from an estimated six million reported deaths, WHO now estimates these deaths to be closer to almost triple the number. India, deeply affected by successive COVID-19 waves, is not delighted with this revision.

There are gaps

Several news reports have pointed at a significant gap in India's COVID-19 story — significantly under-reported mortality figures. The unreleased WHO estimates have been prepared by leading global experts but have left India's health establishment perturbed, with its strong objections to these estimates.

Why? Because as in these figures, India would have had close to four times the COVID-19 deaths reported—a figure that varies highly from India's previously self-reported figures. This would make India's tally of COVID-19 deaths amongst the highest globally.

Not surprisingly, India is in serious disagreement with the WHO-prepared COVID-19 mortality estimates. In fact, its continued objections have been holding back the Global WHO Report. The argument being made by India's health establishment through a public clarification is that this is an overestimation, and the methodology employed is incorrect.

The new estimates also take into account formerly uncounted deaths, but also deaths resulting from the impact of COVID-19. For example, millions who could not access care, i.e., diagnosis or treatment due to COVID-19 restrictions or from COVID-19 cases overwhelming health services.

The methodology for this estimation, led by global experts, is unlikely to be faulty. India's disagreements with the methodology can be easily addressed through consultation. Also, the need to plump up India's COVID-19 deaths unnecessarily would serve little or no purpose.

Why then this objection? A quick study of India's COVID-19 response is insightful. India's COVID-19 response has been replete with delays and denials. For instance, for the longest time that India's COVID-19 number rose, the health establishment continued to insist that community transmission was not under way. It took months and several lakh cases before they agreed that COVID-19 was finally in community transmission.

Second wave's devastation

The end of the first wave saw a slew of congratulatory and adulatory messages by the political leadership applauding India's leadership in ending COVID-19 in the country. India's people were told that the war against COVID-19 had been won and over. Until the deadly second wave arrived and crept up on the country which had turned complacent.

The devastation of the second wave showed how unprepared we were to combat the deadly Delta variant. People began dying from lack of access to basic health facilities and infrastructure such as oxygen, beds, ventilators and therapeutics. The wave devastated India's citizens in unimaginable ways. Crematoriums ran out of wood, people were forced to bury their family members on the banks of rivers. By the time the wave subsided, India's population was devastated, and helpless, seeing dignity neither in disease nor in death.



Potential fallout

The need then to deny these new mortality figures is much like the case of the emperor's new clothes. The establishment shudders to think what these figures reveal to the public not just about the lack of preparedness but also the human costs to the country, and communities.

Also, at this time, there is rising unemployment, rising fuel prices and inflation in India. The figures then also have enormous political relevance. They are the much-needed ammunition that a beleaguered and often out of sync and clueless Opposition needs to counter the Government's victory drumbeat against COVID-19.

These new figures also have the power to revive public memory which is otherwise short-lived. Human tendency is also to gloss over suffering and believe in the mainstream narrative which makes loss more bearable and often easier. These numbers then are important because they can revive the memories of the desperation and the helplessness millions of Indians faced during the devastating second wave.

The COVID-19 mortality data from WHO is more than a disagreement. It is food for thought and poses several questions to India's health establishment. Were these deaths avoidable? Could India have been better prepared? Was India's health establishment dismissive in the face of global warnings? Should India have gone to elections in the middle of a pandemic? But the most important question is — why not count the dead?

Even for the Government's most fervent supporters, these questions are difficult to answer or deflect when faced with such overwhelming mortality figures. It is no surprise then that those figures create fear and spark denial. The figures ratchet up not only issues of administrative but also moral accountability for governments that they have been previously side stepped through effective and misleading media narratives. But, most importantly, these figures pose several key questions before us, the people of India. How much lack of accountability under-reporting are we willing to accept? Do these reduced figures not amount to an erasure of our collective suffering, grief and loss? And who, if anyone, will be held accountable if these figures are accurate? Perhaps it is just as well that death is the end of all questions.

IN HASTE

The emergency use authorisation (EUA) granted on April 26 to two COVID-19 vaccines — Corbevax for children 5-11 years, and Covaxin for children 6-11 years — is one more instance where the Indian drug regulator has acted in haste. Even if the EUA granted to Covaxin in January 2021 despite no safety and efficacy data of the phase-3 trial is condoned as a desperate measure in ensuring greater vaccine availability, the regulator clearly has no fig leaf to defend the greenlighting of the vaccines for children at this stage. Evidence from across the world after the deadly Delta variant and the extremely transmissible Omicron variant has shown that unlike adults, children in general, and little children in particular, do not suffer from severe disease. The ICMR's fourth seroprevalence survey (June-July 2021) soon after the second wave peaked nationally found that 57.2% of children (6-9 years) and 61.6% of children (10-17 years) were infected by SARS-CoV-2 virus; seroprevalence among adults was 66.7%. Since vaccination of adolescents began only in early January 2022, the antibodies detected in children in mid-2021 were only from infection by the virus. The extremely infectious Omicron variant would have infected an even larger percentage of children. Yet, the number of severe cases and deaths in children 5-11 years has been very low. True, with schools reopening, children could be at greater



risk of contracting infection. But with natural infection found to offer protection across age groups, India could have waited for validation of the available evidence on the vaccines for children.

Unlike in January 2021 when approving vaccines for adults as soon as possible was the highest priority, and hence the EUA based on fewer cases and short follow-ups was seen as a necessity, the situation is not the same now, especially in the case of children as young as five. Hence, the regulator's urgency to greenlight vaccines for children under the EUA route is highly questionable. Clinical trial data of Corbevax for children 5-12 years were posted as a preprint, which is yet to be peer-reviewed, on the day approval was granted; trial data of Covaxin for children 2-18 years were posted as a preprint in December 2021. The Health Ministry had already set a precedent last month by clearing Corbevax for children 12-14 years without first seeking the approval of the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (NTAGI), which clears vaccines for the national immunisation programme. With NTAGI clearly against approving vaccines for children, there is every likelihood of the expert body being ignored again. Also, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's message on April 27, a day after the EUA, that every eligible child should be vaccinated at the earliest might prompt the Health Ministry to sidestep the NTAGI once more, thus departing even more from evidence-based policy making.

SSLV 'DEVELOPMENT FLIGHTS' LIKELY IN 2022

The first development flight of ISRO's Small Satellite Launch Vehicle is expected to take place in June. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is hoping to have all three development flights planned for its 'baby rocket' — the Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) — in 2022 itself.

"Three development flights have been approved. 2022 is our target [for all three]," ISRO chairman S. Somanath told The Hindu during a recent visit to the city.

All three missions, to be carried out from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre, Sriharikota, would carry payloads, Mr. Somanath said. The first development flight is expected to take place in June.

Designed as a 'launch on demand' and a cheaper alternative for placing small payloads in orbit, it would have multiple mounting options for nano, micro and small satellites, Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC) sources said.

Physically, the SSLV is a three-stage rocket with a height of 34 metres and lift-off weight of 120 tonnes. By comparison, the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) — ISRO's 'reliable workhorse' — stands 44 metres tall, has four stages and has a lift-off mass of 320 tonnes for its 'XL' variant.

All three stages of the SSLV will be solid propulsion stages.

Private participation

Being developed with private participation, the SSLV will be able to place 500 kg payloads in low-earth orbit.

ISRO had performed ground tests on a new solid booster stage for its new launch vehicle on March 14 this year.

Last December, Union Minister of State (Independent Charge), Science & Technology, Jitendra Singh, told the Rajya Sabha that the Centre has sanctioned a total of ₹169 crore for the development project.



