

CURRENT AFFAIRS for UPSC

10TH TO 16TH JULY 2022
DREAMIAS



INTERNATIONAL

A MULTILATERAL PLATFORM IN A POLARISED WORLD

In the late 1990s, as the existing geo-economic multilateral order was found ineffective in dealing with the Mexican, Asian and Russian financial crises, countries moved towards forming G-20

A group of developed and emerging economies, including OECD and BRICS, were chosen as a “perfect mix” of the old world and new to create the new grouping

During the 2007 financial crisis, G-20 members took concerted actions, including boosting spending and lowering trade barriers, to revive economies

Suhasini Haidar

In a world where multilateralism appears to be gasping for breath, the G-20 Foreign Minister’s meeting in Bali dealt a few more blows. “We cannot deny that it has become more difficult for the world to sit together,” said Retno Marsudi, Indonesian Foreign Minister who hosted the meeting this week, even as G-7 countries skipped a welcome reception and concert to protest the presence of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Mr. Lavrov walked out of one meeting over comments made by Western countries about the war in Ukraine, and another, just before the Ukrainian Foreign Minister, a special invitee to the session on food security, began to speak.

It seems the road between the Foreign Ministers’ meeting, expected to be followed by an equally acrimonious G-20 Finance Ministers’ meeting on July 15-16, which will finalise the agenda, can only lead to an even more contentious G-20 summit four months later, on November 15-16, where Russian President Vladimir Putin has been invited and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is expected to address the gathering as a special invitee. The U.S. has already demanded Mr. Putin be disinvited, or U.S. and European countries would boycott his address. Sensing the difficulties, Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who attended the G-7 summit in Germany as a special invitee, also travelled to Kyiv and Moscow last month, and met with both leaders in the hope of keeping the G-20 together, as it faces what is probably its greatest organisational challenge in 23 years of its existence. India, which will assume the Presidency of the G-20 in December, will have to bear the burden of ensuring the G-20’s continued existence in a globally polarised world through 2023.

In many ways, (minus the Russia-Ukraine war), the present moment reflects many of the crises that led to the creation of the G-20 in the first place in 1999. At the time, the geo-economic multilateral order was dominated by the G-8 countries (now the G-7, after the ouster of Russia), and it was clear that they were ineffective in dealing with the Mexican, Asian and Russian Financial Crises of 1997-98.

Global South

The larger global economic grouping at the time, the 38-member OECD that was created out of the post-World War reconstruction effort, was equally unworkable, and weighted towards the U.S. and Europe. This led to the first G-20 meeting, of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors, to look at the world through a more “Global South” perspective.

Two men in particular, Canadian Finance Minister (and later PM) Paul Martin, and U.S. Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers were credited with the push for this larger grouping, which they said would move beyond the “denizens of Davos” to people who work in “Detroit and Düsseldorf”,



referring to manufacturing hubs of the time. Along with economists from the OECD, which remains the G-20's strategic adviser, they chose from a basket of emerging economies (all BRICS countries are in G-20) to create the G-20 as a "perfect mix" of the old world and new, of the first world and the developing world; of the traditional, ageing global elites, and the more populous, bustling and growing economies.

The final list read: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea (South Korea), Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States, along with the European Union. Spain is a permanent invitee, as are several international agencies like the UN, the IMF, ASEAN, the African Union, etc. Some have joked that only 19 countries are actually G-20 members (as the EU is not a country), proving that "finance ministers can't count", but a little-known fact, disclosed by Mr. Martin years later, was that Nigeria was meant to be the "20th" member, and was dropped at the last minute due to political troubles. Today, G-20 members account for 60% of the global population, 75% of global trade and more than 80% of world GDP.

The G-20 has no fixed headquarters, and the secretariat moves by rotation between the countries hosting or assuming Presidency of the grouping each year. The members are divided into five groups (India is in Group 2, along with Russia, South Africa and Turkey). The G-20 agenda that still depends heavily on the guidance of Finance Ministers and central Governors is finalised by a unique system of 'Sherpas', who are special envoys of G-20 leaders. Another feature of the G-20 is 'Troika' meetings, comprising the countries presiding over the G-20 in the past year, present year, and next year. At present, the Troika is made up of Italy, Indonesia and India.

The G-20's next big leap came during the global financial crisis in 2007. It was clearly a time for leadership to step in, and the first G-20 summit was held in 2008 in Washington DC, hosted by U.S. President George W. Bush. Experts saw the G-20 agreements in 2008 and 2009, where the grouping agreed to revive economies with a spending boost worth \$4 trillion, lowering trade barriers and implementing economic and governance reforms, as proof that the new grouping could actually work, and even save the global financial system through concerted action.

Global priorities

That enthusiasm didn't last, and the next decade brought with it new challenges, as China's strategic rise, NATO's expansion and Russia's territorial aggression in Georgia and Crimea changed global priorities. Today, the world continues to struggle with sharpening geopolitical rivalries, and a possible dilution of the dollar-based system post-Ukraine sanctions, even as it deals with the new realities of post-COVID economics. Globalisation is no longer a cool word, and multilateral organisations have a credibility crisis as countries around the world pick being 'G-zero' (a term coined by political commentator Ian Bremmer to denote 'Every Nation for Itself') over the G-7, G-20, BRICS, P-5 (UNSC Permanent Members) and others.

For India, the G-20's challenges come with the prestige of hosting the Summit next November, when global leaders will descend on New Delhi, and meet with Prime Minister Narendra Modi just months before national elections in 2024. In the past few weeks, India has been more vocal about working with Indonesia to build a consensus for the Bali agenda, and has also begun the process of setting up G-20 structures here. Former NITI Ayog CEO Amitabh Kant has been appointed the PM's G-20 Sherpa, and former Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla will be the G-20 Coordinator. The government plans to hold 100 preparatory meetings in different parts of the country, which led



to a controversy over whether the G-20 summit or Ministerial level meetings would be held in Jammu Kashmir.

Amid protests from Pakistan and China, the MEA has clarified that no decisions have been made yet. The G-20 venue is likely to be at Delhi's Pragati Maidan, where the construction of roads, conference halls, hotels and landscaping is under way. The bigger challenges, however, will remain for India to assist Indonesia in protecting the idea of the G-20, and keeping it from fragmentation in the face of geopolitical fissures, where leaders are loath to hear each other speak, or even sit in the same room together.

IRAN, BELARUS TO BE NEWEST SCO MEMBERS

Iran and Belarus are likely to be the two newest additions to the China and Russia-backed Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) grouping, officials said on Friday.

Expanding the group is among the issues that leaders of the grouping, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping are likely to discuss at the SCO summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in September.

The current SCO Secretary, General Zhang Ming, a veteran Chinese diplomat, told reporters on Friday the grouping hopes for an in-person summit in Uzbekistan, which could see Mr. Modi meet with Mr. Xi for the first time since 2019.

China, Russia and four Central Asian states — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan — were the founding members of the SCO, while India and Pakistan joined the grouping in 2017 in its first round of expansion. Last year's summit in Dushanbe agreed for Iran to join, while Belarus has also begun the membership process.

Sharp contrast

China and Russia are looking to frame the grouping as a counter to the West — particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine — and Mr. Zhang sought to draw a sharp contrast between the SCO and NATO.

"There has been discussion in the international arena that the trend of non-alignment is back," he said. "The expansion of NATO is totally different as the SCO is a cooperative organisation based on non-alignment and not targeting a third party. NATO is based on Cold War thinking. The logic of NATO is creating new enemies to sustain its own existence."

He said the SCO "believes one should not build its safety at the expense of other countries", a statement China has used previously to blame NATO for the Ukraine crisis. Mr. Zhang also hit out at "small circles" — a term China has used in the past to criticise the Quad — underlining India's somewhat unique position in the SCO, whose two most important members, China and Russia, are increasingly positioning the grouping directly at odds with the West.

India will host the SCO summit next year, and Varanasi has been selected as the SCO region's first "Tourism and Cultural Capital", Mr. Zhang said, a title it will hold next year coinciding with India chairing the grouping.



FAR APART

The July 7 meeting between External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers' meet in Bali, served as a reminder of the curious state of affairs in India's relations with China. That the two Ministers had their second meeting in four months — Mr. Wang was in New Delhi in March — indicates both sides see value in continued engagement and remain dissatisfied with the current low level of relations. The problem, however, is that the commonalities appear to end there. Mr. Jaishankar reiterated India's stand, conveyed to China on numerous occasions since the start of the LAC tensions in 2020, that normalcy would not be possible without a resolution of the boundary crisis and full disengagement from all friction areas. The MEA said the External Affairs Minister called for an early resolution of all outstanding issues, and reiterated the need to sustain the momentum to complete disengagement from all the remaining areas.

It is, however, clear that Beijing does not appear to share that view. On the contrary, recent actions suggest Beijing has no desire to resolve the row immediately, which India reasonably sees as a prerequisite for restoring normalcy in relations. Indeed, the official Chinese readout of the Bali talks failed to make a single mention of the LAC crisis, suggesting it is not a priority for Beijing. Instead, it emphasised Beijing's current interest in engaging with India on multilateral groupings such as BRICS and the SCO, which China and Russia see as valuable platforms to counter the West, and to promote, as Mr. Wang put it, "a fairer international order". The Chinese military, meanwhile, has dragged its feet in responding with dates for the 16th round of military talks, marking the longest pause since the talks began. At the last round, that was held as long as four months ago on March 11, both sides failed to achieve a breakthrough to disengage at Patrolling Point 15 in Hot Springs. Depsang and Demchok also remain unresolved. There is little expectation in New Delhi for an imminent breakthrough, particularly with domestic politics in China on edge before the Party Congress this fall when Xi Jinping will begin a third term and the military leadership will also see sweeping changes. The Chinese Foreign Minister, in Bali, said both countries "should push for the early return of bilateral relations to the right track". That aspiration, however, contrasts sharply with Beijing's continued unwillingness to restore the status quo of April 2020. The apparent goal appears to be aimed at testing India's resolve to sustain its forward deployments and to force New Delhi to accept a new normal at the LAC. Until that changes, the stalemate along the borders, and in the relationship, is likely to endure.

I2U2 SUMMIT WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY INDIA'S NIMBLE DIPLOMATIC MOVES, CAN PROVIDE A Foothold FOR A GREATER ROLE IN WEST ASIA

The virtual summit-level I2U2 meeting between the leaders of Israel, India, UAE and US on Thursday took place just nine months after the grouping was launched by the foreign ministers of all four countries in Israel. The UAE has promised a \$2-billion plan for "integrated food parks" in India with the assistance of American and Israeli private sectors and the summit also delivered an investment commitment towards a 300-MW hybrid renewable energy project in Gujarat. But beyond these concrete results, the I2U2 is a validation of New Delhi's nimble foreign policy in West Asia as well as a pointer to the as yet untapped potential in the region.

A grouping like the I2U2 has been made possible by several developments. In recent years, particularly since Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to office, Delhi has responded to the new diplomatic and strategic dynamic in the region — by giving a political imprimatur to the relationship with Israel and engaging more deeply with the Gulf monarchies, for example — while



continuing its relationship with Palestine. The foreign office also seems to have shed its earlier wariness about the US's role in West Asia. Washington, in turn, seems both comfortable with and keen for India playing a more proactive role. The Abraham Accords of 2020, under which the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco now have formal ties with Israel too altered the diplomatic calculus in West Asia. That Delhi is already a player in this ongoing realignment is a prospect for cautious optimism about India's place at the diplomatic table in the region.

For all the gains India has accrued, a lot more remains to be done. Delhi has traditionally viewed West Asia either through the lens of the Pakistan problem or from the perspective of the region as a leading destination for Indian labour. The former — engaging with countries on their own terms, rather than their perceived closeness to Islamabad — has already been addressed to some degree. In terms of the latter, it is important to take into account the immense capital accumulation in the region, and how it has been deployed in infrastructure projects and corridors as far as Africa. Despite the presence of the Indian diaspora, and the country's energy needs, Delhi currently has a negligible presence in these projects. It must gradually address this deficit, and the I2U2 could help in that regard. The I2U2 has made a modest beginning, with cooperation on climate change and agriculture. The Quad, too, began with cooperation on disaster relief after the 2004 tsunami — it now has a significant strategic dimension.

INDONESIA'S NEW VISA POLICY, WHICH ALLOWS TRAVELLERS TO LIVE TAX-FREE

As Indonesia deals with the economic impacts of Covid-19, the country has announced "Digital Nomad Visas" for travellers, to attract more foreign tourists.

While Bali is one of the most famous locations in the country for beaches and bars, Indonesia is looking to promote another element through these visas — the spiritual element.

So, who are digital nomads? What are these visas? And what are some other countries offering such visas? We explain.

Who are digital nomads?

Digital Nomads are people who work remotely while travelling to different places and spending their earned income in the country they are travelling to.

As the pandemic took place most of the workspaces were shifted online, while some offices have begun to open, most organisations have declared remote work.

Now as the world has moved towards getting vaccinated and international borders have opened up, people can continue doing their regular jobs remotely from anywhere in the world.

According to the 2020 State of Independence in America Report by MBO Partners, "Digital nomads are defined as people who choose to embrace a location-independent, technology-enabled lifestyle that allows them to travel and work remotely, anywhere in the Internet-connected world. Unlike regular remote workers, who tend to stay in one geographic area, digital nomads travel and explore while working."

The study also found that 10.9 million American workers described themselves as digital nomads in 2020, which was an increase of 49 per cent from 2019.



What is the “Digital Nomad Visa” Indonesia has proposed?

The Digital Nomad Visa would allow remote workers to stay in Indonesia, including Bali, tax-free.

Announced by Indonesia’s Tourism Minister Sandiaga Uno to boost tourism in the country, the visa will be applicable for five years. This would make Indonesia’s visa one of the longest digital nomad visas compared to other countries.

Through the visa, Indonesia aims to bring in over 3.6 million overseas travellers into the country over the next year to explore spiritual retreats as well as the eco-tourism of Indonesia.

As reported by Bloomberg, Uno said that eco-tourism along with sporting events and the five-year visa should bring in millions of travellers and create over a million jobs for Indonesians as the borders have now opened for foreign tourists.

“In the past, the three S was: sun, sea and sand. We’re moving it to serenity, spirituality and sustainability. This way we’re getting better quality and better impact to the local economy,” Uno told Bloomberg.

Under the visa, as long as the remote workers earn from companies outside Indonesia, they can live tax-free inside the country, including on islands like Bali.

In May this year, Indonesia removed most of its Covid-19 mandates for overseas travellers in order to attract more tourists.

Through easy processing of visas and frequent flights, Indonesia aims to attract employees of organisations like Airbnb, Twitter and others who have allowed remote working for all.

Uno also told Bloomberg that in a survey, 95 per cent of digital nomads responded that Indonesia, especially Bali, was the remote working destination that was at the top of their minds.

In 2021 too, Indonesia had thought of granting a special visa to remote workers or those businessmen who travel for leisure but with the rising cases, the plans got cancelled.

“Now with the pandemic handled and all the ministries getting involved and cooperating from the health side to the immigrations office, we believe that this is an opportune time to relaunch this idea,” Uno added.

What are some other countries that provide nomad visas?

Italy in March, released a new permit for non-EU nationals, or digital nomads, who can stay in the country for up to 90 days without a visa.

Antigua and Barbuda offer a digital nomad visa for two years where the travellers will be required to maintain their own health insurance.

Barbados offers a year-long remote working visa which can be extended further.

Other countries offering nomad visas are Croatia, Costa Rica, Georgia, Hungary, Iceland, Mauritius, Norway, and Spain among many others.



FLEEING, QUITTING

Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has resigned at last, but not before keeping the country guessing for two days. In a not-unexpected turn of events, the beleaguered executive head of Sri Lanka fled by an Air Force plane, reached the Maldives and thereafter went to Singapore, presumably on his way to another country. Evidently hedging against the possibility of being turned back by any of these countries, he did not submit his resignation on July 13 as promised. As he sent in his resignation Thursday evening, it was clear he was holding out so that he would not lose his presidential immunity from prosecution until he reached safe haven. Given the widespread wrath against him, being in Colombo without the shield of office was not an option for him. Instead, he appointed Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to discharge the President's functions in his absence, using a provision in the Constitution which allows such an arrangement if the incumbent has to leave the country or is otherwise unable to perform his duties. Mr. Wickremesinghe is now unlikely to respond to calls for his resignation, as the country's Constitution provides that the current Prime Minister shall act as President until a new one is elected. While the legislature is to be convened soon for formally electing a new President, there are questions over whether the mass uprising will abate, as its protagonists have been asking for Mr. Wickremesinghe's resignation too, seeing him as equally discredited. It is perhaps in anticipation of an intensification of the protest that Mr. Wickremesinghe has asked the military to do whatever is needed to restore order. But order is not born of bloodshed; confrontation must be avoided, and efforts made to heed the demands of the people.

The world has been amazed by the unprecedented display of righteous anger and courage by the citizens of Sri Lanka, as they channelled the widespread fury against the devastation caused by the economic crisis on their day-to-day existence. As civil society came together, it is apt to see this as a revolutionary moment in which an avaricious and apathetic political class has been humbled by people united by suffering. While external observers see this as a moment of truth for authoritarian leaders, power-hungry politicians and their ilk, it remains to be seen if political leaders in Sri Lanka themselves have drawn any lesson from it. Reports suggest that jockeying for power is going on on one side even as images of protesters overwhelming offices and residences associated with the rulers are going viral. Sri Lankans may expect that a change of regime will mean a new order that would usher in constitutional changes, policy reforms and reverse the trend of public interest being sacrificed for political ends. The next President should recognise this legitimate aspiration and refrain from any attempt to maintain the status quo, cover up the misdeeds that led the country to the current crisis or preserve the ill-gotten gains of office.

THE ONGOING DIALOGUE BETWEEN PAKISTAN AND THE TTP

The story so far: On June 29, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, chief of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) during an interview on YouTube said that the group would not back down from its primary demand for reversal of the merger of the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province in 2018. This statement comes amid ongoing negotiations between the government of Pakistan and the TTP in Kabul with the Afghan Taliban's interim government facilitating the negotiations. On June 2, the TTP announced an "indefinite ceasefire" given the "substantial progress" made in talks with the government during a round of meetings. This announcement came a day after a 50-member jirga (tribal council) comprising elders of major tribes and clans from KP visited Kabul and held talks with the TTP leaders.



What has been the history of Pakistan and TTP negotiations?

Negotiations between the TTP and the Pakistan government have been held since 2007. However, the talks have failed to bring stability and peace. The first round of negotiations with the TTP took place in May 2007 when a nine-point peace deal was reached wherein the TTP agreed to stop attacks on security forces and government installations. They stated that they would not disturb peace in the region. Similar talks took place in 2008, 2011, 2013, and 2014 during which the TTP agreed to denounce militancy and condemned the elements involved in attacks on state institutions, police and other law-enforcement agencies.

What has been the focus of current talks?

The latest round of talks began in 2021 after Pakistan President Dr. Arif Alvi suggested that the government could consider giving amnesty to those members of the TTP who have not remained involved in "criminal activities" and who lay down their weapons and agree to adhere to the Constitution. Following this, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government under Imran Khan announced that they were holding talks with the TTP so that its members may surrender and reconcile in order "to be able to live like ordinary citizens."

During the talks, aside from the TTP's primary demand for reversal of the merger, it is also insisting on the withdrawal of security forces from the tribal districts, amnesty for its fighters and the enforcement of Sharia in the Malakand Division. Conversely, the government has maintained that all negotiations would take place within the framework of the Constitution.

Why is the TTP stubborn on certain clauses?

The TTP's main demand has been the reversal of the merger of FATA with the KP province. The TTP has been persistent because of many reasons. Despite the fact that the TTP is not a monolithic group, the most powerful factions within it have been the Mehsud Group which consists mostly of Pashtuns, an ethnic group present mostly in FATA and the KP regions of Pakistan. Thus, the FATA regions give the TTP recruitment and operational leverage due to the concentration of indigenous and migrant Pashtuns whose unique political grievances the TTP exploits. Secondly, the FATA region offers the TTP operational leverage due to its trans-national operational potential and its ability to use Afghanistan as a safe haven by exploiting its cross-border, trans-national linkages with ethno-militant groups such as the Haqqani Network.

So, where does it leave Pakistan?

The state's endgame involves convincing the TTP to agree to a long-term cease-fire as well as dissolving its organisation so that they may join mainstream politics. It is for this purpose, the state has once again reopened channels of communication. The negotiations with the TTP have been carried out largely by the Pakistan military and intelligence services.

The military has been authorised to hold talks with the TTP and report back on the progress of the talk, following which the issue will be debated in Parliament. The previous PTI government had a softer approach while negotiating with the TTP, however, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's ruling coalition has taken a harder stance. The next phase of the negotiation would be shaped by the domestic politics at play in Pakistan. However, with the TTP setting impossible conditions, the state is once again posed with a challenge on how to reach an understanding.

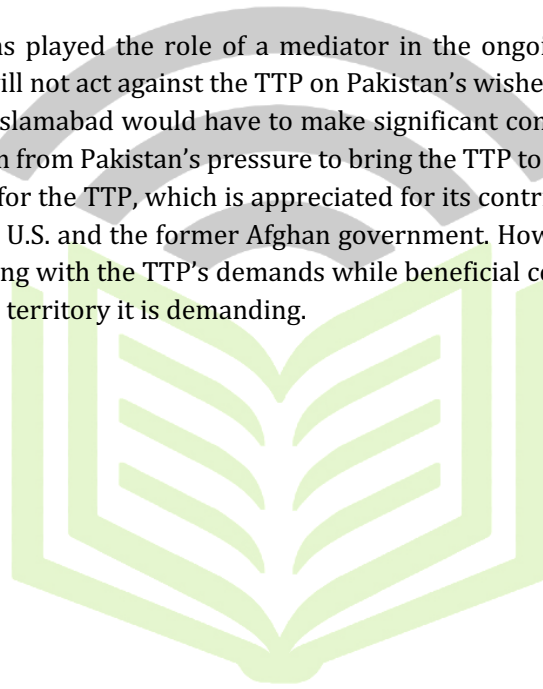


Does the civil society approve talks with the TTP?

Civil society and experts have argued that militant groups should not be allowed to dictate how the state and its security forces operate. Moreover, they raised questions as to whether the state is willing to forgive a group that has the blood of thousands of citizens on its hands. The initial round of negotiations initiated by Imran Khan was heavily criticised due to the lack of accountability and the secrecy around the talks. Additionally, the people remain apprehensive about the TTP's willingness to give up completely given that the group has been responsible for some of the most atrocious acts of terrorism in Pakistan. Moreover, civil society has demanded more transparency in the talks with the TTP.

What has been the role of the Afghan Taliban?

The Afghan Taliban has played the role of a mediator in the ongoing negotiations. They have maintained that they will not act against the TTP on Pakistan's wishes and that if a deal was to be made with the group, Islamabad would have to make significant concessions. The Taliban's role in the negotiations stem from Pakistan's pressure to bring the TTP to the negotiating table and its long-standing support for the TTP, which is appreciated for its contribution in fighting alongside the Taliban against the U.S. and the former Afghan government. However, the Taliban's position remains unclear as siding with the TTP's demands while beneficial could also pose a threat if the TTP controls the entire territory it is demanding.



DreamIAS



NATION

WHO WAS RIPUDAMAN SINGH MALIK, THE MAN ACQUITTED IN THE 1985 AI BOMBING CASE, SHOT DEAD IN CANADA?

Ripudaman Singh Malik, an accused in the 1985 Air India bombing who was acquitted in 2005, was shot dead in Surrey in Canada on Thursday morning. Here are five things to know about him.

Accused in 1985 AI bombing

Ripudaman Singh Malik, 75, was one of the accused in the 1985 bombing of Air India's Flight 182 Kanishka that killed 331 people, mostly from Toronto and Vancouver areas.

Canadian investigators believed a suitcase bomb was loaded onto a plane at Vancouver International Airport and then transferred in Toronto to Air India Flight 182 which exploded off the coast of Ireland, killing 329 passengers and crew. Malik and his co-accused, Ajaib Singh Bagri, were acquitted in 2005 of mass murder and conspiracy charges.

Malik spent four years in prison before his acquittal. He then sought \$9.2 million as legal fees but a British Columbia judge rejected his claims for compensation.

Babbar Khalsa 'links'

Ripudaman Malik was allegedly associated with the Babbar Khalsa, a terrorist outfit responsible for many terrorist incidents in Punjab. He was also a close associate of Talwinder Singh Parmar, the alleged mastermind of the Air India bombing. Parmar headed one of the Babbar Khalsa factions before being killed by the Punjab Police in 1992. Two of Parmar's relatives used to work in one of Malik's schools.

Life in Canada

Malik came to Canada in 1972 and started off as a cab driver. Later, as a successful businessman, he went on to become the president of a 16,000-member Vancouver-based Khalsa Credit Union (KCU) with assets worth over \$110 million. Malik was the president of Satnam Education Society of British Columbia, Canada, and ran Khalsa schools, which besides teaching the Canadian syllabus, also taught Punjabi language and Sikh history.

India visit

Former DSGMC president Manjit Singh GK said Ripudaman Malik had gone back to Canada on June 6-7 after a fortnight-long visit to India. Earlier he had visited India in December 2019 after 25 years following the Narendra Modi government's decision to remove his name from the 'blacklist'.

The Indian government had removed 312 names of Sikhs living abroad from the 35-year-old blacklist in September 2019.

"Ripudaman had made a pilgrimage trip recently to Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Punjab and Maharashtra in the month of May after being granted multiple visa," said Indian World Forum president Puneet Singh Chandhok.



Praise for BJP

Before the Punjab Assembly elections in February this year, Malik had written a letter to PM Narendra Modi, thanking him for the steps taken for the welfare of the Sikhs. His letter listed various pro-Sikh initiatives taken by the BJP government, including reopening of the 1984 riots cases.

In a separate message, he had warned against indulging in a “nefarious campaign” against the PM and had hinted that it was being orchestrated by a foreign power.

Later, the BJP had referred to his letter on the homepage of the party website along with his picture at the Golden Temple during his visit in 2019.

