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INTERNATIONAL

PUTIN DECLARES MARTIAL LAW IN FOUR UNILATERALLY ANNEXED REGIONS OF UKRAINE

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday he was introducing martial law in four Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine that Moscow last month claimed as its own territory.

In televised remarks to members of his Security Council, Putin also instructed the government to set up a special coordinating council under Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin to work with Russia's regions to boost Moscow's war effort in Ukraine.

The moves, nearly eight months into the war, marked the latest escalation by Putin to counter a series of major defeats at the hands of Ukrainian forces since the start of September. They came on the same day that Russian-installed officials in Kherson, one of the four occupied regions, told civilians to leave some areas as soon as possible in anticipation of an imminent Ukrainian attack.

Putin said the measures he was ordering would increase the stability of the economy, industry and production in support of what Russia calls its special military operation. "We are working on solving very complex, large-scale tasks to ensure a reliable future for Russia, the future of our people," he said.

WHAT ARE THE IRANIAN KAMIKAZE DRONES, ALLEGEDLY DEPLOYED BY RUSSIA IN UKRAINE?

Ukraine's capital region was struck by Iranian-made kamikaze drones early Thursday (October 14), Ukrainian officials said. The Deputy head of the presidential office Kyrylo Tymoshenko said "critical infrastructure facilities" in the area were hit, The Associated Press reported. The extent of damage was not elaborated on by officials.

Three drones struck the small town of Makariv, situated west of the Ukrainian capital Kyiv. These kamikaze drones are not new, and have also been supplied by the US to Ukraine in its ongoing war with Russia.

What are Kamikaze drones?

These are small unmanned aircraft packed with explosives that can be flown directly at a tank or a group of troops that are destroyed when it hits the target and explodes. The name comes from the World War 2 era's feared Japanese kamikaze pilots, who conducted suicide attacks by intentionally crashing their explosive filled aircraft into enemy targets.

The modern drone versions have the capability of surpassing traditional defences to strike their targets and are also cheaper than their larger counterparts. The small lethal drones are difficult to detect on radar, and through the use of facial recognition, can be programmed to hit targets without human intervention.

What is Ukraine alleging?

In late September, Ukraine said it would downgrade diplomatic ties with Iran and strip the ambassador of his accreditation over Tehran's "unfriendly" decision to supply Russian forces with drones, Reuters reported.



“Supplying Russia with weapons to wage war against Ukraine is an unfriendly act that deals a serious blow to relations between Ukraine and Iran,” said a statement on the foreign ministry’s website.

“In response to such an unfriendly act the Ukrainian side has decided to deprive the ambassador of Iran of his accreditation and also to significantly reduce the number of diplomatic staff of the Iranian embassy in Kyiv,” it added. Military authorities also said they shot down Shahed-136 unmanned aerial vehicles.

Although the US Kamikaze might be the most advanced in this class of drones, Russia, China, Israel, Iran and Turkey all have some versions of it.

The US kamikaze drones are cheaper than most other drones made in the country, and come in two sizes, according to AeroVironment, the manufacturer. The Switchblade 300 suicide drone weighs about five pounds (2.26 kilograms), can fly for up to 15 minutes at a time, and is designed to be carried in a backpack. The Switchblade 600, by comparison, weighs about 50 pounds, can fly for up to 40 minutes, and is known as a “loitering missile” that can hover around an area for some time and target armoured vehicles.

GERMAN CHANCELLOR SAYS RUSSIA USING ‘SCORCHED-EARTH TACTICS’: WHAT IS THIS STRATEGY

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz Thursday (October 20) said Russian President Vladimir Putin was using “energy and hunger” as weapons but his “scorched earth tactics” would not help Russia win the war over Ukraine.

What are scorched earth tactics?

Scholz’s comments came as Ukraine was forced to ask its residents to cut down on electricity usage amid sustained Russian bombing of energy infrastructure. In a video address on Wednesday, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky asked his countrymen to limit electricity consumption between 5 pm and 11 pm.

Scorched earth tactics form part of a military strategy which seeks to destroy anything that could be of use to the enemy, including energy supplies, bridges, provision stores, agricultural fields, road and railway links, etc. The destruction could be carried out by the enemy, or by the retreating army of a country which does not want invaders to use its resources. Harming civilians as part of this strategy has been banned under the 1977 Geneva Convention.

According to the Oxford Reference, the “term was first used in English in 1937 in a report of the Sino-Japanese conflict, and is apparently a translation of Chinese jiāotǔ.”

The strategy seeks to deplete the enemy’s resources to sustain warfare, and also break their morale by inflicting heavy hardships on combatants and non-combatants alike.

Over the past week, Russia has rained missiles on Ukraine’s cities, destroying civilian infrastructure, including power and water supply lines. As winter approaches, lack of electricity is likely to cause serious suffering. Experts have commented that the tactic is being used by Russia as on the actual battlefield, its military is experiencing setbacks.



According to a Wall Street Journal report, Ukrainian cities are “highly dependent on reliable electricity supplies and centralised heating. Any disruption to these during winter can cause pipes to burst and render high-rises uninhabitable.”

Some past instances

Scorched earth policy has been part of warfare since ancient times, with the nomad Scythians using the tactics in their war against the Persian Achaemenid Empire led by King Darius the Great (who ruled 522 BCE to 486 BCE). The nomadic herders Scythians would hide in the steppes after destroying food supplies and poisoning wells.

A notable example of the use of this tactic came during the American civil war in 1864, when Union General William Tecumseh Sherman and his soldiers burnt everything in sight as they marched through Confederate areas. The campaign, known as the March to the Sea, is estimated to have cost the South close to \$100 million. Sherman’s men pillaged farms, destroyed railway tracks and factories, set fire to cotton crops, and even burnt land deeds so that plantation owners would not be able to prove ownership.

The campaign played a major role in breaking the will of the Confederacy and hastening the end of the war.

Russia itself has used scorched-earth tactics before, including in the World Wars. In 1915, the Imperial Russian Army, when retreating from the Imperial German Army, destroyed anything that could serve the invaders for more than 600 miles, including crops, railway lines, and dwellings.

During the Second World War, in 1941, the Russian army again destroyed telegraph networks and electrical and industrial resources when invaded by Germany.

In India

In India, the armies of Maratha leader Chhatrapati Shivaji were known for their scorched earth tactics. Some historians have said that while the Maratha leaders looted and burnt enemy towns, they were under orders to not harm civilians or desecrate religious sites.

NURTURE DIVERSITY BY CONDEMNING HATE SPEECH UNEQUIVOCALLY: UN CHIEF

Making a strong pitch for the protection of human rights and pluralism in India, UN Secretary-General António Guterres on Wednesday urged Indians to condemn hate speech. Addressing a gathering at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)-Bombay, Mr. Guterres said India’s global role will benefit if “concrete actions” are taken in support of the “rights and freedoms of journalists, human rights activists, students and academics”.

“Diversity is a richness that makes your country stronger. That understanding...must be nurtured, strengthened and renewed every day by practising the values of Gandhi; by securing and upholding the rights and dignity of all people, especially the most vulnerable; by taking concrete action for inclusion, recognising the enormous value and contributions of multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies; by condemning hate speech unequivocally,” Mr. Guterres said.

India was re-elected on October 13 to the UN Human Rights Council but the country’s recent human rights record has received criticism from a number of UN experts who have called upon New Delhi to ensure the safety of human rights activists, journalists and student leaders like



Teesta Setalvad, Rana Ayyub, Siddique Kappan and Umar Khalid, who have been in the focus of government agencies.

“I urge Indians to be vigilant and to increase your investments in an inclusive, pluralistic, diverse community and society,” Mr. Guterres said.

“As an elected member of the Human Rights Council, India has a responsibility to shape global human rights, and to protect and promote the rights of all individuals,” he added.

Mr. Guterres referred to the impact of the Ukraine crisis that has engulfed the commodities market across the world and said: “I urge India to continue speaking up for peace; to expand its global leadership; to align its development and its foreign policy with the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) and the Paris Agreement; to find innovative solutions to today’s global crises.”

Mr. Guterres praised India’s non-violent struggle for Independence from colonial rule. He said the upcoming Presidency of India at the G-20 will provide an opportunity for highlighting the “values and vision of the developing world”.

Earlier, Mr. Guterres visited the memorial for the victims of the 26/11 terror attack in Mumbai and spoke against violent extremism, saying, “Fighting terrorism must be a global priority for every country on earth.”

SWEDISH PARLIAMENT ELECTS CONSERVATIVE PRIME MINISTER, TO SEE A THREE-PARTY COALITION

The Swedish parliament on Monday elected Ulf Kristersson — the conservative Moderate Party leader — as Prime Minister at the head of a minority coalition that is being supported by a once-radical far-right party.

Mr. Kristersson, 59, was elected by a vote of 176 to 173 and will present his government on Tuesday. His three-party coalition does not have a majority, but in Sweden, Prime Ministers can govern as long as there is no parliamentary majority against them.

After a month of talks with the anti-immigration populist Sweden Democrats, Mr. Kristersson presented an agreement that gave them an unprecedented position of influence in Swedish politics. They took over 20% of the vote at the September 11 election.

Mr. Kristersson’s centre-right coalition government is made up of his party, the Liberals and the Christian Democrats, but he has said it will remain in “close collaboration” with the Sweden Democrats. He depends on the support of the Sweden Democrats to secure a majority in Parliament, enabling them to influence government policy from the sidelines.

The Sweden Democrats were founded in the 1980s by far-right extremists. They toned down their rhetoric and expelled openly racist members under Jimmie Akesson, who took over the party in 2005.

Heading committees

Since the election, the populist party has landed the chairmanships of four parliamentary committees, giving it the ability to wield more influence in mainstream Swedish politics.



Mr. Kristersson will be replacing Magdalena Andersson, who heads Sweden's largest party, the Social Democrats, which now are in Opposition. He backs Sweden's historic bid to join NATO following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February.

"It feels great, I am grateful," Mr. Kristersson told a press conference. "I am happy about the trust that I have received from the Riksdag. I am also humbled by the tasks that lie ahead of us."

The center-left Opposition heavily criticised the new governing coalition, with Lena Hallgren of the Social Democrats, calling it "a strange construction."

Many said it represented a paradigm shift in Sweden and would damage its image in the world as an egalitarian and tolerant nation. Nooshi Dadgostar, the leader of the former communist Left Party, said her parents who fled from Iran could never have imagined that Sweden would embark on an authoritarian path.

THROUGH CHOPPY SEAS

The ignominious resignation of U.K. Prime Minister Liz Truss this week may have supplied a momentary pause to the anxieties faced by the British people over months of government fumbling amidst deteriorating macroeconomic conditions, but it is hardly a panacea to what ails the economy. After a disastrous performance in office that belied the promise of putting the Conservative Party's house in order, Ms. Truss quit 45 days after entering Downing Street, the shortest ever time that a British PM has served. The pinnacle of the Truss government's fiasco was the "mini budget" of September 23, in which she and her erstwhile Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, displayed a breath-taking lack of sensitivity to market fragility and announced £45 billion of unfunded tax cuts. No one ought to have been surprised at the crisis that that event triggered: soaring bond yields necessitating emergency intervention in the bond market by the Bank of England, undoubtedly scuppering the central bank's attempts to get a handle on rising inflation. Firing Mr. Kwarteng, which Ms. Truss did despite backing him in formulating their tone-deaf policy proposals, hardly helped, as the crisis spiralled, causing the pound to lose value against the dollar and mortgage rates to climb, bringing economic hardship to Britons.

The U.K. recently lost its place as the world's fifth largest economy to India. At a dangerous moment in the global political economy, when Russia's invasion of Ukraine has stemmed the flow of natural gas to Europe and the U.K., leading to alarming spikes in household bills in these countries, the Conservative Party needs to ensure that a competent PM and Cabinet are quickly installed and get to work. The public mood on this point has darkened: recent polling suggests that the Labour Party is poised to sweep to power should there be a general election, even if such an event is not likely until January 2025. The revolving door at 10 Downing Street might see former Chancellor Rishi Sunak anointed as the third PM within one year or, ominously, Boris Johnson is said to be in the reckoning again despite the debacle following the Partygate scandal. The immediate task at hand for whoever is the head of government will be to set right damaged ties with Europe so that trade links are restored, and supply side bottlenecks can be resolved, and to rework immigration policies so as to reinvigorate the flagging productivity levels of the U.K. economy. If the Tories turn out not to be the party capable of the nimble, intuitive policymaking required to dig the U.K. economy out of this morass, perhaps British voters will decide to bring in their political opposition to get the job done.

WHY IS JAPAN'S UNIFICATION CHURCH BEING INVESTIGATED?



The story so far:

On October 17, the Japanese government ordered an immediate investigation into the Unification Church, a religious group that has come under scrutiny after the assassination of the country's former Premier Shinzo Abe, as the suspected assassin revealed that he targeted Mr. Abe owing to his ties with the Church. Revelations about the association of nearly half of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lawmakers with the religious group has resulted in public anger against the government of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.

What is the Unification Church?

The Unification Church is a religious group, often described as a 'cult' by critics, founded by late Reverend Sun Myung Moon in 1954 in South Korea. The Church, known for its ultra-conservative and anti-communist views, first expanded its international reach in Japan in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Reverend Moon, who died in 2012, was a self-declared messiah who tapped into the Japanese demographic by invoking traditional family values and leveraging a feeling of guilt over the country's past colonisation of the Korean Peninsula. According to The New York Times, an ardent Korean nationalist, Mr. Moon had an ambivalence toward Japan and told his followers that their country and ancestors had sinned greatly for which they had to sacrifice everything for the Church. Members were recruited in Japan through door-to-door campaigns, engaging relatives of existing members, railway station drives and university campaigns. The religious group collected massive donations from its adherents in multiple ways. Mr. Moon reportedly used these donations to expand his business empire and the Church's affiliated organisations.

Why is it facing public backlash?

Former followers of the Church have come out over the decades as victims of brainwashing and monetary exploitation.

Late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's suspected assassin, 41-year-old Tetsuya Yamagami confessed to the police that he targeted Mr. Abe because of his ties with the Unification Church, which he said had pushed his mother into bankruptcy and destroyed his family. Mr. Yamagami said that the Church managed to extract nearly 100 million yen (\$7,36,000) from his mother in the past two decades. The Church confirmed that his mother had indeed been a member of the group since 1998 and further stated that it had paid back 50 million yen to Mr. Yamagami's mother as part of a settlement in 2009. According to victims of the group's exploitation, the Church extracts huge amounts through 'spiritual pressure-sales' and by selling religious or blessed items and even blessings for exorbitant prices.