This includes the cost of development, qualification of vehicle systems and flight demonstration through the three planned development flights labelled SSLV-D1, SSLV-D2 and SSLV-D3. Hardware and structures for the project — solid motor cases, nozzle sub-systems and inter-stage structures included — will be realised through private industry participation.

EXPLAINED: WHY IS IT SO HOT ALMOST EVERYWHERE IN INDIA?

Severe heat conditions have been consistently reported over large parts of India since the beginning of the summer season in March this year. Maximum temperatures in west Rajasthan and Vidarbha in Maharashtra have remained between 40 degrees and 45 degrees Celsius throughout the last two months.

Although March marks the seasonal transition from winter to summer, this year the month saw two spells of heatwaves.

Heatwaves bring very hot days, but there is a technical definition for this meteorological phenomenon

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) declares a heatwave for a region when the maximum temperature reaches at least 40 degrees Celsius in the plains, at least 37 degrees Celsius along the coast, and at least 30 degrees Celsius in hilly regions.

Alternatively, a heatwave is declared when the maximum temperature rises by between 4.5 degrees Celsius and 6.4 degrees Celsius above normal. A severe heatwave is declared when the maximum temperature departs from normal is more than 6.4 degrees Celsius.

A third condition for a heatwave arises when an area records a maximum temperature of more than 45 degrees Celsius and up to 47 degrees Celsius on any given day.

There have been at least 26 heatwave days since beginning of March (Express photo by Shashi Ghosh)

There are months in the year and areas in the country that are the most vulnerable to heatwaves

Heatwaves occur most commonly in the summer months of April-June, with their severity and frequency peaking in May.

The most heatwave prone areas — known as the Core Heatwave Zone (CHZ) — are Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi, West Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Vidarbha in Maharashtra, parts of Gangetic West Bengal, Coastal Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana.

Heatwaves can last between 4 and 10 days, and occasionally for longer. Heatwave spells in May are longer than those that occur in April and June, mainly because of the absence of rainfall.

Studies have shown that the CHZ experiences more than six heatwave days every year during these March to June months.

Many places in the northwest (Rajasthan) and cities along eastern coast (Andhra Pradesh, Odisha) report up to eight heatwave days in a season.

Regions in the extreme north (Himachal Pradesh, Kashmir, Ladakh), northeast, and southwest (Karnataka, Kerala, Goa) are less prone to heatwaves.

There are reasons why March and April have been so hot this year — an early onset of summer, the unusually long heatwaves, and the absence of periodic thundershowers

The usual light-intensity rainfall, hail and lightning have remained absent by and large over many areas of the country since March. The country's all-India rainfall ended at minus 70.7 per cent in March.

March 2022 was India's third warmest March since 1901. The monthly maximum temperature was 32.65 degrees Celsius against the normal of 31.24 degrees, the IMD said.

Normally, passing western disturbances – the eastward propagating stream of winds originating from the Mediterranean Sea – interact with moist winds blowing from southern India to trigger thunderstorms. The intermittent light rain and thunder helps keep a check on the heat.

This summer, the western disturbances have not been sufficiently strong, IMD officials have said. Even though five western disturbances have been recorded since March, three of these were feeble and passed over the extreme northern regions of the country, failing to cause significant changes in weather, a senior IMD scientist said.

Over south peninsular and northeast India, however, April has been wet. As a result, the summer has been relatively cool in these areas. The rainfall departures from normal during the period March 1-April 26 were 50.4 per cent and 49.7 per cent over south peninsular and northeast India respectively.

Unfortunately, no major respite from the heat is expected anytime soon

The summer of 2022 has produced one of the longest heatwave spells over India in recent years. The last time the country saw a prolonged spell of high temperatures was between May 18 and 31, 2015, affecting parts of West Bengal along with Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana. Another long spell was recorded between June 2 and June 11, 2014.

This situation is not expected to change soon. Rajasthan, Delhi, Haryana, Chandigarh, Madhya Pradesh, Vidarbha, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, interior Gangetic West Bengal, and Odisha must brace for hotter days until Sunday (May 1) at least. The maximum temperature is expected to rise by 2 degrees Celsius until May 1 before falling marginally.

However, the heatwave over Bihar and Chhattisgarh will abate after April 30.

On the other hand, temperatures over Telangana and parts of Andhra Pradesh could rise in the first week of May.

FAIZ IS IN THE ROOM

Late one evening, over lukewarm tea, in the middle of discussing gay history and rights in South Asia, noted historian Saleem Kidwai quoted a Faiz Ahmad Faiz nazm (verse) to me. Its famous first line was "Aaj bazaar mein pa-ba-jaulan chalo", quite literally meaning "Let us walk in the market in chains". He explained that Faiz wrote this nazm while being taken in chains from prison by the military dictatorship at the time in Pakistan. It spoke about how we would all need to walk openly wearing the chains we are bound in by society until we achieve freedom.

Years later, it surprised me, pleasantly, that this very nazm was being taught to young CBSE students. Another line from this nazm is even more inspiring, as it tells its readers that it is "not



enough to shed tears, to suffer anguish, not enough to nurse love in secret...Today, walk in the public square fettered in chains”.

In these troubled, divisive times, reading Faiz is balm to our frayed nerves. Teaching it to our kids, well, now that's asking for trouble. After all, don't we want our kids to cooperate, to comply, and to fit in this new world? Don't we want them to follow rules and not question the status quo? Why, then, teach them about freedom or protest? Why should we let them read Faiz?

Recent news reports tell us that the revised Class X CBSE textbooks have bid goodbye to Faiz, along with chapters on “democracy and diversity” that documented social division and inequalities in India. Along with these deletions, two chapters on “popular struggles and movements” and “challenges to democracy” have been dropped as well. It's unclear whether these will be replaced or entirely obliterated from the textbooks.

This is not all. Those in Class XI and XII will no longer read about the Non-Aligned Movement, the Cold War era, the rise of Islamic empires in Afro-Asian territories, the chronicles of the Mughal courts or the industrial revolution. One wonders how, then, will they make sense of India's foreign policy, its current stance in the Ukraine war or understand the depth of the influence of Mughal India? It's confusing as we don't know if what arrives in its place will inform these students more eloquently about these concepts.

Perhaps, all these deletions and exclusions are good news. This is the order of our days. In today's times, ideas, especially those of diversity, struggles and non-alignment, are dangerous for young minds. What if they begin asking questions? What if they refuse to hate, or grow up unprejudiced? What if they turn to seek a path of protest? The entire purpose of education would be lost. They, then, are unlikely to fit in anywhere while discussing such ideas or reading Faiz.

So it's not surprising that many think the consequences of these exclusions are insignificant. We grew up reading everyone from Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, Agyeya, and Mahadevi Varma, alongside Faiz. Our ideas of dissent and freedom were informed as much by the material we read in textbooks as by the poetry we quoted — albeit in jest as we were still too young to comprehend its depth of meaning.

But the poetry stuck with us and does till today. We argued and questioned the rules, refusing the hate that society and the media handed out to us. Faiz and his friends did indeed ruin us.

So, for us ruined folks who grew up believing in the idea of a Subcontinental culture that sweeps across what we now recognise as independent countries, Faiz and other exclusions seem a deep cut. But it comes as no surprise, either. Faiz, whose words surround us in the popular culture of the Subcontinent, has always troubled the minds of smaller men. His poetry is remembered and reinvented every few years enrapturing us, yet again.

