



CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

12th to 18th June 2022



INTERNATIONAL

UPHOLDING THE RIGHT TO REPAIR

The U.S. state of New York recently passed the Fair Repair Act, which requires manufacturers to supply repair information, tools, and parts to independent repair shops and not just their own stores or partners. This provides consumers with the right to repair and refurbish their purchased goods. With access to relevant tools and repair manuals, independent repair shops will finally be able to compete with manufacturers. While this is a victory for consumer rights, privacy, security and quality concerns along with blatant intellectual property (IP) rights violations of the manufacturers cannot be sidelined.

What should be the scope of the right?

The scope of the right can only be determined in the domestic context of the country. We use complex machinery as compared to the past. For instance, air conditioners have largely replaced fans and coolers. An entire repair class is, in effect, denied its right to conduct business as it does not have the tools, parts, guidelines and technical know-how to repair these high-tech products. Further, the lack of certification/licensing of repair workers is seen as a reflection of their lack of skills. But a repair certification/licence can be allotted to those who pass certain criteria and skill tests. In addition to protecting their right to livelihood, it may also prove beneficial as tech companies are required to share their repair manuals with certified technicians.

Manufacturers claim that the quality and functioning of the product might be adversely affected if they allow repairs by consumers and third parties. These claims are not baseless, for in the absence of supervision, who will ensure the quality of spare parts and even the repair technique? The fear of manufacturers is so potent that they incorporate warranty clauses which lapse when the product is repaired by a third party. While necessary clauses to maintain the quality of the product can be included, a blanket waiver should be avoided. For instance, the quality assurance clause can be incorporated for use of company-recommended spare parts and certified repair shops. Making repair manuals available to certified business owners could go a long way in balancing the rights of consumers and manufacturers.

Additionally, manufacturers can sign a non-disclosure agreement to protect the IP with the certified repairers/businesses. Customers with access to genuine parts may also approach independent repair providers who may not offer the original manufacturer's warranty but their own warranty. The aim is to protect the rights of all stakeholders.

Adequacy of Consumer Protection Act

Often, manufacturers reduce the durability of the product, compelling consumers to either repurchase the product or get it repaired at exorbitant prices affixed by the manufacturers. Specifically, this tramples upon the right to obtain information about the quality of the product, the right to procure products at reasonable prices, and the right to seek redress against unscrupulous practices. When read closely, the 'right to repair' can be said to be implicit in Section 2(9) of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019. This warrants some relief. Its apparent disregard merits an explicit insertion of a 'right to repair' clause in the said provision. This would make consumers more aware, provide tooth to an already implicit right, and aid in advancing repair-related liability on various stakeholders, including policy recommendations, pertinent amendments and even a specific law incorporating the right to repair to better implement it.



For instance, the product liability clause under Section 84 can be amended and expanded to impose product liability concerning various reparability parameters of the product. France requires manufacturers to display a reparability index on their products which consists of five parameters. This helps consumers understand if the products are repairable, difficult to repair or not repairable at all. The duration of imposing product liability may vary depending on the product and its longevity. Here, we can rely on the EU's guidelines on Ecodesign for Energy-Related Products and Energy Information Regulations, 2021, which mandate manufacturers to provide spare parts for up to 10 years to avoid premature obsolescence.

The New York legislation is a reminder that it is time to not only acknowledge the right to repair of consumers but also respond to the corresponding rights of the manufacturers. This warrants some expedited policy changes to recognise the 'right to repair', be it through amendments in the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 or through a separate law.

THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

The bipartisan Congressional committee looking into the deadly January 6, 2021, attack by a mob on the very seat of the Houses of the U.S. Congress has painted a clear picture of the attempt by former President Donald Trump and his allies to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election, even if that meant he might damage the U.S. government and purposefully instigate violence to cling on to power, creating "a moment of maximum danger" for the foundations of American democracy. At the first public hearing by the House of Representatives committee, its chairman and vice chairwoman played multiple videos of Mr. Trump's Attorney General, William Barr; and his daughter Ivanka Trump, among others, making statements on camera that pointed towards Mr. Trump's role in fuelling the violence that day. The hearings made clear that Mr. Trump was responsible for several such critical acts of commission and omission, including ignoring intelligence reports that had been passed on to the White House beforehand that the protests could turn violent. Critically, Mr. Trump refused to intervene, for example by deploying the National Guard, as the rioting got out of control and far-right groups such as the Proud Boys, unleashed organised violence after a rally near the Capitol, resulting in some deaths, defacement of public property and an unprecedented security threat to members of Congress in the building.

The January 6 assault came directly on the heels of one of the most vicious election campaigns, waged by Mr. Trump and his Republican acolytes. It not only saw them denigrating minorities, women and the U.S.'s involvement in multilateral and regional organisations but also led to a targeted misinformation campaign against the poll results over the fact that ballot votes and runoff elections in some U.S. States impacted the final outcome of a win for President Joe Biden. The work of the House committee looking into the Capitol attack might be politically consequential, for it is a reminder of the extreme lengths to which Mr. Trump and his supporters will go to undermine the rule of law to stay in power. Yet it is ultimately toothless, because it has no constitutional path that leads to debarring him from standing for election again in 2024, an outcome that is looking increasingly likely given his persisting popularity and the absence of any other strong potential Republican presidential nominee. Having survived two impeachment attempts, and with a legal question mark hanging over the prospect of using the 14th Amendment to ban him from public office for his role in an insurrection against the U.S. government, Mr. Trump looks well-placed to run for the White House and resume his antagonistic politics, should he choose to.



WHY DID A PROVINCE IN CANADA PASS THE TURBAN DAY ACT?

With the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba in Canada passing the Turban Day Act, April 13 every year will now be celebrated as Turban Day across the province. Diljeet Singh Brar, the MLA of Burrows, while introducing the Bill, had said that it was necessary to have a day that officially recognises the turban as a part of Canada's diversity and multiculturalism.

What is the Turban Day Act about?

The Turban Day Act was introduced in the Manitoba House as a private members Bill. The Bill underwent its first reading on March 24, 2022, the second reading on April 7 and the third on May 26. It finally got the Royal Assent on June 1.

Diljeet Singh Brar, MLA Burrows, from the New Democratic Party (NDP), says that even as the NDP is the main opposition party in the Manitoba legislative assembly, the Bill was passed unanimously and without a single opposition. Of 57 members in the House, 35 MLAs are from Progressive Conservative, 18 from NDP and 3 from the Liberal Party. "Not a single vote was against the bill and it received support cutting across the party lines," Brar said, who hails from Muktsar of Punjab, and is an alumnus of Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), Ludhiana.

The Act says that "each year, April 13 is to be known throughout Manitoba as Turban Day". It further explains that the turban is not only a religious symbol of utmost faith for the Sikh community, but also extremely important for their respect and dignity. The Act adds that giving an official recognition to the turban will also spread awareness against racism that Sikhs still face in Canada.

The Act reads: "Whereas physical symbols can be integral to religious identity for people of faith; and whereas the turban is an important symbol for many Sikh Canadians, signifying individual sovereignty, self-respect, courage and human equality; And whereas recognition of April 13 will provide a way for Manitoba to promote understanding of the significance of the turban and combat racism against Sikh Canadians.."

Why April 13?

The day of Baisakhi or Vaisakhi, which usually falls on April 13 or 14 each year, commemorates the birth of Khalsa Panth. It was on this day in 1699 that the tenth Guru Gobind Singh had laid the foundation of Khalsa Panth at Anandpur Sahib among his followers. Baisakhi is observed as a major festival to celebrate the birth of the Khalsa Panth.

"... The practice of wearing the turban was formalized on April 13, 1699, when Guru Gobind Singh Ji formed the Khalsa Panth and pronounced the turban a pillar of the Sikh faith; and whereas Sikhs have faced violence and persecution throughout the world because of their religious identity," the Act stated.

What is the significance of the Act?

MLA Brar, who had introduced the Bill, says that Sikh Canadians, despite contributing immensely to the development of Canada and being an integral part of the society, still face racism and discrimination at various levels and hence, a day that officially recognises turban as a part of Canada's diversity and multiculturalism was the need of the hour.

Is there any other Act in Canada for the Sikh community?

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



The month of April is celebrated as Sikh Heritage Month across Canada after the Federal Parliament passed the Bill in 2019 and it was given the Royal Assent.

Sikhs constitute just 1.4 per cent (around 5 lakh in number) of Canada's total population but hold significant positions in the government and political system. Not just Sikhs, Canada remains the most preferred destination for Punjabis to immigrate.

END THE WAR

The battle for Severodonetsk, the easternmost part of the Donbas where the Ukrainian forces still have defensive positions, has entered the final phase with Russian troops destroying all bridges over the Donets river linking the city with its sister city, Lysychansk. The Russians now have more than 80% control of the industrial city, with the remaining Ukrainian troops trapped without supplies. If Russia takes control of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, the entire Luhansk Oblast will be in its hands, allowing it to march towards Kramatorsk, the last industrial city in the Donbas still with Ukraine. In recent weeks, Ukrainian troops have taken heavy losses with Russian forces blasting their way into Severodonetsk using artillery fire. Officials in Kyiv have said that up to 200 Ukrainian soldiers are being killed every day and troops are running out of shells and ammunition. While these public statements have been in part to push western allies to ramp up weapons supplies, they also draw a bleak picture of the situation in the east. Despite their brave resistance in the north and northeast, which forced Russia to retreat from around Kyiv and Kharkiv, the Ukrainians never stood a chance to push the Russians back in the Donbas.

The West's strategy has been two-fold. It has sent money and weapons to Ukraine to help it resist Russian aggression and slapped biting sanctions on Moscow to make the war economically painful. While arming Ukraine has certainly slowed down Russia's advances (with heavy losses across the battlefronts), it has failed to stop the Russian war machine. Russia has taken most of the key cities in the east and south, including Mariupol, Berdyansk and Kherson, and Severodonetsk could be the next. The economic sanctions have had a mixed result. Sanctions have hit Russia hard and its economy is expected to contract by 8.5% this year. But, at the same time, it has continued to reap a windfall from high oil and gas prices, while, on the other side, soaring inflation has hit the global economy. And Ukraine's economy, needless to say, faces collapse. As the 'weapons and sanctions' approach has been unsuccessful in its objectives, other options should also be explored to end the war. Between the maximalist positions taken by Russia and the U.S., France, Germany and Turkey have maintained some lines of communication with Moscow and Kyiv. These countries should push both sides for talks and try to revive new proposals where all sides get something and lose something in return for peace. Ending the conflict is an imperative not just for Ukraine but also for the world that has been battered by high prices of everything, from food to fuel. Russia, whose invasion has pushed the world to the brink of a devastating security and economic crisis, has the primary responsibility to end this war through a political settlement.

THE CONTROVERSY AROUND THE NORTHERN IRELAND PROTOCOL

The story so far: The Boris Johnson administration has come up with a new legislation, the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, which would enable the U.K. to override provisions of the Brexit deal that concern trading arrangements in Northern Ireland — the Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP). The European Union (EU) has said that the proposed law violates international law and has threatened to take legal action against the U.K. if it goes ahead with the legislation.



What exactly is the NIP?

Northern Ireland is the only part of the U.K. that shares a land border with the EU, as the Republic of Ireland (or Ireland) is an EU member-state. As long as the U.K. was part of the EU, things were fine. But with Brexit, the U.K. exited the EU's customs union. This created a problem whose solution needed two seemingly contradictory outcomes: preserving the sanctity of the EU's single market, as well as that of the U.K.'s domestic market. The NIP's solution was to avoid a customs check at the actual customs border — on the island of Ireland, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland — as this would have violated the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and risked instability in a region with a volatile past. It instead shifted the customs border to that between Northern Ireland and Britain, effectively at the former's ports. As per the NIP, goods flowing into Northern Ireland would be checked at this 'sea border' before entering the island, and Northern Ireland would continue to follow EU rules in product standards.

Why did the U.K. come up with the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill?

The Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP) has been a lingering issue for the U.K. almost from the day Brexit was signed. In fact, back in July 2021, the Boris Johnson administration announced its intent to renegotiate the NIP. But with efforts at negotiations not producing the results it wanted, it decided to proceed with a unilateral revamp of the NIP via domestic legislation. The main irritant for the U.K. in the current version of the NIP was the creation of "unacceptable barriers" to trade within the U.K. internal market — between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It has sparked complaints from businesses about the enormous paperwork needed for supply of goods and services to Northern Ireland despite it being within the sovereign territory of the U.K. Also, the Unionists of Northern Ireland (the section loyal to the U.K.) are unhappy with the NIP, and resent having to put up with a provision that effectively puts them at one remove from the U.K., when compared with citizens in other parts of the U.K. Northern Ireland's main unionist party is, in fact, blocking the formation of a new power-sharing government in Belfast, saying it won't take part until the NIP rules are scrapped. It is in this context that the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill seeks to empower the U.K. government to override key provisions of the NIP.

How does the proposed Bill undermine the NIP?

Instead of subjecting all goods moving between Britain and Northern Ireland to customs checks, the new Bills proposes two categories of goods and checks: goods meant only for Northern Ireland would go in a 'green lane' and will be exempt from any checks, while goods headed for Ireland and the EU would go into a 'red lane' where they will be subjected to all the checks and customs controls. Secondly, the Bill would remove EU oversight on state subsidies and value-added taxes in Northern Ireland. Third, the Bill proposes settlement of trade disputes and the enforcement of the NIP by an independent body rather than the European Court of Justice. Lastly, the Bill wants to give businesses the choice of selling their goods in Northern Ireland either according to the U.K. rules or the EU rules, in effect, proposing a dual regulatory regime instead of the single (EU) one as per the NIP.

What has been the reaction to the proposed Bill?

The Bill has triggered strong pushback from MPs belonging to Mr. Johnson's own party, from Irish legislators, and from EU officials. All of them have pointed out that the legislation would violate international law, damage the U.K.'s reputation as a trade partner, and spark a trade war with the EU. The EU's executive branch announced on June 15 that it would be taking legal action against the U.K. for violating international law.



How has the Johnson administration justified the Bill?

The Johnson administration has sought to justify its breach of its obligations under the Brexit agreement by invoking a principle of international law known as the “doctrine of necessity”. The UN’s International Law Commission allows a state to invoke this doctrine when its “essential interests” are facing a “grave and imminent peril”. The Johnson administration believes that this emergency loophole will enable it to defeat any legal challenge to its proposed Bill. The “grave peril” in this context, according to the British government, is the threat posed by the NIP to the Good Friday Agreement. “The maintenance of stable social and political conditions in Northern Ireland, the protection of the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement...and the preservation and fostering of social and economic ties between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, are essential interests of the United Kingdom,” says a statement from the U.K. Foreign Secretary.

WHAT NOW FOR JULIAN ASSANGE AFTER EXTRADITION ORDER

On Friday, UK Home Secretary Priti Patel approved the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the United States, where he faces criminal charges. The extradition had been ordered in April by a London court, but it was pending as it needed Patel to sign it.

What happens to Assange now?

Assange still has the right to appeal to the English High Court. If refused, Assange must be extradited within 28 days. He is currently being held at Belmarsh prison in London.

Assange’s wife Stella, as well as Wikileaks, has said she would appeal the decision to extradite him.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has previously supported the demand for Assange’s release, the BBC reported. Assange is an Australian national.

The Sydney Morning Herald reported that Assange’s Australian human rights lawyer, Jennifer Robinson, said that the Australian government needed to ask the Biden administration to drop the charges. Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, however, issued a statement saying the Australian government was not a party to the Assange case, nor was it able to intervene in the legal matters of another country, the newspaper added.

Why is Assange wanted in the US?

Assange shot into global prominence in the late 2000s when Wikileaks, which he founded in 2006, began publishing classified and confidential government and corporate documents for public consumption. Some of the most notable of the “leaks” were documents from the US government that said the US military had killed hundreds of civilians in unreported incidents during the war in Afghanistan.

The US government wants him in connection with 18 charges for violating the Espionage Act and the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act. It alleges the information was obtained by Wikileaks illegally and endangered the lives of its officials.

The Government of Sweden too declared Assange wanted in relation to a sexual assault case against him, which was dropped after the time limit or statute of limitations expired in 2019.



How has he escaped extradition so far?

Assange's troubles began in 2010, when Sweden asked for his extradition over the charges of sexual assault levelled by two Swedish women. He denied the charges and claimed they were made in a bid to eventually extradite him to the US for trial.

The Swedish Prosecution Authority said: "Every extradition case is to be judged on its own individual merits. For that reason the Swedish government cannot provide a guarantee in advance that Julian Assange would not be subject to further extradition to the USA."

Assange sought asylum in 2012 in the Ecuadorian embassy. The same year, when the British Supreme Court rejected Assange's appeal against extradition to Sweden, he violated his bail conditions to get to the Ecuadorian embassy and was granted refuge.

But in 2019, the Australian national was removed from the embassy and arrested by UK authorities, after Ecuador withdrew protections for Assange for his alleged attempts at "destabilising" Ecuador's government and flouting the conditions of his stay.

Since then, Assange has been in jail while the extradition hearings have continued. His lawyers have also argued for him to be released given his deteriorating physical and mental health. A district judge ruled in January 2021 that there was a possibility of him dying by suicide in a US prison if extradited. He was still not allowed to leave the UK.

In December last year, the London High Court ruled in favour of the US government after the Joe Biden administration assured it would not hold him at the highest security prison facility. And, if convicted, he could serve his sentence in Australia if requested.

Assange tried appealing against this in the British Supreme Court, but on March 14 the court refused his permission to appeal. Finally, a London court ordered the extradition in April, which has now been signed.

NEW TURN IN SAUDI'S WAR AGAINST HOMOSEXUALITY

Saudi officials are seizing rainbow-coloured toys and articles of clothing from shops in the capital as part of a crackdown on homosexuality, state media reported.

Targeted items include rainbow-coloured bows, skirts, hats and pencil cases, most of them apparently manufactured for young children, according to a report broadcast on Tuesday evening by the state-run Al-Ekhbariya news channel.

"We are giving a tour of the items that contradict the Islamic faith and public morals and promote homosexual colours targeting the younger generation," says an official from the Commerce Ministry.

Gesturing towards a rainbow flag, a journalist says: "The homosexuality flag is present in one of the Riyadh markets."

The colours send a "poisoned message" to children, the report says.

Homosexuality is a potential capital offence in Saudi Arabia.



In April, the kingdom said it had asked Disney to cut “LGBTQ references” from Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness, the latest Marvel movie, but that Disney had refused. The film ultimately did not screen in Saudi cinemas.

HONG KONG WAS NEVER A BRITISH COLONY

HONG KONG — Many schoolchildren around the world have long been taught that Hong Kong was once a colony of the British Empire. But students in Hong Kong will soon learn a different lesson: It wasn't.

Beijing has steadfastly maintained that historical view of the city's status, long before Britain returned the territory to China in 1997, and years before a sweeping crackdown crushed a thriving pro-democracy movement in the once-semiautonomous territory.

Now, as Hong Kong prepares to commemorate 25 years since its handover to China on July 1, 1997, that narrative — which rejects how the British saw their relationship to the city — will be explicitly taught to Hong Kong high school students through at least four new textbooks that will be rolled out in the fall.

Under the terms of the 1997 handover negotiated with Britain, China had agreed that the social and economic systems of the territory would remain unchanged for 50 years after resuming sovereignty, with the result that Hong Kong initially had a high degree of autonomy from the mainland. When moves by Beijing threatened that arrangement, protesters took to the streets in 2014 and again in 2019.

In the wake of the 2019 pro-democracy protests against the tightening grip of China's Communist Party on the city, Beijing sought to punish dissent, limit free speech and target independent news outlets and pro-democracy leaders. It prosecuted thousands of activists, and some fled into exile. A national security law imposed on Hong Kong also gave the authorities sweeping power to silence opposition. Officials also targeted Hong Kong's educational system, which, they said, had shaped the beliefs of youths who led the demonstrations.

In the 19th century, Britain took over what is now modern-day Hong Kong via two wars and a series of treaties that the Chinese government called unequal and coerced.

In 1946, the United Nations included Hong Kong on a list of “non-self-governing territories,” and in a 1960 resolution said the people there should be granted “the right to self-determination.” In 1972, after Beijing took over China's seat in the world body, it successfully pushed the U.N. to remove Hong Kong from the list, arguing that it was within China's sovereign right to decide Hong Kong's future.

AFGHAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE AT RISK

In a rare interview, broadcast by CNN on May 17, Afghanistan's Interior Minister and head of the dreaded Haqqani Network, Sirajuddin Haqqani, promised “very good news” soon on the return of girls to secondary schools that have remained shut since March this year, just hours after their reopening. However, any euphoria about this could be misplaced given the number of regressive steps taken by the Taliban to curb women and girls' freedom since they took power in August 2021.



The Taliban's true colours

The initial shock following the Taliban's seizure of power in Kabul is waning. The Taliban, who during the initial period of the takeover had demonstrated a modicum of moderation to gain international acceptability, funding and recognition, have now started showing their true colours. For long-term observers of Afghanistan, this is hardly surprising. Notwithstanding the U.S.-mediated 2020 peace deal, which seemed to erroneously pin hopes on a "reformed" Taliban to govern the country, many observers had issued warnings that the takeover of power by the Taliban would result in the loss of the fragile gains made in Afghanistan over the last two decades.

While there can be a debate over the gains made by the international community in Afghanistan in the last 20 years, it was unmistakable that opportunities for girls and women in education and employment had expanded vastly. Female participation in Afghanistan's labour force had climbed from around 15% in 2009 to nearly 22% in 2019. During my frequent visits to various provinces of Afghanistan, it was always heartening to see women play important roles in the government, parliament, the media, the health and education sectors, and in civil society. They had carved space for themselves in conflict-ridden patriarchal structures and systems. Though the various interventions by the international community on women's issues did not transform the structures, they did provide opportunities for women to be enablers of change. In parliament, and in the provincial councils of Kandahar, Nangarhar, Badakhshan, Herat, Balkh and others, young women took grave risks in political participation and mobilisation.

Today, those voices are lost. A report from the International Labour Organization in January 2022 found that Afghan women's employment levels fell by an estimated 16% in the third quarter of 2021, compared with 6% for men. By mid-2022, women's employment is expected to be 21% lower than before the Taliban takeover, if current conditions continue. In a rush to reach out to the Taliban during the peace processes, protection of the rights of women were hardly emphasised as a red line. As fatigue towards the war developed within and outside the country, there were barely any concerted efforts in making women rights and human rights a non-negotiable part of the negotiations. The participation of a few Afghan women representatives in the intra-Afghan dialogue in Doha had raised expectations in the international community that the insurgents had reformed and would be willing to accept women's role in Afghan society and government. These hopes were, however, shattered.

There is speculation that the Taliban are in the process of finalising the dress code in schools for girls. Haqqani did refer to the "requirement" that education should be based on Afghan "culture" and "Islamic rules and principles". He referred "more broadly" to the issue of women wearing the hijab. The Taliban are not just identifying dress codes for girls and women; men too have been asked to wear particular types of clothes and grow a beard, which has led to hair dressers bringing down the shutters on their business. However, with regard to women, the Taliban's diktats have been particularly harsh.