SC BENCH TO DEFER HEARING IN ACB CASE

The Supreme Court on Tuesday sought three days’ time to examine a July 11 order passed by Karnataka High Court judge, Justice H.P. Sandesh, in which he revealed that he was threatened with transfer for his manner of examining a case linked to the State Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB).

Separate petitions

The order came on separate petitions filed by the Karnataka ACB and its top officer, ADGP Seemant Kumar Singh Singh, to expunge adverse remarks made by Justice Sandesh in court about them.

They also wanted a stay on the proceedings before his Bench.

Justice Sandesh had called the ACB a “collection centre”, and Mr. Singh a “tainted officer”.

In his July 11 order, Justice Sandesh had proceeded to give an account of how he was subjected to a veiled threat of transfer, that too through a sitting judge of the High Court, unless he laid off the ACB and its top officer.

Justice Sandesh said the incident had happened during the farewell dinner for a retiring Chief Justice of the High Court.

On Tuesday, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the State ACB, said the judge should have refrained from passing the July 11 order. He had been apprised that the top court was seized of the ACB pleas. Urging for a stay on proceedings in the High Court, the law officer sought that the case be transferred to another Bench headed by the Acting Chief Justice of the High Court.

He said Justice Sandesh’s observations and directions had ranged from seeking reports on prosecution/closure of cases probed by the ACB since 2016, to summoning confidential service records of the ADGP, all this while considering a regular bail application of an accused in a corruption case.

“The High Court does have the power to monitor the probe in any case, but such a power cannot be invoked while exercising bail jurisdiction,” Mr. Mehta argued.

Mr. Singh’s counsel submitted that his client was not even given an opportunity to be heard. “My ACR [Annual Confidential Report] from 2009 was read in open court. I was not allowed to speak yesterday,” the lawyer said.

The adverse remarks of the judge had seriously dented his reputation he said.



ASSESSING JUVENILITY A 'DELICATE TASK': SC

The “delicate task” of deciding whether juveniles aged between 16 and 18, accused of heinous offences such as murder, can be tried like adults should be based on “meticulous psychological investigation” rather than be left to the discretion and perfunctory “wisdom” of juvenile justice boards and children’s courts across the country, the Supreme Court held in a judgment on Wednesday.

Initial assessment

Section 15 of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act of 2015 requires a “preliminary assessment” to be done of the mental and physical capacity of juveniles, aged between 16 and 18, who are involved in serious crimes.

The assessment is meant to gauge a child’s ability to understand the consequences of the offence and the circumstances in which he or she allegedly committed the offence.

If the Juvenile Justice Board is of the opinion that the juvenile should not be treated as an adult, it would not pass on the case to the children’s court and hear the case itself. In that case, if the child is found guilty, he would be sent to juvenile care for three years.

On the other hand, if the Board decides to refer the case to the children’s court for trial as an adult, the juvenile, if guilty, would even face life imprisonment.

‘Mental capacity’

“The report of the preliminary assessment decides the germane question of transferring the case of a child between 16 and 18 years of age to the children’s court. This evaluation of ‘mental capacity and ability to understand the consequences’ of the child in conflict with law can, in no way, be relegated to the status of a perfunctory and a routine task. The process of taking a decision on which the fate of the child in conflict with law precariously rests, should not be taken without conducting a meticulous psychological evaluation,” a Bench of Justices Dinesh Maheshwari and Vikram Nath observed.

The court discovered that there were neither guidelines nor a specific framework in place for conduct of the preliminary assessment.

Guidelines needed

“It appears expedient that appropriate and specific guidelines are put in place... We leave it open for the Centre and the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights and the State Commission for Protection of Child Rights to consider issuing guidelines or directions in this regard,” Justice Nath, who authored the judgment, ordered.

The court said the Board which conducts the assessment of the child should have at least one child psychologist. It should further take the assistance of experienced psychologists or psychosocial workers.

The apex court’s judgment came while dismissing the appeals filed by the CBI and the relative of a Class 2 child who was allegedly found murdered in the washroom of his Gurugram school in 2017.



The suspect, a Class 9 student of the same school, underwent a preliminary assessment in which it was decided that he should be tried as an adult. The Bench found that his assessment was limited to an IQ test. The apex court upheld the High Court's decision to reverse the assessment and refer the case back to the Juvenile Justice Board for a fresh 'preliminary assessment' of the now 21-year-old.

A ONE-PAGE REPLY TO SUCH AN IMPORTANT ISSUE?: HC TO SOLICITOR GENERAL ON PMCARES FUND QUESTION

Terming the question regarding legal structure of PM CARES Fund "important", the Delhi High Court Tuesday took exception to a "one-page" reply by the authorities in response to a petition seeking that PM CARES Fund be declared as 'The State' under Article 12 of the Constitution of India.

Directing the authorities to file "a detailed and exhaustive reply" within four weeks, the court listed the matter for hearing on September 16. "You file a proper reply. The issue is not that simple. We need an exhaustive reply. Learned SG, let a proper reply be there because this matter will travel to the apex court also. We will have to pass an order on each and every point raised," added the court.

The bench was hearing a petition filed by Samyak Gangwal, who has argued that that citizens of the country are aggrieved that a fund set up by the Prime Minister and with trustees like the PM and ministers of Home, Defence and Finance has been declared to be a fund over which there is no government control.

In a brief reply filed to the case last year, the PMCARES Fund, a charitable trust under the law, said that the Trust's fund is not a fund of the Government of India and its amount does not go in the Consolidated Fund of India.

"Irrespective of whether the Trust is a 'State' or other authority within the meaning of Article 12 of the Constitution of India and or whether it is a 'public authority' within the meaning of section 2[h] of Right to Information Act, Section 8 in general and that of provisions contained in sub section [e] and [j], in particular, of the Right to Information Act, it is not permissible to disclose third party information," Pradeep Kumar Srivastava, the Under Secretary at the PMO said in the reply.

The question regarding the inadequacy of the response was raised by the court when it was hearing arguments of the petitioner's counsel, senior advocate Shyam Divan. Stating that the Centre has not even chosen to file a reply in the case, Divan pointed to the mistakes in the response filed by the PMO. "I, Pradeep Kumar Srivastava ... working as Under Secretary at Prime Ministers do solemnly swear" he read from the official response.

"Is this how Delhi HC is meant to be treated? They don't even read it," asked Divan to which Mehta responded that it was a typographical error. Chief Justice Sharma said, "I have seen it, that is why I feel a proper and exhaustive reply is required."

Divan earlier argued that the PM CARES Fund cannot "contract out" of the Constitution and said that public officers are trustees of the PM CARES. "Can you in a state have a collector, a sub-divisional magistrate and other government officers set up a trust and say that it is all now going to be outside the government control? I don't believe so. Can you have a state Chief Minister do



this and say that I and other senior ministers are going to form a trust but this has nothing to do with the State?” he argued

He further argued that such a structure is “very destructive of good governance”. “If these kinds of structures are allowed to stand and this kind of opacity is allowed to exist under the roof of our system, it may in the future result in huge problems,” Divan argued.

The petition filed by Gangwal states that the PMCARES Fund was formed by the Prime Minister in March 2020 for a noble purpose of extending assistance to the citizens in wake of Covid pandemic and huge donations were received by it. However, the plea adds that a copy of the Trust Deed was released by the PMCARES Fund on its website in December 2020 according to which it is not created by or under the Constitution of India or by any law made by the Parliament or by any State Legislature.

“It is unimaginable that a Fund, a) which has been set up by the Prime Minister of India, (b) where Trustees are the Prime Minister, Defence Minister, Home Minister and the Finance Minister of India, and (c) which has its office at Prime Minister’s Office South Block, New Delhi-110011 has been declared to be a fund over which there is no Government Control,” argues the petition.

It adds that the Constitution does not envisage a situation where any member of the Executive occupying any public office can establish a Trust, which is represented as a Fund set up by the Government, but “in fact does not have any Government control whatsoever”.

SC PENALISING PETITIONER, WHATEVER THE MERITS OF THE CASE, IS UNJUST; SENDS A CHILLING SIGNAL TO THOSE WHO QUESTION STATE

The Supreme Court rejected a petition Thursday seeking a CBI probe into alleged torture and extra-judicial killings by the Chhattisgarh Police and Central forces during anti-Maoist operations in Dantewada in 2009. What the bench of Justices AM Khanwilkar and JB Pardiwala did next raises troubling questions. It imposed a penalty of Rs 5 lakh on the main petitioner. The court did not just say that the investigation indicated that Maoists, not security forces, were responsible for the killing of 17 people in separate incidents on September 17 and October 1, 2009, but also slapped an “exemplary” cost on Himanshu Kumar, who runs an NGO in Dantewada. The court’s heavy fine sends a chilling signal to all those who would knock on its door in the future armed with nothing more than a plea against the state. It upends and overturns the court’s own approach so far of accepting petitions, from anywhere, and in whichever form, even as a postcard addressed to a judge, or as a newspaper report. In the public interest litigation jurisdiction, in fact, the petitioner is often rendered incidental to the case, as the court takes over the cause, appoints local commissioners and officers, ensures due diligence in the search for truth. The stiff penalty on the petitioner also echoes the stance of the state in case after case — of labelling or ascribing ulterior motives to all those who raise questions, and demand answers, justice, or redress.

The imposition of penalty on the petitioner in the Dantewada case is part of an emerging judicial pattern. It includes the SC ruling, last month, in a Gujarat 2002 case. Here, the apex court upheld the SIT clean chit to the Gujarat government led by then chief minister Narendra Modi and quashed allegations of a larger conspiracy by high state functionaries. But it did not stop there — it also, in effect, asked for punishment for the petitioners. It cast in the dock those who, in its view, “keep the pot boiling” “obviously for ulterior design” and urged that they be proceeded against. As if on cue, activist Teesta Setalvad and former Gujarat DGP RB Sreekumar were arrested the very next day, the FIRs quoting extensively from the apex court verdict. Whatever the merits of



the case, and notwithstanding its inability to hold up in court, the cornering and punishing of the petitioner is unjust and unwarranted. Most fundamentally, it violates the basic compact in a democracy between the citizen and an independent court — the SC is and should be the custodian of individual rights and freedoms, protecting them against transgression by the state but its recent approach suggests that it sees these individuals as irritants and the state as the one that needs protection.

The Supreme Court must reflect on this worrisome inversion and call a halt to it before it does more damage to its hard-won reputation as the upholder of the constitutional check and balance. Every petitioner who approaches the court against those more powerful than her must feel, she must know, that even if her plea is thrown out, she was heard but not punished or made to pay.

A GUARANTOR OF FREE SPEECH

The LDF government's biggest mistake was to get Kerala Minister Saji Cherian to resign over his remarks on the Constitution. Mr. Cherian had said the Constitution is "British-crafted and anti-working class." The writers of the Constitution inserted a few words such as "secularism" and "democracy" here and there, but this did not take away from the fact that the Constitution is a "tool to exploit the common man," he said. Is there any evidence that Mr. Cherian reneged on the oath he took as an MLA and as a Minister?

Amendments to the Constitution

The Indian Constitution is fundamentally liberal. There is no stipulation that makes contempt of the Constitution a serious felony. In fact, Article 19(1)(1) guarantees freedom of expression with which one can even criticise the working of the Constitution. Criticism over Mr. Cherian's remark that the British dictated the Constitution does not hold water. The Constituent Assembly, which drafted the Constitution, borrowed heavily from the Government of India Act, 1935, which was introduced and used by the British for over 12 years in this country. The Constitution is not a holy scripture, but an organic document. The word 'secular' was not found in the original text adopted, but was inserted under the 42nd Amendment.

Many amendments have been made in the Constitution to remove the bias of judgments of higher courts. When Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister announced that 14 banks would be nationalised, the move was challenged in court by the affected banks. The Supreme Court held the Act void. The Mrs. Gandhi government's bill to abolish privy purses was passed in the Lok Sabha, but defeated in the Rajya Sabha. President V.V. Giri then withdrew recognition of all rulers under Article 366(22), which the Supreme Court held unconstitutional. These court decisions led Parliament to introduce the 24th and 25th Amendments to the Constitution. While speaking in support of the amendments, many members of Parliament criticised the judiciary and expressed their dismay over the inadequacies found in the Constitution. P. Ramamurthi of the CPI(M) even went to the extent of describing the Constitution as a representative of the bourgeois landlord state. In the light of these developments, the Marxist party's Central Committee discussed proposing substantial amendments to the Constitution. Just because party cadres contest elections, it does not mean that they are satisfied with the working of the Constitution. They are entitled to criticise the Constitution and work for changes as per their theory of social justice.

In 1967, when E.M.S. Namboodiripad, or EMS, said that the judiciary cannot rise above the economic system and is always subordinate to it, a contempt case was filed against him and he was punished by the Kerala High Court. The Supreme Court, which upheld the conviction, said



that EMS did not have a full grasp of Marxism. Nowhere was the judiciary's subordination to the economic system mentioned in Marxism, it said. The Marxist party fully supported EMS then. Today, however, it has left Mr. Cherian, who expressed similar sentiments, high and dry.

There are examples of people being taken to court for constitutional infringement. In 1986, for instance, while protesting against the imposition of Hindi, K. Anbazhagan and nine other DMK legislators burnt Part XVII of the Constitution. A case was filed to remove them from the legislature. The Madras High Court accepted the plea and they were disqualified from the legislature. The charge against Mr. Cherian does not come anywhere near this. If his speech was not palatable, his party members could have given him an advisory and told the agitating Opposition workers to try their luck with the judiciary.

Changes to the Constitution

It is not as if the Constitution has never been questioned. After the Babri Masjid demolition, the Sangh Parivar started a campaign saying all matters cannot be decided by courts and demanded changes to the Constitution. In 2000, the NDA government appointed retired Chief Justice M.N. Venkatachalaiah to head a committee to review the working of the Constitution. The present NDA government has amended the Constitution to implement its own agenda. By repealing Articles 35A and 370, it has done harm to the integrity of India. Deviating from the constitutional norm of rendering affirmative justice to the socially and educationally backward classes, it introduced the 103rd Amendment to provide reservation for economically poorer sections. No one demanded that the BJP leadership quit for these actions; instead, aggrieved persons took the issues to court. Similarly, if Mr. Cherian's statement was offensive, the agitating persons should have gone to court. His speech was not against Marxist theory on the character of the state and its working Constitution. Removing him from the Cabinet gives the message that the party doubts even the Marxist understanding of the Constitution.

A NEW JUDICIAL DEVICE FOR 'COMPLETE JUSTICE'

Mohammed Zubair, the co-founder of Alt News, continues to be in prison despite the Supreme Court of India, last Friday, granting him interim bail, because of remand in another case by the Delhi police. The Court was aware of the futility of the bail order. Yet, the Court did not direct his release by granting him bail in the other case too.

The order relates to a case challenging the Allahabad High Court's judgment refusing to quash the First Information Report (FIR) against Mr. Zubair. The charge was under Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) — outraging religious feelings ... by insulting religion or religious beliefs. Later, a charge under Section 153-A IPC, of promoting religious enmity, was added.

It was explained to the Court that there was not even a prima facie case against Mr. Zubair. Also, it was shown that the case itself was a device to crush dissent. The political malice behind the charge was very obvious. The Court also seemingly accepted the contentions, as evident from the grant of bail. Yet, the Court said the order was with respect to only the case registered in Uttar Pradesh. This has meant the continued detention of Mr. Zubair.

Challenges before judiciary

The Supreme Court of India is regarded as the world's most powerful top court, on account of its wide power of judicial review. It has the jurisdiction to issue writs under Article 32 of the Constitution. It also has the original jurisdiction under Article 131 of the Constitution. There is



also wide appellate power under Articles 132, 133, 134 and 136 of the Constitution. More significantly, the Supreme Court has the power to “make such order as is necessary for doing complete justice in any cause or matter pending before it”, as per Article 142 of the Constitution. Yet, the top court has shown itself to be helpless when issues of individual liberty have been placed before it on very many occasions. Many political prisoners languish in prison after their bail pleas have been repeatedly rejected by different courts. The executive is able to register multiple FIRs in different States of India so as to ensure that the dissident is not released from prison even if bail is granted in some of the cases. Thus, the jail jurisprudence of the executive effectively surpasses the Court’s bail jurisdiction. Reports say that after the Supreme Court’s order, another warrant was issued against Mr. Zubair by a local court in Lakhimpur Kheri in Uttar Pradesh. This scenario, which reflects the new normal in the country’s criminal jurisprudence, poses crucial challenges to the judiciary.

The Supreme Court cannot afford to be conventional if it really wants to tackle this situation where an aggrandising executive hunts its opponents in a systematic and incremental way. Conventional legal wisdom proclaims that every criminal case is a case which requires to be dealt with as such and taken to its logical conclusion. Even in Mr. Zubair’s case, the contention of the Solicitor General of India was that “any order passed by (the Supreme) Court (in this case) will interdict four judicial orders passed by two courts which have not been challenged”. It is the Court’s inability to overcome this line of argument by invoking the spirit of Article 142 that led to the ironic predicament of Mr. Zubair being in jail, despite the grant of the ‘interim bail’.

The practice of registering multiple FIRs is extremely problematic. In the context of free speech, American legal scholar Professor Vincent Blasi identifies “historical periods when intolerance of unorthodox ideas is most prevalent and when governments are most able and most likely to stifle dissent systematically”. The situation in India is illustrative.

More ‘rule by law’

The criminal justice system in such tough times degenerates into rule by law, that replaces rule of law. The law becomes an effective device in the hands of the Government for the purposes of a witch-hunt and this operates against the opponents of a regime, as a class. In this scenario, if the Court erroneously presumes that the nation’s legal system is governed by the principle of rule of law, fallacies and unjust consequences are bound to occur. In such a legal ambience, it will be equally fallacious to treat each case as isolated, as in reality, it is not so. Climatic changes in a nation’s constitutionalism are a hard reality which no court can ignore.

Even in challenging times, a constitutional court should be able to evolve a mechanism of its own to preserve the democratic foundation of the country by intervening in the incremental process of nation’s “deconstitutionalisation”. Professor of law Rosalind Dixon in a recent study says that “at least under certain conditions — of sufficient independence, political support and remedial power — courts can too play an important role in buttressing democratic processes and commitments”, and this, according to her, “is the essence of responsive judicial review”. The constitutional courts in Colombia and Brazil have developed the new doctrine of “unconstitutional state of affairs”. This enables the court to address structural deficits with a sense of realism and to pass effective orders even by deviating from procedural rigour, with a view to protect fundamental rights. This is, in certain ways, akin to the practice of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in India and structural injunctions in the United States.



Create a judicial atmosphere

The courts, no doubt, may sometimes subserve the interest of the executive. This may even pose a serious threat to personal liberty, as it happened recently in its observations against activist Teesta Setalvad and former police officer R.B. Sreekumar. But in certain rare situations, it could still act as a determined umpire who checks the executive's excesses. The Supreme Court's intervention in the Centre's COVID-19 vaccine policy and the Pegasus episode illustrates this point. The need is to expand the latter approach and to create and perpetuate a democratic judicial atmosphere that supports the cause of freedom.

At least in principle, the Indian Supreme Court is constitutionally equipped with the power to invoke its jurisdiction for the larger cause of liberty, even by deviating from the conventional technical route. The "complete justice" under Article 142 is meant to be used when the legalistic arguments such as those raised by the state in Mr. Zubair's case have the effect of sabotaging the goal of constitutional justice. The Court needs a new version of judicial activism, which the Court itself evolved, in the 1980s.

The genesis of Article 142 shows that the makers of the Constitution have consciously incorporated this provision by drastically modifying the earlier corresponding provision in the Government of India Act, 1935. The Government of India Act, by way of Section 210(2), only said about the enforceability of the orders of the Federal Court. It did not, naturally, contain an idea of complete justice in the constitutional sense. Article 142, on the other hand, arms the Supreme Court with this supplemental power.

The interpretation of the scope of this provision has been varied, and sometimes even conflicting. Some judgments pleaded for its restrictive use while some others did for its liberal and contextual application. In *Delhi Development Authority vs Skipper Construction Company* (1996), the top court said that the power under Article 142 should remain "undefined and uncatalogued, so that it remains elastic enough to be moulded to suit the given situation".

Treat them as a class

It is essential for the Supreme Court of India to treat political prisoners and dissenters facing multiple FIRs and undergoing unjustifiably long incarceration as a class. It needs jurisprudence at the normative level to tackle the technical arguments that create a false notion of rule of law when the very cause of arrest and detention is the lack of it. When a glaring instance of curtailing a person's freedom is placed before the top court, it should be capable of calling for the records pertaining to the multiple FIRs and to suo motu add all the stakeholders as parties (if needed); the Court should immediately ensure that vindictive incarceration does not continue even for a day. This might be difficult, yet not impossible. Mr. Zubair's case is one (like many other cases in the past) that demonstrates the juridical deficits of today's Supreme Court. It is, therefore, an imperative to evolve an effective jurisprudence of "complete justice" by focusing on personal liberty. It is the praxis of this new judicial device that can, perhaps, preserve the country's democratic legacy.

BJP DEMEANS ITS MANDATE BY LINKING FORMER V-P ANSARI TO A DODGY PAK JOURNALIST AND THE ISI

The allegations levelled by the BJP's official spokesperson against former Vice President Hamid Ansari cast extremely unflattering light on the BJP, not its intended target. Ansari has had a



distinguished career as a diplomat and occupied high constitutional office with grace and dignity. For India's ruling party now to cast a slur on him on the basis of unsubstantiated and perhaps unsubstantiable claims made by a little-known Pakistan journalist in a YouTube interview, or the word of a former R&AW operative, is a move both shabby and unseemly. The accusations against Ansari are that he invited a Pakistani spy-journalist, Nusrat Mirza, to a conference on terrorism in India while he was V-P in 2010, and that the journalist used the trip to collect information which he later shared with the ISI, and that as ambassador of India to Iran he compromised national interest. Pointing out the gaping holes in the case sought to be made against Ansari is an exercise in stating the obvious, and engaging with the bizarre. As Ansari himself has pointed out, invitations to conferences such as the one on terrorism in 2010 are sent out by the organisers on the advice of the government. In the interview that the BJP has seized upon, Mirza also makes claims such as these — that America had caused the earthquake in Pakistan in 2005, and floods in the same country in 2010, and the tsunami in Fukushima in 2011.

The unfortunate fact seems to be this: The BJP is throwing terms that are heavily loaded and highly charged at Ansari and hoping that something — the innuendo, if not the substance — sticks. "Terrorism", "national interest", "Pakistan", "ISI", "sensitive and classified" — in a time of polarised and distrustful politics, these are the building blocks of sinister stories that are often constructed from thin air. They collapse, eventually, but not without leaving a residue that is hurtful to their victim, regardless of his or her innocence. The attempt to tar the reputation of a distinguished public figure, following not long after Nupur Sharma's rant against the Prophet, only lends credence to the apprehension that for all its rhetoric of inclusive politics, the BJP, or a significant section of the party, keeps returning to minority-baiting, and the rest of the party is ok with this, if not collusive.

The BJP must realise that it demeans the mandate it got in 2014, reaffirmed in 2019, when it participates in, or sanctions, the coarsening of public political discourse. It has power and, by all accounts, still enjoys the people's trust. To conquer, it does not need to stoop so low.

RETIRED COP AMONG 3 HELD FOR 'PFI LINKS'; PATNA SSP LIKENS TO RSS, SPARKS ROW

THREE MEN with alleged links to the Popular Front of India (PFI), including a retired Jharkhand Police sub-inspector, have been arrested for being part of a "potential terror module" that sought to target those "who make adverse and objectionable" comments against Islam, police said on Thursday.

Courting controversy, Patna Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Manavjit Singh Dhillon said the accused held meetings and imparted physical training, "just as RSS shakhas are held for physical training and imparting training in wielding lathis". Objecting to his remarks, the BJP has sought disciplinary action against the SSP.

The accused — identified as Athar Parvez, allegedly a former member of the now banned Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), Mohammed Jalaluddin, a retired sub-inspector of the Jharkhand Police, and Arman Malik — were arrested from Phulwari Sharif area of Patna on Wednesday.

According to police, the arrests were made following intelligence alerts that some people were gathering in Patna to "foment trouble" ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit on Tuesday.

On Tuesday evening, the police filed an FIR against 26 people, allegedly part of a "potential terror module", under IPC Sections 120B (criminal conspiracy), 121 and 121A (waging war against



state), 153A (promoting enmity between different groups), 153B (imputations, assertions prejudicial to national integration). The trio, all residents of Patna, were arrested the next day.

“They had been holding meetings at mosques and madrasas and working towards what is called radicalisation. Just as RSS shakhas are held for physical training and imparting training in wielding lathis, they had been giving physical training to their people. Besides Bihar, some of the named members are from Karnataka also,” Patna SSP Manavjit Singh Dhillon told reporters.

Phulwari Sharif Additional SP Manish Kumar told reporters that Jalaluddin was a retired Jharkhand Police sub-inspector. According to police, the accused said they were looking to expand PFI’s base in Patna.

According to the FIR, Jalaluddin had rented a part of his house to Parvez for conducting PFI training. Two pamphlets written in English — “India 2047: Towards rule of Islamic India (internal document, not for circulation)” and “Popular Front of India, 20 February, 2021” – were recovered from the premises, said police.

The FIR quoted the pamphlets as saying: “PFI is confident that even if 10 per cent of Muslim population would rally behind it, PFI would subjugate the coward majority communities to their knees and bring back the glory of Islam in India... In the scenario of full-fledged showdown with the state, apart from relying on our PE cadres, we would seek help from friendly Islamic countries...”

According to the FIR, Parvez told the police that “by linking old members of SIMI with PFI, we are trying to raise a new organisation that would target those who commit atrocities on Muslims and speak against Islam. After the recent abusive comments by (suspended BJP spokesperson) Nupur Sharma, there has been revengeful action from our side with Maharashtra’s Amravati and Rajasthan’s Udaipur incidents”.

“The accused were booked for trying to foment communal tension and disturb peace. We have been looking into the case,” Bihar Additional Director General of Police (headquarters) J S Gangwar told reporters.