What is known about its political ties?

In 1968, Mr. Moon established the Federation for Victory Over Communism, the Church's political wing, and during the Cold War, used the anti-communist sentiment to get into the circles of global political leaders including those in Japan and the U.S. Mr. Abe, while not a member of the Church, was reported to have participated in multiple events of platforms associated with it. After Mr. Abe's assassination, an internal probe by the ruling LDP found that 179 of 379 lawmakers of the party had ties with the church. This subsequently pushed Mr. Kishida's approval ratings to record lows and forced a cabinet reshuffle, which included removing Mr. Abe's brother and former Defence Minister, Nobuo Kishi, from his post. Mr. Kishida further said that he would humbly listen to the people's "harsh voices" criticising his governing party's ties to the Church and help victims of its allegedly fraudulent businesses and huge donation collection.



WHAT IS CHINA'S 'WOLF WARRIOR' DIPLOMACY?

With the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) 20th National Congress set to begin on Sunday (October 16), it is widely expected that Chinese President Xi Jinping will get an endorsement for a third term as President. Under Xi, China has witnessed a unique style of governance, which differs in many ways from that of more recent Chinese leaders.

As China's position has undergone a change in world affairs over the years, Xi has advocated for a more intensive approach towards handling issues both domestically and internationally. The "wolf warrior" style of Chinese diplomacy particularly attracted attention.

What does wolf warrior diplomacy mean?

A term that gained popularity, especially after Xi became President, "wolf warrior diplomacy" is a tactic for the Chinese government to extend its ideology beyond China and counter the West and defend itself. It is an unofficial term for the more aggressive and confrontational style of communication that Chinese diplomats have taken to in the last decade.

A 2015 Chinese action film, titled 'Wolf Warrior', and its sequel have served as the inspiration for the term. The films, with their nationalist themes and dialogues, focus on Chinese fighters who frequently face off against Western mercenaries.

A Financial Times article from 2020 noted how the term was directly linked to Xi's ideas. Steve Tsang, director of the SOAS China Institute in London, was quoted as saying, "Xi has said multiple times that Chinese officials and diplomats must unsheath swords to defend the dignity of China," he said. "The wolf warriors are just acting on Xi's call to arms."

What is the need for wolf warrior diplomacy?

The change in strategy has been attributed to many reasons, such as Xi's more authoritarian tendencies as compared to earlier leaders, deteriorating US-China relations under former US President Donald Trump, the coronavirus pandemic-related accusations on China, etc.

According to Chinese officials, the move is simply about standing up to what they believe is Western interference. The South China Morning Post quoted China's foreign vice-minister Le Yucheng saying in December 2020 that the term was rhetorical "tit-for-tat".

Le told a conference at a university in Beijing that the term was a "misunderstanding of China's diplomacy", adding: "Now that they are coming to our doorstep, interfering in our family affairs, constantly nagging at us, insulting and discrediting us, we have no choice but to firmly defend our national interests and dignity."

What does this look like in practice?

Some examples can be seen in the form of messaging on social media too, where Chinese officials are quick to counter any allegations by the West and proactively launch attacks.

For instance, in 2021 Chinese government spokesperson Lijian Zhao tweeted a digitally modified photo of an Australian soldier killing a child, claiming the Australian army was killing children in Afghanistan. This led the Australian Prime Minister to announce he would seek an official apology, but China did not budge.



But this is not limited to Western countries. As C Raja Mohan, director, of the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, wrote in The Indian Express, “The new ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’ confronts head-on any criticism of China in the public sphere. They lecture host governments and don’t always show up when ‘summoned’ by foreign offices. Delhi has been at the receiving end for a while — especially during the recent crises of Doklam and Ladakh.”

Will it continue in Xi’s third term?

It is difficult to say because Chinese diplomats’ comments have not gone unchallenged by countries. They can also damage China’s perception among allies, so there have been attempts to strike a balance.

In June 2021, President Xi Jinping asked China’s official media and diplomats to present the image of a “credible, lovable and respectable China” to the world.

“It is necessary to make friends, unite and win over the majority, and constantly expand the circle of friends [when it comes to] international public opinion,” Xi was quoted as saying.

HELD UP BY THE CHINESE

The story so far:

On Wednesday, China placed a “hold” on a joint India-U.S. proposal, to designate Lashkar-e-Taiba commander Shahid Mehmood under the United Nations Security Council’s (UNSC) 1267 list of terrorists affiliated to Al Qaeda and ISIS. The hold marked the fourth time China had attempted to block a listing move by India and the U.S. in the past four months.

What does “placing a hold” mean?

The 1267 committee that was set up in 1999 (updated in 2011 and 2015) allows any UN member state to propose adding the name of a terrorist or terror group to a consolidated list, maintained by the Committee, that has affiliations to Al Qaeda and ISIS. India has successfully proposed the listing of several terror entities in the past two decades, including Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba. According to the rules, once a listing is proposed, it will be adopted into the list according to a “no-objections” procedure: which means, if any member of the Committee, which comprises all members of the UN Security Council, places a hold on the listing or objects outright to it, the listing cannot be adopted. As a permanent member of the UNSC, China can do this any number of times as its term doesn’t run out, and it carries a veto vote.

The Committee is bound to resolve all such pending issues within six months, but can allow extensions, meaning that technically at the end of the six-month period, the “holding” country has to decide whether to accept the listing or place a permanent objection to it. However, in practice, many of the listing proposals have had prolonged waits.

What are the reasons China has given for holding the listings?

Since 2001, China has placed holds on a number of listing proposals relating mainly to Pakistan-based groups and their leaders, given the close bilateral ties between the two countries. Most notable was China’s objections to the listing of JeM founder Masood Azhar. Azhar was released from prison by India in 1999 and handed over to terrorists in return for hostages onboard Indian Airlines flight IC-814, which should have left little doubt about Azhar’s own status as a terrorist. While the JeM was listed at the UNSC in 2001, and Azhar was mentioned as the group’s founder,



he wasn't designated for several years. Even after the Parliament attack and the Mumbai 26/11 attacks, China kept placing a hold on the UNSC terror listing proposals for him: in 2009, 2010, 2016-18, claiming it had "inadequate information" on Masood Azhar's terror activities. In May 2019, three months after the Pulwama attacks that were traced to the JeM, China finally withdrew its hold.

When asked by The Hindu in August this year for a reason for the persistent "holds" on India's requests for various terror listings, Chinese Ambassador to India Sun Weidong said they needed "some time to study these specific cases, but that doesn't mean China has changed its position on counter-terrorism cooperation efforts." In addition, it is possible that China objects to the listing proposals being brought by a group of countries, especially the joint proposals by India and the U.S. rather than by India alone, but has never given any comprehensive reason for the holds. At the UNSC meet in August, India's Permanent Representative to the UN Ruchira Khamboj had called for an end to the practice of placing holds and blocks on listing requests "without giving any justification". "It is most regrettable that genuine and evidence-based listing proposals pertaining to some of the most notorious terrorists in the world are being placed on hold. Double standards and continuing politicisation have rendered the credibility of the sanctions regime at an all-time low."

Does India have options?

Since the Mumbai attacks in 2008, India has tried a number of different ways to build international consensus on cross-border terrorism, and the UNSC terror listings have been one such route. While China has blocked many of the listings, there are hundreds of names of terrorists and entities in Pakistan that pose a threat to India. As a UN member state, Pakistan has an obligation under the sanctions to block access for all designated entities to funds, arms and travel outside its jurisdiction.

This is something India has also pursued with the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force, where Pakistan was placed on a "grey list" due to its inability to curb terror financing and money laundering from 2012-2015 and 2018-2022. While Pakistan is likely to be taken off that list this week, it has had to carry out several actions against terror entities on its soil, and will continue to be under scrutiny.

Finally, India and the U.S. have built their own separate list of "most wanted" terrorists that document the cases against them, with a view to eventually receiving global cooperation on banning them.

PAKISTAN MAY BE BACK TO BACKING IMRAN KHAN

Imran Khan's rout of the ruling People's Democratic Movement in by-elections to the National Assembly and the Punjab Assembly was no surprise. The former prime minister and Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf leader has been more popular since his removal from office than he was as the head of government. Then, his own followers were deserting him in droves, disappointed at his inability to fix governance and his obsession with fixing political rivals instead. But immediately after his ouster, Khan was able to mobilise support by projecting himself as a "victim" of an alleged conspiracy hatched by the US with the Army chief and opposition leaders to remove him. Demonstrating an energy that he never showed as PM, Khan has galvanised followers across Pakistan, demanding at every meeting that the government must hold early elections, and also attempting to turn army officers against their chief. The conspiracy theory seems to have gone



down well in a country with a deep strand of anti-Americanism, especially in the conservative middle classes, which Khan counts as his main constituency.

The PDM must be seriously worried by the results. The massive public support for it in late 2020-early 2021 was hardly evident in these elections. For the PML(N), the optics are terrible. It was crucial for the party to show it was popular in Punjab province where it is most rooted. But six months in office have not been easy, what with Khan's attacks including against the army, a devastating flood and tough economic decisions. Elections were held in eight National Assembly constituencies — three in Punjab, three in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and two in Sindh. By-elections were also held in three Punjab provincial assembly constituencies. The small consolation for PDM was that while the eight National Assembly seats were all previously held by the PTI, the ruling coalition managed to wrest one in Punjab. It was won by the joint PDM candidate from the PPP. The PTI retained seven, in which Khan was his party's candidate. PTI candidates also won the three Punjab PA seats.

Next month's change at the top in the Pakistan Army could further complicate matters. The new army chief faces not just a complex political landscape, and in keeping with its oversized role in national affairs, difficult choices to make, but also a lawless north-west frontier where the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan has swarmed in from safe havens in Afghanistan and unleashed a campaign of intimidation and extortion. Pakistan will continue to remain unsettled until the next general election at least. It is due next summer, but Khan's demand for an early election is likely to become louder.

BIDEN ON PAK NUKES: LACK OF 'COHESION' MAY BE ABOUT POLITICAL, SECURITY CHAOS

US President Joe Biden's off-the-cuff remark that he thinks of Pakistan "as maybe one of the most dangerous nations in the world" has predictably created uproar in what is perhaps the most America-dependent nation in the South Asian region.

Pakistanis are bristling at the implied questioning of the security of its nuclear weapons. The remarks caught the Shehbaz Sharif government off-guard. And it has played right into the full blown polarisation in Pakistan between those who believe former prime minister Imran Khan is their messiah, and those who are on the side of the Sharif family and the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). Biden was speaking at a Democratic party event ahead of the November mid-term elections. He made the remarks about Pakistan almost in passing, while speaking about the new threats the world faces, and how "the world is looking to us to figure out how we figure this out". And he said he was confident the US could provide this leadership.

"[Xi Jinping] is a guy who understands what he wants but has an enormous, enormous array of problems. How do we handle that? How do we handle that relative to what's going on in Russia? And what I think is maybe is one of the most dangerous nations in the world: Pakistan. Nuclear weapons without cohesion," Biden said.

A shock for Pak

For Pakistan, the remark came as a shock after months of diplomatic footwork by the Sharif government to repair the damage caused by Imran Khan's free flowing anti-US rhetoric, starting with the accusation that it had a hand in the no-confidence motion that unseated him in April.

Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has made at least two visits to the US after assuming office. Pakistan Army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa was in Washington earlier this month in



what was apparently a farewell call ahead of his retirement at the end of November, to ensure a smooth transition for his successor in ties with the Pentagon, and a reset in relations. The approval of a \$450 million F-16 maintenance package — reversing a three-year-old freeze on military assistance to Pakistan — signalled a thaw.

The devastation caused by the floods seemed to have created some sympathy for Pakistan in the Biden Administration. There was much commentary in Pakistan about the “warmth” that the young Bilawal evoked in Washington. The government declared it had managed to salvage a consequential bilateral relationship that Imran had tried his best to destroy.

This is why Biden’s casual putdown has shocked Pakistan. Even before the government could gather its wits to respond, Imran demanded to know on Twitter how the US president had reached this “unwarranted conclusion”, and declared that the statement showed the “total failure of the imported government’s” foreign policy and claims of “reset of relations with US”. Having been PM himself, he knew Pakistan had “one of the most secure nuclear command and control systems”, Imran said.

Without ‘cohesion’

While the security of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons has been long a matter of concern, Biden’s reference to the absence of “cohesion” may have been more about the political and security chaos that has engulfed Pakistan since Imran’s ouster. Imran’s term in office was disastrous in many ways and lost him public support, but as seen in Sunday’s byelections, he has succeeded in mobilising more public sympathy over his parliamentary ouster than any previous leader unseated in a coup ever did.

With general elections next year and Imran raging relentlessly, the Sharif government has been on the defensive, both politically and at the policy level. As the “audio tape leaks” controversy showed, managing the backlash appears to have become the government’s full-time preoccupation, with halting, cautious steps on the economy towards fulfilling IMF conditionalities. The political confrontation can only get worse after Imran’s showing in the byelections, which he had described as a referendum on his popularity.

The Pakistan army, meanwhile, has been preoccupied with protecting itself from Imran’s allegations, which have included insinuation that any one appointed chief to succeed Bajwa would be a “traitor”. In focussing on managing the divisions within, the army appears to have dropped the ball on the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan who, in a repeat of 2008, seem to be having a free run of the border areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with an unchecked campaign of extortion and intimidation, and are believed to have advanced as far as Swat.

Last week, a decade after Malala Yousafzai was shot at and wounded by the Taliban for advocating girls’ education, militants fired at a school bus, killing the driver and injuring two girl students. Over the last few days, Swat has seen massive protests against the army and the government for allowing the TTP to make a comeback, a charge which the military’s Inter-Services Public Relations has refuted.

What now for US-Pak

Just as Pakistan needs American financial assistance and military handholding, the US needs Pakistan for continuing counter-terrorism operations in the Af-Pak region — as was demonstrated in the August 5 operation in Kabul to eliminate al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.



Diplomatic measures would be underway to contain the damage from Biden's remarks, and it will not be surprising if that includes more sweeteners and sops for Pakistan in this 75th year of the bilateral relationship.

India must hold the schadenfreude. As the F-16 maintenance package episode showed, US-Pakistan relations have "a different point of emphasis". The two countries can't live with each other, and they can't live without each other either.