The greatest impact of denial of rights for women in the workforce would be a sharp contraction in the economy. In addition to the loss of rights, many households run by women could be staring at a bleak future. As per the World Bank, in 2019, 36% of teachers in the country were women, the highest number for 20 years. But most female educators have been forced out of work by the Taliban's ban on education for girls in March 2022. By the end of 2021, fewer than 100 of Kabul's 700 female journalists were still working (Reporters Without Borders data).



As the war in Ukraine has grabbed and retained international attention, Afghanistan seems to have been forgotten yet again. Occasionally, the plight of Afghan women and the Taliban's atrocities find mention in the media. The Taliban do not shy from leveraging the issue to gain international attention. The international community, therefore, needs to make a concerted and coordinated attempt to protect the rights of Afghan women and girls and ensure that Afghanistan's de facto rulers are held accountable for their actions.

ADANI POWER PROJECT SPARKS ROW IN SRI LANKA

An Adani project in Sri Lanka is yet again at the centre of a controversy, after a top official of the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) told a parliamentary panel that a renewable energy project in the island's northern Mannar district was given to the Adani Group after Prime Minister Narendra Modi "pressured" President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

CEB Chairman M.M.C. Ferdinando made the remark on Friday before the Committee on Public Enterprises (COPE), but soon withdrew it, saying he had been "emotional".

President's denial

Between his statement on Friday and swift withdrawal was a tweet from Mr. Gotabaya on Saturday that said: "Re[garding] a statement made by the #lka CEB Chairman at a COPE committee hearing regarding the award of a Wind Power Project in Mannar, I categorically deny authorisation to award this project to any specific person or entity. I trust responsible communication in this regard will follow."

The President's office followed up with a statement "vehemently denying" the CEB official's remarks. "Sri Lanka is currently in an acute shortage of power and President desires to expedite implementation of mega power projects. However, no undue influence will be used in awarding such projects. Project proposals for large-scale renewable energy projects is limited, but special attention will be paid to the selection of institutions for the projects, which will be carried out strictly in accordance with the transparent system by the government of Sri Lanka."

The development comes days after Sri Lanka amended its electricity law, effectively eliminating competitive bidding. The move drew flak from critics. In the parliamentary debate on the Bill, subsequently passed, Opposition lawmaker Nalin Bandara flagged concerns that competitive bidding was being done away with "to make way" for projects such as the Adani Group's, according to the Colombo-based Sunday Times.

This is not the first time that Sri Lankans have questioned the Adani Group's entry into the island's energy sector, or brought up Mr. Modi's name in this regard. Following an agreement between the Group and the CEB, to execute renewable energy projects in the northern Mannar and Pooneryn districts, Sri Lanka's main Opposition party, Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), said the Indian businessman was making a "backdoor entry", and accused Mr. Gotabaya of "pampering" Mr. Modi's "notorious friends".

The energy project is the second major venture in Sri Lanka involving the Adani Group, after it bagged a strategic port terminal deal in Colombo. The Group was brought in to execute the West Container Terminal project at the Colombo Port, with majority stakes, after Colombo unilaterally cancelled a trilateral agreement among the governments of Sri Lanka and India and Japan to jointly build the East Container Terminal at the same port.



The Adani Group, Sri Lankan Ministers have said, was the Indian government's "nominee" in both cases, indicating there was no competitive bidding process. Similarly, there is no information of a tendering process having preceded the energy agreement signed by the Group and the CEB. Even the agreement was not officially publicised by either side, and came to light only after Sri Lankan media reported on the development.

Further, India is also executing hybrid energy projects in three islands off Jaffna Peninsula, after displacing a Chinese energy project.

Though China had won the contract for the project through an Asian Development Bank-backed international competitive bid, Sri Lanka opted for the Indian grant project, following New Delhi's "concerns" with a Chinese project close to India's southern coast.

DRAWING CLOSER

Connectivity between Sri Lanka and India seems set to improve, especially between the Tamil areas in the north and Tamil Nadu across the Palk Strait. The projects to link Jaffna by air to Trichy and by boat to Karaikal on the Coromandel Coast are of a piece with India's development outreach to Sri Lanka that focuses on building long-term infrastructure projects in the island nation, besides aid for emergency needs such as fuel, food and essential medicines.

Multiple transport links existed between India and Sri Lanka until the 1980s when the civil war severely curtailed exchanges and transactions. Before that, a cyclonic storm in 1964 destroyed the Pamban Bridge and the railway terminus and jetty at Dhanushkodi that forced the government to end the popular "Boat Mail", which connected Chennai and Talaimannar in northern Sri Lanka via Rameswaram through a rail link and a ferry. Since the war ended in 2009, transportation has been a key area that India-Sri Lanka ties have focussed on, with railways and ports in focus — IRCON, an Indian Railways subsidiary, restored the Colombo-Jaffna railway line, which was opened for the public in 2014, and has since expanded to Kankesanthurai beyond Jaffna. However, air connectivity from Indian cities has so far been restricted to Colombo. In effect, this means that a person travelling from Jaffna to Chennai or Trichy/Madurai — a 45-minute journey by air — has to do a six to eight hour rail or road journey to Colombo and then fly out. Direct flights out of Jaffna to cities in Tamil Nadu will save travel time and money, which could give a fillip to tourism, particularly pilgrimage, in the Jaffna peninsula as well as in India. Similarly, the proposed ferry services between Karaikal and Jaffna/Kankesanthurai could at a later stage be upgraded to facilitate transport of cargo from India to Sri Lanka — at present, Colombo is the only port of entry for Indian goods, which involves extra travel. However, a luxury ferry between Tuticorin and Colombo launched in 2011 was halted for lack of patronage.

The current crisis in Sri Lanka has forced Colombo to recalibrate ties with New Delhi and the latter to emphasise its "Neighbourhood First" policy. The challenge, however, would be to insulate bilateral relations from regional politics in both countries and build on the gains for both. Better connectivity and improved travel facilities could help remove the remaining layers of mistrust that has constrained the India-Sri Lanka partnership from realising its full potential.

THE FATF AND PAKISTAN'S POSITION ON ITS 'GREY LIST'

The story so far: Ahead of the plenary session of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global financial crime watchdog, from June 14 to 17 in Berlin, Pakistan which continues to face an



economic crunch, is hoping for some respite in the form of its removal from the FATF's 'grey list' or the list of countries presenting a risk to the global financial system.

In its last plenary meeting in March, the FATF had retained Pakistan's listing, asking it to expeditiously address the remaining deficiencies in its financial system.

What is the FATF?

The Financial Action Task Force is an international watchdog for financial crimes such as money laundering and terror financing. It was established at the G7 Summit of 1989 in Paris to address loopholes in the global financial system after member countries raised concerns about growing money laundering activities. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attack on the U.S., FATF also added terror financing as a main focus area. This was later broadened to include restricting the funding of weapons of mass destruction.

The FATF currently has 39 members. The decision-making body of the FATF, known as its plenary, meets thrice a year. Its meetings are attended by 206 countries of the global network, including members, and observer organisations, such as the World Bank, some offices of the United Nations, and regional development banks.

The FATF sets standards or recommendations for countries to achieve in order to plug the holes in their financial systems and make them less vulnerable to illegal financial activities. It conducts regular peer-reviewed evaluations called Mutual Evaluations (ME) of countries to check their performance on standards prescribed by it. The reviews are carried out by FATF and FATF-Style Regional Bodies (FSRBs), which then release Mutual Evaluation Reports (MERs). For the countries that don't perform well on certain standards, time-bound action plans are drawn up. Recommendations for countries range from assessing risks of crimes to setting up legislative, investigative and judicial mechanisms to pursue cases of money laundering and terror funding.

What are FATF's 'grey' and 'black' lists?

While the words 'grey' and 'black' list do not exist in the official FATF lexicon, they designate countries that need to work on complying with FATF directives and those who are non-compliant, respectively.

At the end of every plenary meeting, FATF comes out with two lists of countries. The grey countries are designated as "jurisdictions under increased monitoring", working with the FATF to counter criminal financial activities. For such countries, the watchdog does not tell other members to carry out due-diligence measures vis-a-vis the listed country but does tell them to consider the risks such countries possess. Currently, 23 countries including Pakistan are on the grey list.

As for the black list, it means countries designated as 'high-risk jurisdictions subject to call for action'. In this case, the countries have considerable deficiencies in their AML/CFT (anti-money laundering and counter terrorist financing) regimens and the body calls on members and non-members to apply enhanced due diligence. In the most serious cases, members are told to apply counter-measures such as sanctions on the listed countries. Currently, North Korea and Iran are on the black list.

Being listed under the FATF's lists makes it hard for countries to get aid from organisations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the European Union. It may also affect capital inflows, foreign direct investments, and portfolio flows.



Why is Pakistan on the grey list?

Pakistan was retained on the grey list in March as it was yet to address concerns on the front of terror financing investigations and prosecutions targeting senior leaders and commanders of UN designated terrorist groups. Diplomatic sources in Pakistan told The Hindu that steps had been taken in this direction such as the sentencing of terror outfit chief Hafiz Saeed, prosecution of Masood Azhar, arrest of about 300 other designated terrorists, and the seizure of more than 1,100 properties owned by terror groups. India meanwhile, a member of FATF, suspects the efficacy and permanence of Pakistani actions.

Pakistan is currently banking on its potential exclusion from the grey list to help improve the status of tough negotiations with the International Monetary Fund to get bailout money.

Pakistan has found itself on the grey list frequently since 2008, for weaknesses in fighting terror financing and money laundering. In 2009, the country began to cooperate with the FATF-like regional body, Asia Pacific Group (APG), for a ME process.

On completion of the ME in June 2010, Pakistan made a “high-level political commitment” to the FATF and APG to address its strategic AML/CFT deficiencies. It was given an action plan which required demonstrating adequate criminalisation of money laundering and terrorist financing as well as showing adequate measures to identify, freeze and confiscate terrorist assets.

It was taken off the list in 2015 owing to its progress but was put back on it in 2018. It was given a 27-point action plan to restrict terror financing activities. After warnings and two deadline extensions on the first plan, Pakistan was prescribed another seven-point action plan by the APG in 2021, focused specifically on combating money laundering. In March, Pakistan informed FATF that it had completed 32 of the total 34 action items in the two plans but was retained on the list. The FATF gave it time till January 2023 to complete the 2021 plan.

‘THAT’S NOT THE CUTTING CHAI WE LIKE’: PAK MINISTER URGES PUBLIC TO CUT BACK ON TEA, IRKS ALL ONLINE

Ask any desi folk and they’ll tell you about their love for cutting chai. It’s no wonder then that a Pakistani minister’s statement urging people to cut down on their tea intake – purportedly to tackle the country’s rising debt on import bills – has sent chai lovers into a frenzy online.

“I appeal to the nation to reduce tea intake by one or two cups daily because we borrow money for tea import as well,” Pakistan’s Minister for Planning Ahsan Iqbal told reporters in Islamabad recently, leaving all riled up on social media.

The appeal from the senior minister came after it was known that the country consumed tea worth 83.88 billion Pakistani Rupees in the fiscal year 2021-22, according to Geo TV. “The federal budget document for the outgoing fiscal year showed that Pakistan imported Rs 13 billion worth of more tea than the last fiscal year,” the report added.

As his statement created an uproar on social media, Iqbal also doubled down on his take and shared a screenshot of a report that showed Pakistan leading a list of countries with the biggest tea imports with 8.9 per cent of total tea imports. However, netizens were not convinced by his argument, saying that the public buys tea from their own pockets and the government doesn’t distribute it for free. While some seriously lashed out at the government for failing to control inflation and debts, others reacted to the “absurd” remark through memes.



NATION

WHY ARE ECONOMIC STAKES HIGH IN WEST ASIA?

The story so far: The diplomatic fallout from the provocative and communally charged comments made by two erstwhile spokespersons of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), forced the government into firefighting mode earlier this month after several West Asian nations including Qatar, Kuwait, Iran, Bahrain, Oman, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the UAE as well as the 57-nation Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) took strong exception to the remarks denigrating Islam and the Prophet Muhammed. In response, Indian officials strenuously asserted that the government stood by the country's traditional values and respected all religions. It also tasked its diplomats to reach out to individual OIC member states and reassure them on India's position of an 'inclusive' approach to all communities.

What prompted the government response?

India's cultural, economic and trade ties with the countries of the West Asian region are deep and abiding. Starting with maritime trade, the exchange of goods, services and cultures between the people of the Gulf region including those on the western shores of the Arabian Sea and the people of India's southern and western States reaches back several millennia and significantly predates even the foundation of the Islamic faith.

The West Asian region also served as a land trade bridge to Greece, Rome and other early European empires and a flourishing trade in spices, cloth, silk and indigo in exchange for gold and silver is well recorded.

In a more contemporary historical context, the British colonial era saw the advent of even a loose common monetary system with the rupee serving as legal tender in several Gulf states till the middle of the 20th century. It was also the discovery and subsequent commercial exploitation of oil in the Gulf region during the colonial era that started to alter the balance of trade flows between India and the countries in the region.

Today, the countries of the West Asian region collectively account for well over a sixth of India's total bilateral merchandise trade and contribute about three fifths of India's crude oil supplies. The region is also a major provider of jobs and economic opportunities to Indian workers, professionals and entrepreneurs and houses about 89 lakh Indians. These non-resident Indians (NRIs) annually send home about \$40 billion, and account for more than 55% of the country's total remittance inflows. Investments from sovereign wealth funds and other large investors from the GCC have also climbed steadily in recent years and India, which earlier this year signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the UAE, is looking to significantly boost trade ties with the region by negotiating more such trade and investment pacts.

It is the sizeable and rapidly growing economic interconnectedness that the government is keen to insulate from any fallout over this sensitive and potentially disruptive issue.

Why is India so dependent on West Asian countries for its energy needs?

Domestic crude production, which has been declining over the years, meets less than a fifth of the country's oil requirement, forcing India to take recourse to imports to fill the gap of more than 80%. An Observer Research Foundation (ORF) April 2022 paper analysing 'India's oil imports: Trends in diversification' notes that out of India's total imports of crude oil, the share of the Gulf



countries has remained fairly steady at about 60% over the last 15 years. The ORF study observes that in 2020-21, the top oil exporter to India was Iraq, with a share of more than 22%, followed by Saudi Arabia — about 18%. The UAE, Kuwait and Oman were other Gulf countries among the top-10 suppliers of crude oil to India in the fiscal year ended March 2021.

A large proportion of India's refineries have also historically been predominantly configured to process the sulphur-heavy sour grades of crude that are produced in the Gulf region and with the sweeter (low sulphur) grades of oil such as Brent proving comparatively costlier, India's crude purchases have over the last two decades gradually shifted to being more weighted towards the Oman and Dubai sour grades, according to data on the composition of the Indian basket of crude compiled by the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas's Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC). While the ratio of sour grades to sweet grades was 57:43 in the fiscal year ended March 2001, the proportion of sour crude to Brent had increased to 75.62:24.38 in the 12 months ended March 2022.

How reliant is India on the region for non-oil trade?

Over the five years from 2017 through 2021, Iran and the GCC member states comprising the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait and Qatar accounted for a 15.3% share of India's cumulative two-way merchandise trade of \$3.98 trillion in that period, according to statistics available on the UN Comtrade database. Of the \$609 billion of exports and imports that the seven countries accounted for in this period, the UAE contributed the lion's share of \$277.4 billion, or almost 7%, making it one of India's largest trading partners. Saudi Arabia was next with \$153 billion. The region is today a key market for several Indian commodities ranging from tea and basmati rice to electrical equipment, apparel, and machinery. Reflecting this importance, India and the UAE signed the CEPA in February with the aim of increasing the total value of bilateral trade in goods to more than \$100 billion in five years and getting services trade to exceed \$15 billion over the same period. The trade pact will provide Indian exporters preferential market access on '99% of the country's exports to the UAE in value terms, particularly from labour-intensive sectors such as gems and jewellery, textiles, leather, footwear, sports goods, plastics, furniture, agricultural and wood products, engineering products, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, and automobiles', according to a Ministry of Commerce and Industry release. With the CEPA now serving as a framework, the government is actively pursuing a broader FTA (Free Trade Agreement) with the GCC as a whole. With the region serving as a key hub to markets in Africa, India is keen to gain tariff-free access for its exports not just to the Gulf region but also to countries across Africa.

What else is at stake?

The West Asian region provides among the largest number of overseas jobs for Indians, with nearly 89 lakh Indians living and working in the Gulf economies. The UAE, which comprises the seven emirates of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah Ajman, Umm Al-Quwain, Fujairah and Ras Al Khaimah, accounts for the largest share of NRIs in the region and is home to more than 34 lakh Indians. Saudi Arabia with close to 26 lakh and Kuwait with over 10 lakh are the other large providers of jobs and economic opportunities for Indians. Indians are today ubiquitous by their presence across a vast range of job categories in the region spanning construction labour to oil industry workers, nurses and doctors in the medical sector to the hospitality industry and finance professionals.



The remittances that they sent back home in 2017, according to Pew Research data, accounted for about 55% of the total \$68.97 billion in inward remittances received in India from across the world that year.

UNDERSTANDING THE ORGANISATION OF ISLAMIC COOPERATION

The story so far: On June 5, the General Secretariat of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) “condemned and denounced” the comments on Prophet Muhammed made by two erstwhile national spokespersons of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Referring to it as part of “growing spate of hatred and defamation of Islam in India”, it sought that the perpetrators are brought to justice and held accountable. In response, Arindam Bagchi, spokesperson at the Ministry of External Affairs, stated that India rejected the OIC Secretariat’s “unwarranted” and “narrow-minded” comments. He said that the views expressed by the two individuals did not reflect the views of the Indian government and that relevant authorities had already initiated strong actions against them.

What is the OIC?

The OIC claims to be the “collective voice of the Muslim world”. It was established at a 1969 summit in Rabat (Morocco) after what it describes as the ‘criminal arson’ of Al-Aqsa Mosque in the disputed city of Jerusalem. The OIC endeavours to establish solidarity among member states, support restoration of complete sovereignty and territorial integrity of any member state under occupation; protect, defend and combat defamation of Islam, prevent growing dissention in Muslim societies and work to ensure that member states take a united stand at the UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council and other international fora.

The OIC has consultative and cooperative relations with the UN and other inter-governmental organisations to protect the interest of Muslims, and settle conflicts and disputes involving member states, among them being the territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the status of Jammu & Kashmir. Presently based in Jeddah, the organisation plans to permanently move its headquarters to East Jerusalem once the disputed city is ‘liberated’. Moreover, it aspires to hold Israel accountable for ‘war crimes’ and violations of international law.

The organisation adheres to a charter that lays out its objectives, principles and operating mechanism. First adopted in 1972, the charter has been revised multiple times in line with emerging conditions in the developing world. The present charter was adopted in March 2008 at Dakar in Senegal. It enshrines that all members be guided and inspired by the noble Islamic teachings and values alongside committing themselves to the purposes and principles of the UN charter. Member states are expected to uphold and promote good governance, democracy, human rights, fundamental freedom and the rule of law — settling disputes through peaceful means and refraining from the use of threat or force.

In addition, the OIC carves out a 10-year Programme of Action (PoA). Last instituted for the decade ending 2025, the PoA calls for measures to combat all aspects of terrorism globally. It also talks of implementing social schemes to eliminate two-thirds of extreme poverty and spurring industrialisation, investment, trade and overall economic and social growth among member states.



How does the OIC function?

The Islamic Summit, composed of Kings and heads of state, is the supreme authority of the organisation. Convening every two years, it deliberates, takes policy decisions, provides guidance on issues relevant to the organisation and considers issues of concern to the member states. The Council of Foreign Ministers is the chief decision-making body and meets annually to decide on how to implement the OIC's general policies. In addition, this council also appoints, for a period of five years, the Secretary General, who is the chief administrative officer of the grouping. The Secretary General follows up on implementation of the decisions, directs attention to competent organs' specific issues of concern, creates a channel for coordination among the varied organs and submits annual reports on the work undertaken. Former Foreign Affairs Minister of Chad, Housseini Brahim Taha, is the current Secretary General, taking up the role in November 2021.

UN members with a Muslim majority can join the organisation. The membership is to be ratified with full consensus at the OIC's Council of Foreign Ministers. The same provisions apply for acquiring an observer status. All decision-making in the forum requires a quorum defined by the presence of two-thirds of the member states and complete consensus. In case a consensus cannot be reached, decisions shall be made by a two-thirds majority of members present and voting.

The OIC is financed by the member states proportionate to their national incomes. Should a member fail to meet their obligations such that the amount of arrears equals or exceeds the amount of contributions due from it for the preceding two years, their voting rights are suspended. The member is only allowed to vote if the Council of Foreign Ministers is satisfied that the failure is due to conditions beyond the member's control. The OIC also has standing committees for cooperation on information and cultural affairs, economic and commercial matters, scientific and technological initiatives and for Jerusalem.

What has been the nature of India's relationship with the OIC?

India's association with the 57-nation grouping has not been easy. Even though the country has good relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, its membership and engagement has been constantly challenged by Pakistan. In 1969, Islamabad's opposition to Indian participation at the first OIC Plenary resulted in the Indian delegation being turned back from the venue at the last minute.

About 50 years later, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj addressed the OIC Plenary of Foreign Ministers in Abu Dhabi as a guest of honour. The invitation was extended by the UAE's Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan. In 2018, Bangladesh had proposed India be given the observer status at the OIC considering its sizeable Muslim population – a move which received support from Turkey but was opposed by Pakistan. Political analyst Ketan Mehta of the Observer Research Foundation wrote in 2019 that Islamabad's apprehension stems from the fear that India's involvement in the grouping could influence the opinion of other Muslim states — not boding well for its influence.

What have been the criticisms against the OIC grouping?

Brookings Institution analyst Turan Kayaoglu wrote in 2020 that the OIC had become a premise for 'window dressing', more interested in the rights of Muslim minorities in places such as Palestine or Myanmar than the human rights violations of its member states. The author noted that the body lacks power and resources to investigate human rights violations or enforce its decisions through signed treaties and declarations.



Experts have also pointed to the fact that the organisation is largely restricted to arbitrating in conflicts where both parties are Muslims. This is because the organisation is centred around Quranic values, which, it believes, makes it a qualified arbitrator. The according of observer status at the UN to the Palestine Liberation Organisation is considered among its major successes.

Al Sharq Forum analyst Abdullah al-Ahsan, in an article in 2019 — the 50th anniversary of the organisation— noted that the OIC has failed to establish a cooperative venture among its members, who were either capital-rich and labour-scarce countries or manpower-rich and capital scarce. “...the organization has not evolved to become a significant player either in international politics or in the area of economic cooperation,” Mr. Al-Ahsan wrote.

THE FRAGILE STATE OF NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

The story so far: The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) released its yearbook a few days back highlighting some worrying trends of the past year in international security. The expected rise of the global nuclear arsenal was the chief cause of concern among SIPRI experts. The comprehensive report claims that while absolute numbers of nuclear arsenal have reduced, they are expected to grow over the next decade.

What have been the trends in military spending?