In a statement, PFI national secretary Mohamed Shakif said the “allegations are devoid of any substance”. “Police have tried to create an imaginary story of a ‘terror plot’ by planting fake documents. There seems to be a common trend in different states to target the PFI through a uniform modus operandi, which indicates that it is part of a political decision against the organisation coming from a single table. The PFI would like to make it clear that these evil designs to instil fear in the minds of people by demonising the PFI... will not have any effect on the organisation’s democratic struggle for constitutional rights and social justice,” he said.

WHEN PARTIES CLAIM SAME SYMBOL

On Monday, the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena approached the Election Commission of India, requesting it to hear its side before deciding claims to the party’s bow-arrow symbol. The Shiv Sena has lost a large number of members in the Eknath Shinde-led rebellion that eventually caused the fall of the Thackeray-led government in Maharashtra.

The Thackeray camp approaching the EC was a pre-emptive move, since the dispute hasn’t yet officially reached the EC’s doorstep. Shinde, who has claimed to be the “original” Shiv Sena on the



basis of the support of more than two-thirds of the party's legislators in the Maharashtra Assembly, has not officially written to the EC yet to stake claim to the party symbol.

"We have filed a caveat with the ECI, requesting it to make the original Shiv Sena [led by Uddhav Thackeray] a party to the case if any party or group approaches the ECI with regard to any matter related to Shiv Sena," Shiv Sena MP Anil Desai said.

If and when the Shinde camp approaches the EC, the latter will in all likelihood freeze the symbol so that neither of the two sides is able to use it until a final decision is made.

EC hearings are long and detailed, and may take at least six months. How does it decide who gets the symbol — often the very identity of a party and its fundamental connection with voters — when parties split?

What are the EC's powers in such a dispute?

On the question of a split in a political party outside the legislature, Para 15 of the Symbols Order, 1968, states: "When the [Election] Commission is satisfied... that there are rival sections or groups of a recognised political party each of whom claims to be that party the Commission may, after taking into account all the available facts and circumstances of the case and hearing [their] representatives... and other persons as desire to be heard decide that one such rival section or group or none of such rival sections or groups is that recognised political party and the decision of the Commission shall be binding on all such rival sections or groups."

This applies to disputes in recognised national and state parties. For splits in registered but unrecognised parties, the EC usually advises the warring factions to resolve their differences internally or to approach the court.

And how did the EC deal with such matters before the Symbols Order came into effect?

Before 1968, the EC issued notifications and executive orders under the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961. The most high-profile split of a party before 1968 was that of the Communist Party of India in 1964. A breakaway group approached the EC in December 1964, urging it to recognise it as CPI(Marxist). They provided a list of MPs and MLAs of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and West Bengal who supported them. The ECI recognised the faction as CPI(M) after it found that the votes secured by the MPs and MLAs supporting the breakaway group added up to more than 4% in the 3 states.

What was the first case decided under Para 15 of the 1968 Order?

It was the first split in the Indian National Congress — in 1969. Then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's tensions with a rival group within the party came to a head with the death of President Dr Zakir Hussain on May 3, 1969. The Congress old guard, led by K Kamaraj, Neelam Sanjiva Reddy, S Nijalingappa and Atulya Ghosh — known as the 'Syndicate' — nominated Reddy for the post. Indira Gandhi encouraged Vice-President V V Giri to contest as an Independent, and called for a "conscience vote" in defiance of the whip issued by party president Nijalingappa. After Giri won, Indira was expelled from the Congress, and the party split into the "old" Congress(O) led by Nijalingappa and the "new" Congress (R) led by Indira Gandhi.

The "old" Congress retained the party symbol of a pair of bullocks carrying a yoke; the breakaway faction was given the symbol of a cow with a calf.



Is there a way other than the test of majority to resolve a dispute over election symbols?

In almost all disputes decided by the EC so far, a clear majority of party delegates/office bearers, MPs and MLAs have supported one of the factions. Whenever the EC could not test the strength of rival groups based on support within the party organisation (because of disputes regarding the list of office-bearers), it fell back on testing the majority only among elected MPs and MLAs.

Only in the case of the split in the AIADMK in 1987, which happened after the death of M G Ramachandran, was the EC faced with a peculiar situation. The group led by MGR's wife Janaki had the support of the majority of MPs and MLAs, while J Jayalalithaa was supported by a substantial majority in the party organisation. But before the EC was forced to make a decision on which group should retain the party symbol, a rapprochement was reached.

What happens to the group that doesn't get the parent party's symbol?

In the case of the first Congress split, the EC recognised both the Congress(O) and the breakaway faction whose president was Jagjivan Ram. The Congress(O) had a substantial presence in some states and satisfied the criteria fixed for recognition of parties under Paras 6 and 7 of the Symbols Order.

This principle was followed up to 1997.

However, things changed when the Election Commission dealt with the cases of splits in the Indian National Congress and Janata Dal. The disputes led to the creation of Himachal Vikas Congress, Manipur State Congress Party, West Bengal Trinamool Congress, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Biju Janata Dal, etc. The EC then did not recognise the new parties as either state or national parties. It felt that merely having MPs and MLAs is not enough, as the elected representatives had fought and won polls on tickets of their parent (undivided) parties. The EC introduced a new rule under which the splinter group of the party — other than the group that got the party symbol — had to register itself as a separate party, and could lay claim to national or state party status only on the basis of its performance in state or central elections after registration.

WORD CAN'T GET OUT

Language not only changes across region but also profession. For instance, it is common to see the usage 'for your kind perusal' in government letters. We dismiss this as 'bureaucratese'. Similarly, Parliament, too, has its own list of absurd and archaic phrases. The one that never fails to make me laugh is the passionate appeal for peace by the Chair when there is a pandemonium: "The Chair is standing on its legs..." Another phrase, "I beg to lay papers....", was often used in parliamentary proceedings. In 2017, Rajya Sabha Chairman Venkaiah Naidu discouraged this phrase saying parliamentarians in a free nation should not have to "beg" to do their routine work.

Today there is much debate on language again after the Lok Sabha Secretariat compiled a list of 151 words, which have been expunged in 2021 and 2020 in Parliaments across the Commonwealth countries and State Assemblies in India. The list includes words such as 'dodgy', 'betrayal', 'dog', 'frighten', 'hack', 'hypocrisy', 'irresponsible', 'liar', 'murder' and 'shame'. It also includes commonplace words such as 'penguin', 'goose', 'fudge', 'grubby', 'saleswoman', 'species' and 'yapping'. Even a word as benign as 'mate' has made it to the list. As per the document, it was expunged in New South Wales in August 2020. Many of these words may look harmless, but in a heated exchange between parliamentarians, they may not exactly be virtuous.



The list of Hindi phrases is far more potent and includes words that have entered the political lexicon post-2014, such as 'jumla jeevi (a person who makes false promises)'. In the first two decades of the Indian Parliament, English was the primary language used for parliamentary work. This changed as the social composition of Parliament changed from the 1970s onwards. At present, as many as 30 languages are used by parliamentarians during speeches, with many insisting on speaking their mother tongue during crucial debates. Perhaps, the next such compilation will also have words expunged from different regional languages.

The current compilation has especially caused consternation among Opposition parties which see this as an attempt to restrict their vocabulary. The government argues that this list is at best only "instructive" and not "definitive". The preface of the document states that the context in which these words were used is far more important than the words themselves. Ultimately, the final call of whether a word is "unparliamentary" or not lies with the presiding officer of the House.

This brings us to a problem that Parliament faces in today's digital age. The proceedings of both Houses of Parliament are relayed in real time on TV channels and YouTube. There have been instances where live transmission has been halted on the Chair's orders. To circumvent this, many members have recorded the proceedings on their mobile phone cameras. These recordings have also routinely made it to the evening debates on TV channels. Many Opposition members have been censured and even suspended for such misdemeanours, but that hasn't stopped these videos from circulating. It is also common for members to circulate video clips of their own speeches among journalists and on WhatsApp groups with their followers.

Opposition speeches are often provocative. There are many instances of the Chair intervening and expunging words or phrases that it finds "objectionable". Herein lies the problem. The order of the Chair is often relayed by late evening to reporters, but by then, the video clip would have already been circulated many times over. Print reporters are careful and abide by the orders, but in a digital ecosystem, this is not easy. And though print reporters adhere to the terms of engagement, we are faced with a dilemma when such words create a political storm and do the rounds on social media. While the debate rages on, we continue to walk the fine line between watching the action while also sticking to the rules.

BAN ON DHARNAS IN PARLIAMENT PRECINCT SETS OFF A CONTROVERSY

A fresh bulletin from the Parliament secretariat ahead of the monsoon session of Parliament prohibiting the members from using the premises for "demonstration, dharna, strike, fast or for the purpose of performing any religious ceremony," has raised a furore with the Opposition members calling it yet another attempt to bulldoze dissent.

Intervening in the debate, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla sent out a statement saying these circulars are routinely issued. Mr. Birla also urged members to maintain the dignity of Parliament by not using routine information for creating news. The parliamentary officials released copies of similar advisories issued during the Congress-led UPA government.

Congress general secretary (communication) Jairam Ramesh launched a broadside at the government calling it "vishguru's" latest salvo: "D(h)arna Mana Hai!" a play on Darna Mana Hai (Not allowed to be afraid). Replying to Mr. Ramesh's tweet, Trinamool Congress's Rajya Sabha floor leader Derek O'Brien said, "Every year they issue these notices in #Parliament bulletins. Demonstrations, dharnas, strikes, fast are part of legitimate parliamentary tactics to register



protest. No stopping us. However, can you please update me. Didn't SOMEONE conduct a religious ceremony recently?"

Mr. O'Brien's Lok Sabha colleague Mahua Moitra elaborated further.

"By the way honourable MP Varanasi performed a religious ceremony on top of new Parliament building just four days ago," Ms. Moitra tweeted, without naming Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

'Muzzling India's soul'

CPI(M) General Secretary Sitaram Yechury called the circular an attempt to "muzzle the soul of India." "The more useless the government, the more cowardly it is. Such dictatorial orders mock democracy. Protesting in the Parliament House complex is a political right of the MPs," Mr. Yechury tweeted.

Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Manoj K Jha said orders like these undermine the very idea of disagreements, which are essential to parliamentary democracy. "This order is bizarre and shocking. I would urge the government, please stop this brutal assault on the right to protest. We are moving towards Sri Lanka if we continue like this," Mr. Jha said.

ASSAM'S MUSLIMS: WHY SOME HAVE BEEN DECLARED 'INDIGENOUS' AND SOME LEFT OUT

Last week, the Assam Cabinet approved the identification of five Assamese Muslim sub-groups — Goriya, Moriya, Julha, Deshi, and Syed — as "indigenous" Assamese Muslim communities. This effectively sets them apart from Bengali-speaking Muslims, who — or whose ancestors — had migrated at various points of time the region that was once East Bengal, and later became East Pakistan and now Bangladesh.

How many Muslim groups live in Assam?

While many sub-groups exist, this aspect of population dynamics is best understood by looking at Muslims of Assam as belonging to two broad categories. Muslims outside these two categories would account for very small numbers relative to Assam's large Muslim population.

The larger of these two categories comprises Muslims who speak Bengali, or whose roots lie in Bengal, and who settled in Assam at various times after undivided Assam was annexed to British India in 1826. These Muslims are often referred to as Miyas.

The numerically smaller broad category comprises the "Assamese Muslims", who speak Assamese as their mother tongue, and who trace their ancestries in Assam back to the Ahom kingdom (1228-1826). By and large, they see themselves as part of the larger Assamese-speaking community, together with Assamese Hindus, and many of them are very conscious about being distinct from Bengal-origin Muslims.

"Assam has a significant Muslim population. Within that, there is a section that has migrated to Assam at different points of time. However, there are certain Muslim groups, too, who are native to the state, and have long agitated to safeguard their cultural identity. We have recognised their struggle, and identified these groups as 'indigenous' or khilonjiya Assamese Muslims," Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said following the Cabinet decision.



And what are these groups?

These are described in the report of a sub-committee on 'Cultural identity of indigenous Assamese Muslims' constituted by the state government in July last year. It was on the basis of the report of this committee, headed by journalist and commentator Wasbir Hussain, that the Cabinet took its decision on the five sub-groups.

DESHI: Believed to be among the first batch of people in Assam to have embraced Islam, Deshis trace their lineage to Ali Mech, a Koch-Rajbongshi chieftain who converted to Islam during the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji around 1205 AD.

SYED: Sufi preachers settled in Assam at various times, the earliest by some accounts being Syed Badiuddin Shah Mada (Madan Pir) in 1497, and the best known being Syed Moinuddin Baghdadi (Azaan Pir or Azaan Fakir) around 1630. The Syed community comprises descendants of their followers.

GORIYA: In a series of attempted invasions by the Mughals between 1615 and 1682, the Ahom regime took several soldiers prisoner. Many of these belonged to Gaur in ancient Bengal, and hence got the name Goriya. "These people settled in Assam and married local women and gradually became a part of the Assamese society," the report says. It also mentions tribals/Hindus who converted to Islam during Azaan Pir's time; they too became subsequently known as Goriya.

MORIYA: These too are descendants of prisoners of war, captured by the Ahoms after an attempted invasion by Turbak Khan in the 16th century. They "took to working in brass, an occupation which their descendants, who are known as Moriyas, carry on to this day", the British historian Edward Gait wrote in 1933 (A History of Assam).

JULHA: A small community, originally from undivided Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal, and believed to be converts from Adivasis. They migrated to Assam in two phases: as weavers during the Ahom regime, and as tea garden workers brought by British tea planters in the 19th century. Julha is listed as an MOBC community in Assam.

Prominent Assamese Muslims through history include the navy general Bagh Hazarika who fought under the Ahom general Lachit Borphukan against Mughal invaders in 1671; Sir Syed Muhammad Saadulla, Assam's first prime minister during colonial rule; the 20th-century poet Syed Abdul Malik; and India's late President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed.

What are their numbers?

The census of 2011 counted 1.06 crore Muslims (34%) in Assam out of a population of 3.12 crore, but does not record a break-up by ethnicity. The sub-committee report to the Assam government puts the current Muslim population at 1.18 crore, out of which it estimates the five "indigenous" groups at 42 lakh. That implies that out of every 3 Muslims in Assam, 1 is "indigenous". Of these 42 lakh, the report estimates the Deshis at 20 lakh, and the Moriyas at 2 lakh.

So, who are not "indigenous" as per the report?

The omission of the Bengali-origin Muslims, or Miyas, is apparent. But the definition also leaves out at least one Muslim group with a long history in Assam. In south Assam's Barak Valley, dominated by Bengali-speaking Hindus and Muslims, there is also a group called Kachari Muslims, who trace their origins to the Kachari kingdom (13th century to 1832). They consider themselves distinct from the Muslims who migrated from East Bengal.



Atiqur Rahman Barbhuyan, president, Society for Indigenous Muslims of Barak Valley, called the Cabinet decision a “great injustice” to the Muslims of Barak Valley. “Our ancestry is not of migrant origin. Our history goes back to the 1600s,” he said, adding that he had made a presentation to the committee before it filed its report.

What is the point of this exercise?

The demand came from within the community itself. In a state whose history and politics have been shaped by migration, some Assamese-speaking groups and individuals have long sought to be identified as distinct from the Bengali-speaking Muslims.

Assamese Muslims “are bracketed as Muslims, along with the Bengali-speaking Muslims”, the report says, citing “...the lack of a separate identity bestowed upon the Assamese Muslims”.

Apart from recognition as indigenous, the report recommends greater political representation including reservation of a Rajya Sabha seat, reservation in jobs, and various measures for preservation of Assam Muslim culture.

How do Muslim groups feel about it?

The All Assam Goriya-Moriya Deshi Parishad welcomed the move. Its president Hafizul Ahmed said Assamese Muslims were “losing their identity” because they were often clubbed with the “Bengali Muslim migrant community”. “Since we have similar sounding names, it is easy to confuse us but our culture and history is very different,” he said.

Others are concerned that the move would lead to further marginalisation of Bengali-origin Muslims. AIUDF MLA Aminul Islam earlier told The Indian Express that the panel’s proposals were part of a “political rhetoric” to “isolate Bengali Muslims further”.

Yasmin Saikia, professor of history and endowed chair in peace studies at Arizona State University described the move as “shortsighted”. “To me, as an Assamese humanist, it is very sad. The labels given to various Muslims are a strategy to divide the Muslim community,” she said. “If the aim of this move was to improve the socio-economic status of Muslims in Assam, why neglect a chunk of them? Identifying a tiny group within a group, giving them identity cards and certificates is unlikely to serve any purpose. In fact, it will lead to more vulnerability, greater socio-economic problems, and more antisocial elements,” she said.

TWITTER’S PETITION ON SECTION 69A OF THE IT ACT

The story so far: On July 5, microblogging platform Twitter moved the Karnataka High Court seeking to set aside multiple blocking orders of the Central government as well as to alter their directions to identify specific violative content than imposing a blanket ban on individual accounts. According to Twitter, the blocking orders were “procedurally and substantially” non-compliant with Section 69A of the Information Technology Act (IT Act).

What has happened so far?

The U.S.-headquartered tech company had been speaking to the Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology since May about a reconsideration of some of the blocking orders. However, in June the Ministry gave it a last opportunity to comply with the orders, setting out serious consequence for non-compliance. The Hindu learnt from a source privy to the development that it was owing to the seriousness of these warnings that Twitter filed the current



writ petition challenging several of the blocking orders. Responding to the development, Minister of State for Information and Technology Rajeev Chandrasekhar stated that while all foreign intermediaries have the right to judicial review, they also have the unambiguous obligation to comply with Indian laws.

What is the legality behind blocking content?

Section 69A of the IT Act empowers the government to restrict access to any content in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of the country, security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states or for public order. All directions to restrict information or content in circulation must be recorded in writing. Social media intermediaries failing to comply with the regulations are liable to be monetarily penalised along with an imprisonment term which may extend up to seven years. The procedures for executing the provisions of the act are enlisted in the Information Technology (Procedure and Safeguards for Blocking for Access of Information by Public) Rules, 2009. It entails that a government-designated officer along with an examination committee assess the content in question within 48 hours of receiving the takedown request. It must enable an opportunity to the author or originator of the content to provide clarifications. The recommendations are then sent to the Secretary of the Dept of Information Technology for approval to forward a request to the social media intermediary for restricting access. Emergency provisions stipulate that the clarification be sought after the content has been blocked for specified reasons, but within 48 hours. They can be revoked after due examination. Internet advocacy groups have been particularly critical of Rule 16 that suggests strict confidentiality be maintained on all requests and actions taken thereof — often attributed to be the cause for lack of transparency. The mentioned legislations are to be read under the purview of Article 19 of the Indian Constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech and expression. However, Clause 2 of the article permits the state to impose ‘reasonable restrictions’ for the same reasons as those for Section 69A.

What is Twitter’s claim?

The microblogging platform states that it respects user expression while also taking into consideration applicable local laws. The disparity in assessment of what constitutes ‘free expression’ and harm to public order among the two entities is the premise of the entire contestation. Twitter restricts access to an allegedly violative content only based on a “valid and properly scoped request” from an authorised entity. However, the curtailment is limited to the jurisdiction that has issued the legal demand. Its policies stipulate that the author of the content must be informed if such a request is received or acted upon.

As per its transparency report for January to June 2021, India accounted for 11% of the overall legal requests received globally by the micro-blogging platform for moderating access to certain content. Moreover, during the period, internationally it received 43,387 legal demands to remove content specifying 1,96,878 accounts — the greatest observed spike since it started writing the transparency reports in 2012. It attributed the spike in accounts withheld to blocking orders issued under the IT Act. Its petition points to two structural problems, firstly, the absence of a case-specific rationale for blocking content and accounts, and secondly, not according the originators of the content the mandatory hearing.

What procedural issues has Twitter described?

Twitter holds that the government has been merely reproducing the words of Section 69A as reasons for blocking URLs and accounts. The government has allegedly not shown why the restrictions were necessary in the interest of public order or for any other reason. The Supreme



Court's ruling in *The Superintendent, Central Prison, Fatehgarh vs Ram Manohar Lohia* (1960) had held restrictions made in public interest must possess reasonable connection to the objective being achieved. They need to be set aside should the co-relation be "far-fetched, hypothetical or too remote", in other words, bearing no proximity to public order.

The concerns are further aggravated when the directions are aimed at blocking individual accounts (in other words, temporary or permanent revocation of an individual's presence on the platform) and not the specific content. Therefore, the contestation now extends to interrogating if the scope of the legislation is restricted to already-existing content or content that could be potentially generated in the future (by the censored individual). One of the prime reasons why the Supreme Court had upheld the constitutionality of Section 69A in *Shreya Singhal vs Union of India* (2012) was its adherence to accord a hearing to the author of the content as well as the intermediary. It is guaranteed under Rule 8 of the procedural norms but Twitter stated that the government has neither provided any notice nor any hearing.

What kind of content has fallen under the purview of Section 69A?

Between February 2, 2021 and February 28 this year, Twitter received directions to block 1,474 accounts and 175 tweets in India. Of these, it is challenging 39 URLs with its latest petition. Several of these URLs had journalistic or political content. Previous judgments of the Supreme Court have suggested the content must be viewed from the standards of a "strong-minded, firm and courageous" person. The assessment must not be from the standpoint of a "weak" and "vacillating" individual who may sense danger in every hostile point of view. It is in this light that Twitter has argued the blocked content does not meet the "threshold" for restricting access. Twitter has also argued that the vast majority of people who consume the content under scrutiny are necessarily literate and can reasonably perceive the full context of the content.

BRIDGING THE GAP

The struggle to achieve gender equality and bridge the gap between men and women is a long and difficult one. India has got another opportunity to do much better for half of its population with the Global Gender Gap Index for 2022, released by the World Economic Forum on Wednesday, placing it at 135 out of 146 countries. But the new data — India's ranking in 2021 was 140 out of 156 countries — hardly brings cheer as India has fared the worst in at least one of the parameters — 'health and survival' — in which it took the last spot. The Global Gender Gap Index benchmarks the current state and evolution of gender parity across four dimensions: economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival, and political empowerment. India ranks poorly among its neighbours and is behind Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bhutan. Only Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan perform worse than India in the region. In 2022, coming on the back of a pandemic, war and economic crises, the global gender gap has been closed by 68.1%, which means at the current rate of progress it will take 132 years to reach full parity. Among all the regions, it will take the longest for South Asia to reach the target — 197 years — "due to a broad stagnation in gender parity scores ... in the region".

There have been enough numbers from the ground to indicate that India, with a female population of approximately 66 crore, has faltered on the road to gender parity. In the pandemic years, as incomes shrank, women faced hurdles on every front, from food, health, and education for the girl child to jobs. The latest NFHS data (2019-2021) show that 57% of women (15-49 age bracket) are anaemic, up from 53% in 2015-16; though 88.7% of married women participate in key household decisions, only 25.4% of women, aged 15-49 years, who worked in the last 12 months (2019-



2021), were paid in cash. Women having a bank account or savings account that they themselves use have increased to 78.6%, with schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana helping, but women participation in the labour force has shrunk. According to Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) data, in 2016-17 about 15% women were employed or looking for jobs; this metric dipped to 9.2% in 2021-22. The best way to improve India's abysmal ranking is to do it right by women. For that, it is imperative to increase representation of women in leadership positions at all levels so that women get greater access to jobs and resources. It is up to the Government to move beyond tokenisms and help women overcome staggering economic and social barriers.

MINISTRY TAKES UP TRANSGENDER PILOT'S CASE

The decision of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) to deny a commercial pilot licence to a transgender candidate is "discriminatory" and "violates" the law on the rights of transgender people, the Union Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry has said in a letter to the aviation regulator.

The Ministry has demanded that the DGCA provide guidelines for licensing and separate medical standards to enable transgender people to join the flying profession.

The letter follows a report in The Hindu on July 3 about 23-year-old Adam Harry, a trans-male, who was granted a commercial pilot licence on the condition that he stop his hormone therapy to transition into a male.

But the treatment for Mr. Harry is a life-long one, and he says he cannot sacrifice his identity for his profession by discontinuing his transition. "I want to fly as who I am," he told The Hindu.

'Sensitise officials'

The Ministry, the nodal Ministry for implementation of policies on transgender people, has suggested that training be conducted to "sensitise" DGCA officials to the rights of transgender people. It sought a report from the regulator on Mr. Harry's case, along with the steps undertaken by it to prevent a repeat of such incidents.

R. Subrahmanyam, Secretary, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, said there was "no time frame" given to the DGCA to respond to its letter. A senior DGCA official said, "We will respond to the letter."

"The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment would like to bring to your notice that the actions of the DGCA are in conflict with the judgment of the Supreme Court in the National Legal Services Authority case and violates the provisions stated under the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2019, as it ends up being discriminatory by denying/terminating employment or occupation on the basis of gender of the person," said the letter to the Director General, DGCA, Arun Kumar, on July 11.

Special provisions

The Ministry has detailed the steps the DGCA should undertake to "create special provisions" for transgender people. These include providing the option for "male, female and transgender person" to apply for all jobs regulated by the DGCA and "guidelines for licensing" for transgenders persons who apply for pilot licences. The committee that drafts the guidelines should have



representatives from the transgender community and medical experts who have worked with transgender persons.

The Ministry has also asked the aviation safety regulator to develop medical standards, especially in cases where they are undergoing gender affirming medical intervention, as well as review drugs used in hormone therapy. “The DGCA may increase and specify the mechanism of medical check-up to monitor and keep in check the health of the pilots undergoing therapy. This may include prohibition on intake of recreational drugs, regular check-up by cardiologists,” said the Ministry in order to curb possible side effects of a hormone treatment.

CREATE MORE JOBS, REVAMP EMPLOYMENT POLICY

The Government of India has recently announced its plan to create 10 lakh government jobs in the next 18 months. Of about 40 lakh sanctioned posts, 22% posts are now vacant and the Government will fill these posts in 18 months.

Though the announcement has been called a “historic step in the interest of the youth” and as “raising a new hope and confidence among youth” by some top Government leaders, the plan has serious problems.