SIXTY YEARS ON, REVISITING THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS, RECENTLY INVOKED BY BIDEN

The October of 1962 saw the Cold War hit its height, when the two great superpowers, the Soviet Union and the US, teetered on the brink of nuclear warfare for 13 days. The standoff, known as the Cuban missile crisis, was resolved and disaster narrowly averted thanks to timely negotiations between Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev and US President John F Kennedy. Earlier this month, US President Joe Biden said that his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin's veiled threat of using tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine marked the first prospect of nuclear "Armageddon" since the Cuban missile crisis. A day later, his administration said there was no evidence for this claim.

On the 60th anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis, we explain the event.

Background to the standoff

An important precursor of the Cuban missile crisis was the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961, in which US-backed Cuban counter-revolutionaries attempted to overthrow Fidel Castro's regime in the country and establish a non-communist government friendly to the US.

After successfully fending off the operation, Castro turned increasingly towards the USSR and its premier Khrushchev, to deter any future invasion by the US. An agreement was made between the two, and by July 1962, a number of clandestine missile launch facilities began to be constructed in Cuba.

Other than wanting to protect another communist country, Khrushchev also wanted to place nuclear weapons in Cuba to counter the urgent threat of US missiles close to its own borders. From the late 1950s, Washington had begun placing nuclear missiles in Turkey and Italy, which had the capability of destroying strategic centres within the USSR. By placing nuclear missiles in Cuba, the USSR could challenge the strategic status-quo favourable to the US.

The Cuban missile crisis

On October 14, 1962, a US U-2 spy plane flying over Cuban territory took pictures of several medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic nuclear missile sites being constructed in Cuba, which had the capacity to target strategic centres in the heartland of the US. On the morning of October 16, Kennedy summoned his cabinet officials and top advisors to form the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOMM), to develop a course of action. While some members recommended air strikes followed by another invasion of Cuba, others favoured issuing stern warnings.

Kennedy opted for another route and on October 22, announcing the discovery of the missiles, ordered a naval "quarantine" of Cuba. The 'quarantine' was different from a blockade



announcement, which would indicate the occurrence of war. US destroyers and submarines were placed around Cuba in order to prevent military supplies being brought to the island.

The stalemate

The same day, Kennedy sent Khrushchev a letter, stating that the US would not allow offensive weapons to be delivered to Cuba and demanded that Soviets dismantle their missile bases and return all offensive weapons to the USSR. Two days later, Khrushchev responded with a statement that the US deployment was a “blockade” which was an “act of aggression,” and that Soviet ships would continue to proceed to Cuba. However, on October 24 and 25, some ships did turn back from the blockade line. The US recognised that the Soviet missile sites were reaching closer to a state of operational readiness and the nuclear crisis was not resolved. In response, it increased the Strategic Air Command’s readiness to an unprecedented DEFCON II, only one step away from war being declared “imminent.”

The agreement

The first sign of de-escalation came on October 26, when Khrushchev sent Kennedy a letter, stating that he would be willing to stop military shipments and withdraw his forces from Cuba if the US agreed to not invade or support any invasion of its neighbour.

The following day, Khrushchev announced on a public broadcast in the USSR that they would remove missiles from Cuba if the US would remove its missiles from Italy and Turkey first, contrary to what he had said in the letter to Kennedy. Fuelling tensions further was the fact that on the same day, an American U-2 plane had been shot down over Cuba, probably by the Soviets. Kennedy, however, refused to retaliate to this, and chose to respond favourably to the agreement from Khrushchev’s letter while ignoring the additional condition from his broadcast. At the same time, US Attorney General Robert Kennedy met Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin secretly. He agreed to not invade Cuba and to remove the missiles from Turkey and Italy, but added that the latter could not be part of any public resolutions. On October 28, Khrushchev announced that Soviet nuclear missile sites would be removed from Cuba, while Kennedy pledged to never invade Cuba and secretly agreed to remove nuclear missiles from Turkey and Italy. Both superpowers began to fulfil their promises over the coming weeks, and the crisis was over by late November.

Crisis averted on October 27

There were a few instances on October 27 that could have escalated the standoff into outright war. The first was when the US U-2 aircraft was shot down over Cuba, and the government chose to not order retaliatory strikes. A separate U-2 spy had also made unauthorised entry into the Soviet Union. On the same day, the US Navy dropped a series of non-lethal depth charges on a Soviet submarine armed with a nuclear torpedo. Those in the submarine, unaware that they were practice charges, initially assumed the vessel was under attack. Launching the nuclear weapon required the consent of all three senior officers on board, The Guardian reported. Among them, Vasili Alexandrovich Arkhipov, the chief of staff, was the only one to refuse permission and avert nuclear warfare.

After the Cuban missile crisis, the two superpowers created the Moscow-Washington hotline, so that their leaders could have a direct communication link and prevent such tensions.

While nuclear warfare was thankfully averted, the Cuban missile crisis did not mark the resolution of the Cold War, nor the culmination of the ever-growing arms race.



NATION

QATAR FOOTBALL WORLD CUP: FOR MANY MIGRANT WORKERS, GLITTER ON CONTRACT, GRIME ON THE GROUND

Eight-hour work shifts. Two hours of overtime to “meet workload obligations”. Additional payment of 125 per cent for working extra hours on a regular day, and 150 per cent on weekends. Food, transport and accommodation provided by employers, along with a medical card. Twenty-one days of paid leave in the first two years, which would be doubled after that. And, after completing two years, an economy class return air ticket from Doha to the international airport closest to a worker’s hometown in India.

On paper, these are the key terms and benefits listed in a standard contract for a migrant worker availing employment with a company in Qatar, which is hosting the football World Cup next month. The average salary offered is 1200 Qatari riyals, or about Rs 27,000. Most of those who sign up are from rural areas where employment opportunities are limited, and the Government’s job guarantee scheme offers upto 100 days of work in a year with the maximum annual earnings on an average about Rs 21,500.

But Indian workers who have returned from the Gulf state, and the families of those who have died there while working for companies linked to the tournament, say the ground reality is far removed from the glitter on the contract they signed.

For one, they say, their contracts are silent on insurance and compensation in case of death or accident. And that the Gulf country’s opaque labour laws have made it very difficult to make legitimate claims.

This, despite The Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, the Qatari body responsible for organising the World Cup, urging employers at least three years ago to purchase life insurance for workers to ensure their families receive compensation regardless of location or cause of death.

Moreover, workers who have returned from World Cup projects say they were made to toil for long hours in harsh weather conditions, provided unsanitary accommodation, and had to work in unsafe conditions at construction sites.

“After landing there, we submitted our passports to employers. We woke up at 3 am or 4 am every day so we could start work at 5 am, before the temperatures increased. Normally, our work ended around 6 pm. Often, we did not get a chance to take a break. Fridays used to be our day off but the entire day was spent recovering so you couldn’t do anything else,” said Sravan Velmal, who worked for a construction company in Doha along with his father Ramesh. Velmal returned home after Ramesh died in Doha of heart failure.

It was over the last decade, after Qatar won the rights to host the World Cup, that the nation emerged as a preferred destination in the middle east for Indian workers. In 2020, Indians comprised 42 per cent of the 17,639 workers of 69 nationalities who worked on projects overseen by the Supreme Committee, according to the panel’s workers’ welfare compliance report. In July, the Ministry of External Affairs submitted in Lok Sabha that of the 1,29,260 Indians who migrated to Gulf countries in 2021, 49,579 went to Qatar — the most among the lot.



A majority of these workers are employed either at World Cup sites or in the service industry that is gearing to cater to millions of visitors during the tournament — from stadiums and highways to marinas.

And for many of them, the journey began with exploitation at the start of the migration cycle. According to Government rules, recruitment agents are allowed to charge up to Rs 30,000, in addition to 18 per cent GST, for their services. Further, the cost of air tickets and visa fees has to be borne by the employers.

However, family members of several of the workers who died in Qatar say they paid exorbitant fees to agents, going up to Rs 1.5 lakh. “Hence, workers endure challenging conditions in Qatar just so that they can wipe off their debts. The workers are aware that if they return, there aren’t many employment opportunities back home,” said Velmal.

International human rights watchdogs have accused Qatari authorities of failing to investigate the cause of deaths. In one case, after reaching Qatar, a worker — Rajendra Mandaloji, a carpenter — was presented with a contract that paid about half of what he was promised in salary, his wife Sucharita said. This practice, called ‘Substitution of Contract’, is very common, Mandha said. The stress of a low-paying job and heavy debts took such a toll that, in September 2019, Mandaloji died by suicide.

A majority of workers have died due to reasons described on their death certificates as “natural causes”. “While going, a person is healthy. The doctor certifies he is fit to work,” said Mandha, adding that detailed health check-ups are mandatory for workers before leaving for Qatar. “After going there, people below 40 years old are dying, many from cardiac arrest. The reasons have to be investigated.”

T.N. RAISES CONCERN OVER PRESENCE OF CHINESE TROOPS IN SRI LANKA

Tamil Nadu has flagged serious security concerns over the increased presence of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of China in Sri Lanka. An alert issued by the State’s intelligence agency a few days ago said the activities of the Chinese in the neighbouring country is a concern to national security and called for intensified vigil along the coastline.

The movement of PLA cadre and the deployment of hi-tech gadgets such as satellites, drones and other communication equipment in northern Sri Lanka required constant surveillance in coastal districts, the advisory sent to all cities and districts in the State said.

Citing sources, the alert claimed that the PLA had deployed sophisticated gadgets in the garb of launching sea cucumber farming.

Clandestine entry

The security advisory comes days after an alert was issued by the same agency warning that Chinese nationals had clandestinely entered India through the sea route with the assistance of cadre belonging to a Sri Lanka-based political party.

The Tamil Nadu Coastal Security Group had also, citing a Central intelligence agency, issued an alert on the Chinese ship used to monitor satellites, rockets and inter-continental missile launches of China docked at Hanbantota Port, and called for adequate security arrangements in view of vital installations such as and seaports along the Tamil Nadu coast.



The free movement of Chinese nationals in many parts of northern Sri Lanka, including Mullaitivu, Paruthitheevu, Analaitheevu, and Meesalai had triggered discontentment among Tamil fishermen.

They had expressed apprehension that the Chinese were exploiting the rich sea wealth, which is their only source of livelihood.

The fear of the local Tamils was that the prevailing situation might lead to a division among Sri Lankan nationals and curtail the influence of India on Tamils living in the northern and eastern parts of the island nation, the alert said.

Tamil Nadu had strengthened security arrangements along the southeastern coast after a Union government advisory on the arrival of Yuan Wang 5, a Chinese research vessel at Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port on August 11. With the vessel equipped with space/satellite tracking and intercontinental ballistic missile launch facilities, the State activated its intelligence machinery at vital installations along the 1,076-km long coastal belt, sources said.

Additional Director-General of Police and chief of Tamil Nadu Coastal Security Group Sandeep Mittal said it was not a disputable fact that the presence of Chinese nationals was increasing in Sri Lanka. The frequent visits of the Chinese Ambassador to Sri Lanka to islands close to the International Maritime Boundary Line, and a drone survey conducted in the area in the guise of assessing prospects of harvesting sea cucumber, made the developments suspicious.

"While India is providing scholarships to Sri Lankan students pursuing undergraduate programmes in India, China is funding postgraduate Sri Lankan students studying in their own country. It is obvious that they [the Chinese] are trying to woo the youth in Sri Lanka to support their future plans," he said.

Security agencies in Tamil Nadu say there is an urgent need for the Union government to activate the Phase-III funding of the Coastal Security Scheme.

PRINCIPLES OF CAA CAN APPLY TO LANKAN HINDU TAMILS, SAYS HC JUDGE

One can take judicial notice of the fact that the Hindu Tamils of Sri Lanka were the primary victims of the racial strife," said Justice G.R. Swaminathan of the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court while observing that the principles of the recent amendment to the Citizenship Act (CAA) was equally applicable to them.

"Parliament has recently amended the Citizenship Act. The persecuted minorities from the immediate neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, now have an opportunity to get Indian citizenship. Though Sri Lanka does not fall within the said amendment, the very same principle is equally applicable. One can take judicial notice of the fact that the Hindu Tamils of Sri Lanka were the primary victims of the racial strife," he said.

The court was hearing a petition filed by S. Abirami, born in India to Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, and now staying in Tiruchi seeking Indian citizenship. She sought a direction to the Tiruchi Collector to forward her application for citizenship to the State government. The judge took note of the fact that the parents of the petitioner are Sri Lankan citizens. The petitioner was born in 1993 in Tiruchi. She has been in India all these years and did her schooling here. She was issued an Aadhaar card. However, her efforts to obtain Indian citizenship have been in vain, which led to the filing of the present petition.



The judge observed that though the petitioner is a descendant of “migrant parents”, she was born in India. She has never been a Sri Lankan citizen, and therefore, the question of renouncing the same does not arise.

THE ISSUES IN THE COLLEGIUM’S FUNCTIONING

The story so far:

A meeting of the Supreme Court Collegium, comprising the Chief Justice of India (CJI), and four senior-most judges, which was called for September 30 but did not take place, was subsequently “closed without there being any further deliberation”. What prevented further deliberations was the fact that the Union Law Minister, by a letter dated October 7, requested Chief Justice U.U. Lalit to nominate his successor, as the latter’s tenure ends on November 8, 2022. The postponement of the meeting and its subsequent closure has invited attention to the manner in which the Collegium functions.

What is the work of the Collegium?

The Collegium system, one in which a group of the senior-most judges make appointments to the higher judiciary, has been in practice for nearly three decades. Its importance lies in the fact that its opinion has primacy in the matter of appointments to the high courts and the Supreme Court, as well as transfers. Its legal basis is found in a series of three judgments — usually referred to as the ‘Judges Cases’ — concerning the higher judiciary. Its manner of functioning has been laid down in the form of a ‘Memorandum of Procedure’.

The Constitution says a Supreme Court judge is appointed by the President in consultation with the Chief Justice of India. In the ‘First Judges Case’, the court held that the consultation with the CJI should be “full and effective”. The Second Judges case introduced the collegium system in 1993. It ruled that the CJI would have to consult a collegium of his two senior-most judges in the apex court on judicial appointments. The ‘Third Judges Case’ case in 1998, which was a Presidential reference, expanded the collegium to its present composition of the CJI and four of his senior-most judges.

How does it discharge its functions?