During 2012-2021, military spending as a percentage of gross domestic product has largely been stable. If anything, the average worldwide trend has been slightly downward. Russia leads the charge in absolute numbers of nuclear inventory (5977 against the U.S.'s 5428), however it is the U.S. that has the largest number of deployed warheads (1744 against Russia's 1588). The U.K. has 225 nuclear weapons in its inventory, while France has 290, China has 350, India has 160, Pakistan has 165. Israel is estimated to have 90 and North Korea 20.

It is concerning, to say the least, to see how global discourse has created a sense of fear around China's military modernisation and their upward trend in nuclear weapons development while the thousands of nuclear weapons held by the U.S. don't seem to attract a similar level of attention.

What about global arms imports?

Military modernisation is seen to be a global trend. All nuclear weapon owning states have, over the years, stated and worked upon their intention to modernise multiple facets of their armed forces—ranging from the development of newer and more efficient nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers, fighter jets, manned and unmanned aerial vehicles to the growing spread of the use of missile defence systems which may result in aggravating security concerns for other countries.

The yearbook has highlighted India as being the top weapons importer during the 2017-2021 period. Other countries to feature in the top five arms importers list include Saudi Arabia, Egypt, China, and Australia. According to SIPRI, these five nation states account for 38% of total global arms import.

What are the key developments/concerns flagged by the yearbook?

The yearbook mentions low level border clashes between India and Pakistan, the civil war in Afghanistan, and the armed conflict in Myanmar as some of the worrying indicators of an unstable system. It also highlighted three cause of concern trends: Chinese-American rivalry, involvement of state and non-state actors in multiple conflicts, and the challenge that climatic and weather



hazards pose. It is important to note here that the threat posed by climate change seems to feature in the report only nominally.

The marginal downsizing observed in the nuclear arsenal has come mostly from the U.S. and Russia dismantling retired warheads. But the Russian invasion of Ukraine has raised some serious eyebrows because of the continuous rhetoric from the Kremlin over them not shying away from the use of nuclear weapons. China's recent activities surrounding construction of 300 new nuclear missile silos have also been turning heads. Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Chinese Defence Minister, Wei Fenghe, claimed that while they have made "impressive progress" vis-à-vis their nuclear arsenal, the primary purpose of said arsenal continues to be self-defence. Over in the subcontinent, India and Pakistan seem to be making gains over their nuclear arsenal (in absolute numbers) while also looking at the development and procurement of newer and more efficient forms of delivery systems.

Has Iran inflated its military expenditure?

The SIPRI yearbook claims that while there were some advances over the rollout of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Iran increased its enrichment of Uranium-235 to 60% in 2021. It also reported that Iran's military budget grew to \$24.6 billion, growing for the first time in four years. However, some analysts believe that SIPRI has, over the years, overstated Iran's military expenditure. This is based on there not being a single Iranian exchange rate, resulting in a hyperinflated estimation of expenditure by SIPRI analysts.

It is claimed that SIPRI is aware of this 'accusation' and will investigate the 'exchange rate issue'.

What is the general attitude among countries about existing nuclear and arms related treaties?

Earlier this year, the leaders of the P5 countries (China, France, Russia, the U.K. and the U.S.) issued a joint statement affirming the belief that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought". The joint statement also highlighted their seemingly collective belief that bilateral and multilateral arms control agreements and commitments were indeed important. The dichotomy of this sentiment against the upward trend in absolute numbers of arms and nuclear arsenals is rather unsettling. One could however claim that even with these upward trends, the nation states are making sure to remain well within the ambit of what the treaties and agreements ask for. The tactic here seems to be to milk the treaties and agreements to the hilt. The states are aware of the value of the rhetoric and the security dilemma that their actions present. The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent NATO bids by Finland and Sweden seem to be telling events. While the Ukrainian invasion saw Russian military and political establishments hype-up its nuclear attack rhetoric against Ukraine, its primary leadership (both civil and military) had been rather diplomatic and 'relatively' cordial in its treatment of the Finnish and Swedish NATO bids.

Clear and constant communication between the countries involved was instrumental in making sure no unintended meanings were construed by the parties involved. The Russians seem to protract this invasion and hope to win it by exhausting Ukraine's defence capabilities.

The year 2021 also saw the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 2017 coming into effect. The Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and the Missile Technology Control Regimes (MTCR) held their annual meetings despite decision making being limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



What lies ahead?

The recent geopolitical events transpiring around the world in practically all regions have made the global security climate more unstable. A sense of precariousness lulls the air. It is further aided by actions of authoritarian leaders of not just non-democratic systems but also of strongmen leaders of democratic systems. The muscular military policies of these nations coupled with the continuous use of rhetoric that fuel public sentiment over the state's use of military assets make ripe conditions for the situation to further deteriorate. A strong political opposition would be needed to help keep the ruling dispensation in check. Furthermore, the two largest nuclear weapons holding states need to take on a more engaging role in the international arena. SIPRI's yearbook, while not being devoid of some challenges, forces us to look critically at how the global disarmament project seems to be going.

TWO YEARS AFTER GALWAN CLASH, WHERE INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS STAND TODAY

Two years after the Galwan clash in the Ladakh heights, in which 20 Indian soldiers were killed, and which plunged India-China relations to their lowest in decades, the two sides are normalising relations in many respects, with the Indian side displaying a pragmatism far ahead of the "lal aankh" rhetoric.

Relations now

Even though New Delhi has not yet succeeded in getting the Chinese to vacate some parts of eastern Ladakh on India's side of the Line of Actual Control or ensuring a return to status quo ante (as the situation existed in April 2020), bilateral trade has soared and it is now at its highest, first quarter data show.

Further, India's trade with China in the calendar year 2021 was \$125 billion, higher than in the previous year, and higher than pre-pandemic, pre-Ladakh standoff levels. Imports from China reached \$97.5 billion, while exports crossed \$20 billion for the first time. All this after India put in place restrictions on Chinese participation in the Indian economy, and banned several Chinese apps popular in India, and added more to the list subsequently. Tencent, the Chinese tech-entertainment giant, recently bought a stake in Flipkart, even while several apps linked to it such as Tik Tok remain banned in India.

While political contact is yet to resume fully, there have been significant interactions. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Delhi in March. National Security Adviser Ajit Doval participated in meetings of the multilateral Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, and on Wednesday attended a BRICS security officials meeting hosted by his Chinese counterpart Yang Jeichi. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to attend the BRICS summit being hosted by China next week, in a virtual format.

This week, Beijing also lifted a two-year Covid ban on visas to Indian professionals and their families. It has also indicated it is processing visas of Indian students who had returned home on account of the pandemic.

Alongside, India has stepped up its engagement with the Quad, a grouping with Australia, Japan and the US that seeks to contain China in the Indo-Pacific region on both the economic and security fronts.



Military stand-off

Despite the PM's assertion in Parliament that no intrusion had taken place into Indian territory, 15 rounds of talks between India and Chinese senior army commanders in eastern Ladakh for resolution of "friction points" indicate otherwise. The negotiations have led to withdrawal of troops by both sides from Galwan, Pangong Lake and Gogra/ Patrolling Point 17A. While this is not yet a return to status quo ante in these areas, there are three other areas — Depsang plains, Hot Springs and Demchock — where Chinese troops continue to prevent Indian soldiers from entering areas they were previously patrolling.

In this time, there have also been several meetings of the Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC). The Ministry of External Affairs said the two sides reviewed the situation along the LAC in the Western Sector, and agreed to hold the 16th round of senior military commanders at an early date.

Although the withdrawal of troops or disengagement, even partially, was supposed to be a prelude to de-escalation along the LAC, this has not happened either. Instead, China's build-up of military infrastructure on its side of the LAC is going on apace. General Charles A Flynn, Commanding General of the US Army in the Pacific region, said during a recent visit to Delhi that the build-up was "alarming", and while talks were useful, "the way they are acting and behaving is concerning, and should be concerning to everyone, and I think it is".

China has been building roads, living units and entire villages at various parts of the LAC, but the build-up in Ladakh includes a 11-m-wide bridge spanning the narrowest part of Pangong Lake at Khurnak Fort in territory that falls on the Chinese side of the LAC but is claimed by India.

In military terms, according to Brigadier Rahul Bhonsle (retd), writing on his portal Security Risks Asia, "this bridge will facilitate quick deployment of troops from the Rudog base to forward areas as well as faster tactical deployment of troops within the theatre" to avoid being upstaged by India. On August 29-30, 2020, the Indian Army and Special Frontier Force occupied the Kailash heights in Chushul sub-sector, which dominate the strategically significant Spanggur Gap. China had used this area to launch its offensive in 1962. The heights also give India a direct eye on Moldo Garrison.

The Chinese could not deploy additional troops quickly enough to repulse the Indian forces because the only route available was around the lake. This is no longer the case. The bridge is on the halfway mark of the lake. Earlier, another bridge, 6 m wide, came up earlier to facilitate the building of this bridge.

India is also building road infrastructure on its side.

Recalling Galwan

The Chinese People's Liberation Army had pitched tents and an observation post on India's side of the LAC. After a general agreement on disengaging in the Galwan sector earlier in June, the Chinese had agreed to withdraw. But on the night of June 15, a disagreement over the continued presence of the Chinese led to the bloodiest clash between India and China since 1975 .

According to reports at the time, when Colonel Suresh Babu, commander of 16 Bihar that made up the majority of the troops at Galwan, walked up to ask the Chinese to leave, he was manhandled. This led to a five-hour confrontation between 600 soldiers from both sides.



Col Babu died after falling into the ice-cold river, apparently after being hit. At the time, an agreement between the two sides forbade the use of firearms. The Chinese side were equipped with clubs that had nails embedded in them. The Indian side had fibre glass batons. There was stone throwing as well. Many Indian soldiers also died after being hit and falling into the river or being pushed into it.

Ten Indian soldiers including two Majors, two Captains and six jawans were detained by the Chinese for nearly three days before being handed back after several rounds of negotiations. According to unconfirmed reports, the Chinese may have lost more men than India, but so far, the PLA has acknowledged that four of its soldiers were killed. The first acknowledgement of Chinese casualties came eight months after the incident, in March 2021. In February this year, Klaxon, an Australian website, said at least 38 PLA soldiers drowned in the river.

The Galwan clash was the first in which Indian soldiers were killed since October 1975, when four personnel of the Assam Rifles were killed in an ambush by the Chinese at Tulung La in Arunachal Pradesh.

LONG COHABITATION PRESUMES MARRIAGE: SC

The law presumes a couple to be married if they have lived together for long as man and wife, the Supreme Court said in a judgment on Monday.

A Bench of Justices S. Abdul Nazeer and Vikram Nath said “the law presumes in favour of marriage and not in a state of concubinage”.

Though the presumption of marriage could be challenged, it would be a “heavy burden” for the one who seeks to deprive the relationship of a legal origin. The challenger has to prove that the couple are not married, Justice Nazeer, who authored the judgment, observed.

The judgment came in an appeal filed on a suit of partition from Kerala. Four sons and their heirs had coparcenary rights over a property. One of them had lived with a woman for years and had a son. The question before the courts was whether this son should be treated as an illegitimate child. The rival side contended that there were no documents or evidence to prove that the man and woman had tied the knot. They argued that a child from such a union had no right over a coparcenary property.

The trial court, however, ruled in favour of the couple’s son. It presumed that his parents were married. It passed a preliminary decree for partition giving him a share of the property. The Kerala High Court, however, reversed the decision, saying the “marriage” between his parents was not valid.

The Supreme Court set aside the High Court decision, saying it would be almost impossible to find documentary evidence of a marriage which took place 50 years before the filing of the partition suit. Besides, there was evidence that the man had made periodic payments to the woman.

“A strong presumption arises in favour of wedlock where two partners have lived together for a long spell as husband and wife,” the court quoted from its past judgments.



INDIA'S LINGERING HOMOPHOBIA

Pride Month comes and goes; but homophobia in India is here to stay like a spectre. As a good omen for Pride Month of this year, the Kerala High Court set a trailblazing precedent recently by sanctioning a lesbian couple, Adhila Nasarin and Fathima Noora, to live together after they were coercively separated by their parents. Ms. Nasarin had filed a habeas corpus petition following which Ms. Noora, who was allegedly “incarcerated” by her family, appeared before court. The court simply asked the couple if they wished to live together, to which they replied yes. The joy of the couple spilled over into social media. People congratulated the court and many social media profiles talked about gender spectrum. But alarmingly, it triggered rude homophobic chirpings too in the cyber streets. It exposed that the “God made Adam and Eve; not Adam and Steve” attitude lingers in Indian society.

The Indian Psychiatric Society authentically stated that homosexuality was not a mental disorder; but that sentiment has not convinced most Indian homes.

An attitudinal temperament

Homophobia is defined by Britannica Encyclopedia as culturally produced fear of or prejudice against homosexuals that sometimes manifests itself in legal restrictions or, in extreme cases, bullying or even violence against homosexuals. The term ‘homophobia’ was coined by George Weinberg, an American clinical psychologist, in his book *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (1972). The suffix ‘phobia’ generally designates an irrational fear, in the case of homophobia, the word instead refers to an attitudinal temperament ranging from mild dislike to abhorrence of people who are sexually or romantically attracted to individuals of the same sex. It is a culturally conditioned response to homosexuality. Homophobia runs against the Constitutional values of fraternity and dignity.

J.B. Kripalani, a prominent member of the Constituent Assembly, commented on the principle of fraternity in the Assembly: “I come to the great doctrine of fraternity which is allied with democracy. It means that we are all sons of the same God, as the religious would say, but as the mystic would say, that there is one life pulsating through us all, or as the Bible says, we are one of another. There can be no fraternity without this. So, I want this House to remember that what we have enunciated are not merely legal, constitutional and formal principles, but moral principles; and moral principles have to be lived in life. They have to be lived whether it is private or it is public life...” The social and psychological abhorrence prevailing in India against the LGBTQ+ community nullifies the constitutional fraternity that is to be lived out in public and private life of the nation.

Queerness isn't modern, western or sexual only, says mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik in his *Shikhandi: And Other 'Queer' Tales They Don't Tell You* (2014). He opens the treasure box of vast written and oral traditions in Hinduism, some over two thousand years old, to show us many overlooked tales, such as those of Shikhandi, who became a man to satisfy her wife; Mahadeva, who became a woman to deliver his devotee's child; Chudala, who became a man to enlighten her husband; and many more.

'Highest place to fraternity'

Fraternity too is not a pure western ideal. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar elucidated the Indian roots of the ideal of fraternity during an All India Radio interview in 1954: “My social philosophy may be said



to be enshrined in three words: liberty, equality and fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha... he gave the highest place to fraternity as the only real safeguard against the denial of liberty or equality — fraternity which was another name for brotherhood or humanity, which was another name for religion.” Dr. Ambedkar championed the ideal of fraternity to uphold the cause of the oppressed castes, Dalits. The same principle is felicitous to the gender Dalits of present-day India — the LGBTQ+ community. The society should not deprive the LGBTQ+ community of affection and regards thanks only to their sexual orientation.

In Is God anti-gay, Sam Allberry quotes the Bible: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6 v 35). Allberry concludes his booklet by saying that “the invitation [of God] is there for everyone. And so precious is the gift that God cannot be truly said to be ‘anti’ anyone to whom this wonderful gift is being offered.” If God is not anti-gay, how can His sons and daughters be homophobic?

DEADLINE FOR FREEZING ADMINISTRATIVE BOUNDARIES EXTENDED, NO CENSUS THIS YEAR

Since the Census can only begin a few months after the administrative boundaries are frozen, the possibility of a Census in 2022 is ruled out. Also, the Census exercise will be preceded by house-listing. Earlier, the deadline for jurisdictional changes had been kept at June 30.

In March this year, the government had notified certain amendments to Census rules to allow citizens to self-enumerate themselves in the Census and the National Population Register (NPR). The development had led to speculation that the house-listing phase of the Census may begin this year itself.

In the letter sent to the states, the RGI has cited Covid-19 pandemic as the reason for extending the deadline. “Owing to the prevailing conditions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, danger of increased probability of its spread and the preoccupation/involvement of the states/UTs in speeding up the vaccination drive against Covid-19 in the country, it would not be possible to start the work of ensuing Census this year. Also, the time period for conducting the ensuing Census is not yet decided,” it said.

As per rule 8(iv) of the Census Rules, 1990, the boundaries of administrative units shall be frozen from the date intimated by the Census Commissioner, which shall not be earlier than one year from the Census reference date.

“As such, it has now been decided by the competent authority to further extend the date of freezing of boundaries up to 31st December, 2022,” the letter said.

Before every Census, states are required to provide information on changes in the number of notified districts, villages, towns and other administrative units such as tehsils, talukas and police stations to the RGI. For the 2021 Census, the RGI had first issued a jurisdictional change updation notice on December 22, 2017. It had then asked the states to update the changes by January 31, 2020 with December 31, 2019 being fixed as the deadline for freezing of boundaries for the purpose of the Census. The house-listing phase of the Census had then been scheduled to be held from April 1, 2020 to September 30, 2020. It was during this period that RGI was also supposed



to conduct the enumeration for the NPR, which is the precursor to the preparation of National Register of Citizens .

While both NPR and NRC have created much controversy in the wake of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), with many states openly opposing them, the deadline for Census was indefinitely postponed in early 2020 due to the outbreak of Covid-19 in the country. The deadline was first extended till December 31, 2020, then to March 31, 2021, then to June 30, 2021, then to December 31, 2021 and later to June 30, 2022.

According to provisional RGI data , the number of districts have gone up from 640 in 2011 to 736.

BULLDOZER ON THE LOOSE

The demolition of houses and buildings linked to protesters in Uttar Pradesh is nothing but retribution and collective punishment targeted at Muslims. The destruction of the residence of Javed Mohammed, Welfare Party of India activist and businessman, in Prayagraj, shortly after he was identified by the police as an alleged conspirator behind the violence during a protest, amply demonstrates this. The fig-leaf of legality attached to the claim that the action by the Prayagraj Development Authority was to clear an illegal building has been blown away by the fact that the notice of demolition was addressed to Mr. Mohammed, and not to his wife, who owns the property. The family's charge that the notice was served only a day before the demolition and backdated to May 10 cannot be brushed aside. It is well-known that the removal of encroachments or illegal constructions cannot take place without due process, which includes giving the owner or occupier an opportunity to be heard and finding alternative accommodation under any existing rehabilitation scheme. That officials claimed that the notice was served on Mr. Mohammed based on local enquiries shows that they were only following orders to demolish the building and had not bothered to verify the record of ownership before action. Earlier, soon after violence was witnessed in Kanpur, the city's development authority demolished a commercial building allegedly linked to one of the accused in the case.

The latest demolitions are linked to the protests that took place in the wake of controversial remarks made by the now-suspended BJP spokesperson Nupur Sharma on the Prophet. While the Centre has sought to clarify to Islamic countries that it does not brook any disrespect to any religion, U.P. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath wants to send out a message that he will not brook any protests on the issue. It is now a well-established pattern that buildings belonging to those whose names are linked, with or without evidence, to riots or protests are chosen for demolition. For political purposes, it is presented as stringent action against anti-social elements for rioting, and for legal purposes, it is portrayed as removal of illegal constructions. It is unfortunate, and a defining feature of these convoluted times that some States take such pride in demolishing buildings that they want the bulldozer to symbolise their purported resolve in keeping minorities under check. The Supreme Court has ordered that status quo be maintained in respect of the demolitions at Jahangirpuri, in Delhi. Six former Supreme Court and High Court judges and six senior advocates have appealed to the Supreme Court to take suo motu cognisance of the demolitions. Whether the Court acts or not, there is little doubt that the demolitions amount to an abuse of power, a challenge to the rule of law and are inherently illegal due to the absence of due process or proportionality.



FALSE EQUIVALENCE

The investigation by the Delhi Police against 30 people for remarks allegedly hurting religious sentiments is an unnecessary attempt to create an artificial balance between the specific instance of controversial views being expressed recently on the Prophet and the unrelated opinions expressed online by others in recent times. The BJP has acted against its spokesperson Nupur Sharma and Delhi media unit head Naveen Jindal following global outrage among Muslims over their remarks on Islam. There is little doubt that their remarks came as part of a long-running trend among BJP functionaries and several Hindu organisations to vilify minorities, especially Muslims, and few would question any lawful action against them. The Delhi Police have chosen to register FIRs against Mr. Jindal and Ms. Sharma, but also added 30 other social media users. There may be a justification for the registration of a case against anyone if there appears to be a deliberate attempt to outrage religious feelings or inciting ill-will. However, registering an omnibus FIR that covers priest Yati Narsinghanand, journalist Saba Naqvi, AIMIM chief Asaduddin Owaisi, and Hindu Mahasabha activist Pooja Shakun Pandey, and others at one go defies logic. The police believe that many others cutting across religions had created animosity and spread inflammatory misinformation. This may be true in some instances, but clubbing of several such instances, instead of investigating and prosecuting them separately, gives the impression that these emanate from a general culture of hate and intolerance, and an endless cycle of tit-for-tat religious insults. Actually, some of these could be wilful transgressions of the law aimed at creating disharmony and inciting violence for political purposes.

Mr. Owaisi has questioned the registration of a case against him, maintaining that the Delhi Police are displaying 'both-sidesism' due to their fear of prosecuting the former BJP functionaries in isolation. Pursuing all these remarks in a single probe and trial would mean that material must be gathered from various social media platforms against all of them — leading to a prolonged trial. The tactic of putting a 'part-of-a-larger-plot' spin on specific offences is not new. The Bhima Koregaon case was transmogrified into a purported conspiracy to foment a Maoist insurrection; in the aftermath of the East Delhi riots, communal violence was linked with the Citizenship (Amendment) Act protests. If the idea was to open up the larger field of political dissent in those cases, the strategy now seems to be to drag those who made vocal responses into the criminal ambit so that the original offence appears diluted and becomes difficult to prosecute. Investigative agencies should pursue legal action against individuals in a proportionate manner and not through omnibus prosecutions just to give an impression of being 'balanced'.

HATE SPEECH, IPC SEC 295A, AND HOW COURTS HAVE READ THE LAW

The debate surrounding the comments by BJP spokespersons Nupur Sharma and Naveen Jindal have put the spotlight on the law that deals with criticism of or insult to religion. Provisions in the Indian Penal Code (IPC), primarily Section 295A, define the contours of free speech and its limitations with respect to offences relating to religion.

India does not have a formal legal framework for dealing with hate speech. However, a cluster of provisions, loosely termed hate speech laws, are invoked. These are primarily laws to deal with offences against religions.

Section 295A & others

Section 295A defines and prescribes a punishment for deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.

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



“Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of citizens of India by words, either spoken or written, or by signs or by visible representations or otherwise, insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to [three years], or with fine, or with both,” the IPC section reads.

Section 295A is one of the key provisions in the IPC chapter to penalise religious offences. The chapter includes offences to penalise damage or defilement of a place of worship with intent to insult the religion (Section 295); trespassing in a place of sepulture (Section 297); uttering, words, etc, with deliberate intent to wound the religious feelings of any person (Section 298); and disturbing a religious assembly (Section 296).

Section 295A has been invoked on a wide range of issues from penalising political satire and seeking bans on or withdrawal of books to even political critique on social media.

The state often invokes Section 295A along with Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code, which penalises promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, etc, and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony and Section 505 of the IPC that punishes statements conducing to public mischief.