Erasure, of Faiz, or the ideas of humanism, democracy, and diversity is not possible. But do ask what these exclusions will cost our future generations. What will our children learn about the ideals on which the world's largest democracy brought together peoples of different languages, cultures, food habits and faiths? People who struggled together against oppression in action, poetry and song. And yet always found enough common ground to live together, irrespective of the many divisions of caste, class, gender, language and faith.



Reading Faiz in these times — when your religion, not your culture, is your identity, when the choice of what to wear, what to eat, what music to listen to is curtailed — is certainly needed. But who will argue for him to be read by our children?

Meanwhile, despite these deletions, Faiz, the poet, though long gone, continues to fervently ask questions. Someone mentions Faiz, someone sings him, someone quotes him. And then, he comes back again, rudely, uninvited, into the room and the conversation. With him creep in ideas of freedom, democracy, dissent, diversity, and exclusion. And then someone quotes another nazm. This time, it's the familiar "Hum dekhenge". We shall see...

NOW, DONKEYS' MILK WORKS UP A LATHER

It is said that Cleopatra used to bathe in donkey milk to preserve her legendary beauty. The Kerala Khadi and Village Industries Board has brought back the age-old beauty secret of the queen of the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt in the form of a beauty soap under its banner. The soap, under the brand name 'Baymos Bay', contains donkey's milk and is made by Sari Changaramkumarath, a woman entrepreneur from Thrissur.

The soap was a hit at the Ente Keralam mega exhibition held here recently in connection with the Kerala government's first anniversary.

Baymos Bay has a series of beauty products, including soaps, serums, gels and creams, which contain ingredients such as donkey, camel and goat milk and clay from various countries, including France, Greece, Morocco, China and Jordan.

Considered a natural elixir of youth, donkey milk, which is packed with vitamins, nutrients and antioxidants, has anti-ageing properties, says Ms. Changaramkumarath who holds a Ph.D in Wellness.

"Donkey milk has been used not just for skin care but as a super food for many years. It contains many vitamins, including Vitamin A, B1, B6, C and Omega 3 and 6. It is good for infants, especially for gastric problems and skin allergies. It improves immunity. Donkey milk-based products are used for the treatment of psoriasis and eczema," she says.

Ms. Changaramkumarath started making soaps for her eight-year-old daughter. "The COVID-19 lockdown gave me time and a chance to experiment with soap making." Later, she joined a course on cosmetic science.

"I made 134 types of soaps with different ingredients, ranging from various types of milk, clay from different counties, saffron, honey, charcoal, shea butter and so on. I got a good response, especially for the products made using donkey milk."

She sources donkey milk from Tamil Nadu. One litre of donkey milk costs up to ₹7,000. Low yield and limited shelf life are the challenges, says Ms. Changaramkumarath.

The Kerala Khadi and Village Industries Board is marketing the handmade soaps.



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

INDONESIA'S PALM OIL EXPORT BAN

The story so far: Indonesia, the world's biggest producer, exporter, and consumer of palm oil, will ban all exports of the commodity and its raw materials from April 28 to reduce domestic shortages of cooking oil and bring down its skyrocketing prices, the country's President, Joko Widodo, announced on April 22. The announcement came amid surging global food prices as a consequence of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. Food prices rose by almost 13% globally in March according to the United Nations. It also coincided with the spring meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Washington D.C., where policymakers raised global food security concerns, emphasising that countries should avoid hoarding food stocks and refrain from exercising export controls.

How important is palm oil to global supply chains?

Palm oil is the world's most widely used vegetable oil with its global production in crop year 2020 exceeding 73 million tonnes (MT), according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Output is estimated to be 77 MT for the current year. Made from the African oil palm, it is used as cooking oil, and in everything from cosmetics to processed food to cleaning products.

The oil palm industry has come under criticism for what are reportedly unsustainable production practices leading to deforestation, and exploitative labour practices carried forward from the colonial era.

However, palm oil is preferred by many as it is inexpensive; oil palms produce more oil per hectare than other vegetable oil plants. Indonesia and Malaysia together account for almost 90% of the global palm oil production, with Indonesia producing the largest quantity at over 43 MT in the 2021 crop year.

According to Reuters, palm oil makes up 40% of the global supply of the four most widely used edible oils: palm, soybean, rapeseed (canola), and sunflower oil. Indonesia is responsible for 60% of the global supply of palm oil.

Why are the prices of edible oils rising?

The prices of palm oil rose this year as demand increased because of the short supply of alternative vegetable oils. The production of soybean oil, the second most-produced oil, is expected to take a hit this year due to a poor end soybean season in major producer Argentina. The production of canola oil was hit in Canada last year due to drought; and supplies of sunflower oil, 80-90% of which is produced by Russia and Ukraine, has been badly hit due to the ongoing conflict.

Consumers across the globe have been bearing the brunt of these factors, with the pandemic driving up global edible oil prices to record highs. After Indonesia's unprecedented announcement to ban palm oil exports, global prices of other vegetable oils saw spikes. The price of soybean oil on April 22, saw a 4.5% rise, taking it to a record high of 83.21 cents per pound on the Chicago Board of Trade. Soy oil prices have already seen a 50% rise so far this year.



How bad is Indonesia's palm oil crisis?

Indonesia uses palm oil for cooking purposes. The palm oil used for cooking is made by processing crude palm oil (CPO). Due to short supply of alternative vegetable oils, lower-than-expected output from the second-biggest palm oil producer Malaysia due to pandemic-induced labour shortage, the global food inflation linked to the pandemic and the Ukraine crisis, the global prices of CPO had risen significantly since the end of last year.

The price of CPO rose from an already high rate of \$1,131 per metric tonne in 2021 to its highest ever price of \$1,552 in February this year. The global rise affected the price of palm oil in Indonesia, which sells two types of cooking oil — expensive branded cooking oil and cheaper non-branded oil in bulk. The country saw the price of branded palm oil go from 14,000 Indonesian rupiah (IDR) per litre in March 2021, to 22,000 IDR in March this year.

In order to make cooking oil affordable, the Indonesian government introduced price caps in late January; deciding that the MRP of branded oil could not exceed 14,000 IDR, while that of the local product would remain at 11,500 IDR. The issue of consumers hoarding the commodity and reports of it being resold, made the government introduce a two-litre-per-person rule for buying cooking oil. Some sellers were inking the fingers of consumers, as done during voting, to ensure that they don't buy twice.

Amid reports of hoarding of cooking oil by consumers and producers, and producers being discouraged from making more oil owing to the gap between rising global prices and capped prices at home, Indonesia, the biggest palm oil maker, started witnessing an acute shortage of cooking oil. To meet domestic demand, the government announced another policy called domestic market obligation (DMO), under which it required CPO exporters to sell 20% of export volume domestically, at a fixed price of 9,300 IDR per kg. This was later increased to 30%.

These policies, observers said, had an inverse effect on the domestic supply as the price controls and domestic quotas became ineffective amid the global price rise. The government retracted the price caps and export quota in late March but introduced a tax on exports, should the global prices go beyond \$1,500 per metric tonne.

Indonesian Trade Minister Muhammad Lutfi also accused producers of engaging in illegal hoarding, cartel practices and of acquiring illicit export permits amid the export restrictions. Investigations into both these matters are currently underway in the country.

The cooking oil shortage could in part also be attributed to Indonesia using large quantities of CPO to make biodiesel, which it has branded as 'green diesel', despite palm oil production being known to be environmentally degrading. In late 2019, the country increased the palm oil content to be used in biodiesel to 30%. Reuters reported that it used over seven MT of palm oil out of its total national output of 41.4 MT in 2020, on biodiesel.

How will it impact India?