The Collegium’s functioning has been criticised for being opaque. Its resolutions and recommendations are hosted on the Supreme Court’s website, giving relevant information about its decisions. However, the nature of the deliberations and whether there are any internal differences of opinion on the suitability of a particular candidate are unknown. It functions mainly through the system of adopting resolutions and sending them to the Union Law Ministry for further action. If a proposal for appointment of a judge is returned for reconsideration, the Collegium may either drop it or reiterate it. When the Collegium reiterates its decision after reconsideration, it is binding on the government.

Why was the meeting closed without result?

The meeting had to be postponed because on that day, a member of the Collegium, Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, who will be the next Chief Justice of India, was preoccupied with his list of cases well beyond court hours. Subsequently, a difference of opinion has been acknowledged over the manner in which the deliberations were to go on. While Chief Justice Lalit wanted to circulate the files pertaining to some recommendations for appointment to the Supreme Court, two judges in



the Collegium, Justice Chandrachud and Justice Abdul Nazeer, did not favour any decision through circulation. They preferred deliberations in person.

Meanwhile, the Union Law Minister asked the Chief Justice to name his successor. By convention, once a recommendation for the successor to the CJI's office is made, the Collegium ceases to make decisions. There is no law or rule that says the Collegium should become dysfunctional during the last month of a Chief Justice's tenure, but it is observed as a matter of convention.

What are the issues from this development?

Three questions may have arisen from the development. One is whether there ought to be a prescribed mode of decision-making, that is, through personal deliberations or by circulation or by adopting both means as per convenience. The second is whether all members of the Collegium give their opinions in writing, or whether they convey reservations, if any, orally. A related question that arises is whether all decisions ought to be unanimous and consensual. There is a view that a recommendation by majority, with one or two expressing reservations, may give a good reason for the executive to reject the recommendation or seek reconsideration. Also, the need for the Collegium not to hold any deliberations in the last month of a Chief Justice's tenure is something to be debated. Given that the CJI is appointed by seniority, many of them have only a short tenure running into a few months. This convention may slow down decision-making.

WHY DOES THE SC COLLEGIUM HOLD PRIMACY OVER TRANSFERS?

Appointments and transfers of judges in the constitutional courts is a participatory consultative process between the Supreme Court and the government. But there is an increasing trend, if not a disturbing pattern, of the government unilaterally delaying or segregating names recommended by the Supreme Court Collegium. While the need of the hour is to fill up judicial vacancies for effective justice administration, the primacy of the Collegium to recommend names for elevation to the Supreme Court and appointments and transfers in high courts, is affected by what some legal experts term as "cherry-picking" on the part of the executive.

Constant segregation and delays

Justice Muralidhar's transfer as the Chief Justice of the Madras High Court was recommended by the Collegium to the government along with the name of Jammu and Kashmir High Court Chief Justice Pankaj Mithal on September 28. Both names were proposed jointly in a single batch. However, the government chose to notify Justice Mithal's transfer to the Rajasthan High Court while keeping an ominous silence about Justice Muralidhar. The split in the batch had a ripple effect. The name of Justice Jaswant Singh, who was recommended to replace Justice Muralidhar as the Orissa High Court Chief Justice, was also segregated. Justice Singh's recommendation lies in limbo with the government while the other judges recommended by the Collegium in the same batch for elevation were notified by the government on October 11. The juggling of names at the government's end not only affects the primacy of the Collegium, but also impacts the seniority of a judge and even his/her prospects to be appointed to the Supreme Court. But Justice Muralidhar's case is not the first such incident. In the past, the government has unilaterally segregated names recommended by the Collegium. In 2014, the Collegium headed by then Chief Justice of India (CJI) R. M. Lodha had recommended former Solicitor General Gopal Subramaniam for direct appointment to the Supreme Court Bench. The government turned down Mr. Subramaniam's name while clearing the names of senior advocates such as Rohinton F. Nariman, Justices Arun Kumar Mishra and A.K. Goel. Chief Justice Lodha, in an interview to The Hindu, said the collegium



was the “final arbiter of judicial appointments”. He said segregation with the Collegium’s list amounted to “tinkering”. He had maintained that prior consultation with the CJI before segregation was the “integral component of the primacy of the Collegium”.

The mandate of the Collegium

The Three Judges Case establishes the primacy of the Collegium, led by the CJI, in making judicial appointments. ‘Chief Justice of India’ here means the collective opinion of the Collegium. Giving primacy meant the ‘CJI’ was best equipped to know and assess the worth of a candidate for appointment as a superior judge. The executive had at best the power to act as a “mere check on the exercise of power by the Chief Justice of India, to achieve the constitutional purpose”. Thus, the executive element in the appointment process was reduced to the minimum and any political influence was eliminated. It was for this reason that the word ‘consultation’ instead of ‘concurrence’ was used in the Constitution. The way out of the imbroglio would be to introduce checks through the Memorandum of Procedure (MoP) against unilateral segregation by the government. A new MoP could also bring in a clause to clear names for judicial appointments within a reasonable time to avoid delay.

THE NEXT CJI WILL HAVE THE LONGEST TENURE IN THE LAST DECADE

On October 17, Union Law Minister Kiren Rijju announced that President Droupadi Murmu has appointed Justice Dhananjaya Yashwant Chandrachud as the 50th Chief Justice of India (CJI). Justice Chandrachud will take oath on November 9, 2022, a day after incumbent CJI Justice U.U. Lalit retires from office.

D.Y. Chandrachud was born on November 11, 1959, in Mumbai, Maharashtra. After earning a bachelor’s degree from St. Stephen’s College, Delhi, he went on to pursue law (LLB) from the Faculty of Law at Delhi University. He obtained a Master of Laws (LL.M.) degree and a Doctor of Juridical Science (S.J.D.) degree from Harvard Law School. Justice Chandrachud was elevated to the Supreme Court on May 13, 2016. Before that, he served as the Chief Justice of the Allahabad High Court.

Justice Chandrachud will serve as the CJI for two years and two days until his retirement on November 10, 2024. His is expected to be the 14th longest tenure among the tenures of the 50 CJIs analysed. His term will be the longest among all the CJIs of the past decade. The 11 CJIs who were appointed after Justice S.H. Kapadia, who took charge on May 12, 2010 and who served two years, four months and 19 days in the top post, had shorter stints than what Justice Chandrachud is set to serve.

Interestingly, Justice D.Y. Chandrachud’s father, Justice Y.V. Chandrachud, holds the record for serving the longest term as the CJI. Justice Y.V. Chandrachud was appointed on February 22, 1978 and retired on July 11, 1985, which means he served in the top post for seven years, four months and 19 days. Justice Bhuvneshwar Prasad Sinha, India’s sixth CJI, comes a distant second with four years, four months and one day at the helm. He is followed by Justice A.N. Ray who served for three years, nine months and four days.

Justice K.N. Singh, who was appointed as the CJI on November 25, 1991, had the shortest stint: only 17 days until his retirement. Justice S. Rajendra Babu was the other CJI whose tenure lasted for less than a month. Data show that on average, a CJI has served for 1.5 years.



In November, Justice Chandrachud will take charge at the age of 62 years, 11 months and 29 days, which will make him the 16th youngest CJI. He will be the youngest CJI in the last decade. Justice Y.V. Chandrachud, who was appointed to the post at the age of 57 years, seven months and 13 days, holds the record as the youngest CJI.

Maharashtra, the State where Justice Chandrachud was born, is the State of birth for six other CJIs. Five CJIs each were born in Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

Delhi University, where Justice Chandrachud completed his LLB, produced three other CJIs. However, leading the list of institutions is the Government Law College in Mumbai, the alma mater of five CJIs.

The next in line to become the CJI is Justice Sanjiv Khanna, who is expected to take over on November 11, 2024. His term will last for six months and a day. None of the next five presumptive CJI is expected to have a tenure exceeding that of Justice Chandrachud's. Justice Surya Kant's one year, two months and 15 days comes close.

QUESTIONABLE URGENCY

The manner in which the Supreme Court has suspended the operation of a Bombay High Court judgment discharging G.N. Saibaba and others in an alleged Maoist conspiracy case is quite unusual and raises critical questions. It is true that their conviction by a trial court — with Prof. Saibaba and four others being sentenced to life and another to 10 years under provisions of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) — was set aside by the High Court not on merits, but only on technical grounds, and the state may feel aggrieved. However, the apex court could have been more restrained while entertaining an appeal against the order. The Court showed extraordinary zeal in fulfilling the Maharashtra government's wish to have an immediate hearing. A special Bench of Justices M.R. Shah and Bela Trivedi was formed to hear the appeal on a Saturday. Consider the circumstances: the accused have spent years in prison, Prof. Saibaba is disabled, and soon after their discharge, they were required to file a bond under a procedure that requires even those acquitted to be available for further proceedings in case there is an appeal. It is doubtful whether the Court should have responded with such swiftness just to suspend a judgment that has given detailed reasons for discharging the accused. After all, appeals against acquittals are not uncommon.

The gist of the High Court verdict is that in the case of five accused (one of them died in prison), the sanction for their prosecution under UAPA was invalid because material was placed before the sanctioning authority and sanction obtained on the same day, and that there was no summary of the analysis of the evidence made by an independent reviewer to assist the grant of sanction. In the case of Prof. Saibaba, cognisance was taken and even a witness was examined before the sanction order arrived, rendering the entire proceedings void. The Government may have an arguable case, going by Section 465 of the CrPC, that any error, omission or irregularity in the matter of sanction would not vitiate the trial, unless there has been a failure of justice as a result, and that it is a curable defect. However, these issues have been elaborately dealt with by the High Court. The Bench has concluded that when dealing with special laws such as the UAPA, every safeguard provided by the legislature, however small, must be zealously protected. A 1976 judgment does give the Supreme Court the power to suspend an acquittal order, but as a matter of principle, the benefit of acquittal or discharge must not be interdicted by an appellate court without a full hearing.



ALIBI STRIPPED: CENTRE'S CLEARANCE ON BILKIS BANO RAPE-MURDER CONVICTS' RELEASE

In the aftermath of the release of 11 men convicted of gangraping a pregnant Bilkis Bano and murdering 14 members of her family, including her 3-year-old daughter Saleha on March 3, 2002, in the post-Godhra violence in Dahod district of Gujarat, there was rightful outrage. How could these convicts — they were not merely accused, innocent until proven guilty, or undertrials who deserved the benefit of doubt — be allowed to walk free? How could perpetrators of a crime as dark as this one benefit from the legal provision for remission of sentence, after 14 years, for “good” conduct in jail? True, due process is an inalienable part of justice. But in this case, the due process argument was being wielded to cover up the selective exercise of executive discretion and to hollow out justice. This was, after all, one of the cases that the Supreme Court had intervened in, citing “exceptional circumstances”. It had shifted the trial out of Gujarat to Maharashtra, awarded Rs 50 lakh as compensation to Bilkis, who fought on courageously, through her unspeakable pain. How could the Gujarat government, which released the 11, citing a “unanimous” recommendation of the Jail Advisory Committee, turn a blind eye to the enormity of what it was doing, or undoing?

Now, it turns out, it was not alone in its grave misstep. On Monday, in an affidavit filed in the Supreme Court, the Gujarat government told the court that its decision to release the convicts early had been approved by the Centre — even as two of the several authorities it sought an opinion from, the SP, CBI and the special judge of the CBI court, Mumbai, advised against it in clear, ringing terms. The Centre's assent, its complicity in the remission of the sentences, strips it of its alibi in this case — it can no longer point to the Gujarat government, or to the legal technicalities of a disembodied remission policy. Now that the dots have been connected and they lead to the door of the Union Home Ministry, the Narendra Modi government needs to answer the question: Why were these 11 convicts singled out for a show of state compassion and leniency by a government that speaks loudly about “naari shakti”, a prime minister who asked from the Red Fort ramparts on this Independence Day, “Can we not pledge to get rid of everything in our behaviour, culture and everyday life that humiliates and demeans women?”

The 11 convicts walked free, ironically, on August 15, to a hero's welcome. That shameful image was a reproach to the rule of law and a collective humanity. The Centre must do what it has to, to make amends for its participation in this travesty of justice. Of course, the BJP may think that letting rape and murder convicts walk free in the run-up to elections is good for votes. But if the government is tempted to brazen it out, the Supreme Court, which helped bring a semblance of justice for Gujarat 2002, must reprise its role again. Otherwise, all the work done to ensure justice for Bilkis Bano, by the apex court, the prosecution, the trial court, the brave witnesses and the officers who didn't bend, will be stained forever.

TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION AGAINST HATE SPEECH: SC

The Supreme Court on Friday said it is “tragic what we have reduced religion to” in the 21st century and a “climate of hate prevails in the country”, while directing the police and authorities to immediately and suo motu register cases against hate speech makers without waiting for a complaint to be filed.



A Bench of Justices K.M. Joseph and Hrishikesh Roy ordered that any “hesitation” to comply with the direction would attract the proceedings for contempt of the Supreme Court against the erring officers.

The court directed that first information reports (FIRs) should be registered and criminal proceedings initiated against the makers of hate speech “irrespective of their religion so that the secular character of the country is preserved”.

The interim directions were primarily for the benefit of the police of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. The court issued notices to the three States and asked their police chiefs to submit reports on action taken on hate speech cases.

“We are deeply, deeply obliged,” senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for petitioner Shaheen Abdulla, reacted to the order.

“We are doing far too little,” Justice Joseph replied.

“At least somebody has listened,” Mr. Sibal said.

Loud and clear

“We have to... it is our duty. If we don’t, it is plain abdication of duty, nothing else to that... Otherwise, what will happen after sometime,” Justice Joseph told Mr. Sibal.

The Bench heard the case beyond court hours and ensured that the order was ready and read out loudly in open court.

The petitioner, also represented by advocate Nizam Pasha, had highlighted the rising incidents of hate speeches targeting the Muslim community.

The petitioner said the “total inaction” on the part of the police in the three States had given rise to “despondency and angst” within the Muslim community. The petitioner alleged that events organised in Delhi and Haridwar in 2021 hosted hate speeches by leaders who made open calls for the genocide of Muslims.

The order even highlighted some of the specific provisions of the penal law under which hate speech offenders ought to be booked. These include Sections 153A (promoting enmity between different groups on the ground of religion), 153B (imputations, assertions prejudicial to national integration), 505 (public mischief), 295A (deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings) of the Indian Penal Code.

“Where have we reached? What have we reduced religion to? It is tragic... and we speak of scientific temper...” Justice Joseph said after reading out instances of hate speeches and what was said by the speakers. “Very shocking statements have been made in a country that has to be religion-neutral,” Justice Roy noted.