In cases where such speech is online, Section 66A of the Information Technology Act that punishes sending offensive messages through communication services is added. In a landmark verdict in 2015, the Supreme Court struck down Section 66A as unconstitutional on the ground that the provision was “vague” and a “violation of free speech”. However, the provision continues to be invoked.

The broad, vague terms in the laws are often invoked in its misuse. Lower conviction rates for these provisions indicate that the process — where a police officer can arrest without a warrant — is often the punishment. Critics have pointed out that these laws are intended for the state to step in and restore “public order” rather than protect free speech.

Origins of the law

Colonial origins of the hate speech provisions are often criticised for the assumption that Indians were susceptible to religious excitement. In a 2016 paper in the Economic and Political Weekly, legal scholar Siddharth Narrain notes that the First Indian Law Commission, headed by T B Macaulay who drafted the Indian Penal Code, had written to the Governor General of India in 1835 that “there is perhaps no country in which the Government has so much to apprehend from religious excitement among the people.”

Section 295A was brought in 1927.

In his book *Offend, Shock or Disturb*, lawyer Gautam Bhatia writes that the antecedents of Section 295A lie in the “communally charged atmosphere of North India in the 1920s”. The amendment was a fallout of an acquittal under Section 153A of the IPC by the Lahore High Court in 1927 in *Rajpaul v Emperor*, popularly known as the Rangila Rasool case.

Rangila Rasool case

Rangila Rasool was a tract — brought out by a Hindu publisher — that had made disparaging remarks about the Prophet’s private life. Cases against the first pamphlet, filed under Section



153A, were dismissed by the Punjab and Haryana High Court, which examined the question whether targeting religious figures is different from targeting religions.

When a second, similar piece was published, it raised tensions. While the magistrate had convicted the publisher Rajpaul under Section 153A, the Lahore High Court held that a “scurrilous and foul attack” on a religious leader would prima facie fall under Section 153A — although not every criticism.

This debate in interpretation prompted the colonial government to enact Section 295A with a wider scope to address these issues.

Later cases

In 1957, the constitutionality of Section 295A was challenged in *Ramji Lal Modi v State of Uttar Pradesh*. The Supreme Court upheld the law on the grounds that it was brought in to preserve “public order”. Public order is an exemption to the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression and the right to religion recognised by the Constitution.

In a 1960 ruling, in *Baba Khalil Ahmed v State of Uttar Pradesh*, the Supreme Court said that “malicious intent” of the accused can be determined not just from the speech in question but also from external sources.

In 1973, in *Ramlal Puri v State of Madhya Pradesh*, the Supreme Court said the test to be applied is whether the speech in question offends the “ordinary man of common sense” and not the “hypersensitive man”. However, these determinations are made by the court and the distinction can often be vague and vary from one judge to the other.

In *Baragur Ramachandrappa v State of Karnataka*, a 2007 decision of the Supreme Court, “a pragmatic approach” was invoked in interpreting Section 295A. The state government had issued a notification banning *Dharmakaarana*, a Kannada novel written by award-winning author P V Narayana on the ground that it was hate speech, invoking a gamut of provisions including Section 295A. The pragmatic approach was to restore public order by “forfeiture” of a book over individual interest of free speech.

PURSUIT OF JUSTICE

The chargesheet filed by Nagaland police with regard to a botched-up security operation last year in which six civilians were killed is a welcome first step. The chargesheet, which names 30 Indian Army personnel including a Major, is based on a probe by a special investigation team set up by the Nagaland government. The Army had admitted that the killings were a case of mistaken identity and error of judgement — the Court of Inquiry has been completed and is being examined. All stakeholders — the government, state police, Army — must ensure that due process is protected in this sensitive case that had led to massive protests in Nagaland and almost derailed the peace talks between the Centre and the NSCN-IM.

In all, 13 civilians and a security personnel were killed when personnel of 21 Para Special Forces fired at a jeep carrying miners in Oting, Mon district on December 4 last year and in the violence that followed. Six miners were killed in the initial shooting while seven others and a security personnel lost their lives when a mob attacked the security forces later. The firing in Mon took place in the backdrop of the killing of a commanding officer of Assam Rifles, his wife and son, and four security personnel by militants from Manipur Naga People’s Front and People’s Liberation



Army of Manipur in Churachandpur district a few days earlier. The Mon massacre, in the run-up to Assembly elections in Nagaland, gave fresh impetus to civic campaigns for repealing the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. The Centre promised to look at the demand favourably as public protests rocked Nagaland, where a tenuous ceasefire between the NSCN-IM and the Armed Forces has held out for over two decades despite the political deadlock over the demands of the insurgents. On April 1, the Centre withdrew AFSPA from 15 police station areas in seven of Nagaland's 15 districts, a decision that has the potential to influence the narrative on federal relations in the region — according to the Ministry of Home Affairs, militancy in the Northeast has seen a major decline in recent years. It is necessary to nurture this positive spirit and consolidate the gains of hard-won peace in a region that has been wrecked by ethnic strife and militancy.

Action on the SIT report and the chargesheet on the Mon incident should proceed keeping in mind the complex history of the region. It should be insulated from the competing claims of regionalism and nationalism. A closure in this case will help heal the wounds of insurgency and its terrible offshoots including the AFSPA, and enable a conversation on matters of governance such as development, jobs, corruption etc. As for the armed forces, they will have to take the SIT accusation that personnel did “not follow the Standard Operating Procedure and the Rules of Engagement” and resorted to “indiscriminate and disproportionate firing” seriously, pin responsibility and take remedial action. How they respond to the chargesheet will be very significant in the discourse in the region around security and society.

WHAT IS THE INTER-STATE COUNCIL?

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday (June 16), asking that at least three meetings of the Inter-State Council should be held every year to “strengthen the spirit of cooperative federalism”.

Stalin also suggested that bills of national importance should be placed before the Council before being tabled in Parliament. He said this was because there is no “effective and interactive communication” between the states and the Centre on issues of common interest.

What is the Inter-State Council?

It is a mechanism that was constituted “to support Centre-State and Inter-State coordination and cooperation in India”. The Inter-State Council was established under Article 263 of the Constitution, which states that the President may constitute such a body if a need is felt for it. The Council is basically meant to serve as a forum for discussions among various governments.

In 1988, the Sarkaria Commission suggested the Council should exist as a permanent body, and in 1990 it came into existence through a Presidential Order.

The main functions of the Council are inquiring into and advising on disputes between states, investigating and discussing subjects in which two states or states and the Union have a common interest, and making recommendations for the better coordination of policy and action.

The Prime Minister is the chairman of the Council, whose members include the Chief Ministers of all states and UTs with legislative assemblies, and Administrators of other UTs. Six Ministers of Cabinet rank in the Centre's Council of Ministers, nominated by the Prime Minister, are also its members.



What issues has Chief Minister Stalin raised?

Mainly, the DMK chief has flagged the lack of regular meetings, saying the Council has met only once in the last six years — and that there has been no meeting since July 2016. Since its constitution in 1990, the body has met only 11 times, although its procedure states it should meet at least three times every year.

Stalin appreciated the reconstitution of the Council, carried out last month. The body will now have 10 Union Ministers as permanent invitees, and the standing committee of the Council has been reconstituted with Home Minister Amit Shah as Chairman. Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman and the Chief Ministers of Maharashtra, UP, and Gujarat are some of the other standing committee members.

Stalin has frequently disagreed with the central government's policies on matters of taxation, on the medical examination NEET, and often talked about the rights of states. Highlighting the need for the Council to meet regularly, he said, "What could be settled amicably among the executive branches is often taken to the doorsteps of the judicial branch."

Tamil Nadu has long advocated the need for a Council. In 1969, Stalin's father, M Karunanidhi, spoke about setting up an expert committee to study Centre-state relations. Months later, his government appointed a committee headed by P V Rajamannar, a former Madras High Court Chief Justice, which submitted a report in 1971, recommending "the Inter-State Council should be constituted immediately".

What happened in the last meeting of the Inter State Council?

In 2016, the meeting included consideration of the Punchhi Commission's recommendations on Centre-State Relations that were published in 2010. At the time, M Karunanidhi had criticised then Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa for not personally attending the meeting.

The meeting saw detailed discussion on the recommendations. States asked for maintaining the federal structure amid growing "centralisation". Imposition of Article 356 of the Constitution, which deals with the imposition of President's Rule in states, was a matter of concern. Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who was then with the Opposition, demanded that the post of Governor should be abolished.

WHAT ARE THE ED AND IT CASES AGAINST RAHUL AND SONIA GANDHI?

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has been interrogating Congress MP Rahul Gandhi for the past three days in connection with a money-laundering investigation it is carrying out into the affairs of the National Herald newspaper.

Rahul has been called for questioning again on Monday (June 20), while his mother Sonia Gandhi will be questioned on June 23. Earlier, the agency had questioned Congress leaders Mallikarjun Kharge and Pawan Bansal.

What is the case?

The ED case is based on a trial court order that allowed the Income Tax Department to probe the affairs of National Herald newspaper and conduct a tax assessment of Sonia and Rahul. The order was the result of a petition filed by BJP MP Subramanian Swamy in 2013.



Swamy's complaint had alleged cheating and misappropriation of funds on the part of the Gandhis in acquiring the newspaper. Swami had alleged that the Gandhis acquired properties owned by National Herald by buying the newspaper's erstwhile publishers, The Associated Journals Limited (AJL), through an organisation called Young Indian (YI) in which they have 86 per cent stake.

Sonia and Rahul were granted bail in the case by the trial court on December 19, 2015.

In Swamy's complaint before the trial court, Sonia, Rahul and others have been accused of misappropriating funds by paying Rs 50 lakh through YI to obtain the right to recover Rs 90.25 crore that AJL owed to the Congress.

What happened with National Herald?

Jawaharlal Nehru established The National Herald in 1938. It was published by AJL, a Section 25 company, which is generally a not-for-profit entity. AJL also published the Qaumi Awaz in Urdu, and Navjeevan in Hindi.

The company owns prime real estate in various cities including Delhi, Mumbai, Lucknow, Patna, and Panchkula. Plagued by overstaffing and a lack of revenue, AJL ran into losses and stopped publishing in April 2008.

After the publication of the newspaper was suspended, the income of AJL came mainly from exploitation of various properties held by it. One of its key properties was situated at 5A Herald House, Bahadurshah Zafar Marg, New Delhi.

Meanwhile, the All India Congress Committee (AICC), which is the apex body of Indian National Congress, gave the company unsecured, interest-free loans for a few years up to 2010.

What happened thereafter?

By the end of 2010, AJL's unsecured debt had risen to Rs 90.21 crore. Despite owning real estate that is said to be valued much higher than the quantum of its debt, the management of AJL appears to have made no effort to repay the AICC. According to investigations by the Income Tax Department, the properties owned by AJL had a fair market value (FMV) of over Rs 413 crore.

On November 23, 2010, a company called Young Indian Pvt Ltd was incorporated as a Section 25 company, with Gandhi family loyalists Suman Dubey and Satyan Gangaram (Sam) Pitroda as directors. The object of the company was stated to be: "To inculcate in the mind of India's youth commitment to the ideal of a democratic and secular society..."

However, immediately after its incorporation, both the Directors transferred their shares to Congress leaders Oscar Fernandes, Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Moti Lal Vora (now deceased). Later, on December 13, 2010, Rahul Gandhi was appointed as Director of Young Indian and, on January 22, 2011, Sonia Gandhi joined the board as a Director.

As of March 2017, Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi had shareholdings of 38% each in the company. Vora and Fernandes held the remaining 24% in equal parts.

YI then registered itself under Section 12A of the Income Tax Act as a charitable organisation, making it eligible for 100% tax exemption.



What was the AJL-YI-AICC deal?

After the formation of YI, the AICC decided to assign AJL's nearly Rs 90 crore debt to the newly formed organisation. Young Indian paid just Rs 50 lakh for this acquisition.

The loan assigned to YI was converted into shares of AJL, and AJL allotted 9,02,16,899 equity shares to Young Indian in lieu of the aforesaid loan amount. In this manner, almost 99.99% shares of AJL were transferred to Young Indian.

The IT Department has alleged that in order to achieve the objective of holding 100 per cent share of AJL by YI's majority shareholders, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra have purchased an additional 47,513 and 2,62,411 shares through Rattan Deep Trust and Janhit Nidhi Trust respectively.

Interestingly, at the time of AJL's acquisition, Young Indian, incorporated with a paid up capital of Rs 5 lakh, did not have even the Rs 50 lakh funds to acquire AJL. It thus decided to take a loan of Rs 1 crore from M/s Dotex Merchandise Pvt. Ltd, Kolkata. Dotex, alleged by the Income Tax Department to be a company that allowed accommodation entries for a commission, is now owned by the RPG Group.

This loan of Rs 1 crore was also flagged as "suspicious transaction" by the Financial Intelligence Unit of the Finance Ministry.

Notably, AICC transferred its loan to YI on December 28, 2010, more than two months before YI made any payment to AICC. In fact, at that time YI did not even have a bank account. The IT probe has found that YI started its office at AJL-owned Herald House in 2010 itself, without any agreement to that effect or any payment of rent to AJL.

The IT Department has even raised doubts about the purported loan forwarded by the Congress to AJL saying there is no evidence of it except in the books of AJL. "The amount of loan entry of Rs 90.21 crore was fixed in order to ensure that the amount was just sufficient to allot 99% share of AJL to the Appellant (YI)," the IT submission to the IT Appellate Tribunal said.

What were the questions around the deal?

The AICC transferred all its loan to YI for just Rs 50 lakh, claiming that it was not sure if AJL would be in position to return the loan. The IT probe has held that AJL had properties worth hundreds of crores, and thus it was actually in a very good position to return the loan.

Also, in the Notes to Accounts for the financial year 2010-11 of AJL, it was mentioned that the management was confident of a turnaround for the company. Since the same people were office bearers of both AICC and AJL, it was strange for the former to assume that its loan could not be recovered.

Other key questions raised were of conflict of interest, with Vora holding positions in all the three entities involved — AICC treasurer (formerly), AJL CMD, and shareholder and director at Young Indian. Also, The Representation of the People Act, 1950, does not allow a political party to give a loan.



What is the status of the IT case now?

The IT Department had earlier issued a notice to Rahul for allegedly concealing information on his status as a Director of Young Indian. It has said that Rahul's shares in Young Indian resulted in an income of Rs 154 crore, whereas earlier only Rs 68 lakh was assessed. It issued similar notices to Sonia and Fernandes, even as it sought to reopen the assessment to compute the "fair market value" of these shares.

Rahul, Sonia and Fernandes challenged this, contending that no income had escaped assessment, and that they had disclosed all facts. One key argument against the reassessment was that YI, as a Section 25 company, had applied for exemption under Section 12A of the Income Tax Act, which was granted on May 9, 2011.

However, CIT(E) cancelled the registration granted to YI u/s 12A on October 26, 2017 on the ground that no genuine activities were carried out by YI either in furtherance of its objects or otherwise, which can be held to be charitable. The cancellation was upheld by the IT Tribunal. A March 31, 2022 order of the IT Appellate Tribunal asked the IT Department to make further inquiries into the matter, even as it struck down some tax demands by the department on YI.

What is the Congress's defence?

The Congress has accused the BJP government of cheap vendetta politics to divert attention from issues like inflation, GDP, social unrest, and social divisiveness in the country. The party said the case of money laundering was "weird", and the charges were "hollow...more hollow than a pack of cards".

Congress leader Abhishek Manu Singhvi has said that AJL had come under financial stress over the decades, after which the Congress stepped in, and over a period of time gave Rs 90-odd crore as financial support to it.

According to Singhvi, AJL did what any company under debt would do, i.e., to convert its debt into equity which was eventually acquired by Young Indian. He said since Young Indian is a non-profit organisation, "by law...no dividend can be given to its shareholders or directors... So you cannot take a penny."

Singhvi said AJL continues to hold all the properties it was holding earlier, and that the only change was that Young Indian was now the shareholder of AJL.

MALNUTRITION IN INDIA IS A WORRY IN A MODERN SCENARIO

Good nutrition has the power to empower the present and future generations. India's greatest national treasure is its people — especially women and children — but even after 75 years of independence, a majority of them do not get the required diet to meet their nutritional needs. A child's nutritional status is directly linked to their mother. Poor nutrition among pregnant women affects the nutritional status of the child and has a greater chance to affect future generations. Undernourished children are at risk of under-performing in studies and have limited job prospects. This vicious cycle restrains the development of the country, whose workforce, affected mentally and physically, has reduced work capacity.



Marginal improvement

While there has been some progress in tackling malnutrition among children and women over the past decade, the improvement has been modest at best. This is despite declining rates of poverty, increased self-sufficiency in food production, and the implementation of a range of government programmes. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) has shown marginal improvement in different nutrition indicators, indicating that the pace of progress is slow. Children in several States are more undernourished now than they were five years ago.

Stunting, wasting, anaemia

While there was some reduction in stunting rates (35.5% from 38.4% in NFHS-4) 13 States or Union Territories have seen an increase in stunted children since NFHS-4; this includes Gujarat, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Kerala. (Stunting is defined as low height-for-age.) Malnutrition trends across NFHS surveys show that wasting, the most visible and life-threatening form of malnutrition, has either risen or has remained stagnant over the years (Wasting is defined as low weight-for-height).

India also has the highest prevalence of anaemia in the world (Anaemia is defined as the condition in which the number of red blood cells or the haemoglobin concentration within them is lower than normal). The NFHS-5 survey indicates that more than 57% of women (15-49 years) and over 67% children (six-59 months) suffer from anaemia. My home State, Assam, is among the low-performing States, with a huge burden of anaemic cases — 66.4% of women (15-49 years) and 68.4% children (6-59 months) are affected. It is imperative to introspect about these problems, which remain persistent, pervasive, and serious. Anaemia has major consequences in terms of human health and development: it reduces the work capacity of individuals, in turn impacting the economy and overall national growth. Developing countries lose up to 4.05% in GDP per annum due to iron deficiency anaemia; India loses up to 1.18% of GDP annually.

Step up the financing

There is a greater need now to increase investment in women and children's health and nutrition to ensure their sustainable development and improved quality of life. While the Government's focus has been on the consolidation of several programmes to improve outcomes, there is a need for increased financial commitment. Experts have pointed out that Saksham Anganwadi and the Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nourishment (POSHAN) 2.0 programme have seen only a marginal increase in budgetary allocation this year (₹20,263 crore from ₹20,105 crore in 2021-22). Additionally, 32% of funds released under POSHAN Abhiyaan to States and Union Territories have not been utilised.

Monitor constituencies too

India must adopt an outcome-oriented approach on nutrition programmes. It is crucial that parliamentarians begin monitoring needs and interventions in their constituencies and raise awareness on the issues, impact, and solutions to address the challenges at the local level. There has to be direct engagement with nutritionally vulnerable groups (this includes the elderly, pregnant women, those with special needs and young children), and contribute toward ensuring last-mile delivery of key nutrition services and interventions. This will ensure greater awareness on the one hand and proper planning and implementation of programmes at the grass-roots level on the other, which can then be replicated at the district and national levels.



With basic education and general awareness, every individual is informed, takes initiatives at the personal level and can become an agent of change. Various studies highlight a strong link between mothers' education and improved access and compliance with nutrition interventions among children. We must ensure our young population has a competitive advantage; nutrition and health are foundational to that outcome.

THE WAY TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

Since child marriage is rampant in India, will increasing the age of marriage of women solve this issue? The increase in age of marriage is claimed to bring substantive benefits at the individual and societal levels. Is this claim true? Data from the recently released National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), 2019-2021, enables us to examine the facts.

Structural factors

Several empirical studies from South Asia establish a significant association between early marriage and adverse health and educational outcomes of women and their children. Specifically, studies associate early marriage of women with early pregnancy, lower likelihood of accessing ante-natal care, higher risks of maternal morbidity and mortality, poor nutritional status of women and poor nutritional and educational outcomes of children. These studies seem to provide a rather compelling case for increasing the age of marriage of women from 18 to 21 years, as a delayed marriage might offer significant public health dividends.

But a closer reading of the evidence shows that the association between child marriage and adverse health outcomes does not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, it is abetted by structural factors, including social norms, poverty, and women's education. It is because of social norms in many regions and cultures that parents begin preparations for a girl's marriage once she has reached menarche. Equally, a large proportion of child marriages take place primarily because of poverty and the burden of the huge costs of dowry associated with delayed marriages. These factors curtail a girl's opportunities to continue her education. And in turn, the lack of educational opportunities plays an important role in facilitating child marriage.

So, what matters more: the age of marriage or the factors that facilitate child marriage? Stated differently, does a woman's age at marriage matter in itself, independent of education or poverty? It is in this context that the NFHS-5 data become salient. NFHS-5 data show that about 25% of women aged 18-29 years married before the legal marriageable age of 18. The proportion has declined only marginally from NFHS-4 (28%). Expectedly, the prevalence is higher in rural than urban India (28% and 17%, respectively). West Bengal has the highest prevalence (42%), followed by Bihar and Tripura (40% each). Oddly, the decline in child marriage has been paltry at best in these high-prevalence States. At the other end of the spectrum are Goa, Himachal Pradesh and Kerala (6% to 7%).

Education outcomes

If we look at the data community-wise, 39% of child marriages in India take place among Adivasis and Dalits. The share of advantaged social groups is 17% and the remaining share is of Other Backward Classes. In terms of household wealth, 58% of these marriages take place among the poorest wealth groups (bottom 40%), about 40% of them take place among the middle 50% and only 2% of them take place among the top 10% of wealth groups. Only 4% of child marriages in India take place among women who have completed more than 12 years of education. Thus, the



data confirm that a significant proportion of child marriages takes place among women with less than 12 years of schooling and households that are socially and economically disadvantaged.

Since child marriage is substantially lower among women with a higher level of schooling, it would be interesting to know whether an increase in years of schooling necessarily increases the age at marriage. Expectedly, the average age at marriage increases from 17 years among women who are illiterate and have had up to five years of schooling to 22 years among women who have had more than 12 years of schooling. This indicates that an increase in years of schooling goes hand in hand with an increase in age at marriage. While an increase in education is most likely to delay marriage, the increase in age at marriage may or may not increase women's education.

Since the Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2021, fixes 21 years as the marriageable age for women, we examine whether a mere increase in age at marriage without an increase in education bestows women with better nutritional outcomes. While 27% of illiterate women who married before 18 years are underweight (Body Mass Index below 18.5), the proportion is 24% for illiterate women who married at the age of 21 years. A high proportion (64%) of illiterate women are anaemic, in terms of iron deficiency, irrespective of their difference in age at marriage. In terms of the gap between marriage and first pregnancy, it is surprisingly 2.5 years among the former and 1.6 years among the latter. However, the former give birth to a higher number of children (2.4), on average, than the latter (1.4).

Women with 12 years of schooling married before 18 years and at 21 years have hardly any difference in underweight prevalence (14% and 13%, respectively). In iron deficiency anaemia, the prevalence is only marginally higher (54%) among the former than the latter (50%). The gap between marriage and first pregnancy is higher among the former (2.6 years) than among the latter (1.7 years), though the latter have fewer number of children (1 child on average) than the former (1.6). A cross comparison between women who have had more than 12 years of schooling but were married before 18 years and women with secondary education but married at 21 years also underlines the importance of education. While underweight prevalence is almost equal among both, anaemia is marginally higher among the latter. The broad pattern emerges in other indicators as well.