Vacancies are much higher

The first question is: how is the Government managing now in the absence of more than a fifth of the required number of staff? There are as many as 8.72 lakh positions that were vacant in various departments of the Central government, as told by the Minister of State in Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, Jitendra Singh, to the Rajya Sabha on February 3, 2022. If various positions in public sector banks, the defence forces and police, the health sector, central schools and central universities, and the judiciary are added, then the number touches about 30 lakh posts. This number does not include vacancies in State government jobs. As sanctioned posts broadly indicate the required posts needed to run a government, it appears that this government is perhaps facing a serious shortage of staff, which is then causing long delays in work, corruption and maybe other inefficiencies.

The Government, however, has not made any complaints about such shortages in recent years. Why then has it made this sudden announcement? Is it because the Government is concerned about youth unemployment? Or is it because it wants to fill the required posts? Or, is it because elections are due in a number of States?

‘Quality’ as issue

Another major concern is about the quality of employment that will be generated through this plan. The share of contract workers in total government employment has been increasing rapidly in recent years — from 11.11 lakh in 2017 to 13.25 lakh in 2020 and to 24.31 lakh in 2021. In addition, there are “honorary workers” such as Anganvadi workers, their helpers, accredited social health activist (ASHA) workers, etc. These employees of the government earn a lower salary (consolidated wages), and are not entitled to “decent work” conditions (International Labour Organization recommendations) including a minimum package of social security.

The Government must ensure that the employment generated under its plan will be of a standard quality. There has been no assurance so far on this by the Government.



More jobs are needed

The total labour force in the country stands at 437.2 million (April 2022 data). At a labour force participation rate of 42.13% (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd.) the unemployment rate of the youth is about 20% at present. Given the backlog of about 30 million unemployed people and an annual addition of 50 lakh-70 lakh workers every year (World Bank), the dimensions of India's unemployment problem today are formidable. The generation of a mere 10 lakh jobs in the next 18 months is too little. This scheme of the Government will hardly provide any relief to the youth of the country; and will not have much of an impact on the present unemployment problem.

It is important to note here that the performance of the private sector in creating employment opportunities has remained dismal. Currently, when the economy is still struggling to overcome the shocks caused by the novel coronavirus pandemic, and when private final consumption expenditure has not crossed the pre-pandemic level, private firms are being seen to be managing their profit margin by cutting costs (in the form of rationalising wage bills). In this situation it is all the more important for the Government to ensure as many jobs as possible.

Focus on basis needs

As is claimed, if the Government is really in 'mission mode' to provide employment to the unemployed, and to the youth, it will have to do much more than what has been announced. To start with, the Government will have to create more employment within the Government. Recent national and international reports and rankings have shown that India is lagging far behind most other countries in terms of health and nutrition, particularly women and children, in education, literacy and skills, holistic care of children in early childhood and later; drinking water and sanitation, and other basic infrastructure, etc.

We believe that the Government will have to take responsibility for meeting these basic needs without depending on privatisation — at least for the bottom 40% of the population. The first task for the Government would be to take much better direct care of basic well-being, human development and human resource development, and the basic infrastructure of the bottom population without privatisation in these areas.

Another major task would also be to reorient the industrialisation policy to focus on labour-intensive sectors of the economy, and promote Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and informal production by ensuring better technology and higher productivity, providing finances (including working capital) and pushing further cluster development for all industries that have the potential.

Urban employment

And, finally, considering the fact that the urban economy has been badly hurt by the pandemic, a carefully designed urban employment guarantee programme would be most desirable to create ample urban employment avenues for urban youth. This programme will have to be different from the rural employment guarantee programme. The urban programme should include: basic urban services, where the youth would get special training so that they can be absorbed in the mainstream economy; day-care centres set up for childcare to enable women to reduce their unpaid services and to ensure quality care for children; and infrastructural gaps filled in under construction work to facilitate quality urban life.



If the gesture of filling vacant posts in the Government is part of a mission employment, it will have to be followed by radical changes in the Government's employment policy. Let us hope that people of India will be able to discern the motives behind the gesture, and assess the Government's performance accordingly.

THE ROAD TO ROLLING OUT LABOUR CODES

The story so far: The Code on Wages (passed in Parliament in August, 2019), the Industrial Relations Code, the Code on Social Security, and the Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (all passed on September 22 and 23, 2020 in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha) have not yet been implemented. The Centre claims that the four codes are a major step in the process of labour reforms. The central trade unions (CTUs) have held three general strikes against the codes so far, alleging that the codes will result in taking away whatever little social and economic security is left in the employment sector. The farmers' organisations had also supported the trade unions in their protests. The employers' associations, too, had mixed feeling towards the codes, but had generally welcomed them.

Where does it stand?

The government says the delay in implementation is due to the delay in framing rules by the States. As labour is a concurrent subject, both the States and the Centre will have to prepare rules for the codes. The Centre had also offered help to the States so that the codes can be implemented from July 1, 2022.

Union Minister for Labour, Bhupender Yadav, recently said that only a few States have not yet framed the rules. According to a recent report, 24 States have so far published draft rules to all four codes.

What is the process?

The States are publishing draft rules and inviting comments from stakeholders on those draft rules. The Centre had also published draft rules for certain sections of the four codes. The trade unions have been asking the Centre to stop this piecemeal approach and release the complete rules of four codes.

Since the four labour codes are an amalgamation of 29 Central laws and about 100 State laws that are similar to various Central laws, drafting, publishing and holding consultations with stakeholders is taking considerable time. There are also complaints by the Opposition-ruled States that the codes are "poorly drafted".

The Opposition had objected to the way the three codes were passed in Parliament in just two days without much discussion. Recently, Kerala Labour Minister V. Sivankutti said in the Kerala Assembly that the State prepared the draft rules hesitantly as most of the provisions in the codes are "anti-worker."

The Centre intends to implement the four codes together. "Our effort will be to implement the codes in 2022. The Labour Minister has offered discussions with trade unions and representatives of employers to iron out differences, if any," an official said.

The SP Mukherjee committee, which is working towards the issue of minimum wages, is yet to complete its task. Setting a national minimum wage is important in the implementation of the



Code on Wages. The Centre had recently said that the ambit of Employees State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) will be expanded to all districts within two years.

Social security for unorganised workers is a promise in the Code on Social Security and expansion of ESIC network is an unavoidable step for this purpose.

What are some of the concerns?

The central trade unions in the Opposition camp are opposed to all the four codes. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)-supported trade union, Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), is opposed to the Industrial Relations Code and certain provisions of the Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions.

According to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, one of the central trade unions said the exercise “is aimed at pushing out a large section of the workforce out of the coverage of all labour laws through increasing the threshold level of employment in an establishment and repealing of a big number of labour laws meant for certain specific sections of employees/workers viz., sales promotion employees, working journalists, etc.”

The BMS has been maintaining that the codes should not be implemented at one go. “The differences must be resolved by mutual dialogue. We have our concerns about the code on Industrial Relations, specifically on the provisions for the registration and working of central trade unions. Our advice to the government is that it should implement only those sections and codes where there is a larger unanimity among the workers, employers and the government,” said BMS general secretary Binoy Kumar Sinha.

The employers’ associations like Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) had expressed reservation on the proposal for increasing the minimum wages and expanding the social security network by involving the employers too.

What lies ahead?

The trade unions are warning about more protests if the codes are implemented. They say that the Centre will have to repeal it the way it repealed the three farm laws.

The Centre, too, is worried about the political fallout of its implementation and thus, this could also be a possible reason for the delay. The employers are worried that further increase in the salary bill will hamper their profits in a recession-hit economy and they expect the government to hold more discussions.

GANDHI MUSEUM BRINGS OUT MAGAZINE ON SAVARKAR

The national memorial and museum dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi has brought out a special edition of its monthly magazine dedicated to Hindutva leader Vinayak Damodar Savarkar — a choice that has sparked criticism from Gandhians and Opposition leaders.

The June issue of Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti’s (GSDS) Hindi language magazine, Antim Jan, features Savarkar on the cover and articles re-printed from the works of Gandhi on religious tolerance, Savarkar on Hindutva and late Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Savarkar. A portion from Savarkar’s book Hindutva has been adapted for an article with the same title. It also includes articles by other writers on “Deshbhakt Savarkar” (patriot Savarkar) and “Veer Savarkar

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and Mahatma Gandhi". An article by the editor of the magazine, Praveen Dutt Sharma, titled "Gandhi ka Gussa" (Gandhi's anger) has been included as well.

GSDS vice-chairperson Vijay Goel told The Hindu on Friday that the magazine's theme was dedicated to Savarkar as it was his birth anniversary on May 28. "Veer Savarkar was a great man. So was Gandhi, so was Patel. We have to learn from their sacrifice. No one else spent as much time behind bars as Savarkar during the British rule." Asked about the controversy surrounding Savarkar's mercy petitions to the British while in jail, Mr. Goel said the issue was always raised by "those who have not sacrificed at all". He added that the magazine would continue to publish special issues dedicated to freedom fighters and the August issue would have the theme of 'Azaadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav' to mark 75 years of Independence.

The GSDS, which is chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, oversees Gandhi Smriti — the home on Tees January Marg where Gandhi was assassinated in 1948 and converted into a museum dedicated to him — and Gandhi Darshan, which is the memorial at Rajghat.

Reacting to the magazine's theme, Tushar Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi's great-grandson said it was a travesty. "It is going to happen more and more with this administration that is controlling the Gandhian institutions. That is where the danger of political ideology overpowering the ideology of Gandhi exists. This is all very planned strategy of corrupting Gandhian ideology and creating a new narrative which is convenient for the present regime," Mr. Gandhi said.

Congress leader in Lok Sabha Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury said the Centre was trying to subvert the institution of Gandhi Smriti like it was doing to other institutions. "Savarkar is being lionised. This is the agenda of the RSS. But history speaks volumes of Savarkar's stand towards British imperialism. The history of the country is being distorted to satisfy the present government. This is very unfortunate."

Author and journalist Dharendra K Jha said Savarkar was an accused in Gandhi's assassination, although he was let off because charges against him were not corroborated.

"But at that time, the conspiracy angle of Gandhi's murder was not investigated properly. Kapur Commission of enquiry to investigate the conspiracy behind the murder of Gandhi was set up much later in 1966. The commission clearly said that Savarkar and a group of people under him planned to kill Gandhi. The benefit of doubt Savarkar got during the murder trial should not be seen as complete acquittal for Savarkar," Mr. Jha said.

IIT-M RANKED COUNTRY'S TOP HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTE

The Indian Institute of Technology, Madras (IIT-M), is yet again the top higher educational institute in the country followed by the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru, and IIT Bombay, according to the Ministry of Education's National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) 2022.

Among the universities, IISc, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Jadavpur University and Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham were among the top five. And among the top five colleges in the country are Miranda House, Hindu College, Presidency College, Loyola College and Lady Shri Ram College for Women.

The top five medical institutes are All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh, Christian Medical College, Vellore, National



Institute of Mental Health & Neuro Sciences, Bengaluru, and Banaras Hindu University. The top five management institutes are Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Ahmedabad, IIM Bengaluru, IIM Kolkata, IIT Delhi and IIM Kozhikode.

This is the seventh consecutive edition of NIRF. It ranks colleges, universities and research institutions and also provides an overall ranking of all of them combined. Institutes are also ranked across seven subject domains, namely engineering, management, pharmacy, law, medical, architecture and dental.

Accreditation must

A total of 4,786 institutions were evaluated on five parameters — teaching, learning and resources (TLR); research and professional practice; graduation outcome; outreach; and inclusivity and perception.

Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said at an event held to launch the rankings that accreditation and assessment of every higher education institution will be made mandatory and all institutions will have to be part of the NIRF ranking system. He said the two accreditation systems — NAAC and NBA — will be merged and institutes will need to have either NAAC accreditation or NIRF rank to be able to get government funds. He also said soon, there will be a system for accreditation of schools in the country.

WHAT AILS THE CURRENT APPROACH TO AYURVEDA

Ayurveda, India's traditional medicine, has been in practice for close to three millennia. Even today, this ancient system serves the health-care needs of millions of Indians. The adaptation of a traditional knowledge-system for current use comes with its challenges, which, if dealt with lackadaisically, can endanger the welfare of its users. A few challenges that the Ayurveda establishment has for long failed to skilfully address are discussed here.

Speculations versus facts

Ayurveda's ancient treatises, for obvious reasons, cannot be expected to retain relevance in their entirety. They contain useful portions alongside obsolete ones. Therefore, a dispassionate sifting through their contents is a prerequisite for their prudent practical use. Valuable observations relating to health promotion and illness management need to be carefully sifted from outdated theories, implausible conjectures, and socio-religious superstitions.

An example would make this point clear. While documenting its observations on the benefits of physical exercise, an Ayurveda classic notes: "A sense of ease, improved fitness, easy digestion, ideal body-weight, and handsomeness of bodily features are the benefits that would accrue from regular exercise." These observations are as valid today as they were 1,500 years ago when they were first documented. But, such continued validity cannot be claimed for the physiological and pathological conjectures the same text contains.

On urine formation, for instance, the text posits that tiny ducts from the intestines carry urine to fill the bladder. This simplistic scheme of urine formation has no role for the kidneys at all. Needless to say, this very outdated idea can have no place in current medical education except as an anecdote from history. Placing such conjectural ideas side by side with modern physiology and implicitly equalising the truth value of both is a serious malaise that has been plaguing the current



approach to Ayurveda. Teachers of Ayurveda physiology have the unenviable job of constantly grappling with the difficulty of reconciling ancient speculations with established scientific facts.

Factors responsible

Two main factors — one theoretical and the other epistemological — have led to this sad situation. The tridosha theory of Ayurveda is a rough-and-ready model that the ancients devised to systematise their medical experience. Clinical features of illnesses and therapeutic measures to manage them were all classified on the basis of this heuristic model. In the absence of a cogent understanding of the biological processes underlying health and illness, speculations on these topics were also woven around the same model. The theory thus has aspects that are heuristically tenable alongside those that are merely conjectural. Recasting the theory in a way that retains the relevant aspects while jettisoning the obsolete parts is a priority area in Ayurvedic research. The research centres under the Ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy) have remained oblivious to this important work and their omissions have resulted in retaining the theory, lock, stock, and barrel. Consequently, outdated pathophysiological conjectures have become fossilised in the current approach to the subject.

The other factor that has been instrumental in choking the renewal of Ayurveda is the widespread belief among its academics that ancient texts, by virtue of their being divined by sages in deep yogic states, retain timeless relevance. This notion of epistemic superiority has its roots in the hugely influential memorandum on the Science and Art of Indian Medicine authored by G. Srinivasa Murthi. The memorandum formed part of two reports: of the Usman Committee (1923) and later, of the Chopra Committee (1948). The flawed idea, antithetical to the yukti-vyapashraya (reason-based) character of classical ayurveda, has kept the field from demystifying its theories and achieving the reforms long overdue. In short, the belief in epistemic superiority has dethroned ancient medical writings from being revisable scientific treatises into being dogmatic scriptures.

A century ago, P.S. Varier of the Arya Vaidya Sala Kottakkal noted that the “Sareerasthana (section on body structure and function in the Ayurvedic classics) must firstly be revised and made clearer and the remaining parts must be suited to it (sic). Secondly, after this, the other important works should also be corrected. Necessary additions must be made either by translations or by collaboration with experts in portions still deficient.” Ironically, Varier’s submission also forms part of the Usman Committee report alluded to earlier. His suggestions though appear to have fallen on deaf ears. More recently, scholars such as Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya and Priyavrat Sharma have also drawn attention to the myth of epistemic superiority that has rendered Ayurveda texts non-revisable. But the Ayurveda establishment and its research centres have stayed intellectually inept to address the issue. What can enhanced funding do in a field that lacks a vibrant intellectual resource?

A renewed plea to reform

A recent article in the Indian Journal of Medical Ethics has renewed the plea to reform and update Ayurveda. Titled “Confessions of an Ayurveda Professor”, the article is authored by Kishor Patwardhan, a faculty member of Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. Prof. Patwardhan has candidly admitted that the anatomy and physiology contained in the Ayurvedic classics is mostly outdated and that the official approach to this subject is misguided. He has also disclosed the ecosystem-influences that made him adopt a wrong approach to the subject and the ill-effects this approach has had. While implicitly retracting his book Human Physiology in Ayurveda, he has called for a thorough change in the curriculum.



This article also points out the flawed approach of making ancient concepts sound relevant by super-imposing current scientific findings upon them. In addition to resulting in a travesty of truth, such misinterpretations in a practical field such as Ayurveda carry the risk of leading to dangerously wrong clinical choices. While petitioning for a scientific scrutiny of Ayurveda's foundational theories, the professor hopes that Ayurveda students get to unreservedly study current anatomy and physiology.

The basic truth

The Ministry of AYUSH must wake up and take cognisance of the points made here. Academics drawing handsome salaries from government-run AYUSH institutes need to see how sinful it is to hand over an unprocessed proto-science to gullible youngsters and then mislead them into believing that it is a super-sophisticated advanced science. As a medical system, Ayurveda is valuable immensely for its observations, only marginally for its theories, and not at all for its speculations. The sooner the establishment comes to terms with this basic truth, the better.

ANCIENT BUDDHIST SITE FINALLY IN FOCUS

Left almost unattended to for 20 years after it came to light through the excavation by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) between 1994 and 2001, the ancient Buddhist site on the bank of Bhima river near Kanaganahalli (forming part of Sannati site) in Kalaburagi district, has finally got some attention.

The ASI has now come up with a plan for the conservation of the site at a cost of ₹3.5 crore and work has just begun. ASI Regional Director (South) D. Maheshwari and Circle Superintendent (Hampi) Nikhil Das are camping at the site monitoring work.

Till now, some items of antiquity found during excavation were kept in three tin sheds in the same site, while many remained scattered in the open. The conservation project taken up now envisages the resetting of the remains of Maha Stupa retrieved in the excavation to their original positions without much ornamentation and reconstructing of fallen portions of the Ayaka platforms using newly-fabricated bricks of the same size, shape and texture.

Sannati and Kanaganahalli were small and ordinary villages on the bank of the Bhima till 1986 when the Kali temple at the Chandralamba temple complex in Sannati collapsed.

Accidental discovery

In the process of clearing the debris, they discovered an Ashokan edict which put the villages on the world map and opened new avenues of historical research on Mauryan Emperor Ashoka and Buddhism in its early years. It prompted the ASI excavations at Sannati and nearby Kanaganahalli and attracted historians across India and beyond.

The Kanaganahalli excavation opened up many marvels – an 'abandoned well' in the eyes of local villagers turned out to be the magnificent Maha Stupa, which was referred to as Adholoka Maha Chaitya (the Great Stupa of the netherworlds) in the inscriptions.

While the Stupa is believed to be one of the largest of its time, the stone-portrait is considered to be the only surviving image of the Mauryan Emperor which had the inscription 'Raya Asoko' in Brahmi on it.



FROM TEMPLE TO TECH: GOVT PLANS NEW 'INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE' PROJECT

From the restoration of “historical sites”, such as the Ram temple and the Somnath temple, and paying tribute to freedom fighters at Jallianwala Bagh Samarak; from economic policies such as GST to the National Education Mission, the digital mission and scholarships for sportspersons; from unique IDs for persons with disability to the heroes and histories of India’s tribal community.

These are some of the key themes around which the Union Education Ministry is planning to create an “Intellectual Heritage in Development” — a dialogue, documentation and research programme on the Modi Government’s initiatives.

The outline of this project was laid out in a letter dated June 28 and sent by Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan to several Central ministries and departments seeking their participation.

“We propose to create an ‘Intellectual Heritage’ in Development, Knowledge Resource and making New India, based on these initiatives. A few of the themes based on these initiatives of various Ministries/ Departments of the Government have been identified...Dialogues, documentation, research and publication will be planned and organized in various academic institutions in the next 3 months beginning the first week of July 2022 on these themes,” Pradhan wrote.

According to the letter, the plan is to hold about 100 conferences across the country on 100 themes during these three months, where research papers based on secondary data and sources available in ministries or elsewhere will be presented.

Researchers belonging to reputed Higher Education Institutions will contribute to these papers, which will eventually be published in a book.

Some of the focus areas identified in the letter are:

“Economic Reforms and Emerging Global Economy”: The Finance Ministry and related ministries to focus on India becoming the fastest growing economy, expanding markets beyond borders, a record-breaking export year, GST, making India an investment-friendly destination, transparency in procurement, Atmarnirbhar Bharat, etc.

“India’s great cultural heritage: Bhavyata and Divyata”: The Culture Ministry to focus on “bringing our culture history back home”, “tribute to India’s great freedom fighters”, Statue of Unity, Kranti Mandir (Red Fort), Jallianwala Bagh Samarak and the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. The letter also refers to restoring historical sites, including Ram Janmabhoomi temple and Somnath temple, among others.

“Tech-Powered India: Transforming Work, Empowering People”: The IT Ministry to conduct research on ‘Harnessing IT for Good Governance’ and ‘Jeevan Parmaan Patra’, ‘Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission’, Atma Nirbhar India through Unified Payment Interface’ (UPI), and UMANG (Unified Mobile App for New age Governance).

The Education Ministry’s initiatives to be highlighted include the National Education Policy, Samagra Shiksha (National Education Mission), NIPUN Bharat/ National Achievement Survey (NAS), Higher Education Financing Agency, National Initiative for School Heads and Teachers Holistic Advancement (NISHTHA), Scheme for Higher Education Youth in Apprenticeship and Skills (SHREYAS), Rashtriya Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyaan (RUSA) and PM-eVidya.



And the focus in sports will be on Sports Ministry programmes such as Fit India and SPOT Scholarships.

The letter also asks the Social Justice Ministry to focus on “Empowering Divyangs UDID (Unique ID for Persons with Disability)’ and the Tribal Affairs Ministry to highlight “Restoring Janjatiya Gourav through Heroes, Histories”, “Eklavya Model Residential School” and scholarships.

In his letter, Pradhan wrote: “These conferences will be conducted in the HEIs where participation of your good-self as well as your senior officers/ experts/practitioners would be solicited. I request you to kindly ask your Ministry to go through the themes listed in t Annexure and add/modify/delete the same. I would also request you to please consider supporting this academic activity, as the output of the research will be handed over to you for use in your Ministry.”

WHAT IS CAUSING A SURGE IN COVID-19 CASES?

The story so far: Since early June, there has been a steady increase in the number of fresh daily COVID-19 infections, with June 29 marking a new high of 18,467 cases. But on July 6, the daily fresh infections witnessed a further bump with 18,506 fresh infections. After the third wave peaked in end-January 2022, the number of daily cases had dropped and held steady at a very low level till it began increasing in early June. On July 9, the active caseload as of 9:00 am was more than 1,25,000 with the weekly test positivity rate being 3.86%.

Why has there been a rise in daily infections?

The BA.2 Omicron sub-lineage is still the dominant strain in India. However, many States have reported the presence of BA.4 and BA.5 Omicron sub-lineage variants. While the BA.2 Omicron variant itself spreads quickly, the BA.4 and BA.5 are even more transmissible than BA.2. Also, the BA.4 and BA.5 sub-lineages have an even better ability to evade the immune system and cause infection, which is leading to an increase in cases not only in India but in several countries. In its weekly epidemiological update, the World Health Organization (WHO) on July 6 said that for the week of June 27 to July 3, 2022, “over 4.6 million cases were reported, a figure similar to that of the previous week”. But the number of new infections recorded may not reflect the true spread of the virus as “several countries have been progressively changing COVID-19 testing strategies, resulting in lower overall numbers of tests performed and consequently lower numbers of cases detected,” the WHO cautioned.

In addition to BA.4 and BA.5, India and about half-a-dozen other countries have reported BA.2.75, which is a new sub-lineage of Omicron. The spike protein of BA.2.75 carries nine mutations and the mutations are seen on both the N-terminal domain and the receptor binding domain. Whether the nine mutations will further increase the transmissible nature of BA.2.75 compared to BA.5 and BA.2 remains to be seen. One mutation (G446S) can contribute to significant immune escape, which could mean that reinfections and breakthrough infections could drive the spread of BA.2.75, says Dr. Vinod Scaria, a senior scientist at the Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology (CSIR-IGIB). The rapid increase in BA.2.75 cases in India in recent weeks “suggest that it might have a growth advantage,” he tweeted.

It is not clear what percentage of fresh cases is caused by BA.4, BA.5 and BA.2.75. But the sudden increase in daily cases after the third wave peaked in end-January 2022 clearly suggests that a new sub-lineage of the Omicron is driving this increase.



Why haven't the high vaccination coverage and natural infection helped to stop re-infection?

Currently available vaccines have a higher protective effect against hospitalisation, preventing severe disease, and even death. They have very low protective effect against an infection, particularly from the Omicron sub-lineages. Thus a person who is fully vaccinated and even received a booster shot is vulnerable to get a breakthrough infection. In general, soon after a booster shot, the protective effect against breakthrough infection is modest. But with the Omicron variants showing increasing ability to evade the neutralising antibodies, a recently administered booster shot has an even lower protective effect against breakthrough infection.

Natural infection too has been found to be less protective against re-infection by the Omicron sub-lineages. This is again due to the higher immune escape capability of the Omicron sub-lineages. It has been found that infection with BA.2 does not protect from infection caused by the BA.4 or BA.5 variant. For the same reason, it is likely that infection with BA.5 may not protect against BA.2.75. However, hard evidence to support this is not yet available.

Health experts say the reason why BA.2 infection does not offer protection against BA.4 or BA.5 is because of the higher ability of BA.4 and BA.5 to evade the neutralising antibodies caused by a previous infection. So a person infected with BA.2 can still get reinfected with BA.4 or BA.5

Hybrid immunity caused by vaccination and infection was generally seen to offer slightly better protection against infection. But with the Omicron sub-lineages, even hybrid immunity offers no advantage in terms of protecting against re-infections.

How effective are full vaccination, a booster shot and natural infection against severe disease?