India is the biggest importer of palm oil which makes up 40% of its vegetable oil consumption, as per the USDA. India meets half of its annual need for 8.3 MT of palm oil from Indonesia. Last year, the Centre also unveiled its plan to boost India's domestic palm oil production.

Already grappling with record-high wholesale inflation, the late January export controls exercised by Indonesia had led to a 38% rise in the landed cost of CPO in India. The price of soybean oil,



most consumed after palm oil, rose by 29% in the country this year; while sunflower oil, 90% of which India gets from Russia and Ukraine, stopped coming in almost completely.

Amid this situation, India had requested Indonesia in March to increase palm oil shipments to make up for the short supply and expensive alternatives. Despite the rising prices of the commodity, India's palm oil imports jumped 21% in March from the previous month as traders moved to secure alternatives to sunflower oil that could no longer be bought from Ukraine, four dealers told Reuters.

After the ban was announced by Indonesia, Atul Chaturvedi, president of the Solvent Extractors' Association of India told The Hindu BusinessLine "This uncalled-for action (by Indonesia) has got massive repercussions for India. Local prices in Indonesia may fall as a result of this decision, but prices in India may skyrocket. It is going to be a difficult time."

FUELLING FRICTION

At a meeting with Chief Ministers about the resurgence of COVID-19 on Wednesday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi charged Opposition-ruled States with committing an injustice to the people by not cutting duties on petroleum products as the Centre had done in November 2021. Those cuts of ₹5 and ₹10 per litre of petrol and diesel, respectively, came as fuel prices crossed well past ₹100 a litre — those levels have been breached again after a poll-driven lull. The PM noted that the Centre's plea at the time, for States to back these cuts by paring their VAT levies on petroleum products, was not heeded by States not governed by the BJP. But even NDA-administered States are now facing extremely high inflation — retail inflation in April was 8.19% for Uttar Pradesh and Assam, and 7.4% to 7.6% in Bihar, Jammu & Kashmir and Haryana — far higher than the national retail inflation rate of 6.95% for the month. The PM's remarks, buttressed by the slogan of cooperative federalism, attracted an instant backlash from West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Kerala, Telangana, Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh. While all States are fretful about resource constraints and pending dues from the Centre, some had reduced VAT on fuel products and others have not hiked rates for years. Despite its recent assertions that no taxes were levied to counter the pandemic, the Centre had hiked fuel taxes even amid the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown with a preference for cess levies that do not have to be shared with States.

While the political brouhaha over the PM's pitch unfolds, the signal for the common man is clear — abandon any hope of immediate relief. This is akin to striking a cruel blow against the middle and lower-income classes, already besieged by successive setbacks on the job, health and income fronts. Household budgets are severely squeezed because of price rise. Even industry has mooted fuel tax cuts to sustain a fragile consumption recovery. With record tax collections last year and revenue buoyancy expected to hold up this year, the Centre has fiscal room to slash its fuel taxes, and there will be an automatic cascading effect on State taxes levied on an ad valorem basis. Expecting States, which are worried about their limited revenue sources once the assured GST compensation stops flowing from this July, to take the lead in reining in petroleum taxes, is unwieldy, short-sighted and unnecessarily confrontational. Even more so as the States are also expected to ramp up capex spending to revive the economy. As the PM said, the Centre and States need to coordinate better to spur the economy amid global tumult. Singling out a few States to deflect attention from the Centre's excessive reliance on fuel taxes is not the right approach to attain such harmony. Most of all, as high inflation will debilitate the recovery's momentum, shirking corrective action to bolster its revenue kitty would be a case of being penny wise and pound foolish.



CALIBRATE THE RATE

To achieve a revenue neutral structure, adjustments to GST rates could be carried out in a phased manner

In September last year, the GST Council had tasked a group of ministers to look into the contentious issue of rate rationalisation. The GoM, headed by Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai, was also expected to examine the issue of the inverted duty structure and review the list of goods that were exempted from the tax. The rationale for setting up the committee was straightforward — to expand the tax base and boost revenues. While GST collections have improved of late — collections touched an all-time high of Rs 1.42 lakh crore in March — on the whole, they have fallen short of expectations. And considering that GST forms a substantial part of general government tax revenue, lower than expected collections have fiscal implications at both the central and state levels. For states which are unlikely to have the cushion of revenue garnered through the compensation cess after June this year, the situation will be particularly challenging in the absence of a significant pick-up in overall collections.

The lower than expected collections can, in part, be attributed to issues of compliance, and lower tax rates. While, over the years, the GST Council has taken steps to not only address the administrative issues, but also to also raise compliance levels, the tax rates levied continue to remain lower as compared to those under the earlier regime. As per a report by the RBI, the weighted average GST rate fell from 14.4 per cent at the time of inception to 11.6 per cent in 2019 as a consequence of a series of tax cuts between November 2017 and December 2018. To put this in perspective, the Subramanian Committee report had estimated the revenue neutral rate at 15.5 per cent.

Considering the current rate structure — there are several rates, ranging from zero to special rates for diamonds and jewellery, the standard rates of 5 per cent, 12 per cent and 18 per cent and the top rate of 28 per cent — several suggestions have been made to simplify the rate structure and achieve revenue neutrality. These range from reducing the exemptions given to merging the 12 per cent and 18 per cent slabs to raising the 5 per cent slab to 8 per cent. As per reports, the GST Council in its meeting next month is likely to delve into these issues. While the Council should consider aligning the rates to pre-GST levels, it should be guided by the objective of streamlining the multiple rate structure, reducing the slabs. The situation has, however, been complicated by the recent surge in inflation. Retail inflation, as measured by the consumer price index, rose to 6.95 per cent in March, and is unlikely to subside quickly. Thus, rather than opting for a one-time adjustment to the rate structure, perhaps a more prudent approach would be to opt for a phased recalibration.

HOW QUICKLY CAN INDIA MOVE AWAY FROM COAL?

The story so far: On Friday, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, requesting him to ensure adequate supply of coal to the power-generating units in the State. In Maharashtra, Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar said the State government planned to import coal to cope with the power crisis. The other top power-consuming State in the country, Gujarat, is also planning to import coal, according to reports. Decline in coal stocks and the resulting power outages in several States have spurred queries of renewable energy's potential to fill in for the conventional resource. Earlier this week, coal stocks in more than 100 thermal power plants in India fell below the critical mark (less than 25% of the required stock) while it was less than 10% in over 50 plants across India. On Saturday, the Minister for Coal and Mines, Pralhad



Joshi, said at present 72.5 million tonnes (MT) of coal is available at different sources of Coal India, Singareni Collieries and coal washeries, and 22.01 MT with thermal power plants. “There is sufficient coal availability in the country, to last over a month, which is being replenished daily with record production,” he tweeted.

Is there a coal crisis?

Coal accounts for 55% of the country’s energy needs, according to Mr. Joshi. The India Energy Outlook 2021 report of the International Energy Agency (IEA) said energy use in India has doubled since 2000, with 80% of demand still being met by coal, oil and solid biomass. Pandemic-related disruptions, however, prevented the stock-up of coal. Mining operations were halted to curb the spread of the virus. Despite the gradual easing into operations, mining activities were hampered during the monsoons, delaying arrival of stocks. With household demand for power picking up and the arrival of summer, combined with the sudden acceleration in economic activity, it has resulted in a demand-supply mismatch. The country had experienced a similar situation last October, but with peak summer approaching, the coal stock situation is more worrisome now because demand for power will be high. The energy demand will go up as urbanisation and the population increase. The IEA estimates that despite the shock from COVID-19, India’s demand is expected to grow by almost 5% a year till 2040.