WHOSE PLEASURE?

Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan’s indirect threat that he can independently dismiss Ministers is neither in keeping with the dignity of his office nor in line with the Constitution. His claim that “statements of individual ministers that lower the dignity of the Governor’s office can invite action including withdrawal of pleasure” has no basis in the constitutional system. Article



164 of the Constitution, which says the Chief Minister shall be appointed by the Governor and other Ministers shall be appointed by the Governor on the Chief Minister's advice, adds that "the Ministers shall hold office during the pleasure of the Governor". There have been instances of Governors dismissing Chief Ministers, but those were related to constitutional situations in which the legislative majority of the incumbent ministry was in doubt. It is also now judicially determined that the question of majority can be answered only on the floor of the legislature through a confidence vote. Nothing in the Article means that the Governor may independently dismiss a Minister. The pleasure doctrine exists only in a constitutional sense, and is exercised by the Governor only on the advice of the Chief Minister. In other words, the term 'pleasure of the Governor' is used as a euphemism to refer to the Chief Minister's power to drop a Minister from the Council of Ministers.

The context for this particular confrontation appears to be the Governor's reluctance to grant assent to the Kerala University Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2022. Higher Education Minister R. Bindu's remark that the Governor should return the Bill for reconsideration instead of withholding his approval indefinitely was a possible trigger for his comment. While Governors may differ with the contents of a Bill and may exercise the available constitutional options, they should not use their powers to stall legislation unpalatable to them. In the realm of university laws, Governors, being Chancellors of most universities, the scope for friction is quite high. It should be remembered that the office of Chancellor is created by the statute that establishes a university, and the legislature is equally competent to curtail the Chancellor's powers or even abolish the system of having the Governor as Chancellor. Even the M.M. Punchhi Commission, which reviewed Centre-State relations, recommended that Governors should not be burdened with the role of Chancellors. It is time to implement this principle. Governors seem to have an exaggerated notion of their own roles under the Constitution. They are expected to defend the Constitution and may use their powers to caution elected regimes against violating the Constitution, but this does not mean that they can use the absence of a time-frame for decision-making and the discretionary space given to them to function as a parallel power centre.

HC SEEKS STATUS OF KERALA GOVERNMENT MOVE TO ENACT LAW AGAINST SUPERSTITIONS

The Bench passed the directive on public interest litigation filed by the Kerala Yukthivadi Sanghom seeking a directive to the State government to implement the recommendation of the State Law Reforms Commission to enact a law against evil practices. When the petition came up for hearing, the State government submitted that it had already taken steps to bring such a law.

Counsel for Yukthivadi Sanghom, P.V. Jeevesh, submitted that the petitioner had approached the State government on many occasions seeking to enact a law against evil practices, such as sorcery and black magic, to protect the common man. Though Bills had been introduced in the Assembly, they had not been passed. The opponents of such statues contend that such statues were against their religious beliefs. These barbaric practices had to be eradicated. The governments of Maharashtra and Karnataka had enacted laws against such practices. However, the State government was reluctant to take steps for making such laws despite reporting of incidents such as human sacrifice and other black magic. The victims were mostly children and women.

In fact, the State Law Reform Commission recommended a Bill called Kerala Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices, Sorcery, and Black Magic Bill in this regard. The government had not taken any steps to implement the recommendation, he alleged.



The petitioner also pleaded for declaring the films and videos with contents of superstitious practices, including sorcery and occult, illegal.

A TRAVESTY OF JUSTICE

An investigation report is not a clean slate on which the investigator can record his whimsy that flies in the face of facts. Did the Arumughaswamy Commission of Inquiry's final report clarify the circumstances that led to the death of former Chief Minister Jayalalithaa, as mandated by the terms of reference or did it rest with a conclusion that followed a preset diabolical script, accentuating conspiracy theories hatched within a context of political opportunism? The report that was submitted in the Tamil Nadu Assembly on Tuesday found fault with Jayalalithaa's aide V.K. Sasikala, former Health Minister C. Vijayabaskar, two IAS officers, and three doctors, and recommended further investigation against them. However, it falls perplexingly short of explaining where the fault lay with those it found culpable, or tracing a damning trail of evidence to their doorstep. Justice Arumughaswamy, trained as a lawyer and not in medicine, makes post-facto judgments about the medical procedures (angio/surgery for a heart condition) that must have been followed in treating Jayalalithaa during her 75-day stint at Apollo hospital, and goes further out of line to make allegations against qualified medical professionals in charge of treatment, based on these conjectures. In a glaring lapse, he completely sidesteps the AIIMS medical experts' committee's (constituted by the Supreme Court of India) report released earlier, agreeing with the treatment course, and the final diagnosis by the hospital.

The report cherry picks elements from the range of options provided by a panel of doctors, and part-phrases from depositions that suit a seemingly pre-determined narrative to arrive at conclusions. Worse, it peddles lies to heap calumny on respondents and witnesses, particularly obvious when it asks why Jayalalithaa was not taken abroad for treatment after she had agreed to it, ignoring documentation enclosed as part of the report recording that she categorically refused to be shifted out of the country for treatment. The report itself encloses elaborate documentation on treatment from the hospital and yet, unfathomably, accuses it of not providing contra-evidence or documents (on the surgery aspect). Coming five years after the commission of inquiry was constituted, and nearly six years after the death of Jayalalithaa, the report makes no attempt to render any justice, but steps out of line in making unqualified calls on medicine, and reeks of malfeasance. The Tamil Nadu government has done its duty by presenting the report in the Assembly, and seeking legal opinion on it. It is now obligated to render true justice in the matter by ensuring that this long-drawn-out issue is well and truly buried, along with the report.

MURDERS MOST FOUL

The dastardly murder of a Kashmiri Pandit farmer in Shopian in south Kashmir recently follows a series of attacks on the minority community in the Union Territory (UT), with at least six Pandits having been killed in targeted attacks by militants this year. Despite assurances on the community's protection, the recurring attacks have increased its sense of fear, with several families having fled the Valley earlier this year. At one level, these attacks reflect the desperation of radical elements in the separatist current in the Valley, who rely on such murders to create a fear psychosis, invite inevitable state repression in retaliation, and seek to exploit the discontent and disaffection from state actions. This is evident in the statement released online by the purported attackers who use the excuse of the change in the status of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in the Indian Union for the targeted murders and also warn of further attacks. That hapless civilians — migrant workers, farmers and government officers — have been the victims brings



back memories of the exodus of minorities following violence in the Valley in the 1990s, notwithstanding condemnation of the violence now by mainstream and separatist leaders and also civil society. A clinical approach to finding and punishing the perpetrators will be better than seeking to dragnet suspects; it is important to isolate the radicals. The UT administration must also not spare any expense in renewing its commitment to protecting the Pandits and migrants.

The attacks and killings also suggest the failure of the Union government's decisions — the dilution of Article 370 and the bifurcation of J&K — in arresting the trend of violence in the Valley in the latter part of the last decade. Worse, the renewed violence against minorities reflects the deterioration of the situation in the Valley just a few years after democratic participation had improved steadily, reflecting a sense of ease with the mainstream polity among the citizenry. That these attacks have continued with impunity calls into question whether the authoritarian turn to governance in Kashmir has had any fruitful impact. Besides the emasculation of nearly the entire Kashmiri polity — both mainstream and separatist — and persisting disaffection, there is now increased religious polarisation, which has led to the burgeoning of violent radical elements. The persistence of a security-centric approach to the Kashmir issue and the lack of ownership in governance among the citizenry due to the absence of an elected authority have only added to the alienation in India's most conflict-prone province.

THE POLITICS OF THE MADRASA SURVEY

The Uttar Pradesh government's decision to undertake a survey of madrasas has raised serious concerns not just over the fate of these institutions but also on the future of Muslim identity. Other BJP-ruled States have also expressed concerns about madrasas. In May, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said the word 'madrasa' should cease to exist. In September, Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhammi said his State would also conduct a survey of madrasas, like Uttar Pradesh. The stated reason is to check the availability of basic facilities for the students. Responding to this, Maulana Arshad Madani, head of the Darul Uloom Deoband, appealed to Ulemas in charge of various madrasas to cooperate in the survey, taking the stated logic of governance at face value.

In politics, the logic of governance has always been a handy tool to achieve ideological objectives. This was the case in the 1905 Bengal Partition and, as some may argue, during the 2014 general election campaign. The ideological aspect of this survey will become clear only after the survey is completed and various political parties respond to its outcomes. What strands of majoritarianism inspired the survey? Is the survey motivated by prejudice towards Muslims? Whatever the answer, madrasas have become a new battlefield between the Hindu Right and Indian Muslims, and the survey has the potential to offer material that could shape Muslim identity.

Views about madrasas

In India, two arguments are often made about madrasas. The first is that Muslims are economically backward because most of them are educated in madrasas. The second argument is that madrasas are nurseries of radical Islam. This view gained momentum globally after the 9/11 attack. The response of the Western states, or the War on Terror, was formulated based on this argument. Despite the fact that the al-Qaeda failed to attract Indian Muslims, the Indian political class was swayed by this view of madrasas. The most surprising endorsement of this view came from former West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya in 2002.



The Sachar Committee Report (2006) demolished both these arguments with robust empirical evidence. It found that only 3% of Muslim children of school-going age go to madrasas at the national level. It also drew a distinction between madrasas and makhtabs. Makhtabs are neighbourhood schools, often attached to mosques. They offer religious education to children who attend other schools to get mainstream education. The share of Muslims who attend madrasas and makhtabs is not more than 6.3%, the report said. The report's most crucial observation was that Muslims are aspirational. Muslim parents are eager to see their children enrolled in modern education institutions, but often fail to do so owing to their poor financial condition. The report therefore recommended that scholarships be given to Muslim students so that they don't drop out of school. This was even implemented by some BJP-ruled States such as Madhya Pradesh, but not by the then Gujarat government. Such scholarships have made a difference, say some researchers, though scholars have expressed concerns over the lack of commitment of various national governments, including the United Progressive Alliance governments that helped formulate the report, in implementing the committee's recommendations.

A policy for Muslims

It is clear that the governments of Uttar Pradesh, Assam or Uttarakhand have little appreciation for these findings. One BJP leader dismissed the Sachar report as an act of appeasement. Curiously, the authors of the Sachar Committee report deliberately chose to stay away from discussions over party politics or issues of secularism or communalism and the implications of these for the welfare of Muslims. They pretended as if no causal relationship exists between ideology and development. The politics that is expected to follow the madrasa survey will highlight how crucial this relationship is, and how utopian the authors of the Sachar report were in hoping that they could frame a policy for Muslims outside the framework of secularism and communalism.

Madrasas have a long and complex history. In the post-mutiny period, they emerged mainly to help save Muslim identity in the face of growing colonial interventions, which they suspected might impose Christian values on fellow Muslims. Madrasas, particularly Deoband, chose not to seek state support because they suspected that the colonial state, among others, would eventually expect them to produce "loyal subjects for the British Crown" as became the case with Aligarh Muslim University. So, they sought autonomy. Deoband took a political stand and fiercely resisted Partition. While there are issues concerning madrasas and modernity, particularly with regard to issues such as patriarchy and child rights, some of which were raised by the Sachar Committee, to have any state intervention inspired by Islamophobic views will only help deepen majoritarianism.

HINDUS ARE NOT KAFIRS, MUSLIMS ARE NOT JIHADIS

A serious debate over the word kafir started in India after Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat objected to its use against Hindus, during a recent meeting with five Muslim intellectuals. Such a demand for the term's theological renunciation was made earlier too. In 2009, the Dharm Raksha Manch, affiliated to the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), wrote to 13 Muslim organisations asking them to issue a fatwa that Hindus are not kafirs and therefore 'jihad' against them is not justified by Islam. On the face of it, such demands are not unreasonable because Hindus (or non-Muslims in general) are not kafirs from an Islamic perspective. But asking Muslims to stop using this term, or seeking its ban, does not make sense because there is no evidence that even a small section of Indian Muslims contemptuously refer to Hindus as kafirs.

A tolerant policy

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Historically, it was Muslim imperialists who, in collaboration with conniving theologians, wielded the tag kafir as a religio-legal weapon to politically subjugate both Muslims and non-Muslims. But in India the Muslim rule was pragmatic. It did not try to establish a theocratic state and was accommodative of Hindu communities despite the anti-Hindu polemics of influential religious zealots. For instance, Ziauddin Barani (1285–1358), in *Fataawa-e-Jahandaari*, which contains norms of Islamic governance addressed to the rulers of the Delhi Sultanate, tells the sultans to uproot infidels, polytheists, and heretics (that is, Hindus) “if you want not to be ashamed before God and the Prophet.” During the Mughal period, Abdul Qadir Badauni (1540–1615) published *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* to counter Emperor Akbar’s inclusive programme of *sulh-e-kul* (universal peace), which considered all citizens as possible allies of the state irrespective of their caste or religion.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that both the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal empire mostly disregarded the anti-Hindu tirades. In *The Muslim Question: Understanding Islam and Indian History*, Raziuddin Aquil reveals that the preponderant Hanafi position of the ulama enabled medieval Muslim rulers to legally justify and put in practice a tolerant policy towards Hindus. This liberalism was also nourished by a genre of religious ethics called the *akhlaaq* literature authored by open-minded scholars such as Nasiruddin Tusi and Nuruddin Qazi. Qazi, like Tusi, believed that in matters of governance it is justice (*adl*), not infidelity (*kufr*) or religion (*deen*) that matters. For him, a just non-Muslim ruler would serve society better than an unjust Muslim king.

‘SCHEDULED CASTES PANEL CANNOT INITIATE INQUIRY ON UNSUBSTANTIATED COMPLAINTS’

The Delhi High Court has recently ruled that the National Commission for Scheduled Castes cannot initiate an inquiry based on any “specious complaint and unsubstantiated allegations” made by a person belonging to a Scheduled Caste.

Justice Yashwant Varma observed that the panel is empowered to initiate an inquiry provided a member of a Scheduled Caste is able to establish, at least *prima facie*, that he had been ill-treated or discriminated solely on account of the fact that he belonged to that community. The High Court’s observation came while deciding the plea of a company against which the commission had initiated an inquiry over termination of an engineer, belonging to a Scheduled Caste, in September 2012.