The way forward

To sum up, the health dividend emanating from women's increased age at marriage is not imminent. Increasing the age of marriage without a commensurate improvement in women's education is least likely to yield better health and nutritional outcomes. Instead, it might adversely impact the poor and illiterate. The fact that about one-fourth of women (18-29 years) in India have married before 18 years despite the law tells us that legally increasing the age of marriage may not fully prevent child marriages. By contrast, much of the benefits can be reaped by ensuring that women complete education at least up to 12 years. The case of Bangladesh shows that improving women's education and imparting modern skills to them that increase their employability reduces child marriage and improves health and nutrition. Also, schemes which ease the financial burden of marriage but the eligibility criteria of which should essentially link to educational attainment in addition to age demand attention. The lessons from Janani Suraksha Yojana and the zeal demonstrated in ending open defecation might provide valid insights here.

Educating women is important for their personal freedom, social well being and contributes to human development. A legalistic approach to increasing the age at marriage will produce positive results only if it leads to an improvement in women's education and skill acquisition for



employability. In the absence of an enhancement in women's schooling or skills, a legalistic approach to ending child marriage might become counterproductive.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE REUTERS INSTITUTE DIGITAL NEWS REPORT 2022

The story so far: According to the 2022 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, trust in news is falling in nearly half the countries surveyed, with significant proportions of the public, especially younger age groups, beginning to turn away from news. Further, news consumption is increasingly happening via social media platforms such as TikTok rather than traditional media.

What is the scope of this report?

This study, an annual one commissioned by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, tracks how news is consumed in different countries. This year's report, the eleventh overall, is based on a survey conducted by YouGuv, a British market research and data analytics firm, in January/February 2022 through online questionnaires. It covers 46 markets in six continents. Since it is based on online questionnaires, the findings are not necessarily nationally representative, especially for countries with lower internet penetration. For India, the data is more representative of younger English speakers and not the national population as such.

What are the major trends highlighted in the report?

Broadly, the report documents the ways in which "the connection between journalism and much of the public may be fraying". It flags six major trends which could have wider socio-political implications. Firstly, people are trusting news content less and less. Second, consumption of traditional news media declined in nearly all the countries surveyed. Third, the proportion of news consumers who say that they "avoid news" has risen sharply across countries, with the report describing the phenomenon as "selective avoidance". Fourth, despite small increases in the proportion of people willing to pay for online news (mostly in richer countries), the growth in digital subscriptions for news content seems to be leveling off. Next, "the smartphone has become the dominant way in which most people first access news in the morning". Finally, the report notes that while Facebook remained the most-used social network for news, it is TikTok that has become the fastest-growing network, "reaching 40% of 18-24-year-olds, with 15% using the platform for news". TikTok, however, is currently banned in India.

What is 'selective avoidance' of news?

While the majority of people remained engaged with news, the report finds that a growing minority is increasingly choosing "to ration or limit their exposure to it — or at least to certain types of news". The report calls this behaviour "selective avoidance" and says this is one of the reasons why news consumption levels have failed to increase as per expectations. The proportion that says they avoid news has doubled in Brazil (54%) and the U.K. (46%) since 2017. Across markets, respondents cited a variety of reasons for this avoidance. Many said they were "put off by the repetitiveness of the news agenda — especially around politics and COVID-19 (43%). Some said they were "worn out by the news" (29%). A significant number said they avoided news because they didn't trust it (29%). About one-third (36%), especially those under 35, said that news ruined their mood. About 17% said they avoided news because it led to arguments they would rather avoid, while 16% said reading the news led to feelings of powerlessness. A small percentage (14%) said that they didn't have time for news while 8% said that they found it too hard to understand.



What are the reasons cited for declining trust in news content?

The average level of trust in news, at 42%, was found to be lower than the previous year. Trust levels fell in 21 of the 46 markets surveyed, rising in just seven. The report states that an “indifference to news and its value, along with widespread perception of political and other biases by the media, are two of the main reasons for low trust”. The trust levels were also lower among those on the right, compared to those on the left, of the ideological spectrum — a pattern most pronounced in the U.S. In France, on the other hand, the lack of trust closely tracked the class divide, with the ‘haves’ showing higher levels of trust, while the ‘have-nots’ viewed media as often aligning itself with the elites. Other reasons for low trust included perceptions of undue influence from business or political interests, with just 19% agreeing that “news organisations put what’s best for society ahead of their own commercial or political interests.” At the same time, many more said that all or most news outfits “put their own political views (40%) or commercial interests (42%) ahead of society.”

What about preferred modes of news consumption?

Across markets and age groups, text is still king when it comes to news consumption. However, younger audiences, especially ‘digital natives’ who grew up with networks like Facebook and TikTok, were more likely to say they “watch the news”. In India, 58% said that they “mostly read” the news while 17% said they “mostly watch” it. On the other hand, the comparable figures for Finland, which has a historic pattern of high newspaper consumption, was 85% and 3% respectively.

What does the report say about trends in India?

In the section on India, produced in collaboration with the Asian College of Journalism, the report, observing that “India is a strongly mobile-focussed market,” says that 72% of the survey respondents accessed news through smartphones and 35% did so via computers. Also, 84% of the Indian respondents sourced news online, 63% from social media, 59% from television, and 49% from print. YouTube (53%) and WhatsApp (51%) were the top social media platforms for sourcing news. India registered a small increase in the level of trust, with 41% trusting news overall. While legacy print brands and public broadcasters continued to have high trust levels, only a minority — 36% and 35% — felt that the media was free from undue political influence and from undue business influence respectively.

FOOD SAFETY INDEX: HOW IT IS WORKED OUT, HOW THE STATES HAVE PERFORMED

Last week, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) released the State Food Safety Index (SFSI) 2021-22. A look at how the index assesses and ranks states, and their performances.

What is the SFSI?

Developed by the FSSAI, the index aims to measure the performance of states and Union Territories on selected “parameters” of food safety. According to the FSSAI, the index is aimed at encouraging states and UTs to “improve their performance and work towards establishing a proper food safety ecosystem in their jurisdiction...”

The SFSI is released annually for a financial year. For instance, the latest SFSI, released on World Food safety Day, June 7, is for the fiscal 2021-22. This is the fourth edition of the SFSI since its inception in 2018-19.



Which are these food safety parameters?

The SFSI takes into account the performance of the states on five key parameters, each of which is assigned a different weightage in the assessment.

HUMAN RESOURCES & INSTITUTIONAL DATA: This carries a weightage of 20% and measures the “availability of human resources like number of Food Safety Officers, Designated Officers facility of adjudications and appellate tribunals, functioning of State/ District level Steering Committees, pendency of cases and their monitoring and participation in Central Advisory Committee meetings of the Food Authority”.

COMPLIANCE: This carries the highest weightage, 30%. “This is the most important parameter and measures overall coverage of food businesses in licensing & registration commensurate with size and population of the State/UTs, special drives and camps organized, yearly increase, promptness and effectiveness in issue of state licenses/ registrations,” the FSSAI says. “Promptness” in attending to consumer grievances, and availability of a help desk and web portals, too, come under this parameter.

FOOD TESTING—INFRASTRUCTURE AND SURVEILLANCE: Weighted at 20%, this measures the “availability of adequate testing infrastructure with trained manpower in the States/ UTs for testing food samples”. The FSSAI says, “The States/ UTs with NABL accredited labs and adequate manpower in the labs score more in this parameter.” It takes into account the “availability and effective utilization” of Mobile Food Testing Labs and registration and utilization of InFoLNet (Indian Food Laboratories Network).

TRAINING & CAPACITY BUILDING: This parameter carries the lowest weightage, at 10%. It measures states’ performance on training and capacity building of regulatory staff.

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: This carries a weightage of 20%. It evaluates the states and UTs on their performance on various consumer empowering initiatives of FSSAI, such as participation in Food Fortification, Eat Right Campus, BHOG (Blissful Hygienic Offering to God), Hygiene Rating of Restaurants, Clean Street Food Hubs, etc.

Besides, the states’ initiatives for creating consumer awareness are also considered under this parameter.

How is the states and UTs assessed?

The states and Union Territories are not assessed and ranked together. They are segregated into three categories — large states, small states and UTs— and assessed separately within their respective categories, based on their performance on the selected food safety parameters.

“The assessment and evaluation of each category are done by separate teams comprising of outside experts for food testing and food & nutrition professionals in addition to FSSAI officials,” the FSSAI says.

These expert teams examine details received from the states and UTs. They also interact with the states/UTs through video-conferencing for verification and confirmation of data.



How have the states and UTs performed this year?

In the category of the 20 large states, Tamil Nadu with an overall score of 82 out of 100 has performed the best and been ranked 1st on SFSI 2021-22, while Andhra Pradesh with an overall score of 26 has been ranked at the bottom —17th place (some states share a common rank).

Following Tamil Nadu in the rankings of the larger states are Gujarat (rank 2nd with a score 77.5), Maharashtra (3rd with 70), Himachal Pradesh (4th with 65.5) and West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh (sharing 5th with a score of 58.5).

Bihar (rank 16th, score 30), Telangana (rank 15th, score 34.5), Assam (rank 14th, score 35) and Chhattisgarh and Haryana (rank 13th, score 38) join Andhra Pradesh in the bottom 5 among the large states on the SFSI for the large states.

Among the remaining 8 large states, Kerala with a score of 57 has been ranked at 6th, Uttarakhand (score 55) at 7th, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh (both 54.5) at 8th, Karnataka (score 52.5) at 9th, Rajasthan (score 50.5) at 10th, Punjab (score 45) at 11th and Jharkhand (41.5) at 12th.

Among the eight small states, Goa with a score of 56 has been ranked at the top, while Arunachal Pradesh (rank 8th and score 21) is at the bottom.

Among the eight Union Territories, Jammu and Kashmir with a score of 68.5 has been ranked 1st and Lakshadweep (score 16) as the bottom. Delhi with a score of 66 has been ranked at 2nd place.

BRAHMOS, 21 AND DEVELOPING

On June 12, 2001, the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile was first tested from a land-based launcher in Chandipur. In the 21 years since, BrahMos has been upgraded several times, with versions tested on land, air and sea platforms. A look at the 21-year journey of the versatile asset, which recently bagged an export order from the Philippines.

Background and development

Since the early 1980s, the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme, conceived and led by Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, started developing a range of missiles including Prithvi, Agni, Trishul, Akash and Nag, with a wide spectrum of capabilities and ranges.

In the early 1990s, India's strategic leadership felt the need for cruise missiles — guided missiles that traverse the majority of their flight path at almost constant speed and deliver large warheads over long distances with high precision. The need was felt primarily following the use of cruise missiles in the Gulf War.

An Inter-Governmental Agreement was signed with Russia in Moscow in 1998 by Dr Kalam, who headed the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), and N V Mikhailov, Russia's then Deputy Defence Minister. This led to the formation of BrahMos Aerospace, a joint venture between DRDO and NPO Mashinostroyeniya (NPOM), the Indian side holding 50.5% and the Russians 49.5%.

In 1999, work on development of missiles began in labs of DRDO and NPOM after BrahMos Aerospace received funds from the two governments. The first successful test in 2001 was conducted from a specially designed land-based launcher. The missile system has since reached



some key milestones, with the first major export order of \$375 million received from the Philippines Navy this year.

Strategic significance

BrahMos is a two-stage missile with a solid propellant booster engine. Its first stage brings the missile to supersonic speed and then gets separated. The liquid ramjet or the second stage then takes the missile closer to three times the speed of sound in cruise phase. The missile has a very low radar signature, making it stealthy, and can achieve a variety of trajectories. The 'fire and forget' type missile can achieve a cruising altitude of 15 km and a terminal altitude as low as 10 m to hit the target.

Cruise missiles such as BrahMos, called "standoff range weapons", are fired from a range far enough to allow the attacker to evade defensive counter-fire. These are in the arsenal of most major militaries in the world.

The BrahMos has three times the speed, 2.5 times flight range and higher range compared to subsonic cruise missiles. With missiles made available for export, the platform is also seen as a key asset in defence diplomacy.

An extended range version of the BrahMos air-launched missile was tested from a Sukhoi-30 MKI recently. On January 11, an advanced sea-to-sea variant of BrahMos was tested from the newly commissioned INS Visakhapatnam.

The BrahMos is also said to have been involved in a recent controversy. Pakistan claimed that an unarmed Indian missile had landed in its territory on March 9, and the Ministry of Defence said a technical malfunction had led to accidental firing. While the government, which ordered a high-level court of enquiry, did not officially identify the missile, experts felt its trajectory suggested the signature of BrahMos.

Present and future

Senior DRDO scientists say what makes the missile system unparalleled is its extreme accuracy and versatility. Land-based BrahMos formations along the borders, BrahMos-equipped Sukhoi-30s at bases in Northern theatre and and Southern peninsula, and BrahMos-capable ships and submarines deployed in sea together form a triad.

With requirements evolving in multi-dimensional warfare, the BrahMos is undergoing a number of upgrades and work is on to develop versions with higher ranges, manoeuvrability and accuracy.

Versions currently being tested include ranges up to 350 km, as compared to the original's 290 km. Versions with even higher ranges, up to 800 km, and with hypersonic speed are said to be on cards. Efforts are also on to reduce the size and signature of existing versions and augment its capabilities further.

Versions deployed in all three Armed forces are still being tested regularly, and so are versions currently under development.

LAND-BASED: The land-based BrahMos complex has four to six mobile autonomous launchers, each with three missiles on board that can be fired almost simultaneously. Batteries of the land-based systems have been deployed along India's land borders in various theatres.



The upgraded land attack version, with capability of cruising at 2.8 Mach, can hit targets at a range up to 400 km with precision. Advanced versions of higher range and speed up to 5 Mach are said to be under development. The ground systems of BrahMos are described as 'tidy' as they have very few components.

SHIP-BASED: The Navy began inducting BrahMos on its frontline warships from 2005. These have the capability to hit sea-based targets beyond the radar horizon. The Naval version has been successful in sea-to-sea and sea-to-land modes. The BrahMos can be launched as a single unit or in a salvo of up to eight missiles, separated by 2.5-second intervals. These can target a group of frigates with modern missile defence systems.

AIR-LAUNCHED: On November 22, 2017, BrahMos was successfully flight-tested for the first time from a Sukhoi-30MKI against a sea-based target in the Bay of Bengal. It has since been successfully tested multiple times.

BrahMos-equipped Sukhoi-30s, which have a range of 1,500 km at a stretch without mid-air refuelling, are considered key strategic deterrence for adversaries both along land borders and in the strategically important Indian Ocean Region. The IAF is said to be integrating BrahMos with 40 Sukhoi-30 fighter jets across the various bases.

SUBMARINE-LAUNCHED: This version can be launched from around 50 m below the water surface. The canister-stored missile is launched vertically from the pressure hull of the submarine, and uses different settings for underwater and out-of-the-water flights. This version was successfully tested first in March 2013 from a submerged platform off the coast of Visakhapatnam.

MANAGING TYPE 1 DIABETES

Last week, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) released guidelines for the diagnosis, treatment, and management for type-1 diabetes. This is the first time the ICMR has issued guidelines specifically for type 1 diabetes, which is rarer than type 2 — only 2% of all hospital cases of diabetes in the country are type 1 — but which is being diagnosed more frequently in recent years.

"Today, more and more children are being diagnosed with type 1 diabetes in our country. This may be because the actual prevalence of the disorder is going up in India. It may also reflect better awareness and therefore, improved diagnosis of type 1 diabetes. Finally, it could be that children are surviving more due to early diagnosis and better treatment," the guidelines said.

India is considered the diabetes capital of the world, and the pandemic disproportionately affected those living with the disease. Type 1 or childhood diabetes, however, is less talked about, although it can turn fatal without proper insulin therapy.

So, what is type 1 diabetes?

Type 1 diabetes is a condition where the pancreas completely stops producing insulin, the hormone responsible for controlling the level of glucose in blood by increasing or decreasing absorption to the liver, fat, and other cells of the body. This is unlike type 2 diabetes — which accounts for over 90% of all diabetes cases in the country — where the body's insulin production either goes down or the cells become resistant to the insulin.



“Type 1 diabetes is predominantly diagnosed in children and adolescents. Although the prevalence is less, it is much more severe than type 2. Unlike type 2 diabetes where the body produces some insulin and which can be managed using various pills, if a person with type 1 diabetes stops taking their insulin, they die within weeks. The body produces zero insulin,” said Dr V Mohan, chairman of Dr Mohan’s Diabetes Specialities Centre, and one of the authors of the guidelines.

“Before insulin was discovered 101 years ago, these children would die within months after diagnosis. Now, with better insulin and various innovations, they are living longer. My oldest patient with type 1 diabetes is now 90 ; he was diagnosed when he was 16,” he said.

Children with the condition usually present to the hospital with severe symptoms of frequent urination, and extreme thirst, and nearly a third of them have diabetic ketoacidosis (a serious condition where the body has a high concentration of ketones, a molecule produced when the body isn’t able to absorb glucose for energy and starts breaking down fats instead).

How rare is it?

There are over 10 lakh children and adolescents living with type 1 diabetes in the world, with India accounting for the highest numbers. Of the 2.5 lakh people living with type 1 diabetes in India, 90,000 to 1 lakh are under the age of 14 years. For context, the total number of people in India living with diabetes was 7.7 crore in 2019, according to the Diabetes Atlas of the International Diabetes Federation.

The guidelines, which distinguish type 1 diabetes from other less common forms, also talk about how increasing incidence of type 2 diabetes due to obesity in the younger population can lead to confusion. Among individuals who develop diabetes under the age of 25 years, 25.3% have type 2

Who is at risk of type 1 diabetes?

The exact cause of type 1 diabetes is unknown, but it is thought to be an auto-immune condition where the body’s immune system destroys the islets cells on the pancreas that produce insulin.

Genetic factors play a role in determining whether a person will get type-1 diabetes. The risk of the disease in a child is 3% when the mother has it, 5% when the father has it, and 8% when a sibling has it.

The presence of certain genes is also strongly associated with the disease. For example, the prevalence of genes called DR3-DQ2 and DR4-DQ8 is 30-40% in patients with type 1 diabetes as compared to 2.4% in the general population, according to the guidelines.

What are the guidelines?

Running into 173 pages, they have been developed by leading diabetologists including Dr Nikhil Tandon, head of the department of endocrinology at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi. “There were several guidelines from international agencies. However, these are the first truly Indian guidelines which look at everything from diagnosis, treatment, and management of type 1 diabetes. It gives detailed guidelines on managing the disease in different conditions such as when one is pregnant or when one is travelling,” said Dr V Mohan.

The guidelines provide details on diet and exercise, insulin monitoring, and prevention and treatment of complications such as retinopathy, kidney disease, and nerve disease. Dr said the



guidelines would hopefully act as a ready-reference book for all practicing physicians to improve care for children diagnosed and those living with the condition.

A similar guidebook for type 2 diabetes already exists.

How has treatment of type 1 diabetes evolved over the years?

The discovery of insulin helped children with the condition survive, Dr Mohan said, “but they still have to keep pricking themselves to deliver insulin through their life, Researchers are now looking for a cure and there are some encouraging results from a stem cell therapy to increase islets cells”.

“Every child in the world should get insulin, it is essential medicine. In India, half the people can afford it, and the other half can get it for free at most government hospitals. It costs about Rs 5,000 per month,” he said.

Dr Mohan said continuous glucose monitoring devices and artificial pancreas have started to become available, although these are initial reports and it might take a few years for these to become available as treatments. “Continuous glucose monitoring devices can help monitor the blood glucose levels throughout 24-hour with the help of a sensor. The artificial pancreas go a step further and along with monitoring the levels they can automatically deliver the insulin when needed,” he said.

The guidelines state, “Cost considerations remain an issue in India. Thanks to better management, diabetic ketoacidosis is becoming less common, although in rural areas, and in peripheral centres, it still remains a big problem.”

The guidelines also acknowledge modern glucometers. Urine glucose monitoring (and not blood glucose) was the norm before glucometers. And, initially, even glucometers were expensive, painful, expensive, and not so accurate. “Today, we have blood glucose monitors which are extremely precise and are less painful. Cost of strips, however, still remains a challenge,” the guidelines state.

IN HARMONY: DARGAH SHIFTED, SHIKHAR SET, PM MODI TO UNFURL FLAG ATOP TEMPLE

On June 18, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will inaugurate the redeveloped Kalika Mata temple atop the Pavagadh hill in Panchmahal district. Apart from being an engineering marvel, the 11th-century temple complex, housing a dargah, is an example of harmony of faiths as well.

According to the temple trust, for the first time, the temple will have a shikhara (superstructure and spire) where earlier stood the Hazrat Sadanshah Wali Peer dargah that was relocated to a space next to it in an “amicable settlement” during redevelopment. PM Modi will unfurl the red and golden temple flag as part of the inauguration.

It is believed that in the 15th century, Sultan Mahmud Begda conquered Champaner where he set up his capital and “destroyed the shikhara of the temple”, as per a note put out by the trust. The Sadanshah Peer dargah is believed to have been built around that time.

A lore goes that Sadanshah Peer, originally a Hindu Fakir, who embraced Islam to be part of Mahmud Begda’s court after he established his Sultanate in Gujarat and captured Pavagadh, played a key role in saving the temple from being destroyed.



The dargah, earlier situated atop the Garbhagriha of the Mahakali temple for centuries, that shifted to around 50 feet away as an independent structure in the same complex has a distinct minaret design around the walls. The site where the dargah stood earlier made way for the shikhara and the gold-plated kalash.

THE FOUR BUDDHA RELICS TRAVELLING TO MONGOLIA AS 'STATE GUEST', THEIR IMPORTANCE

Four Holy Relics of Lord Buddha are being taken to Mongolia for an 11-day exposition to coincide with Mongolian Buddha Purnima celebrations. A 25-member delegation, led by Union Law Minister Kiren Rijiju, will accompany the relics on their onward journey on Monday, to be displayed at the Batsagaan Temple in Gandan Monastery complex in Ulaanbaatar.

The four relics come from among 22 Buddha relics, currently housed at Delhi's National Museum. Together, they are known as the 'Kapilvastu Relics' since they are from a site in Bihar believed to be the ancient city of Kapilvastu.

The site was discovered in 1898.

The sacred relics

At the age of 80, according to Buddhist beliefs, Buddha attained salvation in Uttar Pradesh's Kushinagar district. The Mallas of Kushinagar cremated his body with ceremonies befitting a universal king. His relics from the funeral pyre were collected and divided into eight shares to be distributed among the Ajathasatrus of Magadha, the Licchavis of Vaishali, the Sakyas of Kapilavastu, Mallas of Kushinagar, Bullies of Allakappa, the Mallas of Pava, the Koliyas of Ramagrama and a Brahmana of Vethadipa. The purpose was erecting stupas over the sacred relics. Two more stupas came up — one over the urn in which the relics had been collected and the other over the embers.