The Omicron variants have so far not turned out to be lethal or causing severe disease and deaths. Since virus transmission takes place before disease onset, the selection pressure faced by the virus is for enhanced transmissibility and not for disease severity. A new variant of concern may be less or more lethal than the current ones but always more transmissible than the currently seen variants. That said, a new variant that is not only extremely transmissible but also more lethal can also arise.

Natural infection, full vaccination with two doses of any COVID vaccine and hybrid immunity greatly reduces the risk of severe disease and death, but its protective effect beyond one year has not yet been studied. But ground evidence suggests that full vaccination protects against severe disease and deaths. A booster shot particularly for the vulnerable population offers greater protection against severe disease. It is therefore advisable that all vulnerable people receive a booster shot as early as possible.

What is the best way to prevent fresh infection?

While all Omicron sub-lineages have extremely high transmissibility, regular and consistent use of good quality face masks together with avoiding crowded places, particularly closed spaces with poor ventilation, can greatly reduce the chances of getting infected.

KERALA REPORTS INDIA'S FIRST MONKEYPOX CASE

The first known lab-confirmed case of monkeypox in India has been reported in a 35-year-old man in Kerala, who reached the State capital three days ago from the UAE. The Union Health Ministry should now make the official declaration.



State Health Minister Veena George, who earlier on Thursday informed presspersons about a possible suspected case of monkeypox, said here at 7 p.m. that the National Institute of Virology, Pune had confirmed the disease.

The person, a Kollam native, has been isolated for treatment at the Government Medical College Hospital (MCH) here. His condition was stable, though he seemed very anxious.

He had first consulted a private hospital at Kollam after he developed fever and other symptoms. He himself volunteered the information that a close contact of his in the UAE had been confirmed as having contracted monkeypox. He was referred to the MCH.

Close contacts isolated

His close contacts — father and mother — have also been isolated at the same hospital.

Ms. George said a few other persons who might qualify as contacts — the driver who took the person from the airport to his home at Kollam, the driver of the autorickshaw in which he travelled to the private hospital, the healthcare personnel who attended to him at the first hospital as well as 11 persons who had occupied the seats near him on his flight from the UAE — have all been informed about the new development. They will also have to go into isolation and monitoring for the next 21 days. Ms. George said that according to the patient, he had travelled on flight wearing the face mask and that he was wearing clothes that fully covered him.

She said the disease spread from person to person only through close contact and that there was no need to panic at this point in time. However, all districts have been asked to enhance disease surveillance in the field and to be on the lookout for any fever with unusual symptoms.

The Kerala Health Department has taken all precautions to ensure that the infection does not spread outside the circle of close contacts. The COVID-19 graph in the State has been up for the past one month and hence mask mandates are in place and health workers are habituated to the use of PPE kits before attending to patients, thus minimising the risk of spread, Ms. George said.

Monkeypox initially presents like any tropical disease with fever, headache, joint ache and possible swelling of the lymph glands. The incubation period for the disease — the time from exposure to the virus to the manifestation of symptoms — ranges from five to 21 days. Rashes appear on the face, inside palms and the body one to four days after fever.

The course of the disease could last two to four weeks, during which time the rashes progress into pustules, vesicular lesions and scabs.

Transmission happens only through close contact and by touching or sharing the clothes or bedding used by the patient, because the lesions usually have a high viral load. Transmission also extends throughout the course of the illness, till the lesions heal.

ALTERING GREEN LAWS

The story so far: On July 1, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, put out a note, proposing amendments in the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. The EPA establishes the “framework for studying, planning, and implementing long-term requirements of environmental safety and laying down a system of speedy and adequate response to situations threatening the environment.” In its note, the Environment Ministry has proposed legislation which scales down punishment for some environmental violations. Stakeholders — citizens, State governments,

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Union Territories and others concerned — have till July 21 to respond with suggestions. Besides changes in the EPA, the Ministry, in a set of notifications, also proposed amendments to three other legislations.

What are the Environment Ministry's proposed amendments?

The Environment Ministry has proposed amendments in four key legislations: The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974, the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981 and the Public Liability Insurance (PLI) Act, 1991. These are the cornerstone environmental laws that led to the setting up of the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), empowering it to take action against individuals and corporate bodies who pollute air, water and land. The clutch of laws currently empowers the CPCB to either shut down a polluting industrial body or imprison executives of an organisation found to be environmental violators.

The Environment Ministry said it had received “suggestions” to decriminalise existing provisions of the EPA to weed out “fear of imprisonment for simple violations.” With a set of amendments, the Environment Ministry proposes to modify provisions of the Environment Protection Act (EPA), by replacing clauses that provides for imprisonment with ones that only requires violators to pay a fine. These, however, don't apply to violations that cause grave injury or loss of life.

How will violators be punished?

The EPA currently says that violators face imprisonment up to five years or a fine up to ₹1 lakh or both. If the violations continue, an additional fine of up to ₹5,000 for every day during which such failure or contravention continues after the conviction may be levied. There's also a provision for the jail term to extend to seven years.

The changes proposed include the appointment of an 'adjudication officer' who will decide on the penalty in cases of environmental violations such as reports not being submitted or information not provided when demanded. Funds collected as penalties would be accrued in an “Environmental Protection Fund.” In case of contraventions of the Act, the penalties could extend to anywhere from five lakh to five crore, the proposal notes, but the clause on provision of a jail term for the first default has been sought to be removed.

Do these amendments defang environment laws?

The Environment Ministry hasn't laid out a clear rationale on why these amendments were necessary. However, the history of environmental action and its success in India shows that the current laws have had limited effectiveness. An analysis by the Centre for Science and Environment found that Indian courts took between 9-33 years to clear a backlog of cases for environmental violations.

Beginning 2018, close to 45,000 cases were pending for trial and another 35,000 cases were added in that year. More than 90% of the cases were pending for trial in five of the seven environment laws.

Ritwick Dutta, lawyer and founder of the Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment, said that myriad challenges dogged the process of bringing violators to book. For instance, to flag pollution from an industrial unit would mean filing a complaint with the court of the concerned district magistrate, or furnishing evidence to the CPCB which would again have to approach the same institution. This would then box the crime in the category of 'criminal complaints' that would have

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to follow a set procedure and was extremely time-consuming. In most cases, it was practically impossible to hold a specific individual in an organisation responsible for a specific crime given the burden of proof required. No top executive in India, said Dutta, had gone to jail for an environmental crime. This was different from cases of crimes such as poaching, or stealing forest produce, where there was always a definite offender who could be apprehended and dealt with by the police. The new amendments, thus, potentially made a certain category of crimes 'civil crimes' making it easier to hold organisations accountable.

Environmentalist Vikrant Tongad said that the existing clause of imprisonment was to deter violators and not to imprison them. The proposed penalties were too meagre and the amendments opened up avenues for "large scale corruption" as the 'Adjudication Officers' could be "arbitrary" in their decision-making.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MANIPUR LANDSLIDE?

The story so far: Landslides have killed at least 125 people across four north-eastern States this year after the onset of rainfall in April. Almost half of them — 49 confirmed and 12 others missing with little chance of survival — died working on a railway project at the Tupul substation in Makhum village of Manipur's Noney district on June 30. The Railways have reportedly blamed jhum or shifting or slash-and-burn cultivation on hill slopes for the tragedy, sparking debates on the tendency to overlook geological challenges and not factor in climate change while executing major developmental projects.

What is the Jiribam-Imphal railway?

Sanctioned in February 2005 as a national project, the 110.625 km Jiribam-Imphal line is considered a vital segment of the Trans-Asian Railway envisaged as an integrated freight railway network across Europe and Asia. The broad-gauge project entails connecting Manipur's Jiribam, a town on the border with Assam, and State capital Imphal mostly across the fragile hills of Noney district, is expected to reduce the travel time from the existing 10-12 hours to three hours. More than 65% of this project with an anticipated cost of ₹14,322.79 crore has been completed and goods trains reached the Khongsang railway station, 68.605 km from Jiribam, in March. The railways have tagged this project, expected to be functional by December 2023, as its most ambitious and challenging endeavour. The project involves 46 tunnels with a total length of 61.398 km, 16 road overbridges and under-bridges, and 140 major and minor rail bridges. Tunnel number 12 on this line is India's longest railway tunnel at 11.55 km and one of the rail bridges near Noney is being built at a pier height of 141 metres, the world's tallest.

Why are most landslide victims combatants?

India's northeast comprising Manipur and seven other States is the sixth most earthquake-prone belt in the world. The geologically young hills of the region are landslide-prone and heavy rains invariably allow only a working season of six months, somewhat explaining the delay in the Jiribam-Imphal project. The writ of extremist groups also affected the project until the 107 Infantry Battalion (Territorial Army) of the 11 Gorkha Rifles was entrusted in 2019 with protecting the stretch. A massive landslide triggered by heavy rainfall hit the location of the unit at the Tupul railway yard construction camp on early June 30 morning and the sliding debris blocked the Ijei River temporarily, creating a dam-like situation. According to Haulianlal Guite, Noney's Deputy Commissioner, 29 of the 49 confirmed dead were combatants of the 107 Territorial Army while 15 were engaged by private firms executing the project and two were



railway employees. Movement on the Jiribam-Imphal national highway has also been affected by a series of landslips, an annual affair.

What caused the Tupul landslide?

The Railways have apparently blamed two successive disasters along project sites in the northeast on the traditional practice of jhum or shifting cultivation. The first was the Lumding-Silchar railway, which was breached at 58 locations in May and the second was the Jiribam-Imphal section. Jhum is practised on hill slopes by clearing vegetation. Northeast Frontier Railway officials have been quoted as stating that their pleas to the State governments to stop jhum cultivation near railway formations often go unheard. Amba Jamir, executive director of Sustainable Development Forum Nagaland, said attributing the Noney landslide to jhum was unfortunate as shifting cultivation and landslides have always been a feature in the northeast, a Himalayan region. "There are also established State rules that forbid jhum in given areas and it is the responsibility of the administration to ensure that such rules are enforced," he said. "But people tend to forget or not question the development models being implemented in such fragile hill or mountain ecosystems. Most disasters are man-made as the designs are not suited to the geology," he said. Others said projects do not factor in climate change, which has been causing short bursts of heavy rainfall over a small area instead of moderate showers spread over a larger area.

How can disasters be averted?

Researchers have advised the Railways and the government to consult local people for sustainable projects instead of bulldozing or drilling through the hills and leaving them at the mercy of the forces of nature. Local NGOs in Noney said the Railways should have learnt lessons from the Lumding-Silchar project experience to minimise disasters in the equally vulnerable Jiribam-Imphal sector. An audit report in 2009 and a Commissioner of Railway Safety report in 2015 had faulted the Lumding-Silchar broad-gauge project for having been executed without adequate geotechnical investigation of the soil. Geologists and advocates of sustainable development say lessons could be learnt from the extensive rain-induced damage to the Lumding-Silchar track and adopt structural measures for stabilisation and control of landslides.

In their Disaster Management Plan of 2017, the Manipur Public Works Department said landslides and mudslides are quite common in the hilly State. "Even at present, mudslides due to the construction of the Jiribam-Tupul Railway line have affected many families in Tamenglong district (Noney was carved out of it)," it said. According to the Geological Survey of India (GSI), disasters and human fatalities can be minimised if its national landslide susceptibility mapping is integrated with infrastructure development and planning in hilly or mountainous terrain. "In India, the mountainous and hilly areas in 16 States and in two Union Territories in the Himalayan region, sub-Himalayan parts of the northeast and in the Western Ghats are landslide-prone. These areas comprise about 12.6% or 4.2 lakh sq. km of India's landmass spreading over 159 districts," the GSI said after documenting 20 landslides in four north-eastern States in 2020. It also said geology, road and railway projects, and unplanned quarrying and construction can turn these landslide-prone areas fatal. The GSI advised structural and non-structural measures for mitigating or preventing landslides. The structural measures involve engineering works for stabilisation and control of landslides while non-structural measures emphasise the identification and avoidance of landslide-prone areas through monitoring and warning systems.



Successes of structural measures include Varunabhat in Uttarkashi, Tindharia in West Bengal's Darjeeling district and some hydroelectric projects under construction. Nainital in Uttarakhand and Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu are the only two places in India where non-structural measures have been successfully implemented through landslide hazard zoning information, the GSI said.

STINGING SENSATION: WHY A GI TAG FOR THE RED WEAVER ANT CHUTNEY FROM MAYURBHANJ, ODISHA, COULD BE AN ANSWER TO FOOD SECURITY

The first time I ate an insect was on a school trip to the Terai region in Uttarakhand when I was in sixth grade at New Delhi's Mirambika – Free Progress School. Our class teacher Baren Raol, a native of Odisha, had asked us all to gather around an ant hill and told us to do something that seemed fascinating to us 12-year-olds – take a few ants, crush and eat them!

I still remember the crunch of it – the initial sourness, due to the formic acid, followed by a slight bitter undertone and finally, salty. While most of my classmates ran away at the thought of eating insects, I was enchanted by the idea of how nature gave us endless possibilities of sustenance.

While my experiences are numbered, using insects in everyday cooking, especially red weaver ants, is extremely popular in the tri-state area of Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. So much so, Odisha's district of Mayurbhanj is set to register their famous Kai (red ant) chutney for the Geographical Indicator (GI) tag where it will be joining its contemporaries such as Kashmiri saffron, Bengali gobindobhog rice and Darjeeling tea.

The Kai chutney is celebrated among the tribal communities of the region, not just for its fiery flavour but also for its medicinal properties wherein it has helped soothe coughs, common colds, jaundice and even issues with eyesight. These red ants are also rich in protein, vitamin B-12 and minerals such as iron, zinc, magnesium, sodium and as many as 18 amino acids. It has also been proven to boost immunity, helping those who make a soup of the ants to gain back their strength.

In order to collect and process the ants, the hunter has to gather the weaver ants from their nest colonies. These nests are made using leaves on trees and attached using silk from the larvae. Moreover, these nests hold onto their own through strong winds and heavy rain. In season, the ants are in abundance, and once collected, the ants and their eggs are eaten with salt and lots of chillies. In order to make it appropriate for mainstream manufacturing, the Ministry of Aayush will have to set safeguard measures and guidelines to standardise protocols for hygiene and sanitisation. The effort towards regulating the production of chutney will hopefully work towards the de-stigmatisation and make public perception kinder towards tribal cuisine.

Entomophagy (the practice of eating insects) has been observed by millions of people from across the globe since the beginning of time. While in Latin America, there's escamole (insect caviar) in Mexico and hormiga culona (female leafcutter ants) in Colombia, enjoyed as significant sources of fat and protein, in Ghana, fried palm weevil larvae, known as akokono and Uganda's nswaa (insect dish) are delicacies. Of course, Southeast Asia, especially Thailand, Vietnam, South Korea and Japan, famous for its fried crickets, silk worms, cockroaches and locusts, have insects as a part of their extensive street food.

Several proponents of entomophagy and food researchers have claimed that this might be the answer to the global food security concerns. One of the biggest challenges of our current food system is the ever-increasing demand for meat, which in and of itself has an environmentally damaging production process. The gradual shift to insect farming, which will take some pressure



off animal husbandry, will produce less amounts of greenhouse gases and ammonia, it will need less land and it will need much less water. Additionally, a third of all agricultural produce in the world is wasted, which can be used for insect farming instead, reducing food waste significantly.

The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), in their report 'Edible Insects' (2013), in fact urged people all over to consider the consumption of insects, saying that it may be the answer to food insecurity and global malnutrition.

While most people show a general aversion to insects, it might be worth thinking about how lobsters, prawns and crabs – while these are crustaceans – are considered the insects of the sea (belonging to the same family of arthropod) and that secretions from bees (honey), has been an essential part of our diet since antiquity and even offered to the gods. The introduction of a new wave of food will always be met with restraint, however one must keep in mind that these changes are products of our current times and challenges, presenting itself to be an alternative to a very serious issue.

WHAT ARE CLOUDBURSTS, AND WHY THEY OCCUR MORE IN PLACES LIKE AMARNATH

Sudden, “highly-localised rains” in Amarnath, Jammu and Kashmir, on Friday evening (July 8) caused flooding and led to the deaths of at least 16 people and injuries to more than 20 others. Those who died were at a camp near the cave, a site of pilgrimage.

Many politicians tweeted out messages of condolence and mentioned cloudburst-induced floods, as was earlier stated by officials. However, the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) later said on July 9 that a cloudburst may not have actually occurred.

We explain what cloudbursts are, the basis on which heavy rains can constitute a cloudburst, and how they can lead to deadly flash floods.

What is a cloudburst?

A cloudburst refers to an extreme amount of rain that happens in a short period, sometimes accompanied by hail and thunder, and this has a precise definition. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) defines it as unexpected precipitation exceeding 100mm (or 10 cm) per hour over a geographical region of approximately 20 to 30 square km. Significant amounts of rainfall such as this can result in floods.

Basically, all instances of cloudbursts involve heavy rain in a short period, but all instances of heavy rain in a short period are not cloudbursts if they do not fit this criterion.

According to weather scientists, the shrine reported 31 mm of rainfall between 4:30 pm and 6:30 pm on Friday, which does not fit the definition. “The flash floods could have been triggered due to rainfall in the higher reaches of the mountains near the Amarnath cave shrine,” IMD Director General Mrutyunjay Mohapatra told PTI.

Why do cloudbursts occur in hilly areas like Amarnath?

Experts have said it is difficult to predict when exactly a cloudburst will occur, and there is little definitive data on the exact number of cloudbursts that occur in India. Due to their definition dealing with a very small area, it is difficult to accurately predict and identify cloudbursts immediately. However, they are more likely to occur in mountainous zones mainly because of terrain and elevation.



This is because, in hilly areas, sometimes saturated clouds ready to condense into rain cannot produce rain, due to the upward movement of the very warm current of air. Instead of falling downwards, raindrops are carried upwards by the air current. New drops are formed and existing raindrops increase in size. After a point, the raindrops become too heavy for the cloud to hold on to, and they drop down together in a quick flash.

A study published in 2020 examined the meteorological factors behind the cloudburst over the Kedarnath region, where a cloudburst aided the devastating 2013 floods. It found that during a cloudburst, the relative humidity and cloud cover was at the maximum level with low temperature and slow winds. "It is expected that because of this situation a high amount of clouds may get condensed at a very rapid rate and result in a cloudburst," wrote the team.

Last year, a cloudburst occurred in the Amarnath region around the same time. However, as the Amarnath yatra had been previously closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it did not lead to loss of life there.

GLACIERS IN DRASS ARE RECEDING FAST, SAYS STUDY

The decadal pace at which glaciers are receding in the Drass region, a key battleground in Ladakh during the 1999 Kargil war, points to a grave threat to Himalayan glaciers. A recent study attributes this to the growing vehicular traffic in the region, which has been witnessing a massive military build-up on both the sides of Line of Actual Control (LAC) since 2020.

The study published by the journal Environmental Science and Pollution Research is based on satellite images of 77 glaciers observed over two decades, from 2000 to 2020, in the Drass basin of the western Himalayas. The glaciers studied ranged in size from 0.27 sq.km to 14.01 sq.km, with an average size of 2.3 sq.km. The study reports that the glacier area decreased from 176.77 sq.km in 2000 to 171.46 sq.km in 2020, which is about 3% of the total glacier area.

"The pace of glacial recession varies greatly among glaciers ranging from 0.24% to 15%. The snout retreat for the period ranged from 30 metres to 430 metres. Debris cover had a significant impact on glacier melting, with clean glaciers losing 5% more than debris-covered glaciers. The average thickness change and mass loss of glaciers have been 1.27 to 1.08 metres," the study pointed out.

Climatologist Shakil Ahmad Romshoo and five research scholars, Khalid Omar Murtaza, Waheed Shah, Tawseef Ramzan, Ummer Ameen and Mustafa Hameed Bhat, participated in the study.

Carbon concentration

The analysis shows that glaciers at lower elevations receded by 4.1%, whereas glaciers at mid- and higher elevations receded by 3.23% and 1.46% over the period observed.

The study found that heavy vehicular movement is the main cause for the rapid pace at which glaciers are receding in the region. Black carbon concentration ranged from 287 to 3,726 nanograms per cubic metre, with an average of 1,518 nanograms per cubic metre, "which is markedly higher compared to the black carbon concentration reported from other high-altitude locations in the Hindu Kush Himalayas".

"From 1980 to 2020, black carbon concentration has increased significantly from 338 nanogram per cubic metre in 1984 to 634 nano gram per cubic metre in 2020. It is inferred that the



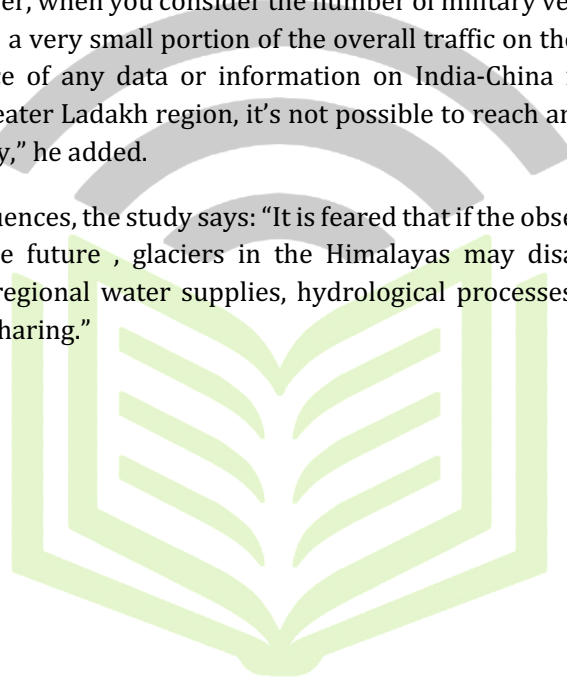
increasing black carbon concentration, due to the proximity to the National Highway, has significantly affected the glacier health.”

The study points out that 17 glaciers situated close to the highway showed higher glacier shrinkage (4.11%) and snout retreat (209 m) than the glaciers situated further away from the national highway, with glacier shrinkage (2.82%) and snout retreat (148 m). “Heavy vehicles are responsible for 60% of black carbon emissions,” it added.

Differentiation difficult

“Given the global nature of climate change, it is challenging to distinguish between the effects of civilian and military infrastructure and mobilisation on the environment and glaciers in the absence of data. However, when you consider the number of military vehicles on the Srinagar-Leh highway, they make up a very small portion of the overall traffic on the road,” Mr. Romshoo told The Hindu. “In absence of any data or information on India-China military mobilisation and manoeuvring in the greater Ladakh region, it’s not possible to reach any scholarly conclusion on the subject immediately,” he added.

Warning of the consequences, the study says: “It is feared that if the observed trends of the climate change continue in the future , glaciers in the Himalayas may disappear entirely, having a significant impact on regional water supplies, hydrological processes, ecosystem services and transboundary water sharing.”



DreamIAS

**BUSINESS & ECONOMICS****FINANCES IS INADEQUATE**

The health of municipal finances is a critical element of municipal governance which will determine whether India realises her economic and developmental promise. The 74th Constitution Amendment Act was passed in 1992 mandating the setting up and devolution of powers to urban local bodies (ULBs) as the lowest unit of governance in cities and towns. Constitutional provisions were made for ULBs' fiscal empowerment. However, three decades since, growing fiscal deficits, constraints in tax base expansion, and weakening of institutional mechanisms that enable resource mobilisation remain challenges. Revenue losses after implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and the pandemic have exacerbated the situation.

Comprehensive data sets on municipal finance are important to understand and counter these challenges, but few exist at the city level. Recently, the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) analysed data from 80 ULBs across 24 States between 2012-13 and 2016-17 to understand ULB finance and spending, and found some key trends.

Share of own revenue

The first is that ULBs' own sources of revenue were less than half of their total revenue, with large untapped potential. The ULBs' key revenue sources are taxes, fees, fines and charges, and transfers from Central and State governments, which are known as inter-governmental transfers (IGTs). The share of own revenue (including revenue from taxes on property and advertisements, and non-tax revenue from user charges and fees from building permissions and trade licencing) to total revenue is an important indicator of ULBs' fiscal health and autonomy. This ratio reflects the ULBs' ability to use the sources they are entitled to tap, and their dependency on IGTs. Cities with a higher share of own revenue are more financially self-sustaining.

Our study found that the ULBs's own revenue was 47% of their total revenue. Of this, tax revenue was the largest component: around 29% of the total. There was a 7% increase in own revenue from 2012-13 to 2016-17, but ULBs still lacked revenue buoyancy as their share in GDP of own revenue was only 0.5% for the five-year period.

Property tax, the single largest contributor to ULBs' own revenue, accounted for only about 0.15% of the GDP. The corresponding figures for developing and developed countries were significantly higher (about 0.6% and 1%, respectively) indicating that this is not being harnessed to potential in India. Estimates suggest that Indian ULBs' can achieve these levels. It is essential that ULBs leverage their own revenue-raising powers to be fiscally sustainable and empowered and have better amenities and quality of service delivery.

Dependent on IGTs

Second, many ULBs were highly dependent on IGTs. Transfers from the Central government are as stipulated by the Central Finance Commissions and through grants towards specific reforms, while State government transfers are as grants-in-aid and devolution of State's collection of local taxes. Most ULBs were highly dependent on external grants — between 2012-13 and 2016-17, IGTs accounted for about 40% of the ULBs' total revenue.



Stable and predictable IGTs are particularly important since ULBs' own revenue collection is inadequate. While dependence on IGTs dipped over the years due to modest increase in own revenue, the scale of IGTs in India remained at around 0.5% of GDP, which is far lower than the international average of 2% to 5% of GDP.

This can be improved by increasing the revenue assigned to ULBs from the State governments, and by allocating a share of the State and Centre's GST proceeds to ULBs. This will cushion ULBs' balance sheets as they mobilise their own revenue and explore market-based instruments. IGTs can also incentivise ULBs to deliver better service quality and maintain fiscal discipline.

Third, tax revenue is the largest revenue source for larger cities, while smaller cities are more dependent on grants. There are considerable differences in the composition of revenue sources across cities of different sizes. Class I-A cities (population of over 50 lakh) primarily depend on their own tax revenue, while Class I-B cities and Class I-C cities (population of 10 lakh-50 lakh and 1 lakh-10 lakh, respectively) rely more on IGTs.