Engineer’s complaint

The sacked engineer had moved the panel alleging that the company had harassed him by “different methods as he belongs to a Schedule Caste” even though he kept performing his duties effectively. The company — Torrent Power Private Limited Agra — contended before the court that the engagement of the engineer was on a contractual basis and terminable with notice. It pointed out that there was no justification for the commission to have taken cognisance of the complaint by the man six years after the termination order was passed. The panel, on the other hand, submitted that it had only initiated a process of inquiry and had not framed any directions which could possibly be viewed as being prejudicial to the interest of the company. “It is important to note that it is not every violation of a perceived civil right of an SC member which would justify the commission assuming jurisdiction,” the court said.



WHY THE ELECTION COMMISSION'S STRATEGY TO NAME AND SHAME VOTERS WON'T HELP

On Tuesday morning, I woke up to the shocking news in The Indian Express that the Election Commission had signed MoUs with over 1,000 corporate houses undertaking to monitor “electoral participation of their workforce” and publish on their websites and notice boards those who do not vote.

To make matters worse, the Chief Electoral Officer of Gujarat has said that the employees of state public sector units and government departments who don't vote will also be tracked. The report also mentioned that on a recent visit to Gujarat, the CEC himself had said that though the commission cannot enforce compulsory voting, it “wanted to identify workers in big industries who don't vote despite availing the holiday”.

These shocking developments raise once again serious issues surrounding voters' rights, compulsory voting, secrecy of voting and debates around privacy and coercion. Any coercion — particularly coercion of the kind being proposed by the EC in this case — betrays an authoritarian approach that is not only antithetical to democracy, but is directly violative of the Constitution and the laws of the land.

The Supreme Court, in *PUCCL vs Union of India*, 2013, (popularly known as the NOTA judgment) has held that abstention from voting and negative voting are protected as freedom of expression — a fundamental right (Article 19). Earlier, in April 2009, the Court had taken the same view while dismissing a plea that sought to make voting mandatory on grounds of governments not representing the majority because of low turnouts.

In every election, there will be those who do not vote out of conviction or for ideological reasons. More importantly, there are millions of daily wage workers, and many homeless and ill. How can those who are unable to vote, given their circumstances, be called anti-democratic and forced to act under duress? The proposal for compulsory voting has been raised for years in response to chronic voter apathy, especially in urban areas. However, persuasion and motivation by education rather than compulsion is the answer. The EC has consistently held and practised this by implementing its flagship programme called SVEEP (Systematic Voters Education for Electoral Participation) since 2010.

It is important to have a look at all the legal and constitutional provisions that this action would be violative of. First, Section 79 D of the Representation of People Act, 1951 defines “electoral right” to mean the right of a person to... vote or refrain from vote at an election”. The same provision exists in the Indian Penal Code, vide Section 171A (b).

The law completely enables, but does not force, citizens to vote. Section 135B of the Representation of People Act, 1951, grants a paid holiday to every person employed in any business, trade, industrial undertaking or any other establishment.

Even a daily wage worker shall be paid for the day. Contravention of the law carries a fine for the employer which may extend to Rs 500. This amount may sound laughable but please remember, it was fixed over 25 years ago. The only exception is essential services. Employers at best can cut the wages of those who take leave but don't go to vote. This leave or wage deduction is normal in the functioning of companies, but such information is not to be put up on notice boards.



It is important to recall the rulings of the apex court on the matter. In PUCL vs Union of India, the Court said: "... free and fair election is a basic structure of the Constitution and necessarily includes within its ambit the right of an elector to cast his vote without fear of reprisal, duress or coercion. Protection of elector's identity and affording secrecy is therefore integral to free and fair elections and an arbitrary distinction between a voter who casts and a voter who does not cast his vote is violative of Article 14. Thus, secrecy is to be maintained for both categories of persons." (Emphasis added) How then can the list of non-voters be put up on a company's notice board or website? It will clearly be contempt of court.

The noble objective of enhanced voter participation can be best achieved through systematic voter education, amply demonstrated by the ECI in elections in all the states and Union territories since 2010 when a voter education division was set up. This soon evolved into its SVEEP programme. This has led to all elections ever since seeing the highest-ever turnouts. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the 67.3 per cent turnout beat all previous records. Many states have reached close to 90 per cent turnout and above. The EC's consistent assertion that motivation and facilitation, rather than compulsion, are the best ways to address the issue, has been clearly vindicated.

The voter education programme has sought to motivate the youth to participate in democracy by registering as voters, voting in every election and voting ethically—that is, without inducement. It has involved schools and colleges to take the registration facility to the doorstep by introducing voter clubs, campus ambassadors and youth icons and placing drop boxes in colleges for new applications.

Employers have been encouraged to create similar facilities in their offices. They are legally obliged to close their establishments on poll day, but this is seldom enforced. Instead, employers are asked to allow the employees a couple of hours off to enable them to go and vote. "Naming and shaming" of non-voters is not an option available, even to the Election Commission.

In fact, alarmed by the news report in The Indian Express, I took the liberty to contact Rajiv Kumar, CEC, who clarified to me that the MoUs are only for voter education and facilitation and not for compelling them to vote, not to speak of "naming and shaming". I think the statements of CEO Gujarat and of the CEC himself to the media have set the cat among the pigeons. The ECI must immediately issue a clarification to nip the commotion in the bud.

IN LIMELIGHT AFTER ANKITA BHANDARI MURDER CASE, WHAT IS UTTARAKHAND'S REVENUE POLICE SYSTEM

In the wake of the murder of 19-year-old Ankita Bhandari, allegedly by her employer Pulkit Arya, the demand to replace the 'Revenue Police' system in Uttarakhand has once again gained ground. In the murder case, there are allegations of the revenue police not registering a complaint in time and even siding with the accused.

Ankita Bhandari was killed on the night of September 18. The accused then informed the local Patwari (as the area falls under revenue police jurisdiction) about her disappearance but no case was registered. Patwari Vaibhav Pratap did not inform anyone about the case and went on leave. After the matter came to the limelight, the case was transferred to the regular police on September 22 and three accused, including Arya, were arrested for murder.

Patwari Pratap was suspended and later arrested by the Special Investigation Team (SIT) probing the case, for negligence and on suspicion of siding with the accused. After the case, Uttarakhand



Assembly Speaker Ritu Khanduri wrote to CM Pushkar Singh Dhami, requesting him to end the revenue police system. The state cabinet has now given its nod to a proposal to replace the system with the regular police.

Although the regular police force exists in Uttarakhand, its jurisdiction does not extend to several hilly areas. At present, the revenue police jurisdiction covers over 50 per cent of the state in terms of area, and about 25 per cent of the population.

The Revenue Police system

The system of revenue police was brought by the British over a century ago when crime in the hilly areas was low. The motive was to save money and resources by not deploying regular police. Under the unique revenue police system, civil officials of the revenue department have the powers and functions of the regular police. Whenever a crime takes place, the revenue police of the area files an FIR, investigates the case, arrests the accused and also files a chargesheet in the local court.

In case of heinous crimes like murder, rape, or crimes against Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), the case is transferred to the regular police. The process, however, takes days or sometimes months, as the revenue police first forwards the information to the district Superintendent of Police (SP), and the SP will hands over the case to a regular police station. Often, the delay causes the disappearance of crucial evidence or weakens the case in other ways.

Pulkit Arya, son of BJP leader Vinod Arya, confessed to killing Ankita Bhandari.

In other states, the core function of revenue officials is to maintain land, cultivation and revenue records of villages, and collect revenues on behalf of the government. The revenue officials like patwari and kanungo compile data on crop production, perform election-related duties, and collect census and literacy data. They are also given the duty of implementing government schemes and preparing birth, death, and caste certificates.

History of Revenue Police

In the 1800s, the rulers of Tehri lost their territories to Gurkhas. They requested the British to oust the Gurkhas from Garhwal and promised to pay in return. However, after the war, they could not pay up and in exchange, the British kept the western part of Garhwal.

In the year 1815, the British ousted the Gurkhas and as per the famous treaty of Saigauli, the river Kali became the international border of then British India and Nepal. As the British wanted the natural resources and minerals found in present-day Uttarakhand for revenue, they put in place a revenue system with the posts of patwari, kanungo, lekhpal, etc., common in the Mughal administration. However, they realised that the hills saw little crime, and it was decided unofficially that no special police was required except in towns like Almora, Ranikhet, and Nainital.

After 1857, the British Police Act 1861 came into existence. It now became necessary to give the revenue police system a legal basis. In 1874, the Scheduled Districts Act came into force. One of the objects of this Act was to make special provisions for such parts of British India which due to their distinct geographical, demographical and socio-economic features were never brought under the general laws.

Under this, the patwari was given the power of a station officer of police. His supervisory officer was confirmed to be the kanungo. The practice continued even after the Independence.



Seven years after Uttarakhand was carved out of Uttar Pradesh, the Uttarakhand Police Act replaced the Act of 1861. However, in the hill parts of the state, revenue officials continue to have the powers and functions of the police officer.

Problems with the revenue police system

Advocating the need to end the revenue police system, a retired IPS officer who served both in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand said the revenue police system has become obsolete in times when crime has become global. The biggest problem with the revenue police, he said, is the fact that revenue officials are given the additional task of policing with none to minimal training.

“One of the major tasks of the police, along with investigating and solving a crime, is to prevent criminal activities. The prevention of crime, either by collecting intelligence or creating a fear of law and order, cannot be done by the revenue officials. In investigations, they sometimes take days or months to transfer cases and all evidence is gone by then. Being a border state, Uttarakhand is very important from a strategic point of view. In this scenario, the existence of revenue police brings major threats,” he said. Also, in a tourist state like Uttarakhand, problems arise when a case is connected to other states. Coordination with other districts or states, which the regular police can do, is difficult for the revenue police. They also have a constraint when seeking forensic help.

In the case of regular police, there is a hierarchy. Based on the seriousness of a criminal case, an official ranging from a Sub-Inspector (SI) to a Deputy SP can take over. However, in the case of the revenue police, the patwari is the highest investigation officer.

Also, revenue police officers do not fall under the Police-Forces (Restriction of Rights) Act, which restricts certain rights conferred by the Constitution to the members of the forces charged with the maintenance of public order. This is to ensure proper discharge of their duties and the maintenance of discipline. Thus, on several occasions, revenue officials have gone on strike from policing duties, demanding adequate resources or freeing them from policing responsibilities.

The plans and the challenges

The Uttarakhand High Court, in a landmark judgment in 2018, ordered the state government to abolish the “century-old practice” of the revenue police system. The court order came in the backdrop of a woman’s alleged killing by her in-laws for dowry in 2011 in a village in the Tehri Garhwal district, which comes under the revenue police system.

However, the state challenged the matter in a higher court.

Earlier this month, after the Ankita Bhandari murder case, the state cabinet gave its nod to a proposal to replace the revenue police system in the state with regular police. The plan is to be implemented in a phase-wise manner. In the first phase, the area of existing police stations and police outposts will be increased.

In addition to that, permission has been granted to six new police stations and 20 police outposts in areas where there is a rise in tourism and commercial activities.

A former police officer in the state welcomed the decision, but said that doing away with the revenue police system will not be an easy task. “Many people have a vested interest in letting this continue. In areas under the jurisdiction of revenue police, the fear of police isn’t there and it allows several illegal activities,” he said, mentioning past incidents when violent protests were held after the government transferred areas from revenue police to normal police.



UNDERSTANDING THE GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX

The story so far:

For the second time in two years, the Ministry of Women and Child Development on Saturday rejected the Global Hunger Index (GHI) that ranked India 107 among 121 countries. India was accorded a score of 29.1 out of 100 (with 0 representing no hunger), placing it behind Sri Lanka (66), Myanmar (71), Nepal (81) and Bangladesh (84). It referred to the index as “an erroneous measure of hunger”.

What is the Global Hunger Index?

The GHI, is a peer-reviewed annual report that endeavours to “comprehensively measure and track hunger at the global, regional, and country levels”. Authors of the report primarily refer to the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG 2) that endeavours to achieve ‘Zero Hunger’ by 2030. According to them, the report attempts to “raise awareness and understanding of the struggle against hunger”. The GHI score is computed using four broad indicators — undernourishment (measure of the proportion of the population facing chronic deficiency of dietary energy intake), child stunting (low height for age), child wasting (low weight for height) and child mortality (death of a child under the age of five).

Why these four metrics?

Undernourishment, as per the authors, provides a basis to measure inadequate access to food and is among the lead indicators for international hunger targets, including the UN SDG 2. Child stunting and mortality, offers perspective about the child’s vulnerability to nutritional deficiencies, access to food and quality of nutrition. Since children (especially below five) are at a developmental age there is a greater and urgent requirement for nutrition with results particularly visible. This forms the basis of assessing nutritional requirement among children. Adults are at a sustainable age — they are not growing but rather subsisting on nutrition for healthy survival. And lastly, on the same rationale, child mortality indicates the serious consequences of hunger.

What allegations are we looking at?

As per the Ministry for Women and Child Development, the report lowers India’s rank based on the estimates of the Proportion of Undernourished (PoU) population. It elaborates that the U.S. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimate is based on the ‘Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES)’ survey module conducted using the Gallup World Poll, that bears a sample size of 3,000 respondents being asked eight questions. It stated that the data represented a miniscule proportion for a country of India’s size. It countered the assertions in the report pointing to India’s per capita dietary energy supply increasing year-on-year due to enhanced production of major agricultural commodities in the country over the years.

The GHI website provides important clarifications on these points raised by the government. It explains that while FAO uses a suite of indicators on food security, including two important indicators — prevalence of undernourishment and prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity based on FIES — the GHI only uses the PoU obtained through food balance sheets based on data reported by member countries, including India. A food balance sheet provides a comprehensive picture of the pattern of a country’s food supply during a specified reference period. It lists down the source of the supply and its utilisation specific to each food category.



On why the GHI uses three child-specific indicators out of the four to calculate hunger for a country's population, the website explains, "By combining the proportion of undernourished in the population (1/3 of the GHI score) with the indicators relating to children under age five (2/3 of the GHI score), the GHI ensures that both the food supply situation of the population as a whole and the effects of inadequate nutrition within a vulnerable subset of the population are captured." In fact, a Senior Policy Officer at the GHI said that, "All four indicators used in the calculation of the global hunger are recognised by the international community, including India, and used for measuring progress towards the UN SDGs."

Is government's critique justified?