What is the consumption pattern?

Coal is abundantly available, has shorter gestation periods and coal-based plants have lower capital costs than hydel and nuclear plants, therefore, making it the most viable enabler of energy security in the country. The conventional resource’s capacity addition is further helped by the increased participation of the private sector in power generation. In Washington recently, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said India’s move away from coal will be hampered by the war in Ukraine. At the recently concluded Budget session, Mr. Joshi said, “Despite push for renewables, [the] country will require base load capacity of coal-based generation for stability and also for energy security.”

Where does India stand on renewable energy sources?

The report of the Central Electricity Authority on optimal generation capacity mix for 2029-30 estimates that the share of renewable energy in the gross electricity generation is expected to be around 40% by that financial year. The Union government has spent ₹3,793 crore until March 14 in 2021-22 for implementing varied renewable energy-related schemes and programmes.

A total of 152.90 GW of renewable energy capacity has been installed in the country as on February 28, as per government figures. This includes 50.78 GW from solar power, 40.13 GW from wind power, 10.63 GW from bio-power, 4.84 GW from small hydel power and 46.52 GW from large hydel power. In accordance with the Prime Minister’s announcement at COP26 (the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference), the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy aspires to install 500 GW of electricity capacity from non-fossil fuel sources by 2030.

In 2020-21, as per the CEA, 1,381.83 billion units (bu) was generated in total, of which renewable energy sources’ share was 297.55 bu — representing 21.5% of the overall generation. Up to August 2021, the share stood at 24%. “Over the next 10 years, the strong growth of renewables is not sufficient in the stated policies scenario to keep up with the projected pace of electricity demand growth, and coal-fired power generation makes up the difference...,” the IEA said in its report on India.



What are the challenges?

The capacity of a plant does not necessarily translate into the actual power it generates for the grid, some of it is lost owing to external factors such as heat or transmission losses. This applies for both renewable and conventional sources.

Solar and wind energy are variable resources with 'variability' being particularly exposed during periods of peak demand. For example, solar energy is abundantly available during daytime in summers. However, the domestic consumption peaks in the evenings when we turn on the air-conditioner after returning from work. With no sunlight outside then, energy requirement and supply face a mismatch. Another dimension to it is the seasonal variation. In monsoons, solar energy is barely available with wind energy available in abundance.

Another factor is spatial variability. Regions near coastal areas enjoy more wind and therefore, possess greater ability to produce wind energy, like Gujarat, in comparison to States which are drier and experience more sunlight, like Rajasthan. Use of renewable energy, therefore, would essentially require a balancing act.

What about transmission and storage?

Transmission and storage are central to addressing variability issues. They help cope with the 'duck curve' power demand among consumers in India. Resembling a duck, the curve is a graphical representation exhibiting the difference between the demand and availability of energy through the day. With both wind and solar being variable sources — it becomes imperative to establish a complementing model. This would require import and export technologies between States as well as optimising the trade between those with differing demand and production profiles. "Thermal plants in the eastern region, by contrast, provide flexibility for demand centres to the south and west, which have high industrial and agricultural loads and may call on imports during periods of low renewables availability," IEA says.

GENERATING ENERGY FROM BANANA PEEL

In the 1985 science fiction film *Back to the Future*, a flamboyant inventor modifies his car into a plutonium-powered time machine and travels back and forth in time. During a visit to the year 2015, he updates his engine so that it will now take any form of matter for generating energy — even a carrot or two tossed into the "tank" will do.

Well, 2015 has gone past us. Fusion-powered vehicles are still beyond the horizon. And we keep hoping for new and better ways of extracting clean energy from renewable sources. Such as carrots, or maybe bananas — which is indeed what has been achieved by a research group working at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (Chemical Science, 2022).

Their version of the banana split involved the splitting of biomass — banana peel, orange peel, coconut shells — by flashes of light emanating from a xenon lamp.

Appeal of hydrogen

But before looking at this innovative approach, a few words about what makes hydrogen an attractive energy source. Storing large quantities of energy in a modest amount of space is a vital requirement, and hydrogen has an impressive energy storage capacity. While classifying fuels in



terms of their energy value (also called heating value), the deciding elements are carbon, hydrogen and oxygen. Hydrogen has an energy value that is seven times that of carbon.

In the burning of wood, carbon and hydrogen are oxidised in a heat-generating reaction, the end products of which are carbon dioxide and water. The former is a greenhouse gas, contributing to global warming. Burning of hydrogen gives us only water and heat.

A smarter way to harness the energy in hydrogen would be to generate electricity with it. This is achieved in a proton exchange membrane fuel cell where, in the presence of a metal catalyst, a hydrogen molecule is split into protons and electrons, with the electrons providing the current output.

Transport vehicles

Such fuel cells are now used to power a few light passenger transport vehicles in some parts of the world. Unlike electric cars, hydrogen-powered cars have a refuelling time of only about five minutes. Commercially available hydrogen-powered cars have fuel tanks that can carry 5-6 kg of compressed hydrogen, with each kilo providing a range of about 100 km (and emitting nine litres of water, mostly as steam).

The limited popularity of hydrogen as fuel is due to production and distribution restraints. It is safer to handle than domestic cooking gas.

Industrial-level quantities of Hydrogen gas are used in processes such as the production of ammonia for fertilizers. Over 90% of the world's hydrogen is produced from fossil fuels.

This brings us back to the search for alternative sources of energy that do not tax the environment. Biomass is a catch-all term for organic waste material of plant and animal origin. It is a rich source of both hydrogen and carbon — our dried banana peel has a hydrogen content of 5%, and 33% is carbon. An important goal of all climate change-curbing protocols is to sequester as much carbon as possible — don't let it become a gas.

The Swiss group uses pyrolysis, wherein organic matter is decomposed using small bursts of intense heat under inert conditions.

Flashes of irradiation from a xenon lamp provide the heat — a total of 15 milliseconds of irradiation are enough to heat the system to 600 degrees Celsius, and decompose a kilogram of banana peel powder — liberating 100 litres of hydrogen gas.

This short burst of photothermal energy also produces 330 grams of biochar, a solid residue that is rich in carbon.

It is worth noting here that if the biomass had been burnt, gaseous carbon would have escaped as carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide. Pyrolysis ensures that carbon remains sequestered as a solid.

Benefits of biochar

Biochar has other uses too — apart from safekeeping carbon, biochar has several uses in agriculture.

Agricultural leftovers such as rice husk are a major source of biomass, and the biochar it forms has significant mineral content. Adding it to soil enriches plant nutrients.



The porous nature of biochar makes it suitable for remediation — the adsorption of toxic substances in polluted soils - thus reducing the potency of contaminants in the soil (Annals Agric. Sci., 2019).

Biomass, be it from banana peel, or tree bark or poultry manure, thus improves air quality and adds value to agricultural produce — while setting in motion that emission-free car.

DATA, INTERRUPTED

India's official statistical machinery is gearing up to relaunch the All-India Household Consumer Expenditure Survey, traditionally undertaken quinquennially, from July 2022. If it fructifies, the result may be known towards the latter half of 2024, provided the Government permits the release. The last such Survey (2017-18), did not get such a sanction — its results reportedly indicated the first fall in monthly per-capita spending by households since 1972-73, with rural households facing a sharper decline compared to 2011-12. The Statistics Ministry had flagged 'discrepancies', 'data quality issues' and 'divergences' between estimated consumption levels and the actual output of goods and services. While it had sought to scuttle suggestions that unflattering data were being obfuscated, a better course of action would have been to release the data with caveats. It could have argued, for instance, that the numbers, at best, reflect the short-term impact of the 'bold structural reforms' carried out in the year preceding the Survey, to 'formalise' the economy — demonetisation and the GST. A fresh survey could then have been commissioned later for a clearer picture. This is what the UPA had done in 2011-12 to measure employment and consumer spending levels afresh, after the 2009-10 Surveys were affected by the global financial crisis and a severe drought that hit rural incomes.