Own revenue mobilisation in Class I-A cities increased substantially. It was primarily driven by increases in non-tax revenue. In the five-year period studied, tax revenue in Class I-A cities grew by about 11%, while non-tax revenue grew by about 30%. The external revenue dependency of these larger cities gradually reduced over time, from around 27% in 2012-13 to about 15% in 2016-17. Own revenues of Class I-B and Class I-C cities, on the other hand, were stagnant even while these cities grew in size.

Operations and maintenance

Fourth, operations and maintenance (O&M) expenses are on the increase but still inadequate. O&M expenses are crucial for the upkeep of infrastructure and for maintaining quality of service delivery. The share of O&M expenses in ULBs' total revenue expenditure increased from about 30% in 2012-13 to about 35% in 2016-17. While the expenses were on the rise, studies (such as ICRIER, 2019 and Bandyopadhyay, 2014) indicate that they remained inadequate. For instance, O&M expenses incurred in 2016-17 covered only around a fifth of the requirement forecast by the High-Powered Expert Committee for estimating the investment requirements for urban infrastructure services.

O&M expenses should ideally be covered through user charges, but total non-tax revenues, of which user charges are a part, are insufficient to meet current O&M expenses. Cost recovery for services such as water supply, solid waste management, transportation and waste water management are thus clearly inadequate.

The non-tax revenues were short of the O&M expenditure by around 20%, and this shortfall contributed to the increasing revenue deficit in ULBs. Increasing cost recovery levels through improved user charge regimes would not only improve services but also contribute to the financial vitality of ULBs.

The scale of municipal finances in India is undoubtedly inadequate. A ULB's realised own revenue resources are far below the estimated potential. Tapping into property taxes, other land-based resources and user charges are all ways to improve the revenue of a ULB. IGTs assume significance in the fiscal composition of ULBs, and a stable support from Central and State governments is crucial till ULBs improve their own revenues. Measures need to be made to also cover O&M expenses of a ULB for better infrastructure and service.



FOREX RESERVES SPIRAL DOWN BY \$8 BILLION ON FPI EXITS, US FED RATE HIKE WORRIES

Foreign exchange reserves fell by \$8.06 billion to \$580.02 billion during the week ended July 8 in the wake of the appreciation of the dollar and capital outflows from India, triggered by the rise in inflation and rate hikes by the US.

With this, forex reserves have plummeted by \$62.4 billion from the record high of \$642.45 billion registered on September 3, 2021. A major reason for the decline in forex reserves is capital outflows by foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) as the US Federal Reserve started the monetary policy tightening and interest rate hikes. The valuation loss, reflecting the appreciation of the US dollar against major currencies and decline in gold prices, have also played a part in the decline in foreign exchange reserves.

Forex reserves have fallen by \$13 billion in the two weeks ended June 8. Foreign investors have taken out Rs 2.24 lakh crore from the equity market and Rs 15,749 crore from debt since January this year, putting pressure on the rupee and the forex kitty.

The RBI is going slow in artificially propping up the dollar by selling dollars from its kitty, allowing the rupee to depreciate and adjust it to other currencies so that exports can become competitive, sources said. However, as the value of the rupee declined in the last a few weeks to 79.88 against the dollar by Friday, the RBI reportedly prevented the rupee from falling below 80 by selling dollars in the last two days.

The US currency has been gaining ground even as the US annual consumer prices jumped by 9.1 per cent in June, the highest in four decades, exceeding expectations of an 8.8 per cent rise. The aggressive policy course by the US Fed to curb rising price pressures is exacerbating fears of a weakening global growth outlook and leading to risk aversion.

According to Aditi Gupta, economist, Bank of Baroda (BoB), global currencies depreciated against the dollar as a hotter than expected US inflation report drove the currency higher. Expectations that the Fed might hike its policy rate by 100 bps next week after the inflation report along with increasing risks of a global recession are underpinning the dollar strength, she said.

The rapid depreciation in the rupee seen presently is driven to a large extent by adverse global factors, particularly a strengthening USD and FPI outflows. "Apart from this, India's external position which remained strong in the last two years, attributable to the pandemic, has deteriorated quite a bit. Trade deficit is at a record-high and this coupled with persistent FPI outflows has put pressure on the balance of payments which is also weighing on the rupee," Gupta said.

To counter the growing CAD, the RBI announced a slew of measures to strengthen the capital account focussing on debt inflows, ECBs and NRI deposits last week. However, these might not be enough to counter the burgeoning CAD, BoB said.

Eyes on Fed move

The aggressive policy course by the US Fed to curb rising price pressures is exacerbating fears of a weakening global growth outlook. The dollar has been gaining ground even as the US annual consumer prices jumped 9.1% in June.



On the current account side, the government announced a hike in gold import duty to curb non-discretionary imports.

Movements in the foreign currency assets — the major component of the forex kitty — occur mainly on account of purchase and sale of foreign exchange by the Reserve Bank, income arising out of the deployment of the forex reserves, external aid receipts of the Central government and changes on account of revaluation of the assets.

The value of gold held by the central bank also declined by \$1.23 billion to \$39.18 billion during the week ended July 8. As of end-March 2022, the RBI held 760.42 metric tonnes of gold (including gold deposits of 11.08 metric tonnes). While 453.52 metric tonnes of gold is held overseas in safe custody with the Bank of England and the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), 295.82 metric tonnes of gold is held domestically.

In value terms, the share of gold in the total forex reserves increased from about 5.88 per cent as at end-September 2021 to about 7.01 per cent as at end-March 2022, the RBI said.

POST RBI EASING NORMS, BANKS HIKE FOREIGN CURRENCY DEPOSIT RATES

Banks have started hiking interest rates on foreign currency deposits following the Reserve Bank's decision to relax norms to shore up forex inflows. SBI, ICICI Bank, HDFC Bank and IDFC First Bank have raised interest rates on foreign currency non-resident (FCNR) deposits.

The RBI had last week temporarily allowed banks to raise fresh FCNR(B) and NRE deposits from non-resident Indians (NRIs) without reference to the current regulations on interest rates, with effect from July 7, 2022. This relaxation will be available for the period up to October 31, 2022.

SBI has revised the FCNR rates on US dollar in the range of 2.85-3.25 per cent per annum on various tenure US dollar deposits with effect from July 10, 2022. It has hiked the rate on one-year tenure FCNR USD deposits to 2.85 from 1.80 per cent earlier. For deposits of 3-4 years and 5 years, it has been hiked to 3.10 per cent and 3.25 per cent, respectively. The previous rates were 2.30 per cent and 2.45 per cent.

Besides relaxing norms on FCNR deposits, the RBI raised overseas borrowing limits for companies and liberalised norms for foreign investments in government bonds to boost foreign exchange inflow.

Total NRI deposits had declined to \$ 139.02 billion in FY22 from \$ 141.89 billion in the previous year. NRE deposits account for a major chunk of NRI deposits with an outstanding at \$ 100.80 billion, down from \$ 102.57 billion a year ago, amid expectations of a rate hike by global central banks. FCNR(B) deposits of banks were at \$ 16.91 billion as of March 2022.

Banks will be able to offer higher returns to NRIs on their deposits in the wake of the RBI relaxation. "The removal of CRR, SLR and interest rate capping norms for incremental NRI deposits in FCNR-B and NRE term deposits will help in reduction of cost of funds and allow banks to offer higher yields to customers," said a bank official.

WHY THE EURO HAS FALLEN TO \$1, WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE RUPEE

On Tuesday, the euro achieved parity with the US dollar. In other words, in terms of the exchange rate, one euro became equal to one US dollar. This is only the second time since 2002 that the euro



has fallen this low to a dollar (see chart below). The weakening in the euro against the dollar shows that investors are pulling out money from the Eurozone and into the US.

Why is the euro losing value against the dollar?

Broadly speaking, the euro has been becoming weak against the dollar since the start of 2008. However, since the start of 2021, the decline has been sharp. The latest blow to the exchange rate has come from the energy crisis in the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine.

The reasons for the euro's continued weakness against the dollar can be broken into two parts. One, the weakness of the Eurozone's economy. Two, the difference in the monetary policy response between the US and European central banks.

On the economic front, the Covid-19 pandemic and the fiscal response to counter it had left the eurozone with a weak economy facing historically high inflation. In this moment of weakness, Russia's war on Ukraine and the consequent ban on Russian energy have left the European economies completely vulnerable. Europe was completely dependent on Russian oil and gas and the unprecedented spike in energy prices has not only created a cost-of-living crisis for common people but also raised questions in the minds of investors about the viability of future investments in the Eurozone. Eurozone economies have had to import more and more. For instance, Germany, the biggest Eurozone economy, in May registered its first trade deficit since 1991. It makes more sense for companies to shift base to the US, which is far more independent in energy terms.

So even though there is a good chance that the US economy is slowing down and possibly heading towards a recession, the Eurozone is doing even worse. And that has created the economic logic why money is being pulled out of the Eurozone and going to the US. The continued weakness in the euro against the dollar is essentially a marker of this shift in preference.

The second reason is the monetary policy response by the European Central Bank (ECB). It is completely different from the response of the US Fed, which has made it clear that it will not stop until inflation, which is also at multi-decade highs in the US, comes back to the target rate of 2%. As such, the Fed is aggressively raising interest rates, even if that brings in a recession. The ECB, by contrast, hasn't moved. Faced with the scenario where raising interest rates (in order to control inflation) may dampen the economic recovery, the ECB hasn't raised rates. This has created another big reason for the money to flow out to the US because it offers better returns for investments.

Why is the dollar appreciating even when the US is facing recession?

The dollar remains the safest bet for global investors and news outside the US economy is worse than it is in the US. The weakness in the euro against the dollar should also be seen as part of the larger story where the US dollar is gaining against all currencies of the world — be it the euro, or the Japanese yen or the Indian rupee.

In fact, the Indian rupee, despite its continued weakness, has shown more resilience against the dollar than most other currencies. A case in point is the fact that the rupee has sharply appreciated against the euro since the start of 2022. It was close to 90 at the start and is now close to 80 to a euro.



Does that mean the euro's fall will help the rupee?

At the moment, the rupee has appreciated considerably and as such, Indians holidaying in Europe will find it cheaper to travel. However, Anindya Banerjee, VP, Currency Derivatives & Interest Rate Derivatives at Kotak Securities Ltd cautions that "if the euro continues to stay weak and trend below parity, it will also take the rupee down with it".

In other words, if the euro continues to weaken, the rupee, which is already just a whisker away from 80 to a dollar, will further weaken against the dollar. That's because the euro has immense trade linkages with India and similar emerging economies.

Banerjee said the rupee has done better than euro against the dollar because the RBI has intervened in a manner to ensure rupee stays that way.

'FISCAL DEFICIT REINED IN, CAD A CONCERN'

India's macro risks have receded in recent weeks and concerns about the fiscal deficit target being breached may be misplaced, the Finance Ministry asserted on Thursday, while conceding that the current account deficit (CAD) could, however, deteriorate this year mainly due to rising trade deficits.

Identifying elevated inflation and a widening trade deficit as 'twin challenges' for the economy, the Ministry, however, emphasised that economic activity in the country remained resilient almost five months into the Russian-Ukraine conflict.

Data released separately on Thursday showed the trade deficit widened in June to an all-time high of \$26.2 billion as imports surged past \$66 billion. Retail inflation eased slightly to 7.01% in June, and the Ministry attributed it to measures taken by the government and the central bank as well as fears of a global recession that had dragged oil prices lower.

The government would still need to 'continue to walk the tightrope of balancing inflation and growth concerns' as long as price gains remain above the 6% mark, the Ministry said in its monthly economic review.

"Softening of global commodity prices may put a leash on inflation, but their elevated levels also need to decline quickly to reduce India's CAD," it noted. The Ministry stressed that the boom in gold imports was also a concern though the government had raised import duties in a bid to curb them.

"A sudden and sharp surge in gold imports amid wedding season (as many weddings were postponed to 2022) is also exerting pressure on the CAD. If recession concerns do not lead to a sustained and meaningful reduction in the prices of food and energy commodities, then India's CAD will deteriorate in 2022-23 on account of costlier imports and tepid exports," the Finance Ministry cautioned.

The current account slid back into a deficit of 1.2% of GDP in 2021-22, after registering a surplus of 0.9% in the preceding pandemic-hit fiscal year. Economists expect the CAD to widen to about 3% of GDP this year.

An increase in services exports where India is more globally competitive as compared to merchandise exports, may help rein in the CAD, which is also putting pressure on the rupee, the Ministry averred.



While the rupee has dropped 6% against the dollar since January, the Ministry contended that the currency had performed well compared with peers from other major economies 'unlike in 2013, when it depreciated against other major economies'. This, it asserted, reflected the 'strong fundamentals' of the Indian economy.

However, on the flip side, the Ministry noted: "The depreciation, in addition to elevated global commodity prices, has also made price-inelastic imports costlier, thereby making it further difficult to reduce the CAD."

While meeting the fiscal deficit target for this year may seem like a challenge following the excise duty cuts on petroleum products announced in May, the Ministry said it expected the revenue losses to be offset by robust GST collections, increase in customs duty receipts, and the imposition of the windfall tax on petroleum product exports.

GLOBAL PRICES COOLING: GOVT TO RELOOK DUTIES, CESSSES ON FUEL & CRUDE

The government is looking at reviewing the imposition of cesses and duties on fuel and domestic crude in a meeting to be held Friday, officials said. Officials of petroleum and finance ministries will attend the meeting to review the levies which came into effect on July 1.

With global crude prices having softened since the imposition of the levies on July 1, it is likely that the government may consider lowering the duties and cesses.

"A meeting will be held tomorrow (Friday) to review the duties and cess on petrol, diesel and crude. The decision will take into account the situation of global crude oil prices," an official said.

With an aim to address the issue of fuel shortage in the country, the Centre had on July 1 imposed special additional excise duty on export of petrol and diesel. Cesses equal to Rs 6 per litre on petrol and Rs 13 per litre on diesel were imposed on their exports. The government had also levied a cess of Rs 23,250 per tonne (by way of special additional excise duty) or windfall tax on domestic crude being sold to domestic refineries at international parity prices. These measures are expected to yield revenue of around Rs 15,000 crore.

The Finance Ministry did not give a timeline for continuation of the levy, but had said it will assess the situation every 15 days to review the impact of these changes.

Starting June, fuel pumps across India have been reporting fuel shortage, leading to the closure of many of them. The situation of fuel shortage at pumps peaked in the middle of June, resulting in the government issuing a statement on the matter. The statement assured of enough fuel available in the country and asked oil marketing companies to ensure their fuel pumps remain open.

As global crude prices rose, domestic crude producers were making windfall gains. Private oil marketing companies (OMCs) were exporting petrol and diesel to foreign countries like Australia for better realisation. The shortage of fuel at retail outlets was because OMCs were not willing to sell fuel at a loss since fuel prices have not increased despite rising crude and depreciating rupee: these two factors had led to OMCs losing Rs 20-25 per litre on diesel and Rs 10-15 per litre on petrol.

Over the last fortnight, the benchmark contract of Brent on the Intercontinental Exchange has fallen by over 12 per cent to around \$97.5 per barrel on fears of a recession in the US and concerns about fuel demand pick-up in China due to Covid-related restrictions in some areas.



GLOBAL EDIBLE OIL PRICES CRASH; WILL OTHER FOOD COMMODITIES FOLLOW?

As far as overall food inflation goes, these are still early days. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) food price index hit an all-time high of 159.7 points in March, the month immediately following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since then, the index — a weighted average of world prices of a basket of food commodities over a base period value, taken at 100 for 2014-15 — has eased a tad, by 3.4%, to 154.2 points in June.

The picture is clearer in vegetable oils, where the FAO's sub-index has fallen by 15.9%, from 251.8 to 211.8 points, between March and June. The rise during April 2020 to March 2022 was sharper for vegetable oils (from 81.2 to 251.8 points) than for the general index (from 92.5 to 159.7 points). But so has been the subsequent dip from March to June.

Palm vs 'soft' oils

A better idea of the price decline can be had by looking at individual oils. Crude palm oil (CPO) traded at a record 7,268 ringgit per tonne at the Bursa Malaysia derivatives exchange on March 9. On Friday, the most-active two-month futures contract settled at 4,157 ringgits. That's 42.8% down from the peak.

Four months ago, the landed price (cost plus freight) of CPO in India was about \$2,000 per tonne, while it was \$1,960 for RBD (refined, bleached and deodorised) palmolein, \$1,925 for crude degummed soyabean oil and \$2,100 for crude sunflower oil. Those prices have since retreated to \$1,185 (CPO), \$1,160 (RBD palmolein), \$1,460 (soyabean) and \$1,700 (sunflower) per tonne.

Much of this price collapse to have taken place in just over the last one month, with the fall more in palm than for so-called soft oils, namely soyabean and sunflower. It is also reflected in the data from the Department of Consumer Affairs. Between June 8 and July 8, the all-India modal (most quoted) retail price of packed palm oil has come down from Rs 160 to Rs 145 per kg; it has been less for soyabean (Rs 170 to Rs 160/kg) and sunflower (Rs 190 to Rs 182.5), and non-existent for groundnut (Rs 180).

"The transmission of international to domestic prices will be higher for imported oils and which require less voyage time," says BV Mehta, executive director of the Solvent Extractors' Association of India (SEA).

India annually consumes around 23 million tonnes (mt) of edible oils, out of which 13.5-14.5 mt is imported and 8.5-9.5 mt domestically produced. The imported oils mainly comprise palm (8-9 mt), soyabean (3-3.5 mt) and sunflower (2-2.5 mt), while those sourced indigenously include mustard (2.5-2.8 mt), soyabean and cottonseed (1.2-1.3 mt each), rice bran (1-1.1 mt) and groundnut (0.5-0.8 mt).

"Palm oil tanker vessels from Malaysia and Indonesia take 8-10 days to arrive in India. The same for soyabean oil from Argentina and Brazil is 40-45 days. Given the steeper fall in international prices of palm oil and less time to bring fresh cargoes, it's natural to see it becoming cheaper first before the other oils," adds Mehta.

Being a 'hard' oil that is semi-solid (as opposed to liquid) at room temperature, palm oil isn't used much in home kitchens for direct cooking or frying. Most of it goes to make hydrogenated fats (vanaspati, margarine and bakery shortening) or as key ingredient in bread, biscuits, cookies, cakes, noodles, mithai, namkeen, frozen dessert, soap, and cosmetics. The benefits of the slide



mainly in palm oil prices will thus accrue more to the food, restaurant, or skincare industries than to households. They would want prices of 'soft' (soyabean and sunflower) and indigenous (mustard and groundnut) oils to fall more.

The other side

Davish Jain, chairman of the Indore-based Soyabean Processors' Association of India, feels that the government should review the existing import tariffs on edible oils, considering the recent crash in world prices and the ongoing planting season for kharif oilseeds.

The effective import duty is currently 5.5% on crude palm, soyabean and sunflower oil, while it is 13.75% for RBD palmolein. Further, the Centre, on May 24, allowed up to 2 mt each of crude soyabean and sunflower oil to be imported at zero duty during 2022-23 and 2023-24 (April-March). Quantities beyond this would attract the regular 5.5% duty.

"Domestic soyabean prices have already dropped from roughly Rs 69,000 to Rs 62,000 per tonne in the past month. If the trend in international prices continues, it will send a negative signal to farmers when kharif sowing is at its peak. A rollback of the customs duty exemption and even a gradual increase is in order," points out Jain.

According to the Agriculture Ministry, farmers had planted 77.80 lakh hectares (lh) under kharif oilseeds till July 8, against 97.56 lh during the corresponding period of last year. Acreages are down in soyabean (from 69.54 lh to 54.43 lh), groundnut (25.31 lh to 20.51lh) and sesamum (1.71 lh to 1.53 lh). The lower area covered has been attributed to weak monsoon activity in June, with all-India rainfall 7.9% below the historical average and 24 out of the country's 36 meteorological subdivisions registering shortfall in excess of 10%.

July, however, has recorded 31.3% above-normal rains so far, resulting in the cumulative rainfall from June 1 to July 10 turning 5.2% surplus. SEA's Mehta expects a substantial pick-up in sowing due to the monsoon's revival and the acreage gap closing before the month-end.

Ukraine to Indonesia

As noted earlier, the current global food inflation began with edible oils. The initial trigger was the 2020-21 drought in Ukraine (the world's biggest sunflower oil producer) and Covid-induced migrant labour shortages in Malaysia's oil palm plantations. The war was the final straw. The supply disruptions from Ukraine and Russia were aggravated by Indonesia's restrictions on exports of palm oil in response to domestic price increases and drought in South America badly affecting the region's 2021-22 soyabean crop.

Those supply shocks seem to be easing somewhat. Soyabean production in Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay is set to recover this year. Indonesia was forced to lift its ban on palm oil shipments in late-May after a piling up of stocks. Excess supplies from the world's largest producer are now exerting downward pressure on prices.

Whether other food commodities will follow vegetable oils may be only a matter of time.

STAYING WATCHFUL

The concerted efforts made by the Reserve Bank and the Union government to contain inflation appear to be having some impact, albeit marginal, in slowing the pace of price gains, the latest retail inflation data show. Price gains as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) eased

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almost imperceptibly to 7.01% in June, from May's 7.04%, with food price inflation slowing by a distinct 22 basis points to 7.75%. Of the 12 items comprising the food and beverages basket — almost half the weight of the CPI — the prices of pulses and edible oils both shrank from a month earlier. Prices of the key cooking medium, which had been on a boil amid a supply shock (from Ukraine and Indonesia), have cooled, helped by import duty reductions. Year-on-year inflation in oils and fats decelerated last month by a whopping 390 basis points to 9.4%, with the index shrinking 0.7% on a sequential basis. And prices of pulses contracted both from a year earlier and the preceding month. The other major positive sign of a policy measure translating to softer prices was with transportation fuels. The Centre's reduction of excise duty on petrol and diesel in May manifested in a significant easing in inflation in the transport and communication index: year-on-year, the rate slowed by 260 basis points to 6.9%, while sequentially it shrank by 120 basis points.

Still, it would be way too premature for policymakers to drop their guard. With nine of the 12 items in the food and beverages basket, representing almost 80% of the sub index and spanning cereals, milk and meat to vegetables, sugar and spices, experiencing sequential price gains, the Government would need to maintain vigil to ward off any build-up of inflationary pressures in consumers' kitchens. Year-on-year inflation in cereals, meat and milk all accelerated in June from May's pace, and price gains in vegetables still remained in double digits at 17.4%. The progress of monsoon rains give hope that the prices of farm produce may moderate in the coming months, provided the extreme rainfall and flooding seen in some States does not adversely hit crop growing regions. And while an appreciable softening in global crude oil prices in recent sessions offers some respite, the rupee's sharp depreciation against the dollar means India will continue to face the spectre of 'imported inflation' as the bill for imports, including crude, keeps rising. The decision of the GST Council to raise tariffs on a range of goods including some items of mass consumption is also bound to add upward pressure on prices. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's remarks on Tuesday reflect authorities' recognition that any let up in the fight against inflation risks undermining growth and broader macroeconomic stability.

FASAL BIMA: WHO'S IN, OUT AND WHY

The Union Agriculture Ministry announced on Tuesday that Andhra Pradesh has decided to rejoin the crop insurance scheme Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) from the ongoing kharif season. Andhra Pradesh was one of six states that have stopped implementation of the scheme over the last four years. The other five, which remain out, are Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Telangana.

Why did these states opt out?

ANDHRA PRADESH: The state left the PMFBY from rabi season 2019-20. Sources said the state had mentioned several reasons: that the scheme should be voluntary; that states should be given options to choose the risks covered; the scheme should be universal; the cut-off date for enrolment should be flexible; and fourth, the state should be given option to use their own database of E-crop, an application used by the state government to collect information about crops.

"All these issues have been resolved now," the sources said.

On Tuesday, the Agriculture Ministry announced that Andhra Pradesh has decided to rejoin the PMFBY following talks between Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar and the Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy.



The move comes days after Union Agriculture Secretary Manoj Ahuja met the CM. On July 7, a team headed by Ahuja gave a presentation to Reddy.

BIHAR: The first state to opt out, from 2018-19, after implementing the scheme in 2016-17 (27.1 lakh farmers insured) and 2017-18 (23 lakh). Sources say there were main three reasons for the state's decision.

First, the state wanted universal coverage.

Second, the state government wanted zero premium for farmers (meaning the entire premium should be paid by the government.) Under the PMFBY, a farmer is required to pay as premium 2% of the sum insured or actuarial rate, whichever is less, for all kharif foodgrain and oilseed crops; 1.5% of sum insured or actuarial rate, whichever is less, for all rabi foodgrain and oilseed crops; and 5% for horticultural crops. Sources said the Centre can not make farmers' premium zero. However, states such as Haryana, Goa and Puducherry are paying farmers' share from their own budget for selected crops.

The third reason was that the rate of premium was very high for Bihar because of the history of claims under earlier schemes.

The Agriculture Ministry is trying to persuade Bihar to rejoin the scheme. On July 1, Ritesh Chauhan, CEO, PMFBY and Joint Secretary in the Ministry, wrote to the Bihar government about addressing its concerns, the sources said.

JHARKHAND: Jharkhand stopped implementing the scheme soon after the Centre revamped it in February 2020, effective from kharif 2020. Under the revised guidelines, "The non-payment of the State Share of premium subsidy within the prescribed timelines as defined in the seasonality discipline will lead to the disqualification of the State Government to implement the scheme in the next season."

Sources said Jharkhand's share of premium subsidy was overdue for 2018-19 and 2019-20. This was the main reason that Jharkhand opted out from 2020-21. Besides, there were other "operational challenges" and "political reasons", the sources said.

Ministry data shows that in Jharkhand 8.8 lakh farmers in 2016-17, 12.0 lakh in 2017-18, 12.9 lakh in 2018-19, and 10.9 lakh in 2019-20 had availed the scheme.

WEST BENGAL: Sources said the reason for West Bengal not implementing the PMFBY is purely "political". The state wants to implement the scheme without mentioning Pradhan Mantri in the scheme's name, which is not possible, sources said.