Stupas erected over the bodily relics of Buddha (Saririka stupas) are the earliest surviving Buddhist shrines. It is said that Ashoka (272–232 BC), being an ardent follower of Buddhism, opened up seven of these eight stupas, and collected major portion of the relics for enshrinement within 84,000 stupas built by him in an effort to popularise Buddhism as well as the cult of the stupas.

The Kapilavastu relics

The discovery of an inscribed casket in 1898 at the stupa site in Piprahwa (near UP's Siddharthnagar) helped identify the place with the ancient Kapilavastu. The inscription on the casket's lid which refers to the relics of Buddha and his community, the Sakya, reads: 'Sukiti bhatinam sa-bhaginikanam sa-puta-dalanam iyam salila nidhare Bhaddhasa bhagavate sakiyanam.'

It roughly translates to: "This shrine for relics of the Buddha, the August One, is that of the Sakyas. The brethren of the distinguished One, in association with their sisters and with their children and their wives."

According to records with the Ministry of Culture, this discovery was followed by many explorations. A further excavation of the stupa by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1971-77 — apart from revealing three stages of the construction — brought to light two more steatite relic



caskets, containing a total of 22 sacred bone relics, which are now under the care of the National Museum.

This was followed by the discovery of more than 40 terracotta sealings from different levels and spots in the eastern monastery at Piprahwa saying, 'Om Devaputra Vihare Kapilavastusa Bhikshu Sanghasa', which means "community of Buddhist monks of Kapilavastu living in Devaputra Vihara", and "Maha Kapilavastu Bhikshu Sanghasa" in Brahmi script of 1st and 2nd centuries, which establish that Piprahwa was the ancient Kapilavastu.

Security for travel

During the 11-day visit, the relics will be accorded the status of a 'state guest' in Mongolia and will be taken in the same climate control case in which they have been kept presently at the National Museum.

For the visit, the Indian Air force has made available a special airplane, C-17 GlobeMaster, which is among the biggest aircraft available in India. Two bullet-proof casings as well as two ceremonial caskets are being carried by the Indian delegation for both the relics.

In 2015, the Holy Relics were placed under the 'AA' category of Antiquities and Art Treasures which should not be ordinarily taken out of the country for exhibition, considering their delicate nature. But upon the request of Mongolian government, the government has made a special exception and permitted the exposition of the Holy Relics in Mongolia.

HARI CHAND BELONGED TO THE GOLDEN ERA OF MEN'S MIDDLE- AND LONG-DISTANCE RUNNING IN THE COUNTRY

There were no diet charts or recovery experts, no trainers or physios, and yet the 1960s-'70s were the golden era of men's middle and long-distance running in the country. Tarlok Singh started the medal rush in the 5,000 m and 10,000 m in the 1962 Asiad. Tarlok's bronze and gold were bettered by Shivnath Singh's gold and silver in 1974. Hari Chand became the greatest when he pulled off the gold double four years later in Bangkok to match Milkha Singh's feat in the 200 m and 400 m from two decades earlier.

Chand, who died on Monday at 69, in one retelling of his medal-winning exploits, recalled how legendary coach Joginder Saini insisted on him wearing spikes on the eve of the races in Bangkok. The policeman was most comfortable running barefoot. Instead of rubbing his coach the wrong way, he slipped on the running shoes and won. At 5 feet 2 inches, Chand was dwarfed by most of his competitors. Questions about whether his short stature was a disadvantage elicited an analogy — he was the jackrabbit who outran the cheetahs. This era is also special because of records that stood the test of time. Chand's rivalry with Shivnath Singh remains one of the fiercest in Indian track and field. Shivnath moved to the marathon, and being an all-round athlete, set the current Indian record of 2 hours and 12 minutes in 1978. Chand's 10,000 mark took 32 years to fall.

Sriram Singh, another great from the '70s, had to wait for 42 years before his 800 m record was broken. Gopal Saini's 3000 m steeplechase record set in 1981 was broken in 2018 by Avinash Sable, the most promising endurance runner in decades. Sable is from a humble background, similar to Chand's, but has the advantage of having sponsors meet his every need, apart from exposure tours, foreign coaches and the benefits of sports science. One wonders how much faster Chand and his barefoot rivals would have run today.



MONSOON SO FAR: HEAVY RAINFALL IN PARTS OF NORTHEAST, HARDLY ANY ELSEWHERE

Despite the monsoon's early arrival on May 29 over Kerala, rainfall has been abysmally poor over most regions where the onset has been declared. The rainfall deficiency for the season until June 17 is as high as 60% in Kerala and Maharashtra. (File)

The southwest monsoon has started inconsistently in different parts of the country, with rain eluding many states but lashing parts of other states. The all-India rainfall was 18% short of normal until Friday. But while a majority of India awaits rain, Assam and Meghalaya have been submerged in record rainfall of 1,000mm in the last 24 hours.

Monsoon so far

Despite the monsoon's early arrival on May 29 over Kerala, rainfall has been abysmally poor over most regions where the onset has been declared. The rainfall deficiency for the season until June 17 is as high as 60% in Kerala and Maharashtra.

Experts at the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said that the wind circulation pattern is yet to fully get established.

This, along with absence of favourable systems, have kept the monsoon inactive so far. Senior Met officials noted that the monsoon onset has largely been driven by convective activities — thunder, lightning and localised rainfall, mainly realised during afternoon hours.

On Friday, the Northern Limit of Monsoon (NLM) — or the imaginary line indicating the areas covered by the Southwest monsoon — passed through Porbandar, Bhavnagar, Khandwa, Gondia, Durg, Bhawanipura, Kalingapatnam, Malda and Motihari. On Friday, the monsoon advanced into a very small geographical area over north Bihar and sub-Himalayan West Bengal. The southwest monsoon has covered the entire Southern Peninsular and Northeast India, southern Chhattisgarh and Odisha, and some parts of Gujarat and Bihar.

Region-wise, the rainfall departures were -24% in Southern Peninsular India and +39% in East and Northeast India. Over other regions, where the monsoon is yet to arrive, the departures were -63% in Northwest India and -57% in Central India.

World's wettest places

Cherrapunji in Meghalaya, among the world's wettest locations, has received unprecedented rainfall this week. In just three days between June 15 and 17, the total rainfall recorded was 2,456 mm — more than the annual rainfall of many places in central India and Mumbai's seasonal (June to September) average rainfall. Friday (972 mm) was Cherrapunji's third wettest June day since 1901, and Wednesday (811.6 mm) was the eighth wettest.

Mawsynram in Meghalaya, the world's wettest place, broke an 83-year record for June. The 24-hour rainfall on Friday at Mawsynram was 1003.6mm. The previous highest rainfall in June here was 954.4mm in June 1966.

The IMD has attributed such extreme rainfall consistently over three days to the strong and moisture-loaded southerly winds blowing from the Bay of Bengal straight towards parts of Assam and Meghalaya. Since June 1, Meghalaya and Assam have recorded 194% and 96% surplus rainfall, respectively. Other northeastern states remain in deficit: Mizoram (-46%), Manipur (-45%) and Tripura (-39%).



Implications for agriculture

Many southern states have started kharif sowing. At present, nursery sowing or transplantation of rice, finger millet, maize, soyabean, pigeon pea, groundnut are ongoing in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, coastal Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Haryana and Punjab.

The agricultural meteorology division of the IMD has advised farmers to take up nursery of rice and vegetables and prepare land ahead of sowing.

'ABNORMAL' DINOSAUR EGG FOUND IN INDIA

A team of researchers from the University of Delhi has discovered a unique set of fossilised dinosaur eggs, with one egg nesting within the other.

While eggs-within-eggs are a rare phenomenon, they are so far known to occur only in birds and never known in reptiles. This discovery brings out newer connections between reptilian and avian evolution.

The findings, published in the journal Scientific Reports, talk about the "egg-in-egg" phenomenon in a titanosaurid dinosaur egg found at Bagh in Madhya Pradesh's Dhar district .

Dinosaurs of the Sauropod family were among the largest land animals that ever lived and widespread millions of years ago in the territory that is now India. Fossils of these animals have been found in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Meghalaya.

52 nests documented

The Upper Cretaceous Lameta Formation of Central India is long known for its dinosaur fossils (both skeletal and egg remains), and scientists, some of whom were involved in the team reporting the latest findings, documented 52 titanosaurid sauropod nests near Padlya village close to Bagh town in Madhya Pradesh. One of these nests had 10 eggs, one of which was the "abnormal" egg.

The egg has two continuous and circular eggshell layers separated by a wide gap like that observed in birds. Until this discovery, no egg-in-egg fossil egg was found in dinosaurs and other reptiles such as turtles, lizards and crocodiles.

It was believed that dinosaurs had a reproductive function similar to that of turtles and other reptiles (unsegmented oviduct) in contrast to segmented reproductive tract of crocodiles and birds with separate regions of membrane and shell deposition.

Sequential laying of eggs

Though crocodiles have separate regions of shell membrane and mineralised shell deposition, they ovulate and release all the eggs simultaneously like turtles and other reptiles. In birds, ovulation is sequenced and eggs are laid one at a time.

"The new discovery of an ovum-in-ovo egg, which is characteristic of birds, in titanosaurids argues for a segmented oviduct like in crocodiles and birds, and possible sequential laying of eggs like in birds," the authors note.



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

WTO SAID TO EXTEND E-COM TARIFF FREEZE IN PROVISIONAL DEAL

WTO members reached a provisional deal on Thursday to extend a moratorium on applying duties to electronic transmissions until the next ministerial meeting, likely to be in 2023, two trade sources involved in the discussions told Reuters.

The prospect of ending the moratorium, which has exempted data flows from cross-border tariffs since 1998, had raised major concerns among businesses. Backed by players like the U.S., the U.K. and the European Union, they argued that letting it expire would undermine a global recovery already threatened by spiralling prices. "We agree to maintain the current practice of not imposing customs duties on electronic transmissions until MC13 which should ordinarily be held by 31 December 2023," the agreement showed, referring to the next ministerial conference. It said the moratorium would expire in March 2024, should the next conference be postponed.

Members' nod needed

The provisional deal was reached in a negotiating room of the WTO's Geneva headquarters among a group of major members and still needs to be backed by the body's 164 members.

India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and South Africa had threatened to block an extension earlier in the five-day ministerial conference, where deals are also being sought on fishing, vaccines and food security. It was not immediately clear what might have made them change their minds.

RACE FOR RELEVANCE

The U.S. Federal Reserve on Wednesday implemented its steepest interest rate increase in more than 27 years as it fights to rein in runaway inflation. Barely six weeks after raising the policy rate by half a percentage point and underscoring the likelihood of "additional 50-basis-point increases" at the next couple of meetings, Chairman Jerome Powell stressed it had become "essential" to increase the rate instead by 75 basis points to bring inflation down. The overarching message, he asserted, was that the Fed recognised the 'hardship high inflation was causing' and had the resolve to restore price stability with singular focus. Acknowledging that inflation had 'surprised to the upside' since the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) had last met in May, he said the committee agreed that the larger increase was required to anchor inflation expectations. With U.S. Consumer Price Index based inflation quickening to a fresh four-decade high of 8.6% in May, spurred by housing, petrol and food prices, the Fed admitted that price pressures had spread to a broad range of goods and services. Even as it realises that it has very little control over supply side factors, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine and COVID-related lockdowns in China, the U.S. central bank said it was determined to continue raising interest rates till it saw 'compelling evidence' that inflation was slowing towards its 2% goal. Mr. Powell emphasised that yet another 'unusually large' 75-basis-point or a 50-basis-point increase was 'most likely' in the meeting in July.

For Mr. Powell and fellow FOMC members, focusing unrelentingly on taming price gains through monetary action, including raising borrowing costs and gradually tightening liquidity, risks squeezing the economy into a recession. It is also a scenario mirrored earlier this month in forecasts by almost 70% of academic economists, polled by the Financial Times and the University of Chicago, who foresee the U.S. economy shrinking in 2023. The Fed recognises that the tighter



financial conditions have tempered demand, even as it posits that real GDP growth has rebounded on strong consumption spending. Mr. Powell, who had in May underlined that the Fed would not hesitate to move policy to 'restrictive' levels if needed, on Wednesday flagged the reductions in the FOMC's median projections for growth. Central bankers now see the U.S. economy expanding by 1.7% both in 2022 and 2023, slower than the March forecasts of 2.8% and 2.2%, respectively. For India, the Fed's actions are likely to result in an acceleration in the recent exodus of foreign portfolio investments, spur more gains for the dollar against the rupee thus widening the trade deficit, and also fuel faster inflation as imported goods, including crude oil, become costlier.

WHY THE UAE HAS 'SUSPENDED' RE-EXPORT OF INDIAN WHEAT-MILLING

The United Arab Emirates' decision, reported on Wednesday (June 15), to "suspend" re-export of wheat and flour from grain originating in India is basically an assurance that whatever it imports will be used only for domestic consumption.

"India doesn't want its wheat exported to Dubai or Abu Dhabi to go out to other countries, whether as grain or flour. It would want that wheat to be consumed locally, including the migrant Indian workers in UAE," trade sources told The Indian Express.

This will, in turn, allow India to provide an exception to its wheat export ban and ship out some quantities to the Gulf federation. India, on May 14, banned export of all wheat, except against outstanding contracts backed by already-issued letters of credit and to countries on case-to-case food security considerations.

India exported 4.71 lakh tonnes (lt) of wheat valued at \$136.53 million to the UAE in 2021-22. That constituted about 6.5 per cent of its total 72.35 lt shipments of the cereal worth \$2,120.27 million last fiscal.

While the quantities exported may not be that big for India, they aren't small for UAE. The US Department of Agriculture has estimated UAE's annual wheat consumption, which is entirely imported, at 15 lt. The wheat-milling capacity is higher, at 16.7 lt, which is driven both by local consumption and re-export of flour sold to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan, Ethiopia, Taiwan and Philippines. Such exports amount to about 1 lt annually.

More than 50 per cent of UAE's wheat imports are from Russia, followed by Canada, Ukraine and Australia. From 2020-21, India also emerged as a key supplier, exporting 1.88 lt to the Gulf federation. Exports rose further in 2021-22, before the export ban decision that came on top of the Russia-Ukraine war, which has disrupted shipments from the Black Sea ports.

The trade sources pointed out that the global wheat supply situation should ease somewhat, with the harvesting and market arrivals of Russian and Ukrainian wheat from July. The USDA has projected Ukraine's wheat exports to nearly halve to 10 million tonnes (mt) in 2022-23, from 19 mt in 2021-22. However, it expects a substantial jump in Russia's exports, from 33 mt in 2021-22 to a record 40 mt in the new marketing year.

HOME TRUTHS

India's industrial output rose 7.1 per cent year-on-year in April. Coming after a 11.4 per cent increase for the whole of 2021-22, it points to a recovery, albeit from the negative growth of the preceding lockdown-impacted fiscal. What's worrying, however, is consumer non-durables production growing by just 0.3 per cent in April, on top of 3.3 per cent for 2021-22. The National



Statistical Office's data tallies with what private consumer research firms have also been putting out. NielsenIQ has estimated India's fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector to have registered minus 4.1 per cent year-on-year volume growth in January-March, minus 2.6 per cent in October-December, and 1.4 per cent in July-September. Kantar Worldpanel has reported volume contraction in the country's FMCG market for the last three consecutive quarters. Even the market leader Hindustan Unilever posted a 10.4 per cent sales turnover jump for the January-March quarter, but "with flat underlying volume growth".

The simple takeaway is that the Indian consumer is buying less, although paying more for the same, if not less, volume of groceries and essentials. One reason is inflation. Most market surveys suggest high price increases to have impacted discretionary as well as staple consumption. While consumers are either cutting down on purchases or opting for lower-priced/ non-premium/unbranded products, FMCG firms have sought to push sales of smaller packs and even undertake "grammage reductions". In other words, passing on soaring costs — whether of palm oil, wheat or packaging material — not through explicit price hikes, but by decreasing product weight/size for the same price points. There are limitations to such stratagems. Individual companies may grow significantly ahead of the market, gaining both value and volume shares. But even they would want the market itself to expand, rather than resorting to "shrinkflation" or consumers "downtrading" and "titrating" volumes.

Inflation should come under control, hopefully sooner than later. Of greater concern is the stress on incomes. Most households in India received little, apart from free grain, as stimulus during the last two years of job and income losses. As a result, they emerged from the pandemic with battered balance sheets. This is in contrast to the previous decade, where household consumption held up even as overall economic growth was dragged down by an over-leveraged corporate sector and bad loans-laden banks. That "twin-balance sheet" problem looks less of a threat. Profit margins of listed companies in 2021-22 were the highest for over a decade, with the non-performing assets ratio of banks moderating to their lowest in six years. Today, corporates and banks are better-positioned to invest and lend, respectively. But the weak balance sheets of households and government constrains their ability to spend — and that's a real problem.

THE FALL IN UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IN THE 2020-21 LABOUR SURVEY, WHAT IT MEANS

Labour indicators recorded a sharp, all-round improvement in 2020-21 (July-June) compared with the previous three years, data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) on Tuesday showed.

The annual report of the Periodic Labour Force Survey for July 2020 to June 2021 showed that the unemployment rate, as per usual status (reference period of last 365 days preceding the survey), eased to 4.2 per cent from 4.8 per cent in 2019-20.

As per the current weekly status (reference period of one week) — contrary to perceived expectations of a likely hit on jobs — unemployment rate eased to 7.5 per cent in 2020-21 from 8.8 per cent. But there is a catch: while the overall employment situation showed improvement, the rise was seen mostly in low-quality, unpaid work.

The headline employment numbers show an improvement in the employment situation.

The unemployment rate of 4.2 per cent in 2020-21, the lowest since the first PLFS showed an unemployment rate of 6.1 per cent in 2017-18. According to the report, the labour force



participation rate (LFPR), or those working or seeking or available for work in the labour force, was the highest in four years at 39.3 per cent in 2020-21, as was the worker population ratio (WPR) at 36.3 per cent. WPR is defined as the percentage of employed persons in the population.

The unemployment rate was higher for males in rural areas than females. In rural areas, the unemployment rate was 3.9 per cent in 2020-21, while that for females was 2.1 per cent. In urban areas, the unemployment rate for females was 8.6 per cent, while that for males was 6.1 per cent.

Rise of agricultural share, unpaid work

While the overall employment situation showed improvement, the rise was seen in low-quality, unpaid work.

Employment in the unpaid self-employed category continued to show an increase in 2020-21 by rising to 17.3 per cent from 15.9 per cent in 2019-20 and 13.3 per cent in 2018-19. Rural unpaid employment also showed increase to 21.3 per cent in 2020-21 from 20.0 per cent in the previous year, while that for urban areas increased to 6.3 per cent from 5.7 per cent.

Unpaid self-employment for females increased to 42.8 per cent in rural areas in 2020-21 from 42.3 per cent a year ago, while that for rural males increased to 11.0 per cent from 10.4 per cent.

In urban areas, unpaid self-employment for females showed a significant increase to 12.4 per cent in 2020-21 from 11.1 per cent in 2019-20, while that for males increased to 4.5 per cent from 4.1 per cent.

The PLFS data shows that the share of the labour force engaged in agriculture continued to show a rise in 2020-21, increasing to 46.5 per cent from 45.6 per cent in 2019-20 and 42.5 per cent in 2018-19 — a reversal of the decades-long decline in the labour force participation in agriculture.

This suggests that the movement of labour out of agriculture, which had gathered pace post 2004-05, seems to have been stymied by the economic slowdown and the pandemic. The reverse migration of labour from cities to villages would have only increased the pressure on agriculture to absorb the workers.

The increase in share of agricultural employment was seen more for urban areas than rural areas. In urban areas, male employment in agriculture increased to 5.3 per cent in 2020-21 from 5.0 per cent in 2019-20, while that for females increased to 10.4 per cent in 2020-21 from 8.2 per cent.

In rural areas, both males and females recorded a slight moderation in agricultural employment to 53.8 per cent and 75.4 per cent, respectively, from 55.4 per cent and 75.7 per cent in the previous year.

GIVEN WEAKNESS IN EQUITY AND CURRENCY MARKETS, POLICYMAKERS MUST TREAD CAREFULLY

On Tuesday, the BSE Sensex ended the day at 52,693, down 0.3 per cent. Since the beginning of this year, the Sensex has fallen by around 11 per cent. India markets are not an outlier. Around the world, equity markets have witnessed a sell-off. The S&P 500 is down around 22 per cent from its January levels. European stock indices, too, have witnessed weakness, as have Asian markets. Prior to this correction, the Sensex was trading at a price-to-earnings multiple of around 25. But even though markets are forward-looking, these valuations appeared stretched considering that the economy at the end of 2021-22 had only recovered to its 2019-20 levels. Alongside, the Indian



currency has also weakened against the dollar. On Monday, the rupee breached the 78 mark for the first time, touching an all-time low of 78.29 against the dollar. However, the Indian currency has fared relatively better than its emerging market counterparts, which have fallen even more sharply. This weakness in markets can be traced to tightening monetary conditions, both globally and in India.

With inflation surging in most economies, investors now expect more aggressive interest rate hikes by central banks to tackle the growing price pressures. In the US, the Federal Reserve was expected to raise interest rates by 50 basis points this week. However, with recent data showing that inflation had surged to 8.6 per cent in May, some analysts are now penciling in a rate hike as steep as 75 basis points. In an uncertain macroeconomic environment, investors will rush towards safer assets. The DXY — a dollar index which measures the strength of the currency against a basket of six other currencies, namely the euro, pound, Japanese yen, Swedish krona, and Swiss franc — has strengthened to multi-year highs.

In India, along with foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) being net sellers, a rising trade deficit — it rose to \$23.3 billion in May — adds to the pressure on the currency. On its part, the Reserve Bank of India is reported to have intervened in the currency markets to stem the rupee's slide. However, it should do so only to smoothen volatility. It must let the currency find its own level. A weaker currency will act as an automatic stabiliser triggering necessary adjustments. As the macroeconomic environment becomes more challenging, policy-makers in India will have to carefully navigate this tumultuous period, as they withdraw the pandemic-induced accommodative measures, while nurturing a recovery.

COLD COMFORT

The latest retail inflation numbers point to a slight softening in the pace of price gains, and that should provide policymakers some solace that recent interventions appear to be working. Inflation measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), slowed 75 basis points from April's 95-month high of 7.79%, to 7.04% in May. While it is hard to quantify the effect that the RBI's surprise 40 basis points interest rate increase of early May had on prices, the Centre's May 21 decision to cut the excise duty on petrol and diesel by ₹8 and ₹6, respectively, seems to have had an immediate impact. Inflation in the transport and communication category of the CPI slowed by 137 basis points to 9.54% last month. This key category, with a weight of 8.59 that places it behind only cereals and housing, captures the pump prices of the main transportation fuels, making it a crucial indicator of price pressures in the economy. A closer look, however, shows inflation in the category continued to quicken sequentially, even if at a slower pace. Disconcertingly, rural consumers, who have comparatively lower purchasing power than their urban peers and yet are heavily reliant on the fuels for farm operations, experienced a significantly slower softening of only 42 basis points in the year-on-year pace. With the price of the Indian basket of crude oil now having surged by almost 8.5% from April to a 10-year high this month, and the rupee plunging to successive new record lows against the dollar, it would be unwise to drop one's guard especially given the pass-through impact transportation costs have on most other prices.