Close to 20 per cent of children in the country below the age of five suffer from the most visible and life-threatening form of malnutrition — wasting, or "low weight-for-height". About 35 per cent of such children are not as tall as they should be. These sobering factoids could have served as inputs for government programmes such as Poshan 2.0 and the Mid-Day Meal scheme. However — like last year — the Ministry of Women and Child Development not only dismissed the GHI but also questioned the intent of its authors. An official statement has described the report as part of a "consistent effort" to "taint India's image".

Part of the government's critique pertains to one of the major takeaways of the GHI — the pandemic seems to have aggravated India's malnutrition crisis. It contends that the report ignores the food security efforts undertaken during the crisis, especially the provision of 5 kg foodgrain to all beneficiaries of the National Food Security Act in addition to their regular ration. There can be little doubt about the efficacy of the PDS as a safety net during troubled times. However, as several scholars have pointed out, the nutrition deficit of the country's children is, in large measure, a function of their poor diets. Studies have shown that even the well-off in the country do not consume adequate amounts of fruits, vegetables and non-cereal proteins. Eggs do not figure in the Mid-Day Meal schemes in a majority of states.

The government has argued that the index relied on an opinion poll. The authors of the report have clarified that the GHI draws on data reported by member countries, including India. The debate on methodology isn't settled and such conversations could enrich the understanding of a longstanding predicament faced by the country — one that the National Family Health Surveys have long underscored. The NFHS-5, conducted just before the pandemic, showed that more than 20 per cent of children below the age of five did not weigh as much as they should. The discourse on nutrition could acquire greater nuance with more data — on household consumption of food items, for instance. But the country has not had any official estimate on per capita household spending since 2011-12 — the findings of the last survey in 2017-18 were rejected by the government on "data quality" issues. Work on filling this vacuum has, reportedly, begun. The government would be well-advised to bolster its information repositories that can help it address malnutrition effectively, and not be prickly about GHI rankings.

GONE GIRLS

Reported violence against women is the proverbial tip of the iceberg; it conceals more than it reveals. But what it reveals can sometimes shock the collective conscience of a nation, especially a heinous crime that plays out in broad daylight as an assault on a young woman. Last week's incident of violence in Chennai, where college student Sathyapriya was decapitated as a young man pursuing her romantically pushed her in the path of an oncoming train did no less tug at the heartstrings of the public. The incidents of violence against women in train stations in Chennai



are following a nearly copycat pattern after Swathi, a young techie was murdered in 2016, in broad daylight by a man, who was again stalking her, in a railway station. In 2021, Swetha, a young college goer was murdered near a suburban train station by a man in a 'troubled relationship' with her. In each of these cases, the inability of the stalker to accept the fact that his overtures were turned down by the girl directly led to the violence. Earlier this month, an eight-year-old girl in Delhi was kidnapped, sexually assaulted and murdered. In September, the bodies of two teenaged girls were found in Lakhimpur Kheri in Uttar Pradesh. Police said they had been strangled with a scarf and hung from a tree after they were raped. Only a few cases hit the headlines or make an impact on social media. Many more go unreported, the massive unseen underbelly of the iceberg.

In the chequered history of handling the many forms of violence against women in India, the horrific Nirbhaya rape of 2012 is a definitive milestone. It rocked the nation with such force that lawmakers rushed to strengthen laws, and put in place systems and infrastructure that were meant to ensure such dreadful incidents are never repeated. However, according to National Crime Records Bureau statistics, a whopping 4,28,278 lakh crimes against women happened in 2021. These included rape, rape and murder, dowry harassment, kidnapping, forced marriage, trafficking, and online harassment. At this juncture, a decade later, it is pertinent to ask if the Government has rolled out all the strategies conceived of and fuelled by the Nirbhaya Fund. Speedy process of trial and resolution resulting in conviction of the accused is a casualty in courts that are flooded with pending cases. The Sustainable Development Goals underline the importance of building safe, resilient and inclusive cities from a gender lens. No slackening on the part of authorities is acceptable when it comes to dealing with violence against women; zero tolerance alone is acceptable.

HINDI IMPOSITION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The story so far:

The reported recommendation of the Parliamentary Committee on Official Language to use Hindi as the medium of instruction in Central institutions of higher education in Hindi-speaking States and regional languages in other States has once again ignited a controversy over, what is called by critics of the BJP, an attempt to impose Hindi on non-Hindi speaking people. Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, M. K. Stalin and Pinarayi Vijayan have voiced their concerns over the recommendation.

What is the backdrop to the Hindi imposition row?

The origin of the linguistic row goes back to the debate on official languages. In the Constituent Assembly, Hindi was voted as the official language by a single vote. However, it added that English would continue to be used as an associate official language for 15 years. The Official Languages Act came into effect on the expiry of this 15-year period in 1965. This was the background in which the anti-Hindi agitation took place. However, as early as in 1959, Jawaharlal Nehru had given an assurance in Parliament that English would continue to be in use as long as non-Hindi speaking people wanted it.

Why do many parties in Tamil Nadu stand against the recommendation?

Tamil Nadu has had a long history of agitations against "Hindi imposition". In August 1937, in the then Presidency of Madras, the regime headed by C. Rajagopalachari, also known as Rajaji or CR, decided to make Hindi compulsory in secondary schools. E.V. Ramasamy, or Periyar as he was



known, who was still in the Justice Party at that time, had spearheaded an agitation against the move, marking the first such stir. A few months after CR's resignation, the British government, in February 1940, made Hindi optional. In January 1965, the second round of agitations erupted in the wake of Hindi becoming the official language of the Union government coupled with the approach adopted by the Central government towards the whole issue.

At different points in time, leaders, starting from Jawaharlal Nehru in the mid-1950s, assured the people of Tamil Nadu that there would be no "imposition" of Hindi. However, in recent years, be it the National Education Policy or reports of English signage on National Highways in the State getting replaced with Hindi signage, the political class of the State had overwhelmingly expressed its reservations. The reiteration of the age-old assurance by the Central government coupled with the promise of the promotion of other Indian languages have barely mollified the protesters.

The essence of the Official Languages Act, 1963, is to provide something to each of the differing groups to meet its objections and safeguard its position. Whenever the parties in the State see any attempt to disturb this status quo, their reaction is always uniform — a virulent opposition.

What does the present proposal say?

If reports in sections of the media are an indication, English, as a medium of instruction in all technical and non-technical institutions, will be permitted only where it is absolutely essential, as the idea is to replace the language gradually with Hindi in those institutions.

While IITs, IIMs and All India Institute of Medical Sciences are considered technical institutions, Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalayas fall under the other category. Also, the committee has recommended the removal of English as one of the languages in examinations held for recruitment to the Central services. It has stated that the requisite knowledge of Hindi among candidates should also be ensured.

What is the alternative suggested by critics of the proposal ?

Both Mr. Stalin and Mr. Vijayan have called for equal treatment to all the languages specified under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. The Kerala Chief Minister has specifically stated that question papers for competitive examinations should be prepared in all the languages while his Tamil Nadu counterpart has urged the Centre to promote all languages and keep open the avenues of progress in terms of education and employment equal to speakers of all languages.

CENTRE LAUNCHES PROGRAMME TO STRENGTHEN KASHI-T.N. BOND

Amid the continued debates over imposition of Hindi across the country, the Union government on Thursday announced a month-long programme to "strengthen" and "rekindle" the cultural and civilisational bond between Tamil Nadu and Varanasi. Named the 'Kashi-Tamil Sangamam', the programme would be held from November 16 to December 16.

"The period will cover the Tamil month of Karthikeya during which all Tamil households go pray to Lord Shiva. This programme, which would be a part of the 'Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat' initiative, is aimed at rekindling the civilisational link between the new Kashi and Tamil Nadu — both deep centres of knowledge," Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said. He added that building a heritage bridge for the new generation was a key feature of the National Education Policy.



As part of the programme, 2,500 people divided into 12 groups would be travelling to Varanasi by train during the period. The journey points in Tamil Nadu would be Chennai, Rameswaram and Coimbatore. The groups would include students, teachers, artisans and people from various walks of life.

“It would be an eight-day tour package,” the Minister said after launching the online registration for the tours. Mr. Pradhan said the tours would include seminars, lectures, group meetings and visits to the Kashi Vishwanath temple and centres of important Tamil cultural heritage in Varanasi.

The Centre’s decision comes at a time the Tamil Nadu government has moved a resolution against ‘Hindi imposition’ in the State Assembly.

Chief Minister M.K. Stalin had earlier written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi against “continuous efforts to promote Hindi in the name of one nation”.

Denying any link between the Hindi debate and the launch of this programme, Mr. Pradhan said, “This is not a reactionary programme. We had been trying to launch this for the past six months”. “The Prime Minister has earlier said that all languages are national languages and no language will be imposed on the other.”

“The Home Minister has also said that in Hindi-speaking areas it should be the link language and in other areas, the local languages should be the link language. This is our policy, all regional languages are national languages,” the Minister added.

The knowledge partners for the programme would be IIT-Madras and the Banaras Hindu University, while the Uttar Pradesh government would be the host State.

TEACH IN MOTHER TONGUE UNTIL AGE 8, NEW LANGUAGE CAN UNDO LEARNING: NATIONAL CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for foundational stage education, released by Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan on Thursday, has recommended that the mother tongue should be the primary medium of instruction for children till eight years of age, in both public and private schools, saying a new language “reverses the entire learning process” in the early years. It adds that English could be one of the second language options.

The previous NCF, released in 2005, had also stated that the language of interaction and communication in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) would “normally be the child’s first language, or home language”. However, it also said that in the light of socio-political realities, English has to be introduced early as a second language, either in Class I, as several states have already done, or at the pre-school level.

The new NCF, which deals with pre-school and classes I-II, steers clear of any detailed instruction on a timeframe for introducing English. It states that English can be one of the second languages taught at the foundational level, but doesn’t specify which grade.

Instead, it emphasises the virtues of the mother tongue as the primary medium of instruction, saying that by the time children join pre-school, they acquire significant competence in the “home language”.



“If the child is taught with a new or unfamiliar language as the medium of instruction, the three-four years of experience that the child comes with gets completely disregarded, as a new language is taught from the beginning, at the cost of negating the foundational experiences, skills, and learning that the child has already accumulated, thus reversing the entire learning process,” it states.

“Since children learn concepts most rapidly and deeply in their home language, the primary medium of instruction would optimally be the child’s home language/ mother tongue/ familiar language in the foundational stage. This should be the approach in both public and private schools,” it adds.

“For young children to acquire skills of speaking fluently in their language 2 or language 3 (which could also be English), a natural, communication-focussed approach that also uses scaffolding of their language 1 (primary medium of instruction) needs to be adopted,” it says.

The previous NCF had observed that language teaching is a complex issue in a multilingual country like India, where teachers may be required to cope with a number of languages in a classroom. “Any Indian language used as a medium of instruction in pre-schools, especially in towns and cities, poses problems for children coming from different language backgrounds and dialects,” it had said.

The NCF will set the stage for changes in school syllabus, starting with the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). The NCF for the foundational stage will be followed by its editions for higher classes, as well as teacher and adult education, over the next few months.

The NCF’s foundational stage edition, however, is not so much about revision of textbooks, but about changes in teaching and learning process. While the medium of instruction forms an integral part, it also focuses on play-based pedagogy and addressing delayed learning.

Pradhan said he expects the NCERT to complete the new syllabus and textbooks for the foundational level by “Basant Panchami” next year. In other words, the government is keen on implementing the recommendations of the report by February 2023.

“And in many cases, textbooks are not required at this level, states the report. It is understandable as most things will be play-based, story-based. The method of teaching will be very important. The report has suggestions not just for students, but teachers as well. We will work on war footing,” he said.

The report underlines that “children in this age group should not be burdened with textbooks”. In the last two years of the foundational stage, or ages 6 to 8 years, simple and attractive textbooks can be considered, it says.

The report acknowledges that currently “there is a learning crisis in India”, as children are enrolled in primary school but are failing to attain basic skills such as foundational literacy and numeracy.

“During 2020-21, of the 19,344,199 students admitted in Grade 1, only 50.9% had pre-school experience. Of these, 24.7% had pre-school experience in the same school, 7.9% in another school and 18.3% in an anganwadi/ ECCE centre, respectively,” it states.



LECTURES TRANSCREATED FROM ENGLISH TO FIVE INDIAN LANGUAGES

This idea first occurred to Prof. Rajeev Sangal of Indian Institute of Information Technology (IIIT) Hyderabad, who in discussion with then Principal Scientific Advisor to the Prime Minister Prof. Vijay Raghavan, initiated the process.

This project aims to transcreate about 40,000 videos of lectures from the NPTEL and SWAYAM programmes into five Indian languages at first and then into 13. The pilot project spiralled out from IIIT Hyderabad, with Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras and IIT Bombay as partners.

Dipti Mishra (IIIT Hyderabad), Pushpak Bhattacharya (IIT Bombay), Umesh Srinivasan and Hema A. Murthy (IIT Madras) led the project in their respective institutions.

The process

In the project, every video is first subjected to speech recognition. The extracted file is cleaned up with errors being manually removed (at IIIT Hyderabad and IIT Bombay).

The identification and discovery of technical “domain terms” is done at IIIT Hyderabad. This is followed by text-to-text machine translation, carried out at IIIT Hyderabad and IIT Bombay.

A manual error-correction is then done at IIT Madras and IIIT Hyderabad. From the translated, corrected text, speech is synthesised at IIT Madras where also the speech is made to synchronise with the lip movement.

In future, this technology would develop to the extent that the synthesised speech will perfectly match with the original speaker’s voice itself.

“The project is meant to engage a large number of startups for not only technical lectures, but also general topics,” said Prof. Murthy.

Future goals

In all, 75 videos have been transcreated in five different Indian languages. Once machine translation is developed for more languages, this can be extended to 13 languages.

“The software is indigenous and available in open source, and to startups for commercial purposes at no fee,” says Prof. Murthy.

Future goals include making 100 courses available in 18 Indian languages. Also, the researchers plan to perform spoken language identification, provide keyword search and transcreations between two Indian languages and Indian English.

This will involve many more institutions across India.

CENTRE TO PROMOTE DESTINATIONS IN 15 STATES AS PART OF SWADESH DARSHAN 2

Prayagraj, Chitrakoot, and Gwalior are among the cities identified in 15 States across the country to be promoted as part of India’s new domestic tourism policy which moves away from theme-based tourist circuits and focuses on revving up destination tourism.



The initiative is being taken as part of the first phase of the 'Swadesh Darshan 2' which will be kicked off in January.