West Bengal implemented the scheme for three years from 2016-17 to 2018-19, covering 41.3 lakh farmers in 2016-17, 40.4 lakh in 2017-18, and 51.3 lakh in 2018-19.

GUJARAT: Gujarat implemented the PMFBY from 2016-17 to 2019-20, covering 19.8 lakh farmers in 2016-17, 17.6 lakh in 2017-18, 21.7 lakh in 2018-19, and 24.8 lakh in 2019-20. Sources say, after the scheme was revamped, Gujarat invited tenders for three years in 2020 but insurance companies quoted a very high premium, and hence the state opted out.

TELANGANA: Telangana too implemented the PMFBY for the initial four years, covering 9.7 lakh, 11 lakh, 8 lakh in 2018-19 and 10.3 lakh farmers in successive years before stopping in 2020-21.



Sources said Telangana's share of premium was overdue for 2018-19 and 2019-20, the main reason why it did not notify the scheme for 2020-21.

The Agriculture Ministry is in talks with the state government to bring back on board. A central team made a presentation before of a Group of Ministers of Telangana on June 23, said sources, who expect the state to rejoin from the coming rabi season or next year.

How was the scheme structured, and what has changed since?

The government had launched PMFBY from kharif 2016. Under the scheme, all farmers including sharecroppers and tenant farmers growing "notified crops" in the "notified areas" are eligible for coverage.

Initially, the scheme was compulsory for loanee farmers; in February 2020, the Centre revised it to make it optional for all farmers.

In the initial scheme, the difference between actuarial premium rate and the rate of insurance premium payable by farmers, which is called the rate of normal premium subsidy, was to be shared equally between the Centre and states. However, states and Union Territories are free to extend additional subsidy over and above the normal subsidy from their budgets.

In February 2020, the Centre decided to restrict its premium subsidy to 30% for unirrigated areas and 25% for irrigated areas (from the existing unlimited). Earlier, there was no upper limit for the central subsidy.

Food crops (cereals, millets and pulses); oilseeds; and annual commercial / annual horticultural crops are covered under the scheme. In addition, pilots for coverage can be taken for those perennial horticultural/commercial crops for which standard methodology for yield estimation is available, state the scheme guidelines.

What is the coverage?

As per information shared by the Agriculture Ministry to Lok Sabha in April this year, the number of farmer applications insured increased to 7.65 crore in 2021-22 from 5.83 crore in 2016-17 when the scheme was launched. However, the number of states implementing the scheme had gradually come down from 27 in 2016-17 to 20 in 2021-22.

A BETTER RIDE

On July 5, 2010, the first request for a ride was placed on the cab hailing platform, Uber. Less than two years later, Uber had expanded globally, with the app going live in Paris. The company now operates in more than 70 countries and 10,000 cities. Along the way, it also became the world's most valued start-up. The platform's global appeal and success can be traced to the sheer ease with which it allows for cabs to be hailed, often at odd hours. Coupled with a competitive pricing model, this makes for an attractive proposition for consumers across the world. And then, there is employment generation, with the company "employing" millions of drivers across the world. In India alone it has served around 9.5 crore riders, and has nearly six lakh driver partners. Yet, even as the company has reshaped public transport, it has been embroiled in controversy. By operating in the regulatory grey zones and blindspots, by taking on entrenched taxi services and unions, and by doing little to assuage consumer concerns, Uber has managed to get caught in the crosshairs of governments, drivers and riders.

Over the past few days, an investigation by this paper, carried out in collaboration with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, has painted a less than flattering image of the manner in which the ride-sharing platform has conducted itself over the years. The investigation details how the company tried to bypass regulators and cut corners as it navigated the loopholes in law in its drive to expand at breathtaking pace. The Uber Files are a classic example of how Big Tech manages to get ahead of the curve, and how policy often has to play catch-up. Consider, for instance, the revelation that the company has employed technology to stay ahead of law enforcement — the investigation has revealed how tools like “greyball” and “geofencing” were deployed “to keep Uber rides away from prying policemen and government officials”. Or how despite riders and drivers lying at the heart of the platform, it rode roughshod over the concerns of both. As the investigation has revealed, “critical elements of the new safety features” that were meant to be put in place after the rape incident in Delhi in December 2014 have still not been implemented.

However, such concerns are not India-specific. For instance, the classification of drivers, and as a consequence their treatment, is globally a contentious issue. Treating them as workers rather than self-employed, as the UK Supreme Court has ruled, would entitle them to minimum wages and other benefits. Or take the concerns over data privacy — the ride-sharing platform holds a treasure trove of information on the ride-hailers. While governments may be tempted to respond to such disclosures by imposing draconian rules, regulation should be framed with a light touch so as not to throttle innovation. At the same time, the sheer pace of innovation and the manner in which tech firms have exposed gaps in the regulatory structures underlines the need for governments to be more nimble in their approach as they attempt to regulate the new age behemoths.



DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

THE SEARCH FOR DARK MATTER

The story so far: Many physicists strongly believe that the entire visible part of the universe forms only 5% of all matter in it. They believe the rest is made up of dark matter and dark energy. Once this was convincingly demonstrated through various indirect observations and calculations, experiments started being set up to hunt for these elusive particles. The latest to hit the news in the field of dark matter is a dark matter detector experiment named LUX-ZEPLIN (LZ) in South Dakota in the U.S. As of today this is the most sensitive dark matter detector in the world. To give an idea of the degree of difficulty in measuring evidence of a dark particle, it is said that the chamber of this LZ detector, can contain only one gram of dust if it is to detect a dark matter particle. This is the extent to which researchers have to go to rule out unwanted signals coming from other entities.

What is dark matter and why is it so elusive?

All interactions in the universe are a result of four fundamental forces acting on particles — strong nuclear force, weak nuclear force, electromagnetic force and gravitation. Dark matter is made up of particles that do not have a charge — which means they do not interact through electromagnetic interactions. So, these are particles that are “dark”, namely because they do not emit light, which is an electromagnetic phenomenon, and “matter” because they possess mass like normal matter and hence interact through gravity.

Gravitational force, besides not being fully integrated and understood by particle physicists, is extremely weak. For one thing, a particle that interacts so weakly becomes rather elusive to detect. This is because interactions from other known particles could drown out signals of dark matter particles.

If we cannot see it and have not detected it yet, why do physicists believe strongly that dark matter exists?

There is strong indirect evidence for dark matter, and this evidence is reflected at various levels (or distance scales, as physicists would explain). At the shortest distance scale, consider the rotation of galaxies. If you look at stars all the way from the centre of any galaxy to its rim, the way the velocities of the observed stars change may be plotted. In the lab this same function may be plotted on a graph by assuming the visible matter is all that exists. There is a marked difference between the observed plot of star speeds and the calculated value as you move from the inner part of the galaxy towards its rim. Now if you assume there is a certain fraction of matter which exerts a gravitational pull on the rest of the stars in the galaxy, for it cannot be seen in any other way, and recalculate the plot, it fits in with the observed value. This means that there is a definite amount of dark matter in the galaxy.

NASA TELESCOPE DIVES DEEP INTO THE UNIVERSE

On November 30, 1609, Galileo turned his telescope towards the night sky. This singular act revolutionised astronomy. Until then, scholars held that celestial objects were without any kind of blemish. Galileo showed that the Moon had craters and mountains. All celestial objects, including stars, were thought to go around the Earth. The telescope, by observing phases of Venus firmly established that planets go around the Sun and not the Earth. The Milky Way, a haze in the dark night teemed with hundreds of stars, established that the cosmos is immense and beyond

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our imagination. Galileo revolutionised astronomy using a crude telescope which by today's standards is merely a toy.

The first five images released by NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) on July 11, captured by the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) is no less momentous in the history of astronomy than the day Galileo turned his telescope toward the heavens.

NASA on Tuesday unveiled images from the James Webb Space Telescope, the largest and most powerful orbital observatory ever launched.

The pictures, designed to peer farther than before with greater clarity to the dawn of the universe, were hailed by NASA as milestone marking a new era of astronomical exploration.

Nearly two decades in the making, the \$9 billion infrared telescope was launched on December 25, 2021. It reached its destination in solar orbit nearly 1 million miles from Earth a month later.

The crowning debut image, previewed on Monday by U.S. President Biden at the White House but displayed with greater fanfare on Tuesday, was a "deep field" photo of a distant galaxy cluster, SMACS 0723, revealing the most detailed glimpse of the early universe recorded to date.

Among the other Webb subjects were two enormous clouds of gas and dust blasted into space by stellar explosions to form incubators for new stars — the Carina Nebula and the Southern Ring Nebula, each thousands of light years away from Earth. The collection also included fresh images of another galaxy cluster known as Stephan's Quintet, first discovered in 1877.

ANCIENT JAWBONE DUG UP IN SPAIN'S BURGOS CITY

Archaeologists in Spain said on Friday that they had dug up an ancient jawbone that could help them look into the face of some of the earliest human ancestors in Europe.

The surprise find, which could be about 1.4 million years old, could also give vital clues to the evolution of the human face over the millennia, the team from the Atapuerca Foundation said in a statement.

Entering the history

"The first week of July 2022 will enter the history of human evolution," the team said in a statement.

The fossilised fragment of an upper jaw and cheekbone was found near caves in the Atapuerca Mountains in northern Spain's Burgos province, the site of other ancient remains.

The scientists said they were still working on identifying the specific kind of human ancestor and determining the bone's age.

"We have to continue our research for about at least a year... This takes lots of time," José María Bermúdez de Castro, one of the team's coordinators, told presspersons.

Important finding

"What we can say is that we have found a fossil that's very important and interesting that belongs to one of the first populations that arrived in Europe."



MULTILATERAL NEGOTIATIONS WILL BE INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT IN THE PRESENT CHAOTIC GLOBAL SITUATION. IT IS ONLY BY WORKING BILATERALLY WITH POTENTIAL ALLIES THAT INDIA CAN ATTAIN THE STATUS OF A POLE IN THE NEW WORLD WITH STEADFAST FRIENDS AND FOLLOWERS. INDIA-EU: GLOBAL DYNAMICS

With carbon neutrality being the byword to a sustainable world, a host of countries — Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Japan, Germany, Canada, Costa Rica, the United States, Brazil, India, and China among others — have set for themselves net-zero targets for the middle and later part of the century.

At the forefront of the commitment to net-zero is the European Union, which wants to be the first carbon-neutral region in the world by 2050. It brought out the 'European Union Green Deal' in July last year to focus on a new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU society into a fair and wealthy one with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy.

CBAM: carbon-pricing system

To attain carbon neutrality, the EU has set forth immediate targets and has brought out the 'Fit-for-55' package, a communication of its 2030 climate targets. A provision in the policy plan is the introduction of Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), a carbon-pricing system proposed for imports into the EU. The CBAM suggests taxing the imported goods-based difference between carbon used in the production of domestic and imported goods.

Proposed to be complementary to the EU Emission Trading Scheme (EUETS), during the transition phase of CBAM — beginning January 1, 2023 — importers will only have to report emissions embedded in the production of goods and are not obliged to pay a financial penalty. The CBAM, however, will come completely into force from January 1, 2026 and the measure will see a gradual reduction of free EUETS allowance coverage of 10 percentage points per year and a complete phase-out by 2035. In the initial phase, five CITE (Carbon Intensive and Trade Exposed) sectors such as iron and steel, aluminium, cement, fertilizers and electricity will be taxed under CBAM.

The EU claims that CBAM is intended to reduce carbon leakage, create a level playfield for EU producers and encourage producers in other countries to adopt cleaner technologies. But several discussions have cropped up around CBAM. Developing countries have raised their concern on the legality of CBAM pointing out its conflict with World Trade Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) norms, and are afraid that it encourages protectionism.

History provides several instances of conflict between domestic restrictive policies stating environmental concern and trade openness such as the Shrimp-Turtle Case and Air Transport Association of America vs Energy Secretary Case for Energy and Climate Change. Rulings in these cases have been in favour of environmental laws, proving that the ongoing debate is a continuation of pre-existing issues and, in the past, environment concerns have outweighed those related to trade.

Developing countries also flag the use of revenue collected from CBAM. According to the EU, revenue collected from CBAM will be a part of the EU's budget, the NextGenerationEU, a recent initiative launched to provide economic support to EU member countries impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries opposing the proposed revenue utilisation mechanism suggest that if



CBAM is to be implemented, revenue collected from it should be used for cleaner technology adoption in developing countries.

India and the EU share a healthy trade relationship. The EU is India's third largest trading partner, while India is EU's 11th largest trading partner. In 2019-20, India-EU trade accounted for ₹63.8 billion (11.1% of total Indian trade) in goods, while a total of 1.9% of EU's total trade in goods in 2020 came to India. India exports almost 14% of its global exports to the EU.

Progressive steps

Recently, there has been increasing initiative from both sides to deepen engagement with each other. Talks on India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that were stalled a while ago have picked up again and are scheduled to take place in June. The target to finalise the Free Trade Agreement has been set for 2023-24.

Both India and the EU are committed to climate change, and the recent progress in India-EU alliance opens prospects of a customised partnership and mutual growth. Rather than tax on exports to EU as proposed in CBAM, India and EU can cooperate better by investing in cleaner and greener technologies in India and helping in cleaning up production in India. Such a partnership will ensure that both India and the EU have their agendas of economic growth and sustainability fulfilled, a win-win situation for both entities.

FAIR PLAY

New Zealand Cricket striking a deal to remunerate its women cricketers the same as their male counterparts is a major landmark in the fight to close the gender pay gap in sports. From August, New Zealand's men and women players will be entitled to the same match fees, both at the international and domestic levels. This comes four months after the United States' women's national footballers won the six-year-long battle with their federation to secure equal compensation. The agreements are expected to be game changers, encouraging more girls to take up the sports. As New Zealand captain Sophie Devine said, "It's great to be recognised in the same agreement, alongside the men. It's a massive step forward and will be a huge drawcard for young women and girls." But victories in equal pay struggles have not come easy. Tennis moved first because of the untiring efforts of Billie Jean King, who pressured US Open to shell out the same for men and women back in 1973. That it took another 34 years for the other three Grand Slam tournaments to come around, with Wimbledon the last in 2007, shows the road is still uphill. Football, basketball and golf remain holdouts. Seen in this context, the decisions in New Zealand and the U.S. appear seismic.

Barriers to bridging the pay gap have come from various quarters. In tennis, the sporting argument that men play best-of-five-set matches at the Majors while the women best-of-three is often made. In cricket, any move to narrow the monetary gap between men and women, especially in India, is dithered over by citing lower market ratings for the ladies' game. But it would be prudent to focus on the factors that are holding women back — unequal opportunities, curtailed playing time and lack of investment. Historically, men taking to sport and following sport have been organic exercises, largely because of social conditioning. Women, on the other hand, have been forced to internalise that sporting participation and fandom are not for them. The need of the hour is to eliminate such barriers and improve access. The prime example in India is the success of Saina Nehwal and P.V. Sindhu, who benefited from a reasonably well-structured system, found success and rose to become highly paid stars in their own right. It will also help if the terms



of the debate are widened. Reducing the pay gap is also about being fair and respectful, and recognising the effort and excellence women bring to sport. It is time the vicious cycle of fewer women accessing sports, fewer women becoming professionals and hence fewer women having commercial opportunities is broken and the glacial pace of the journey towards pay parity hastened.

UN POPULATION REPORT EXPLAINED: A LOOK AT THE TRENDS, PROJECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

According to the 2022 edition of the United Nations' World Population Prospects (WPP), released on Monday, India is projected to surpass China as the world's most populous country in 2023. It also projected the world's population to reach 8 billion on November 15, 2022.

What is the World Population Prospects?

The Population Division of the UN has been publishing the WPP in a biennial cycle since 1951. Each revision of the WPP provides a historical time series of population indicators starting in 1950. It does so by taking into account newly released national data to revise estimates of past trends in fertility, mortality or international migration.

What are the main takeaways for the global population?

1. The world's population continues to grow, but the pace of growth is slowing down: The global population is expected to grow to around 8.5 billion in 2030, 9.7 billion in 2050 and 10.4 billion in 2100. In 2020, the global growth rate fell under 1% per year for the first time since 1950.
2. Rates of population growth vary significantly across countries and regions: More than half of the projected increase in global population up to 2050 will be concentrated in just eight countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines and the United Republic of Tanzania. Disparate growth rates among the world's largest countries will re-order their ranking by size. The 46 least developed countries (LDCs) are among the world's fastest-growing. Many are projected to double in population between 2022 and 2050, putting additional pressure on resources and posing challenges to the achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
3. The population of older persons is increasing both in numbers and as a share of the total: The share of the global population aged 65 years or above is projected to rise from 10% in 2022 to 16% in 2050. As such, the report warns that countries with ageing populations should take steps to adapt public programmes to the growing proportion of older persons, including by improving the sustainability of social security and pension systems and by establishing universal health care and long-term care systems.
4. A sustained drop in fertility has led to an increased concentration of the population at working ages (between 25 and 64 years), creating an opportunity for accelerated economic growth per capita: This shift in the age distribution provides a time-bound opportunity for accelerated economic growth known as the "demographic dividend". "To maximize the potential benefits of a favourable age distribution, countries need to invest in the further development of their human capital by ensuring access to health care and quality education at all ages and by promoting opportunities for productive employment and decent work," the UN report says.



5. International migration is having important impacts on population trends for some countries: For high-income countries between 2000 and 2020, the contribution of international migration to population growth (net inflow of 80.5 million) exceeded the balance of births over deaths (66.2 million). Over the next few decades, migration will be the sole driver of population growth in high-income countries. For 10 countries, the estimated net outflow of migrants exceeded 1 million over the period from 2010 through 2021. In many of these countries, the outflows were due to temporary labour movements, such as for Pakistan (net flow of -16.5 million), India (-3.5 million), Bangladesh (-2.9 million), Nepal (-1.6 million) and Sri Lanka (-1.0 million). In other countries, including the Syrian Arab Republic (-4.6 million), Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) (-4.8 million) and Myanmar (-1.0 million), insecurity and conflict drove the outflow of migrants over this period.

How reliable is the UN projection, and how do they compare with India's Census?

K S James, Director & Senior Professor of the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), said UN's WPP has a long history and several countries use these projections. "It is an authentic source and there is no doubt about its credibility," said James.

In India, of course, the Registrar General comes out with a population projection based on the Census. The last such projection was released in 2019 and it was based on Census 2011. "The Census projection is slightly lower than the UN projection," said James. As such, he said, if not in 2023 then in another few years India would overtake China as the world's most populous country.

What is the significance of India overtaking China?

That India would overtake China has been known for a while. Moreover, in the past, when the world population was still at 5-billion or 6-billion levels, there was a concern about overcrowding. But, James said, those concerns no longer exist because the global population is already 8 billion and several countries (including India) have achieved a replacement rate of fertility. "The concern now is not about the absolute numbers — India's population is already 1.4 billion and may go up to 1.6 billion before declining — but the quality of life for the people alive," said James. "The focus now has shifted to whether we can reduce poverty, provide healthcare facilities, education etc.," he said.

Looking at the India data, it is clear that as things stand, cohorts of 0-14 years and 15-24 years will continue to decline while those of 25-64 and 65+ will continue to rise for the coming decades.

So, what are the policy implications arising out of these two trends?

For those already in the 25-64 age bracket, James underscored the need for skilling. "Although the educational attainment of those already in this bracket is lower than what today's generation has, they can't be brought back to school. Skilling is the only way to ensure they are more productive and have better incomes. This is the major policy challenge for this cohort," said James.

The 65+ category is going to grow quite fast and it faces several challenges. Provisioning of social security is obviously a big challenge. This will stretch the resources of the future governments. In this context, James points out that if the aged stay within the family set-up, the burden on the government could be reduced. "If we go back to our roots and stick around as families, as against the western tendency to go for individualism, then the challenges would be less," he said.



INDIA'S DEMOGRAPHY AT CROSSROADS: ELDERLY MAY OUTNUMBER THE YOUTH

India's favourable demographic dividend is at an inflection point of sorts, with the population share of the youth starting to taper off even as the share of the elderly is expected to steadily surge during 2021-2036. The more populous states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, which experienced a rise in proportion of youth population to total population till 2021, are expected to see a decline from hereon, according to the 'Youth in India 2022' report released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

States such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh are projected to see a higher elderly population than the youth by 2036. "Bihar and Uttar Pradesh experienced a rise in proportion of youth population to total population till 2021 and then it is expected to start declining. These two states, along with Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, are projected to have over half (52 per cent) of the country's youth," the report said.

Citing the findings from the Report of Technical Group on Population Projections, 2020, constituted by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, this report said youth in the age group of 15-29 years comprise 27.2 per cent of the population for 2021, which is expected to decrease to 22.7 by 2036.

The proportion of the population aged under 15 years is projected to decline, the elderly in the population is expected to increase, the report said. "The youth population is expected to increase initially but will start to decline in the latter half of 2011-2036 period. The total youth population increased from 222.7 million in 1991 to 333.4 million in 2011 and is projected to reach 371.4 million by 2021 and, thereafter, decrease to 345.5 million by 2036," the report said.

For Kerala, which saw the youth population peak earlier than other states, the elderly population share in total population has been projected at 16.5 per cent compared with 22.1 per cent of youth population in 2021. The share of elderly in total population (22.8 per cent) in Kerala is then projected to cross the share of youth (19.2 per cent) by 2036. Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh are also projected to experience elderly population more than the youth by 2036, the report said.

A greater proportion of youth at present will result in a greater proportion of elderly in the population in future. "This will create a demand for better healthcare facilities and development of welfare schemes/programmes for elderly people," the report said.

Experts said the rise in the share of elderly population will put pressure on social security and public welfare systems and the next 4-5 years need to be utilised well to accelerate productive job creation. "We haven't utilised this period to create more productive employment to enhance savings and growth because that is what demographic dividend is all about. That window is closing. In the case of the southern states, where the share of the dependent population is predicted to increase, then it means how are you going to support the dependent population and what implications it will have on things like providing social security for the aged, pension and healthcare as longevity increases. That's the conversation that happens in advanced economies. The share of the elderly in the population starts rising as opposed to the young working age group. Given the fact that people are typically in informal employment that don't provide social security, then who is going to step in to provide social security that adds burden to the state. Those would be the kind of issues," Radhicka Kapoor, senior visiting fellow, ICRIER, said.



Proportion of youth to the total population had increased from 26.6 per cent in 1991 to 27.9 per cent in 2016 and then projected to start a downward trend and to reach 22.7 per cent by year 2036. On the contrary, the proportion of elderly population to the total population has increased from 6.8 per cent in 1991 to 9.2 per cent in 2016 and is projected to reach 14.9 per cent in 2036.

“We should have seen expansion in manufacturing. We have missed it. We are still aspiring to increase our share of employment in manufacturing, which we need to continue doing because even for the people who are currently seeking employment and are in current labour force, when they are going to retire and the share of elderly starts rising in very populous states, then it will be like a ticking time bomb. In the next 4-5 years, if active labour market policies are adopted to accelerate productive job creation, then we can at least try to ensure that the situation doesn't worsen,” Kapoor added.

HOW MUCH ALCOHOL IS UNSAFE, BASED ON AGE

Young people face higher health risks from alcohol consumption than older adults, according to a new analysis published in *The Lancet*. The analysis from the Global Burden of Disease is the first study to report alcohol risk by geographical region, age, and sex. Using estimates of alcohol use in 204 countries, researchers calculated that 1.34 billion people (1.03 billion males and 0.312 billion females) consumed harmful amounts in 2020.

Higher risk under 40

The analysis found males between ages 15-39 at the greatest risk of harmful alcohol consumption. In every region, males in this age group comprised the largest segment of the population drinking unsafe amounts. Among people who consumed unsafe amounts in 2020, 59.1% were in the 15-39 age group, and 76.7% of these were male.

In this age group, the analysis found no health benefits to drinking alcohol, only health risks, with 60% of alcohol-related injuries occurring among this segment, including motor vehicle accidents, suicides, and homicides.

In India, 1.85% females and 25.7% males in the 15-39 age group consumed unsafe amounts of alcohol in 2020. This was lower than 1.79% females and 23% males in the 40-64 age group who consumed unsafe amounts.

For adults over age 40, too, health risks vary by age and region. However, the authors note that consuming a small amount of alcohol (for example, between one and two 3.4-ounce glasses of red wine) can provide some health benefits for people in this age group, such as reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, and diabetes.

“Our message is simple: young people should not drink, but older people may benefit from drinking small amounts. While it may not be realistic to think young adults will abstain from drinking, we do think it's important to communicate the latest evidence so that everyone can make informed decisions about their health,” senior author Dr Emmanuela Gakidou, Professor of Health Metrics Sciences at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington's School of Medicine, said in the report.



Call for new guidelines

The authors suggested that global alcohol consumption recommendations should be based on age and location, with the strictest guidelines targeted toward the 15-39 age group. They stressed that the consumption level recommended by many existing guidelines is too high for young people in all regions.

Dr Pankaj Chaturvedi, Deputy Director, Tata Memorial Centre, Mumbai, told The Indian Express that they have written several letters to the Health Ministry to bring out an alcohol-related policy. "We are not asking for prohibition but there is an urgent need for limiting the consumption of alcohol. Due to peer pressure the age of drinking is coming down and there are children between 14-16 years who are consuming alcohol," he said.

How much to drink

The study also estimates how much alcohol a person can drink before taking on excess risk to their health, compared to someone who does not drink any alcohol.

AGE 15-39: For this group, the recommended amount of alcohol before risking health loss was 0.136 standard drinks per day. That amount was slightly higher for females at 0.273 drinks per day.

AGE 40-64: For those without underlying health conditions, safe alcohol consumption levels ranged from about half a standard drink per day (0.527 for males and 0.562 for females) to almost two standard drinks per day (1.69 for males and 1.82 for females).

EXERCISE KEEPS YOUR BRAIN YOUNG

The human brain reaches adult size by the age of 10; but its wiring and its abilities continue to change through a lifetime.