The Government had promised to examine the 'feasibility' of a fresh Consumer Spending Survey, over 2020-21 and 2021-22, after 'incorporating all data quality refinements' mooted by a panel. One hopes the exact 'refinements' are spelt out upfront in the upcoming Survey. Of equal import is providing data comparable with past numbers, while factoring in changes in consumption patterns; and it may still not be too late to release the previous Survey's findings to help assess longer term trends. The absence of official data on such a critical aspect of the economy — used to estimate poverty levels, rebase GDP, and to make private investment decisions — for over a decade, is damaging to India. Being a free-market and transparent democracy distinguished India from the likes of China where official data are read with a pinch of salt. The Government's actions, including the delayed release of critical jobs data, have dulled that perception. If anything, such Surveys need to be conducted more frequently for more effective policy actions informed by ground realities, no matter how unpleasant they may be. Now, imperfect proxies are deployed to gauge the economy, surmises made about the extinction of extreme poverty, and outlays are tom-tommed without evidence on outcomes. The NSO must be empowered to collect and disseminate more data points, without fear of insinuations about its abilities, or a looming axe on its regular Surveys.

EXPLAINED: STATE OF (UN)EMPLOYMENT IN INDIA

Data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) shows that India's labour force participation rate (LFPR) has fallen to just 40% from an already low 47% in 2016. This suggests not only that more than half of India's population in the working-age group (15 years and older) is deciding to sit out of the job market, but also that this proportion of people is increasing.

What is LFPR?

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

47

Telegram: http://t.me/DreamIAS_Jamshedpur



Before understanding LFPR, we need to define the labour force itself. According to the CMIE, the labour force consists of persons who are of age 15 years or older, and belong to either of the following two categories:

* are employed

* are unemployed and are willing to work and are actively looking for a job

There is a crucial commonality between the two categories — they both have people “demanding” jobs. This demand is what LFPR refers to. While those in category 1 succeed in getting a job, those in category 2 fail to do so.

Thus, the LFPR essentially is the percentage of the working-age (15 years or older) population that is asking for a job; it represents the “demand” for jobs in an economy. It includes those who are employed and those who are unemployed. The Unemployment Rate (UER), which is routinely quoted in the news, is nothing but the number of unemployed (category 2) as a proportion of the labour force.

What is the significance of LFPR in India?

Typically, it is expected that the LFPR will remain largely stable. As such, any analysis of unemployment in an economy can be done just by looking at the UER.

But, in India, the LFPR is not only lower than in the rest of the world but also falling. This, in turn, affects the UER because LFPR is the base (the denominator) on which UER is calculated.

The world over, LFPR is around 60%. In India, it has been sliding over the last 10 years and has shrunk from 47% in 2016 to just 40% as of December 2021.

This shrinkage implies that merely looking at UER will under-report the stress of unemployment in India.

How is it under-reported?

Imagine that there are just 100 people in the working-age group but only 60 ask for jobs — that is, the LFPR is 60% — and of these 60 people, 6 did not get a job. This would imply a UER of 10%.

Now imagine a scenario when the LFPR has fallen to 40% and, as such, only 40 people are demanding work. And of these 40, only 2 people fail to get a job. The UER would have fallen to 5% and it might appear that the economy is doing better on the jobs front but the truth is starkly different.

The truth is that beyond the 2 who are unemployed, a total of 20 people have stopped demanding work. Typically, this happens when people in the working-age get disheartened from not finding work.

Something similar has happened in India’s case. The LFPR has sustained a secular decline. In fact, every time the LFPR falls, the UER also falls — because fewer people are now demanding jobs — giving the incorrect impression to policymakers that the situation has improved.

The main reason for India’s LFPR being low is the abysmally low level of female LFPR.

So, what is the correct way to assess India’s unemployment stress?



When LFPR is falling as steadily and as sharply as it has done in India's case, it is better to track another variable: the Employment Rate (ER).

The ER refers to the total number of employed people as a percentage of the working-age population.

By using the working-age population as the base and looking at the number of people with jobs (instead of those without them), the ER captures the fall in LFPR to better represent the stress in the labour market.

If one looks at the ER data, it becomes clear that while India's working-age population has been increasing each year, the percentage of people with jobs has been coming down sharply.

Looking at the absolute numbers makes the stress even more clear. In December 2021, India had 107.9 crore people in the working age group and of these, only 40.4 crore had a job (an ER of 37.4%). Compare this with December 2016 when India had 95.9 crore in the working-age group and 41.2 crore with jobs (ER 43%). In five years, while the total working-age population has gone up by 12 crore, the number of people with jobs has gone down by 80 lakh.

Why is India's LFPR so low?

The main reason for India's LFPR being low is the abysmally low level of female LFPR. According to CMIE data, as of December 2021, while the male LFPR was 67.4%, the female LFPR was as low as 9.4%. In other words, less than one in 10 working-age women in India are even demanding work. Even if one sources data from the World Bank, India's female labour force participation rate is around 25% when the global average is 47%.

Why do so few women demand work?

There are several reasons.

One reason is essentially about the working conditions — such as law and order, efficient public transportation, violence against women, societal norms etc — being far from conducive for women to seek work.

The other has to do with correctly measuring women's contribution to the economy. Academics such as Ashwini Deshpande, professor of economics at Ashoka University, have pointed out methodological issues in formally capturing women's contribution to the economy since a lot of women in India are exclusively involved within their own homes (caring for their family) of their own volition. Lastly, it is also a question of adequate job opportunities for women.

How do people who leave the labour force survive?

According to Mahesh Vyas, CEO of CMIE, households with more than one working member often witness this phenomenon. He said the fall in the LFPR since 2016 has been accompanied by a fall in the proportion of households where more than one person is employed. "The fall in LFPR has largely been the result of the additional person employed in a typical household losing a job," he said.



LIFE & SCIENCE

SWEPT AWAY

The dire warnings of climate change experts are coming true. Flooding caused by torrential rainfall in the past two weeks has claimed close to 500 lives and left thousands homeless in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province. Tens of thousands of people in Durban are, reportedly, without water and there are concerns of an infectious disease outbreak. Authorities fear the toll could climb much higher.

Intense rainfall in spring and early summer is part of South Africa's weather pattern. In April-May, a low-pressure system, stemming from the westerly trough systems of cold air, develops south of the country and often results in inclement weather. In 2019, flash floods claimed 85 lives in Durban. But the intensity of the downpour this year was unprecedented. Some parts of KwaZulu-Natal experienced a year's rainfall in less than 36 hours. The weather vagary is straight out of classical climate change literature: Warmer seas push large amounts of moisture into the atmosphere leading to intense spells of rainfall. But that's one part of the story. The deluge's catastrophic turn has much to do with a failing that's common to several parts of the world, including India: Durban's drainage system that has, at best, seen cosmetic improvements in more than a century, was ill-equipped to handle the relentless downpour.