Food prices, the other driver of retail price gains, offered far less respite with the Consumer Food Price Index (CFPI) inflation slowing by only 34 basis points to 7.97%. City consumers experienced an acceleration in food price gains as urban CFPI inflation quickened 11 basis points to 8.2% last month. Nine of the 12 items on the food and beverages sub-index of the CPI, also quickened sequentially, resulting in the month-on-month inflation accelerating 30 basis points from April's pace. Prices of vegetables and those of meat and fish surged 18.3% and 8.23%, respectively, from



their year-earlier levels, adding to the nutritional precarity of low-income households. And even though inflation in edible oils slowed from April's pace, there is no room for complacency given that price gains in the vital cooking medium were still running at 13.3% amid persistent supply concerns in the wake of the Ukraine war and the disruption in sunflower oil imports. May's wholesale price data also provide little comfort, with headline WPI inflation quickening to a fresh high of 15.9%. With the RBI's consumer confidence survey showing an appreciable deterioration in households' expectations of the one-year ahead price level, authorities must stay laser-focused on the battle to tame inflation.

WHAT ARE SEBI'S CONCERNS AROUND CRYPTO ASSETS?

The story so far: The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), the watchdog which regulates the securities and commodities market, has reportedly told the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance led by Jayant Sinha that regulation of crypto assets would be difficult given the nature of technology that sustains them. It was reported last month that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had also shared its worries about cryptocurrencies with the committee.

What exactly did the SEBI tell the committee?

SEBI has essentially flagged the problems with regulating crypto assets because they "are maintained in decentralised distributed ledgers, which are nested in computer nodes spread all across the globe." Crypto assets is usually used as an umbrella term to encompass cryptocurrencies (e.g., Bitcoin, Ether) as also non-currency tokens such as utility tokens (which provide a certain utility within an ecosystem) and non-fungible tokens (which help establish ownership of unique items), among others. The underlying technology for crypto assets is the same — distributed ledgers that aren't controlled by any one entity.

What else did SEBI say?

As per media reports, SEBI has elaborated upon the possible need for different regulators to deal with different aspects of a crypto asset market. Crypto exchanges, for instance, represent one such aspect. These exchanges, in case of a cross-border transaction, in effect enable the use of a cryptocurrency as a bridge to convert one nation's official currency to another. These exchanges, SEBI has suggested, could be brought under the regulatory purview of the RBI. The idea is to implement what are called KYC/AML/CFT (Know Your Customer/Anti-Money Laundering/Combating of Financing of Terrorism) norms. For some years now, the RBI has implemented a set of these guidelines in regulating banks so as to prevent them from being used by criminal elements.

The subscribers or customers of crypto assets form another important part of the market. SEBI has suggested that the Consumer Protection Act of 2019 be invoked to make sure their interests are safeguarded. It has also sought clarity on whether cryptocurrencies can be legally classified as securities. Right now, they aren't. According to media reports, SEBI has said that crypto assets are not part of the definition of what constitutes as securities under the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act of 1956, also known as SCRA. It is to be noted that what constitutes as securities under the SCRA is what is used under the SEBI Act.

Why is this important?

In December 2021, it was widely reported that the government was looking to get SEBI to regulate crypto assets by bringing in legislation around that time. Though such a legislation — the



Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2021 — did not materialise at that time, the talk that the government wants to treat cryptocurrencies as digital assets, rather than as currencies, has not ebbed. Ajay Tyagi, former chairman of SEBI, had in March said that the regulator has made several representations to the government regarding cryptocurrency regulation since November last year.

Has SEBI also flagged issues about celebrity endorsements?

Yes. It has proposed to the committee that celebrities should not be allowed to endorse cryptocurrencies. A Hindu BusinessLine report quoted a source who spelt out SEBI's stance thus: "Given that crypto products are unregulated, prominent public figures including celebrities, sportsmen, etc, or their voice shall not be used for endorsement/advertisement of crypto products." It was also mentioned that they must be held responsible for making any endorsement of crypto products.

What did the RBI tell the committee?

According to a report by PTI, top RBI officials told the committee that cryptocurrencies can lead to "dollarisation" of a part of the economy. This, they said, was against India's sovereign interest. "Almost all cryptocurrencies are dollar-denominated and issued by foreign private entities, it may eventually lead to dollarisation of a part of our economy which will be against the country's sovereign interest," the officials were reported as saying. They linked this to a possible undermining of RBI's ability to regulate money supply in the economy.

What has been the stance of the government?

Over the last few years, the government's stance has definitely changed. But there is still ambiguity around what it really wants to do. A Bill that was sought to be introduced last year signalled its intention to ban cryptocurrencies outright. It, however, didn't see the light of day.

The idea that the administration doesn't consider cryptocurrencies desirable has been made clear from time to time for some years now. It started as statements in the Budget but then an inter-ministerial report recommended an outright ban. Such currencies were and are considered problematic as they can easily evade official scrutiny, bypass and weaken the monetary system, and fuel illegal trade. Around this time, an RBI circular sought to bar banks from dealing in such currencies, only for the Supreme Court to strike it down.

The cryptocurrency industry saw a window of hope earlier this year when Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman imposed a tax for the first time on crypto assets. The tax, at 30%, was seen at first to settle the question of legality of such currencies. But, Ms. Sitharaman, in a TV interview indicated that taxability was an issue that is not to be linked to legitimacy.

Legislative clarity is still awaited. Meanwhile, the Sinha-led committee has in recent months been holding extensive conversations with the financial regulators, who being statutory bodies, report to Parliament. The committee last November also met with representatives of the crypto industry. The Bill aims to set up a facilitative framework for creation of the official digital currency to be issued by the RBI.



THE MOVE TO LINK CREDIT CARDS WITH UPI

The story so far: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has proposed to allow linking of credit cards with the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) platform. The move is part of the central bank's efforts to enhance the scope of UPI. While announcing the move, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das stated that RuPay credit cards issued by the RBI-promoted National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) will be enabled first, and will become available after system developments. The UPI, also managed by the NPCI, was first introduced in 2016.

What explains the effort to link credit cards with UPI?

The UPI has, over time, become a popular mode of payment in India with more than 26 crore unique users and five crore merchants on the platform. In May 2022, about 594 crore transactions amounting to ₹10.4 lakh crore were processed through the interface.

At present, the UPI facilitates transactions by linking savings/current accounts through users' debit cards. It is now proposed to allow linking of credit cards on the UPI platform. This is intended to provide additional convenience to users and enhance the scope of digital payments.

When will the facility be made available?

This facility would be available after the required system development is complete. The RBI will issue necessary instructions to NPCI separately to facilitate the change. To begin with, the indigenous RuPay credit cards would be linked to the UPI platform. It is likely to be followed by other card networks such as Visa and MasterCard that would bring in more users.

What is the benefit of this provision?

The arrangement is expected to provide an additional avenue for payment to customers and hence enhance convenience. The linking of credit cards to UPI has been proposed to further deepen the reach and usage of credit cards.

Why do authorities expect this move to spur the use of credit cards?

It is expected to bolster transactions and acceptance at more merchant sites. People who generally prefer to pay by credit card so as to avail of a longer pay-back period or loans on credit-card outstanding, or who do not wish to touch their savings at the moment of purchase, can pay using credit cards via UPI.

Currently, many merchants do not have credit card point-of-sale (PoS) terminals especially in semi-urban and rural areas but a significant number do have the QR code-based UPI acceptance facility. Now, they too will be able to accept credit payments via UPI without needing a PoS device.

Linking of credit cards with UPI is likely to increase the use of such cards in small-ticket-size payments, as it would provide users with more options to pay from. The move will provide a significant boost to overall spending via credit cards — currently, spending through the use of credit cards is more than double the average spend via debit cards. More spending is generally a force multiplier for the economy.

Besides accelerating digital transactions this measure is also expected to affect the average ticket size of financial transactions. Currently the average ticket size per transaction is ₹1,600 while it is ₹4,000 in credit cards. So, with the new development the UPI transaction ticket size is likely to go



up to somewhere around ₹3,000 to ₹4,000, analysts claim. Many people use credit cards for rewards and benefits and UPI for its convenience & security. The new provision of linking credit cards to UPI brings both these advantages together.

Kirana stores where credit cards are not accepted would likely find it convenient to accept credit card payments through UPI.

Will a merchant discount rate be applicable for these payments?

There is no word yet on the merchant discount rate (MDR) applicable on transactions using credit card numbers via UPI, other than for RuPay, which attracts no such charge. Today, since foreign card issuers such as Visa and MasterCard have a lion's share of the credit card network business, part of the fees goes to them. However, the Indian government has shown its intent to promote the indigenous RuPay card system. It remains to be seen if it indeed does turn out more economical for merchants to accept payments from users with credit cards from foreign issuers.

NCLAT JUNKS AMAZON APPEAL AGAINST CCI SUSPENDING FRL DEAL

In a major setback to Amazon, the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) rejected the U.S. e-commerce company's appeal against an antitrust suspension of its investment deal with Future Group, saying the retailer had not made full disclosures at the time of seeking approval.

NCLAT also upheld a ₹200-crore penalty imposed on Amazon by the Competition Commission of India (CCI) and asked the e-commerce firm to deposit the same in 45 days.

It supported the CCI findings that Amazon didn't make full disclosures regarding the deal with Future Retail subsidiary — Future Coupons Pvt. Ltd. (FCPL).

The competition watchdog had on December 17, 2021, levied a ₹200-crore penalty on Amazon and suspended its deal with Future, stating that the U.S. firm had deliberately suppressed the actual scope and purpose of the 2019 investment and made false and incorrect statements. Amazon had challenged the decision, arguing that it had not concealed any information.

GOVT. MAY PURSUE RECOVERY OF \$3.85 BN FROM RELIANCE, PARTNERS

The government on Monday said it would pursue recovery of \$3.85 billion from Reliance Industries and its partners in the Panna/Mukta and Tapti oil and gas fields case and is mulling an appeal against an English court order over cost recovery dispute in the same fields.

Reacting to an English High Court last week dismissing India's appeal against a \$111 million international arbitration award in favour of Reliance Industries Ltd. and Shell-owned BG Exploration and Production India Ltd (BGEPI), the government in a statement said it had the right to seek leave of the English commercial court to challenge this judgment. Reliance and BGEPI had in December 2010 dragged the Centre to arbitration over cost-recovery provisions, profit due to the state and amount of statutory dues including royalty payable.

=A three-member arbitration panel by majority issued a final partial award in October 2016 upholding the government view that profit from the fields should be calculated after deducting prevailing tax of 33% and not the 50% rate that existed earlier. The government used this award to seek \$3.85 billion in dues from Reliance and BGEPI. Reliance-BGEPI challenged the award — under nine heads — before the English Commercial Court.

“In April, 2018 the English Court passed a judgment, in favor of Union of India,” the Centre said, dismissing 8 out of 9 challenges. Both parties challenged the 2018 award before the English Commercial Court. The court disagreed with the tribunal’s denial of cost of \$259 million and in March 2020, remitted this part of the 2018 award back to the Tribunal. “The Tribunal heard the matter again and in January 2021 awarded a further sum of \$111 million in favour of the contractors. This was challenged by the Government before the English Commercial Court.”



DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

THE GLOUCESTER SHIPWRECK, AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN BRITISH POLITICAL HISTORY

It was over 300 years ago that a royal ship carrying the future king of England, Ireland and Scotland sank killing hundreds onboard. It also nearly killed the Duke of York, who later reigned as King James II, but could never shake-off the criticism that came his way in the aftermath of the ship's sinking.

The discovery of the royal shipwreck was revealed recently on June 10, and has since been hailed as one of the most significant discoveries of maritime history.

THE \$935 MILLION UK LAWSUIT ACCUSING APPLE OF THROTTLING THE PERFORMANCE OF OLDER IPHONES

Justin Guttman, a consumer rights campaigner in the United Kingdom, is launching a class action suit against Apple seeking damages of around \$935 million. The representative action is being filed against Apple for throttling the performance of some of the older versions of iPhone.

What is the UK suit about?

The class action suit being filed at the Competition Appeal Tribunal in London is to represent 25 million iPhone users in the UK who used any of the 10 iPhone models from the 2014 iPhone 6 until the 2017 iPhone X, including the iPhone SE. The suit claims that Apple abused its market dominance to engage in exploitative and unfair commercial practices.

In case of this lawsuit, Apple has said, as quoted by the BBC: "We have never, and would never, do anything to intentionally shorten the life of any Apple product, or degrade the user experience to drive customer upgrades."

Guttman's suit is an "opt-out" claim, which means that any affected customers will not need to actively join the case to seek damages.

What is the accusation against Apple?

The Cupertino, California-based company is said to have misled iPhone users by applying a power management software update, released in January 2017 in iOS 10.2.1, that throttled the performance of the said devices.

In the case of some of the older iPhones, this update reduced the processor's peak performance by up to 58%. Apple had said that this was introduced to cut the load on the phone's battery. Later, in 2018, after this move was called out, Apple apologised for its handling of the episode, and launched a battery replacement programme for the affected iPhone models.

Have there been such lawsuits against Apple in other jurisdictions?

Yes, in 2020, the company settled a class action suit in the United States, which accused Apple of intentionally slowing down the performance of older iPhones to push consumers into buying new models. The company then paid around \$500 million to settle the litigation without accepting any wrongdoing.



The French antitrust regulator in the same year levied a fine of around \$27 million on Apple for throttling devices without informing customers. This time, Apple agreed to also display a statement on its website about the sanction for a month.

CAN THE NEW GOOGLE CHATBOT BE SENTIENT?

The story so far: Blake Lemoine, a U.S. military veteran, identifies himself as a priest, an ex-convict and an Artificial Intelligence (AI) researcher. He was engaged by Google to test for bias/hate speech in the Language Model for Dialogue Applications (LaMDA), Google's nextGen conversational agent. He was sent away on paid leave after claiming that the updated software is now sentient. He claims that the neural network with deep learning capacity has the consciousness of a child of seven or eight years old. He argues that consent from the software must be obtained before experiments are run on it. Google and many tech experts have dismissed the claim. However, this episode, which came on the heels of Google firing Timnit Gebru over her warnings on their unethical AI, has caused ripples in social media.

Is AI technology here?

AI technology appears futuristic. However, Facebook's facial recognition software which identifies faces in the photos we post, the voice recognition software that translates commands we bark at Alexa, and the Google Translate app are all examples of AI tech already around us.

Inspired by the mathematician Alan Turing's answer to the question 'Can a machine think?', AI tech today aims to satisfy the Turing test to qualify as 'intelligent'. Turing was the designer and builder of the world's first computer, ENIGMA, which was used to break the German codes during the Second World War. To test if a machine 'thinks', Turing devised a practical solution. Place a computer in a closed room and a human in another. If an interrogator interacting with the machine and the human cannot discriminate between them, then Turing said that the computer should be construed as 'intelligent'. We use the reverse Turing test, CAPTCHA, to limit technology access to humans and keep the bots at bay.

Which were the first chatbots to be devised?

As electronics improved and first-generation computers came about, Joseph Weizenbaum of the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory built ELIZA, a computer programme with which users could chat. ALICE (Artificial Linguistic Internet Computer Entity), another early chatbot developed by Richard Wallace, was capable of simulating human interaction. In the 1930s, linguist George Kingsley Zipf analysed the typical human speech and found that most of the utterances began with 2,000 words. Using this information, Wallace theorised that the bulk of commonplace chitchat in everyday interaction was limited. He found that just about 40,000 responses were enough to respond to 95% of what people chatted about. With assistance from about 500 volunteers, Wallace continuously improved ALICE's responses repertoire by analysing user chats, making the fake conversions look real. The software won the Loebner Prize as "the most human computer" at the Turing Test contests in 2000, 2001, and 2004.

What is a neural network?

A neural network is an AI tech that attempts to mimic the web of neurons in the brain to learn and behave like humans. Early efforts in building neural networks targeted image recognition. The artificial neural network (ANN) needs to be trained like a dog before being commanded. For example, during the image recognition training, thousands of specific cat images are broken down



to pixels and fed into the ANN. Using complex algorithms, the ANN's mathematical system extracts particular characteristics like the line that curves from right to left at a certain angle, edges or several lines that merge to form a larger shape from each cat image. The software learns to recognise the key patterns that delineate what a general 'cat' looks like from these parameters.

Early machine learning software needed human assistance. The training images had to be labelled as 'cats', 'dogs' and so on by humans before being fed into the system. In contrast, access to big data and a powerful processor is enough for the emerging deep learning softwares. The App learns by itself, unsupervised by humans, by sorting and sifting through the massive data and finding the hidden patterns.

What is LaMDA?

LaMDA is short for 'Language Model for Dialogue Applications', Google's modern conversational agent enabled with a neural network capable of deep learning. Instead of images of cats and dogs, the algorithm is trained using 1.56 trillion words of public dialogue data and web text on diverse topics. The neural network built on Google's open-source neural network, Transformer, extracted more than 137 billion parameters from this massive database of language data. The chatbot is not yet public, but users are permitted to interact with it. Google claims that LaMDA can make sense of nuanced conversation and engage in a fluid and natural conversation. The LaMDA 0.1 was unveiled at Google's annual developer conference in May 2021, and the LaMDA 0.2 in 2022.

How is LaMDA different from other chatbots?

Chatbots like 'Ask Disha' of the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation Limited (IRCTC) are routinely used for customer engagement. The repertoire of topics and chat responses is narrow. The dialogue is predefined and often goal-directed. For instance, try chatting about the weather with Ask Disha or about the Ukrainian crisis with the Amazon chat app. LaMDA is Google's answer to the quest for developing a non-goal directed chatbot that dialogues on various subjects. The chatbot would respond the way a family might when they chat over the dinner table; topics meandering from the taste of the food to price rise to bemoaning war in Ukraine. Such advanced conversational agents could revolutionise customer interaction and help AI-enabled internet search, Google hopes.

How intelligent are AI's?

The Turing test is a powerful motivator for developing practical AI tools. However, scholars, such as philosopher John Searle, use the 'Chinese Room Argument' to demonstrate that passing the Turing test is inadequate to qualify as intelligent.

Once I used Google Translate to read WhatsApp messages in French from a conference organiser in France and in turn replied back to her in French. For some time, she was fooled into thinking that I could speak French. I would have passed the 'Turing test', but no sane person would claim that I know French. This is an example of the Chinese room experiment. The imitation game goes only so far.

Further scholars point out that AI tech uses a false analogy of learning. A baby learns a language from close interaction with caregivers and not by ploughing through a massive amount of language data. Moreover, whether intelligence is the same as sentience is a moot question. However, the seemingly human-like conversational agents rely on pattern recognition, not empathy, wit, candour or intent.



Is the technology dangerous?

The challenges of AI metamorphosing into sentient are far in the future; however, unethical AI perpetuating historical bias and echoing hate speech are the real dangers to watch for. Imagine an AI software trained with past data to select the most suitable candidates from applicants for a supervisory role. Women and marginalised communities hardly would have held such positions in the past, not because they were unqualified, but because they were discriminated against. While we imagine the machine to have no bias, AI software learning from historical data could inadvertently perpetuate discrimination.

WHEN AN ICON OF PAST FADES TO BLACK

Time was when this icon, designed around the letter 'e', in blue with an orbit around it, would usually be the first one you would click on the desktop of your computer.

For a generation, Internet Explorer, which debuted in 1995, was the gateway to the world of information and entertainment, but it has been steadily losing in popularity and on Wednesday, its creator Microsoft is retiring it.

Like many things associated with the Internet we thought we could not do without, Internet Explorer is also bidding adieu. Remember Orkut? By the time Orkut, a social network site that used to compete with Facebook, shut down in 2014, Internet Explorer was no longer the browser that most people used to log in for one last time.

Internet Explorer's monopoly – it once had a usage share of 95% - had long gone.

'Cherished memory'

But for those who first surfed the web when the speed read something like 64kbps, and the possibility of streaming an HD video without buffering would have almost sounded like science fiction, the blue icon of Internet Explorer is a cherished memory.

MICROPLASTICS FOUND IN ANTARCTICA

Scientists have found microplastics — plastic pieces smaller than a grain of rice — in freshly fallen Antarctic snow for the first time, which they said has the potential to influence the climate by accelerating melting of ice.

The findings, published recently in The Cryosphere journal, brought to light a serious threat to the Antarctic region.

In late 2019, Alex Aves, a PhD student at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand collected snow samples from the Ross Ice Shelf in Antarctica.

The researchers then found that there were plastic particles in every sample from the Ross Ice Shelf, and that the findings would be of global significance.

EXTRA CHROMOSOME IN 1 IN 500 MEN, DISEASE RISK HIGHER: STUDY

Around one in 500 men could be carrying an extra X or Y chromosome, most of them unaware, according to researchers at the universities of Cambridge and Exeter. This puts them at increased



risk of diseases such as type 2 diabetes, atherosclerosis and thrombosis, the researchers report in a study published in Genetics in Medicine.

They analysed genetic data collected on over 200,000 men aged 40-70 from UK Biobank, a biomedical and anonymised database on half a million UK participants. They found 356 men who carried either an extra X chromosome or an extra Y chromosome.

Sex chromosomes determine our biological sex. Men typically have one X and one Y chromosome, while women have two Xs. However, some men also have XXY or XYY.

In the study, the researchers identified 213 men with an extra X chromosome and 143 men with an extra Y chromosome. As the participants in UK Biobank tend to be 'healthier' than the general population, this suggests that around one in 500 men may carry an extra X or Y chromosome, they said.

Only a small minority of these men had a diagnosis of sex chromosome abnormality on their medical records or by self-report: 23% men with XXY and only one of the 143 XYY men (0.7%) had a known diagnosis.

By linking genetic data to routine health records, the team found that men with XXY have much higher chances of reproductive problems, including a three-fold higher risk of delayed puberty and a four-fold higher risk of being childless. These men also had significantly lower blood concentrations of testosterone. Men with XYY appeared to have a normal reproductive function.

Men with either XXY or XYY had higher risks of several other health conditions. They were three times more likely to have type 2 diabetes, six times more likely to develop venous thrombosis, three times as likely to experience pulmonary embolism, and four times more likely to suffer from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

WHAT IS RAMSAY HUNT SYNDROME — THE RARE FACIAL CONDITION AFFECTING JUSTIN BIEBER?

Pop sensation Justin Bieber Friday revealed that a viral disease has temporarily paralysed one side of his face. Speaking about the reason behind the recent cancellations of his shows, Bieber said he has developed a rare condition called the Ramsay Hunt Syndrome. In an Instagram video, Bieber said the condition has fully paralysed the right side of his face. "As you can see, this eye is not blinking. I can't smile on this side of my face... So there's full paralysis on this side of my face," he said.

What is Ramsay Hunt Syndrome?

Ramsay Hunt Syndrome is neurological disease in which a virus – Varicella Zoster – causes inflammation of the nerves involved in facial movements. When the nerves get inflamed, they lose their ability to function, leading to temporary facial palsy or paralysis. What it means is that facial muscles in the infected person cannot receive necessary signals to function properly.