After the age of 40, the brain begins to shrink in volume. Less blood flows through the brain, and hormone and neurotransmitter levels go down. Ageing leads to slowing down in some functions such as the learning of new tasks.

Learning requires the formation of new connections in the brain, a property called neuroplasticity. Your brain is a dynamic entity that is constantly remodelling itself in response to new experiences.

Some brain structures show greater plasticity and rewiring than others. Ageing affects them more extensively than others. One such structure is the hippocampus. Located between the ears, it plays a key role in the formation and consolidation of new and lasting memories, and thus of learning and experience. It also creates mental maps of your surroundings, enabling you to find your way home.

Experiments have shown that the brains of older mice have fewer connections, called synapses, between their nerve cells and perform poorly in finding their way through mazes — indicating deficiencies in spatial learning.

MRI studies on the brains of London taxi drivers show that they have an enlarged hippocampus — the city's roads have been 'mapped' in the hippocampus, and this 'map' readily expands as experience is gained.



Human studies in this area, however, are confounded by large differences between individuals — some “Super Agers” can even compete with much younger people in memory tests.

Brain injuries

The brain’s capacity for rewiring and change is seen in the case of brain injuries resulting from trauma or from a stroke. A large number of brain cells die in such events, leading to a loss of some abilities. Yet over time, the brain remodels itself, leading to a full or partial restoration of lost abilities. This can be accelerated by medications, stem cell therapy and psychological interventions.

The aging process is often, but not always, accompanied by cognitive decline. Along with memory, executive functions may be impaired — these include the ability to plan and the ability to perform two or more tasks simultaneously.

These changes are a consequence of a reduced ability of the brain to rewire itself, of reduced neuroplasticity. But it is possible to change behavioral and lifestyle patterns to enhance the brain’s ability to adapt, and to function like a younger brain.

Regular exercise and sensible dietary choices are key elements in keeping your brain young, as is an aptitude for learning (mastering a new language, or musical instrument).

Benefits of exercise

In aging individuals, exercise reduces the risk from systemic disorders such as heart ailments and high blood pressure. Such disorders elevate the risk of dementia. Thus, exercise reduces the risk of dementia and debilitating conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease.

Regular exercise also helps you lose weight or at least stop gaining weight or regaining lost weight. The probability of occurrence of cancers of the lung, stomach, colon and bladder is lowered. Exercising individuals are less prone to anxiety and depression.

A significant benefit of exercise in older adults is the lowered risk of falls, and of fall-related injuries. Exercise enhances the stability of your posture, both while standing and when you are in motion, as your brain is being trained over and over to quickly respond to disturbances in your balance (Rogge et al., *Neuropsychologia*, 2019).

What type of exercise is better? Comparing the results from six months of aerobic endurance training (cycling indoors) with stretching/coordination training show us that in the 40-56 age group, both these activities lead to improvement in memory relative to sedentary individuals. These activities will of course improve cardiovascular fitness, and participants in the study, who showed the most improvement in their cardiovascular fitness, also had the best improvements in memory. Reverting to lethargy and lowering one’s fitness level negates the gains in memory functions (Hötting and Röder, *Neurosci. Behav. Rev.*, 2013).

Cognitive training, meaning exercising your brain, helps your brain to stay flexible. Combining this with physical exercise shows even better results in improving the cognitive abilities of older people.

The amount of exercise required is another question that older people may worry about.



Health and cognitive parameters in older individuals are often evaluated before and after a 10-minute routine involving some jogging and some walking, “enough to cause a mild sweat but not cause fatigue”. For those above 65, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends 30 minutes of brisk walking five or more times a week.

ARTIFICIAL DIET, FEEDING DEVICE FOR MOSQUITOES

The ICMR-Vector Control Research Centre (VCRC), Puducherry, has filed patent applications for two of its unique products — an artificial diet and a feeding device for mosquitoes reared in laboratory — with the Indian Patent Office recently.

The team has also planned to approach to patent it at the global level.

“Both the products have been awarded a unique number which will protect the Intellectual Property (IP) of both,” Dr. Ashwani Kumar, Director of VCRC said.

The two products allow efficient and cost-effective mass-rearing of mosquitoes in laboratory as it is important to keep these mosquitoes healthy to investigate basic facets of their biology and to study vector-borne disease and measures to control it.

Speaking about the products, Dr. Nisha Mathew, one of the inventors who formulated 18 different diets, said: “Mosquito females require animal or human blood diet to produce eggs. For this, blood has to be obtained from blood banks or live animals. Regular supply of blood from blood banks is not easy. Considering these challenges and huge potential demand, we have zeroed in on four artificial diets for feeding.”

She further explains, “These four diets prepared for female mosquitoes are like a baby formula food and have all the essential nutrients, which are present in the blood. These diets would attract hungry female mosquitoes to accept the meal, taste like blood, produce healthy and viable eggs which should hatch like normal eggs, form healthy offspring useful for laboratory research and mass production whenever necessary.”

Dr. Kumar said that the foods needed to be kept at a certain temperature. “It was very difficult to maintain the feed temperature to the optimum level of 37 degrees Celsius, which is human body temperature, by usual water circulation or by using the melted wax,” he said.

Dr. Mathew said, “Hence a device with controlled temperature was invented.”

The director said, “These products are a success story of an artificial mosquito diet and feeder that is commercially viable and has great potential in rearing mosquitoes for research purposes. It is also capable of mass production of mosquitoes for their control based on sterile insect technology, population replacement, or population reduction study and Wolbachia endosymbiont bacteria-based control operations.”

20 RED PANDAS TO MAKE A HOME IN THE FORESTS

The Singalila National Park, the highest protected area in West Bengal, will soon get new denizens. A zoo in the picturesque Darjeeling Hills has started an ambitious programme to augment the wild red panda population.



In the first rewilding programme of red pandas (*Ailurus fulgens*) in India, the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park will release 20 of these furry endangered mammals in about five years to the forests.

The number of red pandas has been declining in the wild, even in the Singalila and Neora Valley National Parks, the two protected areas where the mammal is found in the wild in West Bengal. Recent studies estimate that there are 38 of them in Singalila and 32 in Neora.

Basavaraj Holeyachi, Director of the zoological park who is at the centre of the Red Panda Augmentation Programme, says conservation breeding of red pandas is only one part of the programme. Selection of animals to be released in the wild, breaking their food association with humans and tagging the animals released in the wild are crucial factors in rewilding of the red panda population, he adds.

The Padmaja Naidu park, at a height of about 2,000 metres above the sea level, is one of the high-altitude zoos in the country and has been quite successful in captive breeding of the furry mammals.

With the birth of a couple of cubs a few weeks ago, the number of red pandas at the Darjeeling zoo has increased to 27. Dr. Holeyachi told The Hindu it was the coordination zoo for conservation breeding of red pandas in the country with decades of experience. He said most other high-altitude zoos were participatory zoos that have animals given by it.

In 2021, two pairs of red pandas were released in the Singalila park. While two died, signals were received from two animals who managed to survive in the wild. The zoo director said this year, three females are likely to be released in October in Singalila. Dr. Holeyachi said the whole process of selection and identification of animals to be released in the wild is time-consuming and meticulous.

Categorised as an endangered species as per IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, red pandas are shy, solitary and arboreal animals and considered an indicator species for ecological change.

HOW A CANCER DRUG CUTS THE RISK OF DEATH IN COVID-19 PATIENTS

A newly published phase-3 study for the drug sabizabulin, initially developed to fight cancer, has shown that it cuts risk of death by about one-fourth in patients hospitalized with moderate to severe Covid-19. The study – funded and conducted by the drug manufacturing company Veru – was published Wednesday in the New England Journal of Medicine.

What did the study look at and how?

The study, as its primary efficacy endpoint, looked at all-cause mortality, that is, proportion of patients who died during the study up to day 60 compared with placebo in the intent-to-treat population. The key secondary endpoints looked at differences in the trial and placebo arms in the days in the ICU, days on mechanical ventilation, and days in the hospital.

Eligible patients were required to meet the following criteria to be included in the study like being at least 18 years of age with laboratory-confirmed SARS-Cov-2 infection and baseline oxygen saturation (SpO₂) level of 94% or lower on room air. Further, they needed to have a WHO-defined 9-point ordinal scale for clinical improvement score of 4, with a documented comorbidity such as asthma, chronic lung disease, diabetes, hypertension, severe obesity, 65 years of age or older,



primarily residing in a nursing home or long-term care facility, or immunocompromised status, or WHO 5 status of noninvasive ventilation or high-flow oxygen, or WHO 6 status of intubation and mechanical ventilation.

Among those excluded from the study were pregnant and breast-feeding women, and patients on ventilation plus additional organ support such as long-term pressors, renal replacement therapy, or extracorporeal membrane oxygen.

What were the findings on mortality reduction among hospitalised Covid-19 patients?

According to the study, the “cumulative mortality analysis showed that the reduction in deaths with sabizabulin started within the first week of treatment and the relative reduction in deaths reached 51.8% at day 29”.

With 204 participants in the study — 134 were administered the drug and 70 others a placebo — sabizabulin treatment resulted in a 24.9 percentage point absolute reduction and a 55.2% relative reduction in deaths compared with placebo, among the subjects who were at high-risk for acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) and death, the study notes.

Further, the beneficial effects of sabizabulin were observed starting as early as day 3 after dosing and by day 15, “statistically significant reductions in mortality were observed” with the beneficial effect maintained through day 29, when the mortality rate was observed to be 17% in the sabizabulin group compared to 35.3% in the placebo arm.

This implies, the drug could reduce the risk of mortality by 18.3 percentage points by the 29th day.

From the 29th day to the 60th, the death rate increased by 9.8 percentage points in the placebo group, that is the mortality rate stood at 45.1% at the end of 60th day in the placebo group, and the death rate increased by 3.2 percentage points in the sabizabulin-treated group, that is the mortality rate stood at 20.2 percent for the drug group by the 60th day. This indicates the drug could reduce the mortality risk by 24.9 percentage -points when compared with the placebo group.

Did the drug impact hospitalization?

Further, the study claims that there was a 43 percentage point relative reduction in days in the ICU — with an average of 17.4 days spent by a sabizabulin subject compared to an average of 30.8 days spent by a placebo-arm subject in the ICU. The average days spent on mechanical ventilation too halved for the sabizabulin arm (14.4 days) compared to the placebo arm (28.5 days).

How does sabizabulin work?

The study notes that the drug, by targeting microtubule trafficking, has both dual anti-inflammatory and antiviral activity. According to Veru, the company which developed sabizabulin, the drug has shown in preclinical studies to have efficacy against many tumour types including castration resistant prostate cancer, triple negative breast cancer resistant to anthracyclines and taxanes as well as ovarian cancer, cervical cancer, lung cancer, melanoma, leukaemia, glioma, and pancreatic cancer.



CANCER HAS BEEN A SCOURGE FOR CENTURIES, ADVANCES IN SCIENCE HAVE MADE THE DISEASE FAR LESS INTRACTABLE

Last week, the University of Houston announced that its researchers have made significant improvements to a next-generation cancer therapy that kills tumour cells while leaving healthy tissues intact. The treatment uses genetically engineered or naturally occurring microbes — oncolytic viruses — that replicate in cancer cells and overwhelm them. The therapy also strengthens the cancer patient’s immune system against the tumour. However, this also means that, at times, the oncolytic viruses come up against the body’s natural defence system. At the University of Houston’s Centre for Nuclear Receptors and Cell Signaling, researchers used gene editing to cancel out such an immune response, enabling the anti-cancer microbes to work with all their might. Along with the breakthrough, last month, in anti-rectal cancer treatment, advances in the use of oncolytic viruses offer hope that cancerous tumours can be eliminated without the use of surgery or debilitating chemotherapy.

Cancer has been a scourge of humankind for centuries. Advances in molecular cell biology and genetics since the second half of the 20th century have made the disease far less intractable. Early tumour detection with non-invasive imaging such as CT, MRI and PET scans has helped in discriminating between aggressive and non-malignant tumours. There is a vaccine for cervical cancer. Scientists have taken important steps to unravel the complex linkages between individual immune systems and cancerous cells. Research has also underlined connections between the disease, local environments, cultural practices, and individual habits. Such facets of the disease could have been difficult to model or quantify about two decades ago. But advances in computational methods and the ability to generate and share big data have made it easier to arrive at a more granular understanding of the disease.

Cancer accounted for nearly 10 million deaths in 2020 — before the world was overtaken by the Covid pandemic, nearly one in six deaths was cancer-related. That two-thirds of all cancer deaths occur in low-and middle-income countries indicates the limited reach of this state-of-the-art research. For a large section of those who can access treatment, the high costs of modern-day healthcare often mean a devastating financial burden. Even in the US, a report of a Kaiser Family Foundation-NPR survey released last week has revealed that “two-thirds of adults with health care debt who have had cancer themselves or in their family have cut spending on food, clothing, or other household basics”. The Covid pandemic has re-ignited debates on making healthcare equitable and reforming practices — including patent systems — that lock out a large number of people from accessing healthcare. Cancer treatment should be an essential part of such conversations. It’s time the ground-breaking work in research labs reaches people who suffer from the disease.

WHAT INDIA’S FIRST HPV VACCINE COULD MEAN FOR FIGHT AGAINST CERVICAL CANCER

The Serum Institute of India (SII)’s vaccine Cervavac recently received the Drugs Controller General of India’s (DGCI) approval for market authorisation. Cervavac is India’s first quadrivalent human papillomavirus vaccine (qHPV) vaccine, and intended to protect women against cervical cancer.

Experts see this as a real opportunity to eliminate cervical cancer, and have expressed the hope that it will be rolled out in national HPV vaccination strategies, and be available a cost more affordable than existing vaccines.



The disease

Cervical cancer is preventable, but kills one woman every eight minutes in the country, said Dr Smita Joshi, senior scientist with Prayas health group, a public charitable trust working on sexuality, gender, and HIV/AIDS. It is preventable as long as it is detected early and managed effectively.

Cervical cancer is a common sexually transmitted infection. Long-lasting infection with certain types of HPV is the main cause of cervical cancer.

Worldwide, cervical cancer is the second most common cancer type and the second most common cause of cancer death in women of reproductive age (15–44). India accounts for about a fifth of the global burden, with 1.23 lakh cases and around 67,000 deaths per year according to the World Health Organization’s International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC-WHO).

“Screening and vaccination are two powerful tools that are available for preventive cervical cancer. Still there is little awareness among women for prevention of this cancer and less than 10% of Indian women get screened. All women aged 30-49 must get screened for cervical cancer even if they have no symptoms and get their adolescent daughters vaccinated with HPV vaccine,” Dr Joshi said.

Existing vaccines

Two vaccines licensed globally are available in India — a quadrivalent vaccine (Gardasil, from Merck) and a bivalent vaccine (Cervarix, from GlaxoSmithKline). Each dose costs Rs 2,800 per dose (Gardasil) or Rs 3,299 (Cervarix).

Although HPV vaccination was introduced in 2008, it has yet to be included in the national immunisation programme.

According to a report in the Indian Journal of Gynaecologic Oncology (December 2021), a vaccine delivery and demonstration project led by international non-profit organisation PATH was started in 2009 in Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat but had to be suspended in 2010 as a result of public concern allegedly arising from the deaths of seven girls who received the vaccine.

In 2016, a multidisciplinary expert group of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) reviewed available evidence globally regarding immunogenicity and efficacy, adverse effects and cost effectiveness of HPV vaccines, and recommended that adolescent girls should be vaccinated with two doses.

The new vaccine

The vaccine is based on VLP (virus like particles), similar to the hepatitis B vaccine, and provides protection by generating antibodies against the HPV virus’s L1 protein.

Experts have expressed hope that the DGCI approval will allow the government to procure enough HPV vaccines at a special price to vaccinate nearly 50 million girls aged 9–14 years in India who are waiting to receive the vaccine. This will be a huge step to accelerate cervical cancer elimination in India and globally, a statement from IARC-WHO has said.

“It will be great to see this vaccine being rolled out in the national HPV vaccination strategies in India and globally. We have a real opportunity to eliminate cervical cancer which causes a lot of



death and suffering worldwide among women,” WHO chief scientist Dr Soumya Swaminathan told The Indian Express.

SII received the DCGI’s authorisation in the second week of July. SII plans to launch the vaccine by the end of the year, although officials said it was too early to comment on the quantities. “In particular, this vaccine is very important for adolescent girls as teenagers and upwards to protect them against cervical cancer,” said Adar Poonawalla, CEO of SII told The Indian Express.

Trial results

Scientists from IARC were part of a collaboration between the Department of Biotechnology of the Government of India, US States National Institutes of Health, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to support the evaluation of the vaccine in females and males aged 9–26. This model of public–private partnership resulted in completion of phase II and phase III trials, despite the pandemic, IARC- WHO said.

Clinical trials commenced in early 2019, involving thousands of participants across 12 sites in the country. Phase III trials show a robust immune response in 100% of the vaccine recipients with excellent safety records, according to SII officials.

Vaccination can be started at the relatively young age of nine.

Dr Sanjay Gupte, former President of Federation of Obstetric and Gynaecological Society of India, said that vaccination is extremely effective when administered before the first sexual intercourse. Dr Gupte agreed that it was difficult to convince women to get screened for cervical cancer, and hence this development is of immense importance.

JAPAN’S SECRET TO TAMING THE CORONAVIRUS: PEER PRESSURE

To understand how Japan has fared better than most of the world in containing the dire consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, consider Mika Yanagihara, who went shopping for flowers this past week in central Tokyo. Even when walking outside in temperatures in the mid-90s, she kept the lower half of her face fully covered.

“People will stare at you,” Yanagihara, 33, said, explaining why she did not dare take off her mask. “There is that pressure.”

Japan’s COVID death rate, just one-twelfth of that in the United States, is the lowest among the world’s wealthiest nations. With the world’s third-largest economy and 11th-largest populace, Japan also tops global rankings in vaccination and has consistently had one of the globe’s lowest infection rates.

Although no government authority has ever mandated masks or vaccinations or instituted lockdowns or mass surveillance, Japan’s residents have largely evaded the worst ravages of the virus. Instead, in many ways, Japan let peer pressure do a lot of the work.

Even now, as average daily cases have fallen to just 12 per 100,000 residents — about one-third of the U.S. average — a government survey in May found that close to 80% of people working in offices or enrolled in school wear masks and about 90% do so when using public transit. Movie theaters, sports stadiums and shopping malls continue to request that visitors wear masks, and for the most part, people comply. The term “face pants” has become a buzzword, implying that dropping a mask would be as embarrassing as taking off one’s underwear in public.



Many factors have undoubtedly contributed to Japan's coronavirus outcomes, including a nationalized health care system and severe border controls that have outlasted those in many other countries.

But social conformity — and a fear of public shaming that is instilled from the youngest ages — has been a key ingredient in Japan's relative success in COVID prevention, experts say. Unlike in many other countries, Japanese law does not permit the government to order lockdowns or vaccinations. The majority of the population followed one another in heeding guidance from scientific experts who encouraged people to wear masks and avoid situations where they would be in enclosed, unventilated areas with large crowds.

After a slow start, once Japan ramped up the distribution of vaccines, most people followed advisories to get them. Even without mandates, close to 90% of all people older than 65, the most vulnerable population, have received booster shots, compared with 70% of U.S. seniors.

Unlike in the United States, wearing a mask or getting a vaccine never became ideological litmus tests. Although trust in government has fallen during the pandemic, in a country where the same party has governed for all but four years since 1955, the public put pragmatism over politics in the approach to COVID.

Children are taught to act for the collective benefit. Students clean classroom floors and school grounds and take turns serving lunch in cafeterias.

Japanese culture also depends on an ethic of public self-restraint that can be marshalled into group action. When Emperor Hirohito was dying in 1988, pop singers postponed weddings and schools cancelled festivals.

After the 2011 nuclear disaster in Fukushima led to serious power shortages, the public cut back on electricity use voluntarily. (With temperatures rising in Tokyo this past week, residents are being asked to do so again.)

During the pandemic, politicians tapped “into this collective idea of self-restraint for the public good,” said James Wright, an anthropologist at the Alan Turing Institute in London who has studied Japan's coronavirus response.

When the coronavirus emerged from China in early 2020, Japan was among the first countries where it showed up, spreading in small clusters and aboard the Diamond Princess, a cruise ship that docked in Yokohama and suffered a large outbreak. Japanese experts quickly realized that the virus was airborne and that the best way to reduce its spread was to keep people from gathering in small, unventilated spaces or having close contact with others.

With few legal options for enforcing the guidance, authorities hoped the population would voluntarily comply with pleas to stay home, said Hitoshi Oshitani, a professor of virology at Tohoku University in north-eastern Japan and a government adviser.

Despite Japan's culture of collectivism, Oshitani was surprised when businesses quickly closed and people refrained from going out. Companies that had never allowed telecommuting sent employees home with laptops. Families cancelled visits to older relatives. Close to 200 industry groups representing theatres, professional sports teams, and venues that hosted weddings and funerals issued lengthy protocols for preventing infections.



The public embraced the guidelines, and the overall death rate actually fell below that of the year immediately preceding the coronavirus outbreak.

Although the public has provided most of the sticks, the government has offered carrots in the form of economic subsidies for businesses.

In 2020, the country paid out more than \$40.5 billion to more than 4.2 million small- to medium-size companies and individual business owners, according to statistics from the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry.

Larger businesses received “cooperation money” based on their pre-pandemic revenue, as much as 200,000 yen — just under \$1,500 — a day.

The incentives were not universally effective. In the first summer of the pandemic, clusters of infections began appearing in nightlife districts in central Tokyo, as visitors to bars and cabarets ignored the experts’ advice.

When businesses flouted guidance on ventilation, masking and alcohol-sanitizing, city officials were dispatched to convince them to fall in line. Only as a last resort were businesses fined or cut off from economic subsidies. In Tokyo, according to the city’s Bureau of Industrial and Labour Affairs, between 96% and 98% of businesses ultimately agreed to follow the rules.

Experts warn that voluntary compliance is no guarantee of indefinite success. “The response is like an Othello game,” said Oshitani, comparing Japan’s coronavirus results to the board game where one move can change a winning outcome to a losing one. “All of a sudden, the most successful countries can become the worst country in the world,” he said.

STUDY FINDS THREE ASYMPTOMATIC MONKEYPOX CASES

Monkeypox is transmitted by close contact with people who have symptomatic infection, and all those infected are assumed to show symptoms. But a recent study has found that people can be infected with monkeypox without showing any of the typical or atypical symptoms. The preprint has been posted in medRxiv server, which is yet to be peer-reviewed.

The study found three men tested positive for monkeypox but have no symptoms whatsoever. “All three men denied having had any symptoms in the weeks before and after the sample was taken. None of them reported exposure to a diagnosed monkeypox case, nor did any of their contacts develop clinical monkeypox,” the preprint notes.

Symptoms assumed

Similar to smallpox, everyone who is infected with monkeypox is expected to develop symptoms, and the virus is considered to spread through close contact with people who show symptoms. Since every individual infected with monkeypox is assumed to develop symptoms, and since close contact is most often needed for the virus to spread, it is considered that staying away from infected people and maintaining simple hygienic measures can halt the spread of monkeypox virus, as observed in several outbreaks in endemic regions.

But asymptomatic transmission can change and challenge the efforts to contain the monkeypox outbreak, which till July 4 has been reported in 6,027 people across 59 countries, including those in endemic countries in Africa.



According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the “extent to which asymptomatic infection may occur is unknown”.

The researchers retrospectively screened 224 clinical samples collected for sexually transmitted infection (gonorrhoea or chlamydia) throughout the month of May 2022 with a monkeypox-specific PCR. And they found evidence of asymptomatic monkeypox virus infection in three individuals. They tested anorectal and/or oropharyngeal samples collected from 224 people at the HIV/STI clinic of the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp, Belgium.

All the three men who tested positive for monkeypox were informed about their diagnosis and recalled to the clinic for additional case investigation and contact tracing. Follow-up samples were collected from all three men when they were recalled to the clinic. The repeat samples collected 21-27 days later were all negative.

At the time they were recalled to the clinic, none of them showed signs or symptoms of monkeypox and all denied having noticed any symptoms during the two months prior or three weeks after initial sampling, the authors write. All three men had condomless sexual intercourse with at least one male partner within a few days to one month before the sampling.

The authors note that one of the three men who tested positive for monkeypox and was asymptomatic predated the first detected symptomatic case in Belgium by several days. There was no epidemiological link to any other monkeypox case, nor did he report international travel or participation in mass gatherings.

“This may indicate that monkeypox virus circulated among asymptomatic individuals in Belgium before the outbreak was detected,” they write.

The researchers also note that the cycle threshold (Ct) values in anorectal samples taken from the asymptomatic men were “similar or lower than those in samples taken from typical monkeypox skin lesions”. Based on the lower Ct values of anorectal samples, the researchers note that the “anorectal mucosa of asymptomatic cases may be as infectious as skin lesions of symptomatic cases”.

Similar viral loads

The anorectal cycle threshold values of symptomatic cases were in the same range as those who did not show symptoms. This, according to the authors, suggests similar viral loads immaterial of whether they showed symptoms or not. “This would support the hypothesis that monkeypox virus can be transmitted via anal sex, even in the absence of symptoms,” they write.

They also add, “It is possible that in the current outbreak in non-endemic settings, asymptomatic carriership plays a more substantial role in virus transmission... In the current outbreak, the skin eruption often remains localised at the site of inoculation, and the mode of transmission seems to be sexual. In this case, asymptomatic carriership, especially with high viral loads in the anal mucosa, could, therefore, be a significant driver of transmission.”

Unnoticed skin lesions

While they state that transmission of the virus in the absence of noticeable symptoms might explain why self-isolation at symptom onset has been insufficient to halt the epidemic thus far, they caution that the three men may not have been completely free of symptoms at first presentation when samples were collected. This is because no clinical examination was conducted

then and no symptoms were reported then due to recall bias or because the small skin lesions went unnoticed.

But more studies are needed to confirm or refute the findings of these researchers. Meanwhile, more efforts should be directed at identifying asymptomatic cases through increased contact tracing, and screening high risk populations, they say.



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