As in climate disasters in most parts of the world, the poor in South Africa have borne the brunt. Durban is a city of migrants, and large numbers live in shacks, locally called "informal settlements". These houses — an Apartheid-era legacy of the poor living in low-lying areas — were the first to be swept away by the flash floods. Experts have sounded the red alert for more extreme weather events in South Africa in the coming years. As in other parts of the world, the way forward lies in improving the accuracy of warning systems, and building the resilience of people, especially the poor. This should be the focus of adaptation strategies.

YOUR DOG'S PERSONALITY MAY HAVE LITTLE TO DO WITH ITS BREED

Research confirms what dog lovers know — every pup is truly an individual.

Many of the popular stereotypes about the behaviour of golden retrievers, poodles or schnauzers, for example, aren't supported by science, according to a new study.

While physical traits such as a greyhound's long legs or a Dalmatian's spots are clearly inherited, breed is not a strong predictor of any individual dog's personality.

The researchers' work, published Thursday in the journal *Science*, marshals a massive dataset to reach these conclusions — the most ever compiled, said Adam Boyko, a geneticist at Cornell University, who was not involved in the study.

Dogs became humanity's best friend more than 14,000 years ago, as the only animal domesticated before the advent of agriculture.

But the concept of dog breeds is much more recent. Around 160 years ago, people began to selectively breed dogs to have certain consistent physical traits, like coat texture and colour and ear shape.



The researchers surveyed more than 18,000 dog owners and analysed the genomes of about 2,150 of their dogs to look for patterns.

They found that some behaviours — such as howling, pointing and showing friendliness to human strangers — do have at least some genetic basis. But that inheritance isn't strictly passed down along breed lines.

For example, they found golden retrievers that don't retrieve, said co-author Kathryn Lord, who studies animal behaviour with Karlsson.

Some breeds, such as huskies and beagles, may show a greater tendency to howl. But many of these dogs don't, as both the owner survey and genetic data showed.

The researchers could find no genetic basis for aggressive behaviours nor a link to specific breeds.

"The correlation between dog behaviour and dog breed is much lower than most expected," said Jeff Kidd, a geneticist at the University of Michigan, who had no role in the research.

BUYING FREE SPEECH

After buying Twitter for \$44 billion, billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk made a pitch for free speech. "I hope that even my worst critics remain on Twitter," he tweeted, "because that is what free speech means". He also likened Twitter to "a digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated". The world's richest man talking about free speech and humanity's future after buying one of the most influential social media platforms seems to be the most politically correct thing to do. But it is certainly ironic considering that the billionaire buyer had no qualms over the years about using the social media platform to aggressively promote his business interests as well as block and, some may say even bully, critics. But in saying what he has said, Mr. Musk has put the spotlight on what has been a sensitive issue for Twitter in recent years — its inability to convincingly come across as a platform where healthy conversations can take place. Often, those indulging in hate speech and threatening violence have found full play on the platform until authorities put in a request for withholding of the offensive tweets. Whatever it did toward that goal — from creating policies around abuse and disinformation to unleashing technology for spotting problematic content early — did little to change the perception. One need not even consider its move to permanently ban the then U.S. President Donald Trump to make the point that it, at times, has come across as an interested player rather than a disinterested platform — its inconsistencies in labelling content as problematic would alone suffice.

What Mr. Musk does next toward promoting free speech on the platform would be keenly watched. The first challenge to this is the fact that free speech is understood differently by people belonging to different political ideologies. But, Mr. Musk is all for a light touch in moderating content. CNN quoted him as saying in a recent TED conference that, "If in doubt, let the speech exist." He added, "If it's a gray area, I would say, let the tweet exist. But obviously in the case where there's perhaps a lot of controversy, you would not necessarily want to promote the tweet." He is also in favour of increasing trust by making the algorithms open source and using technology to spot spam bots. Would that improve the situation? Perhaps. Would he do away with the safeguards Twitter has built over time? One hopes not. But Mr. Musk may realise in the journey that the issue of free speech is not so black-and-white from the vantage point of a platform owner. For, he is no longer just only a Twitter user with over 80 million followers.



TRUE LOVE

Here's the synopsis for a great romantic drama: A relatively shy, hard-working man falls in love with a pop star. They meet online, fall in love and decide to get married. But the world and their families can't accept the union. They are from different worlds, after all. He's just a regular guy and she is — here comes the twist — a piece of digital and robotic fiction. Despite what seems like the most insurmountable of divides — between the organic and inorganic, life and not-life — Akihiko Konda is managing to make his marriage work. In 2018, the Japanese “fictosexual” tied the knot with Hatsune Miku, a computer-synthesised pop singer. He has recently become a spokesperson for others like him.

It is easy to laugh at Konda, or to think of the growing number of fictosexuals — people in love with fictional characters — as delusional. But they have probably cracked the secret of the fairytale romance. Isn't all love delusional, after all? Don't the subtle algorithms that govern social behaviour make people pretend to be someone other than they truly are? Dress well on a first date; ask interesting questions for the first month; pretend to be a “sapiosexual” overcome by “wanderlust”; hide the insecurities and warts for the first few years. And, if all goes well, people make a commitment, sometimes for life. Then, so often, the fantasy ends. It turns out, that like all fiction, love and marriage are often acts of projection, of imagining qualities in a paramour that may or may not exist. That's why, perhaps, marriage is a contract — with a penalty for violating its terms.

Since so much of romantic love begins in lies and ends in disappointment, what's wrong in going into it with your eyes open? Konda's relationship with Miku may be one-sided, and imaginary. But at least he knows it.

FLOUNDERING POLIO ERADICATION

The recent news of wild poliovirus type 1 (WPV1) in Malawi imported from Pakistan and of polio outbreak in Israel caused by ‘circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 3’ (cVDPV3) are visible signs of floundering polio eradication. When a virus in oral polio vaccine (OPV) de-attenuates by mutations, acquiring transmission efficiency and neuro-virulence, it is called cVDPV.

The eradication target, when launched in 1988, was 2000, as “a gift of the twentieth century to the twenty-first”. The World Health Organization assumed the task, assigned by unanimous resolution in the World Health Assembly (WHA), the forum of Ministers of Health of all nations.

The resolution was perfectly timed: Rotary International launched its ‘PolioPlus’ project in 1985, to provide polio vaccines to under-five children of all developing countries before 2005. Of the six WHO regions, three — Americas, Europe and Western Pacific — had already independently resolved to eradicate polio in their territories by or before 2000. Incidentally, they achieved the goal more or less on time. WHO's task was essentially confined to the “Southern Arc” of the remaining regions — Africa, Eastern Mediterranean and South East Asia. Having failed the target of 2000, WHO revised it every 4-5 years; now it is 2026, as in the strategy document (<https://bit.ly/38fKrka>).

WHO's budget estimate

There are disturbing aspects of this extraordinarily slow pace. The WHO's original budget estimate for eradication was about \$5 million, but since 2000, the annual spending is about \$1



billion, raised through Rotary, Gates Foundation and rich country governments. A billion dollars is not an insignificant portion of WHO's annual budget. Countries in the three Southern Arc regions continue the eradication drill, like the curse of Sisyphus. India conducts one annual national and two sub-national pulse immunisation campaigns with bivalent (type 1 and 3) OPV (bOPV) for all children below five years, in addition to routine immunisation with five doses — totalling 10 to 15 doses per child in different States.

Every paediatric textbook warns that on rare occasions, OPV itself may cause vaccine-associated paralytic polio (VAPP) in vaccinated children (vaccinated VAPP) and unvaccinated child-contacts (contact VAPP). The commonest cause of vaccinated VAPP is type 3 vaccine virus and for contact VAPP, it is type 2.