"There are 12 cranial nerves in the body. Ramsay Hunt Syndrome is the viral infection impacting the 7th cranial nerve that is involved in facial movements. The inflammation caused by the Varicella Zoster Virus makes the nerve ineffective," says Dr (Col.) JD Mukherji, Principal Director and Head of Neurology, Max Healthcare at Saket, Delhi.



What are the symptoms of Ramsay Hunt Syndrome?

The symptoms include painful, red rash and blisters in and around the ear, and facial paralysis on the same side. Patients also report hearing loss in the ear that has been impacted apart from Tinnitus or ringing sounds. Inability to close the eye causes dryness.

“You can get a rash on the eardrum, the ear canal and the earlobe. Rashes can also appear inside the mouth, on the tongue. There is hearing loss, vertigo or spinning sensation. It causes weakness of one side of the face and causes difficulty in closing one eye and eating as food falls off from the affected side. There is drooping of the face,” said Dr Mukherji.

What is the virus that causes Ramsay Hunt Syndrome?

The Varicella Zoster Virus (VZV) is the same virus that causes chickenpox and shingles. According to the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, this virus belongs to the herpesvirus group and can stay in the body as a latent infection. The virus can stay dormant in a person’s body and can reawaken to attack the nerves. According to doctors, VZV can get reactivated due to weakening of the immune system. Stress is also considered a trigger, according to some studies, as it depresses the immune system. Some reports also suggest that T-cell dysfunction caused by coronavirus infection can reactivate VZV.

How does the disease progress?

Initially, the patient may complain of facial weakness and little difficulty in closing one eye. The disease fully manifests in a matter of two to three days. Prompt treatment after diagnosis can speed up the recovery and reduce chances of severe nerve damage.

How is Ramsay Hunt Syndrome treated?

It is treated using anti-viral drugs, steroids and physiotherapy. Steroids and anti-viral drugs are the cornerstone of the treatment, says Dr Mukherji.

“Facial exercises are very important. Patients need to protect their eyes. When one eye doesn’t close, there is a chance of developing corneal aberration. Patients must use tear drops and use eye protection. They should wear glasses when they go out, and tape the eye that has been impacted when they sleep at night,” he adds.

Is Ramsay Hunt Syndrome contagious?

The disease is not contagious but can lead to chickenpox in those not vaccinated for the disease. Till the blister scabs fall off, the patients are advised to avoid contact with those with low immunity and the ones who have not had chickenpox, or are not vaccinated against it.

Do patients recover fully from Ramsay Hunt Syndrome?

The disease is reversible. Patients get cured within 15 days to three months of starting the treatment.

“The take-home message is that it can be cured. Near-complete resolution happens. Even the hearing loss is reversible. Little bit of residual facial palsy may remain. There may be just a little bit of lag in the closure of the eye later on. That’s very minor,” Dr Mukherji pointed out.



DRINKING COFFEE DOES NOT RAISE RISK DURING PREGNANCY: STUDY

A new genetics-based study from the University of Queensland, published in the International Journal of Epidemiology, has found that drinking coffee during pregnancy didn't increase the risk of miscarriage, stillbirth or premature birth.

The researchers referred to WHO guidelines that pregnant women should drink less than 300 mg of caffeine (two to three cups) per day. "But that's based on observational studies where it's difficult to separate coffee drinking from other risk factors like smoking, alcohol or poor diet. We wanted to find out if coffee alone really does increase the risk of adverse pregnancy outcomes, and the research shows this isn't the case," a media release from the University of Queensland quoted researcher Dr Gunn-Helen Moen as saying.

The researchers used a method called Mendelian Randomisation, which used eight genetic variants that predicted pregnant women's coffee drinking behaviour and examined whether these variants were associated with birth outcomes.

WHY BABIES MUST ONLY BE BREASTFED FOR 6 MONTHS

In recently published guidelines on nutrition, the Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences recommended that new-borns be given a mixture of ghee and honey, a paste of gold, and several herbs some of which contain psychoactive ingredients. The guidelines recommend just honey and butter with some herbs on the first day of birth, ghee with herbs on the second day, and colostrum (mother's first milk) with ghee and honey only on the third day of birth.

Several doctors have called out these guidelines for contradicting the proven benefits of breastfeeding. Some have noted that feeding new-borns honey could lead to a rare but serious infection called botulism.

When should breastfeeding start?

Doctors say breastfeeding should start as soon as possible, preferably within one hour of birth, and babies should be exclusively breastfed for six months. "It is important that babies start breastfeeding soon after birth; the colostrum is rich in antibodies and protects them from infections. In fact, honey, sugar, salt, nuts, and cow's milk should not be given to a child until age 1," said Dr Nitin Verma, director, Madhukar Rainbow Children's Hospital.

He said consuming honey before that age is linked to botulism, poisoning caused by a bacterial infection that leads to weakness of the muscles of the eye, face, mouth, and throat, which can spread to the torso and legs as well. Although spores of the bacterium are widely present in the environment, contaminated honey is one of the reasons for infant botulism. The World Health Organization, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Mayo Clinic all recommend against honey being given to children below age 1.

Dr Roopali Dewan, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Safdarjung Hospital, said: "Early breastfeeding also increases the quantity of milk expressed by the mother and increases their bonding. In our hospital, our nurses ensure that breastfeeding starts within the labour room. They tell mothers that the children should not consume anything else, not even water, for six months."

Why six months?



“Breast milk contains adequate calories needed for up to six months. Babies can consume only a certain amount of liquids. Say they can consume 800 ml fluids — if you give them 100 ml of water, they miss out on calories contained in 100 ml of milk,” Dr Verma said.

Dr Verma said, “This sort of messaging [about honey and herbs] just confuses people, especially those who aren’t very educated. It is good to have one clear message that there should be exclusive breastfeeding for six months.”

How widely are breastfeeding guidelines followed in India?

“Despite our best efforts, only about 56% to 60% of women breastfeed their children. Some aren’t able to, but some also go for formula milk. But that is not recommended. Bottles are actually a major killer. For bottle feeding, it has to be sterilised for 10 minutes in rolling boiled water after every use. It is not possible to maintain 100% sterilisation all the time and this leads to diarrhoea in children,” Dr Garg said.

“It is also difficult to adjust the proportions of the formula. People tend to put say one spoon in one glass of water, but that is actually dilute. The formula box should get over in eight to ten days ideally and it is very expensive. But less feed might lead to malnutrition,” she said.

BRAIN NETWORKS AND NICOTINE ADDICTION

By studying brain scans of human patients who incurred lesions in their brains after an accident, and then spontaneously quit smoking, researchers map out the brain networks associated with addiction. The study published in Nature Medicine sheds light on areas of the brain that can be used as target for modulation and therapy for addiction to nicotine or alcohol. The authors of the paper caution that more larger studies need to be done to ascertain what side effects such modulation and therapy will produce.

The harms of substance abuse

Substance use is a term in common parlance that includes the use of a range of products, including psychoactive drugs. Psychoactive drugs are substances which when taken or administered into the system cause an alteration in mental processes, such as perception, consciousness, cognition and mood or emotions. Psychoactive drugs include alcohol and nicotine. While not all of these are addictive, substance use disorders are a major health hazard. They affect 8-10% of adult population and are a leading cause of death. Hence there is an interest in understanding how to treat addictions and substance use disorders.

Among these, tobacco alone is a major factor, and the data on tobacco use is grim. India is the second largest consumer of tobacco. According to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (2016-17) nearly 267 million adults (15 years and above) in India, which is about 29% of India’s adult population, use tobacco in some form or the other. To add one more datapoint to this, about 8 million people annually die because of tobacco use — that is nearly half the people who use it — and of this, over 7 million are primary users and around 1.2 million are non-smokers exposed to tobacco in a passive manner.

Treatment for substance use disorders are inadequate and do not show promise in the long term. New methods of treatment try modulating specific parts of the brain which are believed to be implicated in addiction. Now, a study published in Nature Medicine tries to identify the network of regions in the brain that are involved in substance addiction. The study finds that brain lesions



that lead to spontaneous remission of tobacco addiction in people affect a part of a common brain network. Further, they find evidence of commonality of this network across different substance addictions and this seems to suggest new targets for neuromodulation therapies.

Brain circuits, not regions

The researchers studied the brain scans of 129 patients addicted to smoking at the time they suffered localised brain damage. Of these, 60% were male and their average age was 56 years. Of the 129, 34 patients experienced spontaneous addiction remission following the injury. That is, they were able to quit smoking without experiencing craving or relapse. They also show that though the lesions associated with remission occurred in many different places in the brain, these can be mapped to a specific brain network. Additionally they found this network was reproducible in the case of other substances of abuse, in independent groups of people with lesions. These included people with reduced risk of alcohol addiction and case reports of lesions that disrupted addiction to substances other than nicotine.

Broadly speaking, the authors found that brain circuits rather than specific brain regions may be involved in causing addiction, and damage to these circuits — whatever the reason — may result in remission. Common areas were found for alcohol and tobacco addiction. “These results did not correlate with psychological tests which indicates that anatomical rather than behavioural factors may be involved,” says Dr. Smita Deshpande who is a professor of psychiatry at St. John’s Research Institute, St. John’s National Academy of Health Sciences, in Bengaluru.

Dr. Deshpande also points out that the authors have measured alcohol dependence by a questionnaire which did not actually mean that those people were alcohol dependent. “They also did not look at issues such as degree of recovery, ability to function in daily life, family support, occupational factors and psychological factors other than those described in the paper,” she says. It is also not specified for how long the patients studied had quit smoking (remained free of nicotine), “as relapses are common in all addictions.”

WHAT WAS THE BLACK DEATH, WHERE DID IT ORIGINATE?

Where did the Black Death — one of the deadliest epidemics in the history of humankind — exactly originate? It is a question that has plagued historians for centuries. A group of scholars from different disciplines have now attempted to solve this much-debated mystery.

In a study published in the journal *Science* on June 15, researchers have claimed that the disease originated in modern day northern Kyrgyzstan around 1338-1339 — nearly 7-8 years before it ravaged large parts of the world.

What was the Black Death?

The term Black Death refers to the bubonic plague that spread across Western Asia, Northern Africa, Middle East and Europe in 1346-53.

Most scholars agree that the Black Death, which killed millions, was caused by bacterium *Yersinia pestis* and was spread by fleas that were carried by rodent hosts.

The microorganism *Y. pestis* spread to human populations, who at some point transmitted it to others either through the vector of a human flea or directly through the respiratory system.



Contemporaries who wrote about the epidemic, often described the buboes (hard, inflamed lymph nodes) as the distinguishing clinical feature.

Matteo Villani, the Florentine chronicler, referred to the disease in 1348 as the 'mortal disease of buboes' and 'pestilence of buboes'.

The onset of symptoms was followed by intense fever and vomiting of blood. After the initial infection, most victims died within 2-7 days.

How did researchers pinpoint the Black Death's origin?

In the late 19th century, excavations of two Christian cemeteries near Lake Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan unearthed a settlement of a trading community that had been affected by an unknown disease in 1338-1339.

Historian Philip Slavin, one of the researchers involved in the present study, examined the tombstones, on which Syriac inscriptions stated that the victims died of an unknown epidemic or "pestilence".

The researchers then extracted DNA from the teeth of seven people that were buried at the cemetery and found genetic traces of *Y. pestis* bacterium.

The extracted DNA was compared with bacterial DNA collected from other plague victims in Europe. The researchers found that the strain of *Y. pestis* that caused the epidemic in the settlements near Lake Issyk-Kul was the direct ancestor of the strain that caused the Black Death, according to the Wall Street Journal.

By piecing together the *Y. pestis* genome from the cemeteries in Kyrgyzstan, researchers found a single plague strain that can be placed at the beginning of the Black Death outbreak before it spread to Europe years later.

"We found the Black Death's source strain and we even know its exact date (the year 1338)", said Maria Spyrou, lead author of the report.

Why is the new discovery significant?

The geographical origin point of the plague has been debated for centuries. Some historians have argued that the plague originated in China, and spread across Europe by Italian merchants who first entered the continent in trading caravans through Crimea.

According to another contested theory based on a 1348 memoir of an Italian notary from Piacenza, it has been argued Mongol army hurled plague-infested bodies into the city during the siege of Caffa (Crimea) and led to spread of the disease.

Historian Mary Fissel told The New York Times that if the latest research is correct, it would mean that the plague spread through trading routes and not, as some historians have argued, through warfare a century prior.

Why was this plague called the Black Death?

It is commonly believed that the term Black Death gets its name from the black marks that appeared on some of the plague victims' bodies. However, historians argued that this term, which



only emerged centuries later, had less to do with the disease's clinical symptoms, and more to do with how European writers from the 19th century onwards understood the epidemic.

In the 14th century, the epidemic was referred to as the 'great pestilence' or 'great death', due to the demographic havoc that it caused.

Historian Nukhet Varlik argues that the term Black Death was devised by European writers in the 19th century, becoming widely accepted as time went by. German physician Justus Friedrich Carl Hecker is credited with universalizing the term in his 1832 book *Der Schwarze Tod* (Black Death), which was translated to other languages as well. He presented the Black Death as a unique plague, distinct from any other disease that came before it.

Varlik argues that the world black also carried a dark, gloomy emotional tone, due to the sheer amount of deaths generated by the plague.

How deadly was the spread, what was its aftermath?

Due to a lack of comprehensive historical data from that time, it is difficult to know the exact death toll. Norwegian historian Ole J Benedictow, who wrote extensively on the disease, estimated that around 60-65 per cent of Europe's population or 52 million people died due to the plague.

Describing his experience from Siena in 1348, Italian chronicler Agnolo di Tura wrote: "Great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds both day and night."

A dramatic reduction in population was accompanied with huge economic and social changes in Europe. With a smaller labour force available, wages went up, leaving ordinary people with a higher economic surplus.

The Black Death also led to an increase in religious persecution of the Jews, who were blamed for spreading the contagion.

IS MONKEYPOX A SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTION?

As of June 8, 1,177 cases of monkeypox have been confirmed, with Europe being the worst affected with 704 cases, as per the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Monkeypox cases have been detected in 18 countries in Europe, mainly in the U.K., Spain and Portugal. The U.S. has confirmed 45 cases of monkeypox virus cases as of June 9.

Most of the cases reported so far have been in men who have sex with men and bisexual men. However, the risk of monkeypox virus is not restricted to men who have sex with men. "People who closely interact with someone who is infectious, including health workers, household members and sexual partners are at greater risk for infection, the World Health Organization (WHO) says. "You can catch monkeypox if you have close physical contact with someone who is showing symptoms. This includes touching and being face-to-face. Monkeypox can spread through close skin-to-skin contact during sex, including kissing, touching, oral and penetrative sex with someone who has symptoms."

The WHO also stresses that it is currently not clear if monkeypox virus can spread through semen or vaginal fluids. "But direct skin-to-skin contact with lesions during sexual activities can spread the virus. Monkeypox rashes are sometimes found on genitals and in the mouth, which is likely to



contribute to transmission during sexual contact. Mouth-to-skin contact could cause transmission where skin or mouth lesions are present,” WHO adds.

The virus can also spread through large respiratory droplets and contact with bedding, towels, etc. that a person with monkeypox infection has used.

Virus in semen

But a study published on June 2 in Euro-surveillance found the virus in the seminal fluid of four men who tested positive for monkeypox virus. The researchers have ruled out the possibility of sample contamination. Based on the findings, they say, “Although these findings cannot be considered definitive evidence of infectivity, they demonstrate viral shedding whose efficiency in terms of transmission cannot be ruled out.”

They say that further studies are needed to “assess presence, persistence and contagiousness of the virus in different body fluids”. But the researchers also mention that all four men had sex with many men and the lesions were initially seen mostly in the anal and genital areas. “These suggest that close contact during sexual intercourse was important for virus transmission,” they note.

“Direct [skin-to-skin] contact is the primary route of monkeypox virus transmission,” says Dr. Gagandeep Kang, Professor of Microbiology at CMC Vellore. The presence of the virus in the seminal fluid in all four men cannot be considered as proof of sexual transmission unless proven that virus transmission could not have happened any other way, Dr. Kang adds.

In the case of HIV, besides sexual route of virus transmission, the virus can be transmitted from the mother to the child (vertical transmission) during pregnancy, labour, delivery or breastfeeding and also through injection drug use. Yet, HIV is called a sexually transmitted disease.

“HIV spread is predominantly sexual/parenteral, while monkeypox is mainly direct contact,” Dr. Kang says.

Though most of the cases have been reported in men who have sex with men and presenting with lesions mostly seen in the anal and genital areas as well as the mouth, monkeypox is not considered to be sexually transmitted. Instead, intimate, skin-to-skin contact is considered key to transmission. Even if other studies find infectious monkeypox viruses in the seminal fluid, it is unlikely that monkeypox would be called as a sexually transmitted infection.

Question of stigma

On whether calling monkeypox as a sexually transmitted infection will lead to more stigma and discrimination, Dr. Titanji told The Hindu, “I am worried about stigma too and that is the challenge in public health messaging. [But] shrouding this in taboo will breed stigma, and stigma is bad for controlling outbreaks.”

She adds, “Calling any disease that spreads through sexual contact an STI is not intended to stigmatise. It is intended to identify and address risk factors and offer interventions to help folks manage their risk.”

She elaborated this in a tweet, “Calling an infection an STI is not intended to be stigmatising. It allows for people to understand how they could be exposed and potentially infected, it also helps with tracing partners, notifying them so they are aware of their exposures to seek treatment.”



SUSHRUTA'S DESCRIPTION OF RECONSTRUCTING A NOSE

Surgery performed on the nose is called rhinoplasty. In the modern era, it is popularly called a 'nose job' and is often associated with vanity — the cosmetic improvement of “facial symmetry”. Functional improvements to the airways is also a good reason for surgery, or less frequent causes such as birth defects (cleft palate) falls, cancers, etc.

India ranks fourth in the world in rhinoplasties performed annually. (A note of caution — availability of the procedure does not translate to widespread availability of expertise, and the outcome of nose jobs can be hit-or-miss. Prominent surgeons say that a significant number of their new patients are only seeking a 'redo').

The nose is a defining feature of our appearance and identity. This may explain why phrases such as the Hindi phrase, *naak kat gaya* (my nose was cut) refer to a not so literal loss of face. In many societies, the cutting of the nose was a severe form of punishment. This may also explain why the reconstruction of noses is a very old surgical procedure.

Ancient method

The first careful description of nasal reconstruction is found in the Sushruta Samahita. Modern scholars have dated this text to the 7th or 6th century B.C, its esteemed author having practiced this art on the banks of the Ganges. The collection of Sushruta's writings is regarded as the earliest true medical textbook.

Two sites were described for gathering the skin that would be reshaped into a new nose — the cheek or the forehead. A leaf was chosen that provided an approximate measure of the missing nose. A segment of skin was then incised from the cheek, but not fully detached — a short stalk or pedicle remained attached to the face for unhindered blood circulation.

The scalpel was then deployed to make small raw wounds around the remaining nose stump.

The incised cheek flap was stretched over, positioned and stitched to the face at these raw spots. The nose was shaped by positioning stalks from the castor oil plant (Hindi - *arandi*; Tamil - *amanakku*) where nostrils should have been. A powdered mix of barberry, licorice and red sandalwood (Hindi - *daruhaldi*, *mithi lakdi*, *rakta chandan*; Tamil - *adimaduram*, *chandanam*) was then sprinkled over the area, as an analgesic and antiseptic. The wounds were covered with cotton, and sesame oil was constantly applied until the skins had fused — at which point the connection to the cheek was cut off.

Sushruta did not claim credit for inventing this technique. He described it as an 'ancient method'. The Sushruta Samahita was translated into the Arabic in the 8th century.

A notable English translation by Kunja Lal Bhishagratna appeared in 1907. Curiously, there were no descriptions of rhinoplasty from Europe until the 13th century, when accounts of the “Indian cheek flap” method began to appear.

Not familiar

The fact that this surgical procedure was unfamiliar to the British is evident from a book, An account of two successful operations for restoring a lost nose, published in 1816 by Joseph Carpue of York, a pioneer of rhinoplasty in his country.



In the book, he recounts the observations of two “medical gentlemen” of the East India Company who had watched a surgery performed by one Mr. Kumar in Poona in 1792.

Nose surgery using wax

The unfortunate victim, Cowasjee, was a bullock-cart driver transporting goods for soldiers of the East India Company. His nose had been mutilated by men of Tipu Sultan’s army.

In Mr. Kumar’s hands, a thin slab of wax that had been expertly shaped and trimmed to resemble the lost nose, was carefully flattened and placed on the forehead of the victim. The outline of this wax served as the boundary for the dissection of the skin, with the central part between the eyebrows, remaining connected to the face. The incised skin was then stretched downward to the region of the nose and stitched into place.

More studies needed

It should be noted that this nasal reconstruction method was not a true graft. Skin grafting, the transplanting of an expanse of skin from another part of the body (or from another person or animal) would require advances in our understanding of the biology of tissue rejection and compatibility.

For antimicrobial action, catechu (Hindi - kathha; Tamil - karungali) was coated on the sites and a cloth soaked in ghee used as cover for a few days. Over time, no scars were visible, and the recipient could even sneeze and blow his nose without discomfort.

Performed nearly 2500 years after Sushruta wrote his text, the method was essentially unchanged.

EASING OF IP RESTRICTIONS ON VACCINES IS WELCOME. BUT IT WILL NEED TO BE ACCOMPANIED BY TECHNOLOGY TRANSFERS

Nearly two years after it was initiated by India and South Africa, a proposal to waive patents on Covid-19 vaccines has been approved by the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The global trade agency’s 12th Ministerial in Geneva went into extra time to arrive at the decision, which, no doubt, is a shot in the arm for the principle of vaccine equity. The question, however, is: Will patent waiver, at the current stage of the pandemic, make a meaningful impact in the battle against the virus? In the lead-up to the WTO ministerial, India accused developing nations of dragging negotiations for far too long — New Delhi has, however, described Friday’s decision as “progressive”. Vaccine supply is no more the challenge it was at the beginning of this year. The argument that the deal has come too late is, therefore, correct to an extent. The vaccines currently in use provide protection against the more severe forms of Covid. But it’s also clear that these shots do not always guard against infection. The virus continues to pose new questions — the lingering after-effects of the disease in large numbers of Covid patients, for instance — even though it appears to have become less virulent. Information flows must, therefore, be geared towards developing second-generation preventives and therapeutics. Easing intellectual property restrictions should be seen as the first step in this endeavour.

Waiver of IP rights will not amount to anything substantial if pharma companies in the Third World do not have the know-how to produce medicines and vaccines. In India, for nearly five decades, the generic industry has reverse-engineered drugs to mass manufacture low-priced therapeutics. But vaccines present a different order of challenge: Manufacturers require not only

patented knowledge but also partnerships with the original innovator to develop these preventives. Such arrangements help vaccine manufacturers mobilise technical skills and raw materials. Technology transfers were harbingers of some of the most effective interventions in the battle against the virus. The tie-up between pharma major AstraZeneca, Oxford University and the Serum Institute of India is a case in point.

There was a global consensus, very early in the pandemic, that knowledge sharing would be critical in the battle against the pathogen. However, this understanding did not translate into equitable distribution of the most potent shield against the virus. The WTO decision, though belated, is a corrective. Much more will be needed in the coming months.



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