These safety problems were known since 1964. For avoiding VAPP, rich countries immunise children with the inactivated polio virus vaccine (IPV), which is completely safe.

Should economics or ethics guide our choice between IPV and OPV? The low cost of OPV could be fallacious: will overall programme-cost be less for 10-15 doses of OPV, including campaigns, than IPV given through Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP)? We know of no such analysis.

Benefit-risk balance

Ethics is uncompromising. With SARS-CoV-2 vaccines, benefit-risk balance became widely understood. Against high risk of deaths due to COVID-19, vaccines with rare safety problems, including death, scored well on benefit-risk analysis. When the risk of WPV polio was annually two per 1000 pre-school children, and the risk of VAPP in one per 1,50,000 birth cohorts, the benefit was favourable for OPV. When the risk of death or paralysis falls low, the benefit-risk ratio reverses — as for COVID-19, so also for polio.

After WPV-2 was eradicated in 1999, the benefit of type 2 vaccine virus became defunct. The ethical problem of risk without benefit was neglected until cVDPV2 caused several outbreaks, beginning in 2006, forcing the tOPV (trivalent oral polio vaccine) to bOPV switch in 2016. WHO experts recommended one dose of IPV at 14 weeks of age to mitigate further risks of cVDPV2 outbreaks. But that was too little too late, as more countries continue with cVDPV2 outbreaks than have WPV type 1.

After wild virus type 3 was globally eradicated in 2012, vaccine virus type 3 had to be removed for avoiding VAPP. No agency has any right to cause VAPP in the name of eradication, especially after WPV-3 has been eradicated. This ethical dilemma remained invisible as VAPP is classified non-polio AFP. In Israel, cVDPV3 emerged and caused the outbreak. Only seven children were paralysed, all unvaccinated. The risk of paralysis with WPV-3 is one in 1,000 infected children — so at least 7,000 unvaccinated children were infected. Israel's population is less than 10 million, but ours is 1,400 million.

The probability of cVDPV3 outbreak is low in India, but on account of our population size of 1,400 million, its impact is likely to be enormous. India must withdraw type 3 and continue monovalent type 1 OPV, which also must be withdrawn after reaching 85-90% coverage with IPV, three doses per child.

HOW SELF-REPLICATING MRNA COVID-19 VACCINES WORK, AND WHAT TRIAL RESULTS SHOW



A self-amplifying mRNA vaccine — one in which the delivered RNA multiplies inside the body — has shown promising results against Covid-19 in ongoing phase 1/2/3 trials. The vaccine, ARCT-154, has been developed by Arcturus Therapeutics Holdings, based in San Diego, California, and its trials are in progress in Vietnam. It offered 95% protection against severe Covid-19 and death, and 55% against Covid infection, Arcturus said in a press release.

WHAT IT MEANS: An mRNA vaccine, such as those from Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna, use messenger RNA that encodes the spike protein of the coronavirus. In other words, the mRNA directs the cell to produce copies of the spike protein, so that the immune system will recognise the spike if and when actual infection takes place, and mount a response.

A self-amplifying mRNA vaccine is an improvement on the traditional RNA platform. It encodes four extra proteins in addition to the vaccine antigen, and these enable amplification of the original strand of RNA once inside the cell. The basic advantage is that it requires a smaller dose.

The analysis of severe Covid-19 disease (including deaths) included 43 severe cases. Forty-one cases occurred in the placebo group and two in the vaccinated group, demonstrating vaccine efficacy of 95%, the release said. Nine deaths were reported in the placebo group, and one in the vaccinated group, whom the company described as an older age group participant who was also at increased risk of severe Covid-19.

FROM ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN TO PRACTICAL USE: STUDY SHOWS OLD MASKS CAN STRENGTHEN CEMENT

With single-use masks during the pandemic now presenting an environmental problem, researchers have demonstrated the idea of incorporating old masks into a cement mixture to create stronger, more durable concrete. If they are not reused, disposable masks can remain in the environment for decades and pose a risk for the ecosystem.

In a paper published in the journal *Materials Letters*, researchers showed that the mixture using mask materials was 47% stronger than commonly used cement after a month of curing, Washington State University said in a press release.

Production of cement is a carbon-intensive process, responsible for 8% of carbon emissions worldwide. If concrete is reinforced with microfibres, it can potentially reduce the amount of cement needed for a project, or make the concrete last longer, saving carbon emissions as well as money. Medical masks have fibres that can be useful for the concrete industry.

“These waste masks actually could be a valuable commodity if you process them properly... This work showcases one technology to divert the used masks from the waste stream to a high-value application,” the release quoted the paper’s corresponding author Xianming Shi, professor of civil and environmental engineering, as saying.

The researchers developed a process to fabricate tiny mask fibres, ranging from 5 mm to 30 mm in length, and then added them to cement concrete to strengthen it and to prevent its cracking. They removed the metal and cotton loops from the masks, cut them up and incorporated them into ordinary Portland cement. They mixed the mask microfibres into a solution of graphene oxide before adding the mixture to cement paste. Without the fibres, microscopic cracks in the concrete would eventually lead to wider cracks and the material’s failure, the release said.



The researchers are conducting more studies to test their idea that the graphene oxide-treated microfibres could also improve the durability of the concrete and protect it from frost damage and from deicing chemicals that are used on roadways. They also envision applying this technology to the recycling of other polymer materials, such as discarded clothing, to incentivise the collection of such waste.

The study was led by Zhipeng Li, a graduate student in WSU's Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering. The study was funded through the US Department of Transportation's National Center for Transportation Infrastructure Durability and Life Extension.

ASTHMA DRUG BLOCKS PROTEIN CRUCIAL TO REPLICATION OF CORONAVIRUS: IISc STUDY

A widely available drug, used for treatment of asthma and allergies, can also block a protein that is key to replication of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19, a study by Indian Institute of Science (IISc) researchers has found. The study has been published in the journal eLife.

The drug: The drug, montelukast, is an oral treatment given to prevent wheezing, difficulty breathing, chest tightness, and coughing caused by asthma, and also used to prevent breathing difficulties during exercise, according to the US National Library of Medicine.

"Montelukast is prescribed in India by physicians. It is readily available as tablets and syrup (for kids) in pharmacy shops under different brand names," IISc Assistant Professor Tanweer Hussain, senior author of the study, told The Indian Express.

In fact, some clinicians were using montelukast to treat Covid-19 patients because of its known role in making breathing easier in asthma patients, Hussain said. "However, it was not known that this drug also has antiviral activity, which we have figured out in this study."

Targeting Nsp1, therefore, can reduce the damage inflicted by the virus. And the IISc researchers found that montelukast binds strongly to Nsp1, blocking its access to the ribosome.

Other viral proteins could, of course, still bind elsewhere on the host cell. "However, blocking viral Nsp1 allows the host cells to synthesise immune effector proteins to fight the viral infection," Hussain said.

Also, Nsp1's mutation rate is very low compared to other viral proteins, which means Nsp1 is likely to remain largely unchanged in any virus variants that emerge, Hussain said. Hence drugs targeting this region are expected to work against all such variants.

How the drug was identified: The researchers first used computational modelling to screen more than 1,600 drugs approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). "A new molecule will have to clear all phase trials before it can be prescribed to patients, which would require months and years to complete. Hence we looked for candidates among USFDA-approved drugs," Hussain said.

The researchers shortlisted a dozen drugs that binds to Nsp1, among which they zeroed in on montelukast and saquinavir, an anti-HIV drug. Lab tests on cultured human cells then showed that only montelukast was able to rescue Nsp1's inhibition of protein synthesis.