Fifteen States are part of the first phase which include Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra. Two destinations from each State have been identified, sources in the Ministry of Tourism told The Hindu.

Some of the prominent places identified are Jhansi and Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh, Gwalior, Chitrakoot and Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh and Ajanta and Ellora in Maharashtra.

The sources said the destinations had been zeroed in on after consultations with the State Tourism Departments, and the Centre was now waiting for approval from Tourism Minister G. Kishan Reddy. The Swadesh Darshan scheme is 100% centrally funded. The scheme has been revamped with the mantra of "vocal for local", a top official of the Tourism Ministry told The Hindu adding that it was essentially aimed at targeting domestic tourists.

The Swadesh Darshan Scheme was launched by the Centre in 2014-15 for the integrated development of theme-based tourist circuits. Under the scheme, the Ministry of Tourism provides financial assistance to State governments, Union Territory Administrations or Central Agencies for development of tourism infrastructure in the country.

From December, the revamped scheme would be launched which seeks to enhance the contribution of tourism.

"To create jobs including self-employment for local communities, to enhance the skills of local youth in tourism and hospitality, to increase private sector investment in tourism and hospitality and to preserve and enhance local cultural and natural resources," the vision document said.

According to the third Tourism Satellite Account for 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20, the contribution of tourism to the employment is 14.78%, 14.87% and 15.34%, respectively.

START-UPS TO TAP POTENTIAL OF LAB-GROWN MEAT

It is among the handful of Indian companies that are employing advances in cell biology and protein synthesis to solve a global challenge: how to ensure that a rising world population gets better, cheaper protein from fewer animals and diminishing cultivable land.

Some companies have bet on modifying plant products like soya, for instance, and processing it to the extent that its texture feels like meat and others, such as Neat Meatt are trying to derive cells from species that can be coaxed into meat. Unlike such plant-based meat, Neat Meatt aims to make lab-grown or so called 'cultivated meat.'

Three kinds of cell-lines are critical to recreate meat: fibroblasts — the cells that form connective tissue and collagen — myoblasts, which form muscles and adipocytes, which make up fat tissue. "The bigger challenge is in bringing all of these together," said Mr. Sharma whose team is developing these at centres based in Delhi University, South Campus and at the ICAR-National Research Centre for Meat.

A big challenge

Cell-lines are a group of cells derived from an animal that can be used to recreate several of their kind indefinitely. However, deriving an ideal stock is often a challenge because of which some



companies have set their sights on relatively simpler life forms such as shrimp and prawn, whose texture and taste are easier to create.

Nithin Shetty of Pune-based Klevermeat faced challenges with sourcing live shrimp, from which he needed cells to create cell lines. “We have finally managed to get such shrimp and in the process of getting cell lines. Once we perfect this — and this is potentially a huge market in itself — we could consider moving on to fish such as rohu and katla,” he told The Hindu.

A summit was organised here by the Good Food Institute (GFI, India), a non-profit that works with start-ups, research bodies and government bodies to promote ‘smart protein’ or foods that are high on protein but require less land and water and aren’t reliant on slaughtering animals and sea-life. Varun Deshpande, Managing Director, GFI (India), said the export market for such meat out of India was expected to be ₹1,300 crore-4,100 crore and could create 15,000-50,000 jobs by 2030 if enabling policy conditions were present. So far, the total invested capital globally in cultivated meat is around \$ 1.3 billion, the organisation added.

Cultivated meat was targeted at non-vegetarians, and those who’d want to continue to experience the taste and texture of meat but would like their meat to be ‘cruelty-free’ and in consonant with the challenges posed by climate change, said Mr. Shetty. “A kilogram of shrimp in India can cost over ₹1,000 and while cultivated meat will be slightly more expensive now, it will eventually be comparable or cheaper,” he added. However even vegetarians concerned about the carbon footprint from cattle and methane emissions have an alternative to one of India’s most widely consumed foods — milk. Bharat Bakaraju, CEO of Phyx44, a Bangalore-based biotechnology startup, is recreating the genes that make cow milk. “If soya-based milk is one end and the real milk is at the other, we are somewhere in the middle so far,” he said.

PANDEMIC AND A FREE PRESS: HOW THE LARGEST DEMOCRACY REPORTED ON COVID

Sanna Irshad Mattoo, a 28-year-old Kashmiri photojournalist, was stopped at the Delhi airport from boarding her flight despite having a valid ticket and U.S. visa. She was on her way to receive the Pulitzer Prize for her coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in India for Reuters. In this article dated September 17, 2020, Joel Simon explains how COVID reporting in India became an endless saga of violence, harassment and censorship.

India is justly proud of its position as the world’s largest democracy. It is less proud of the fact that it has become a hotbed for the spread of COVID-19, with an estimated 90,000 daily infections, and over 5 million cases overall, second only to the United States. Can India find a way to combat the virus while preserving the democratic values that define the nation?

At the heart of any democracy is an informed citizenry that is empowered to make decisions and hold its government accountable. That is why there is nothing more essential to a democracy than a free press. It is not merely the means through which citizens gather information. It is the vehicle through which ideas are debated, policies are formulated, and conflicts are resolved. Yet, India’s press freedom record has seen a decline in recent years.

Violent attacks against journalists, including murder, are surprisingly common in India and rarely punished. A 2016 report entitled ‘Dangerous Pursuits’ by the Committee to Protect Journalists, the organisation I lead, found that journalists who report on government corruption are routinely murdered with impunity. Legal prosecution is also rife, particularly against journalists reporting on the conflict in Kashmir. Aasif Sultan, a journalist with the monthly Kashmir Narrator, was



arrested on August 31, 2018 in reprisal for his reporting. He has since spent more than two years in jail.

'Only official versions'

These negative trends have only intensified since the COVID-19 outbreak, with journalists across the country facing attacks, harassment, and arrests. The Narendra Modi government of course famously asked the Supreme Court to impose a nationwide censorship on the publication of information that the government deemed "false or inaccurate." The Supreme Court denied that request, but it did direct the media to refer to the "official version" of events when covering the pandemic — an ambiguous edict which has not been enforced.

DILIP MAHALANABIS: THE ORS PIONEER WHO HELPED SAVE MILLIONS OF LIVES

In the demise of Dilip Mahalanabis on October 16, we lost a pioneering public health physician. His contribution to the application of Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS) at the population level revolutionised the treatment of cholera and acute diarrhoeal diseases, saving thousands of lives, particularly that of children. Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) entails drinking water with modest amounts of sugar and salts, specifically sodium and potassium to correct dehydration due to fluid losses from diarrhoea. As a Current Science article put it in 2019, "ORT remains the greatest contribution from the Indian subcontinent towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals. ORT teaches many lessons: The delays in translating research to therapy, the lure of gadgetry smothering frugal innovation, need for institutional endorsement from the West, in addition to the general indifference towards public health priorities."

Administration of fluids through the intravenous route used to be the mainstay of management of cholera till the results of a study demonstrated that an oral solution of glucose and electrolytes was effective for replacing water and electrolyte losses. A Lancet editorial in 1978 termed it "potentially the most important medical advance this century". ORT was in marked contrast to the then prevailing doctrine of patients being given only sips of water without food, euphemistically called "resting the stomach", often worsening the underlying malnutrition. An estimated 54 million diarrhoeal deaths were averted by ORT alone between 1978 and 2008, such was the magnitude of its beneficial impacts. The translation of the basic science concept to quick and efficient practice was, however, not easy. And that is the fascinating story and sterling contribution of Mahalanabis and his co-workers.

ORT for the management of severe diarrhoea was developed in the latter half 1960s. While ORS was indeed a "simple solution" to a disease that carried very high mortality, there was resistance from the physicians in not leaving it to inexperienced health workers to manage cholera or severe diarrhoea. Instead, the professionals argued that ORT should be supervised by doctors and trained health workers only. This period coincided with the seventh cholera pandemic (El Tor biotype) that started in Indonesia in 1961 and spread to East Pakistan (Bangladesh) by 1963 and to India in 1964. Though experiments with ORS were underway, the WHO responded in 1970 by distributing large amounts of intravenous fluids – a move marked by high transportation costs and limited utilisation on account of a shortage of a trained health workforce. The focus of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), through the Cholera Research Laboratory in Dhaka, was to find a vaccine to protect the US troops from cholera attacks in Southeast Asia.

The refugee crisis on account of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 led to an estimated 10 million refugees fleeing to India and 30 million internally displaced. The ongoing security and



financial crisis led to the Cholera Research Laboratory suspending the trials including those of ORT. Mahalanabis was trained as a paediatrician and joined the Cholera Research Programme of the Johns Hopkins University Center for Medical Research and Training (JHCMRT) in Calcutta in 1966. His team was treating cases of the cholera epidemic in a camp in Bangaon, West Bengal that housed 3,50,000 refugees but ran out of intravenous fluids. He thought that it would be opportune to use ORS. As no ORS packets were available, they mixed salt and sugar solution (ORS) in drums and administered it to the cholera patients in the camps. The library of the JHCMRT was converted into a factory. This was not a mandated mode of treatment and at great personal risk, Mahalanabis chose to respond to the humanitarian crisis in this manner. It was evident in two to three weeks' time that not only was the therapy working but that it was possible to administer ORT through volunteers (in the absence of a sufficient number of trained workers).

OCTOBER STORM IN BAY OF BENGAL AFTER 3 YEARS: WHEN, WHERE IT IS LIKELY TO HIT

The first tropical cyclone of the post-monsoon season of 2022 is likely to form in the Bay of Bengal on October 24, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has said. If realised, this will be the first cyclone to develop in the Bay of Bengal in October since 2018, and will be called Sitrang, as named by Thailand. The last October cyclone in the Bay of Bengal was Titli in 2018.

Why storms in October

The months of October-November and May-June see storms of severe intensity develop in the North Indian Ocean — comprising the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea — with an average of five developing in a calendar year. In the past 131 years, October saw 61 storms develop in the Bay of Bengal, according to the Regional Specialised Meteorological Centre (RSMC). The east coast, notably Odisha, has faced many of its severest storms in October, including the Super Cyclone of 1999.

“After the withdrawal of the Southwest monsoon, there is a rise in ocean heating, which leads to rise in sea surface temperature over the Bay of Bengal. The atmospheric moisture availability over the ocean region, too, is higher. So, when remnant systems from the South China Sea reach the Bay of Bengal, they get conducive conditions, aiding the formation and intensification of cyclones in October,” said Umasankar Das, IMD scientist from Meteorological Centre, Bhubaneswar.

In some years, ocean-atmospheric factors hinder this phenomenon. For instance, in 2020, weak La Nina conditions along the equatorial Pacific Ocean prevented a cyclonic formation near India's coasts.

Cyclone Sitrang

On Thursday, IMD officials said the cyclonic storm set to develop in east-central Bay of Bengal on October 24 will reach close to the coasts of West Bengal – Bangladesh by October 25.

The name Sitrang (read Si-trang) has been given by Thailand, and features in the list of tropical cyclone names prepared by the RSMC being followed since April 2020. The IMD is one of the world's six RSMCs mandated to provide cyclone advisories and alerts to 13 member countries — Bangladesh, India, Iran, Maldives, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

Cyclones in the Arabian Sea



In comparison with the Bay of Bengal, only 32 storms have developed in the Arabian Sea in October since 1891. Climatologically too, the IMD states that of the five storms formed in the North Indian Ocean in a calendar year, four are in the Bay of Bengal and one in Arabian Sea.

CENTRAL PANEL TO PROBE 'ILLEGAL' AXING OF TREES IN NATIONAL PARK

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) on Friday told the forest officials of Uttarakhand that it would direct the Union government to form a committee to initiate an investigation into "illegal tree cutting" in Jim Corbett National Park.

The NGT's move came after it had taken cognisance of The Hindu's report on the felling of trees in the Corbett Tiger Reserve (CTR). The report had quoted a Forest Survey of India (FSI) report stating that over 6,000 trees were illegally cut to pave the way for the Pakhro tiger safari project at the tiger reserve.

Samir Sinha, Chief Wildlife Warden of Uttarakhand, who appeared before the NGT on Friday, told The Hindu that the State government had informed the court about the steps taken by the government over the "alleged illegal tree cutting". "The court said it would direct the Centre to form a committee to investigate the allegations," Mr. Sinha said.

Vinod Singhal, the Principal Chief Conservator of Forest and Head of the Forest Force, said the forest department had permission to cut 163 trees for the project, but preliminary investigation showed 97 extra trees were illegally cut.

The fact that thousands of trees had been cut for the project was highlighted by Gaurav Bansal, an environment activist and lawyer based in Delhi. In a complaint to the National Tiger Conservation Authority, he alleged that a large number of trees were axed in the protected area.

Taking cognisance of the complaint, the State government asked the FSI to conduct a survey of the number of trees felled in the designated area for the Pakhru tiger safari project inside the tiger reserve.

The Forest Survey Institute was also tasked with scanning the area for illegal axing of trees and change in forest cover in Kalagarh forest division.

Over nine months, the FSI compiled a report on the tree cover in the Pakhro, Kalushaheed, Nalkhatta, and Kalagarh ranges in the forest area.

The report, which was published in September, observed that 6,093 trees had been illegally felled in the tiger reserve, a senior official of the Uttarakhand forest department, who did not wish to be named, told The Hindu. According to the report, around 16.21 hectares of land in CTR had also been allegedly cleared by forest officials.

The State forest department, however, refuted the FSI's claims and said there were some technical issues that needed to be resolved before the report could be accepted. Mr. Singhal accepted that the FSI report found that over 6,000 trees were illegally cut, but maintained that the forest department had some issues with the report and had not accepted it yet. Former State Forest Minister Harak Singh Rawat had laid the foundation stone for the Pakhro tiger safari project in December 2020. He said the project would be the State's first tiger safari and the world's longest.

WHAT EXPLAINS DELHI'S LOVE AFFAIR WITH PALM TREES?



Underneath the Lajpat Nagar flyover in South Delhi are a group of newly planted palm trees that are far away from what would have been their natural home – California in the United States. The species, *Washingtonia filifera*, with fan-shaped leaves and a stout trunk, and commonly called the ‘California fan palm’, is the newest addition to the city’s greenscape.

Among the species of palms that the Delhi Public Works Department (PWD) is planting as part of its streetscaping project, the trees can be spotted along the central verge of Narwana Road in Patparganj and across the road from the Sarai Kale Khan bus stand, where they share space with date palm trees. An official associated with the project said the trees were planted about a year ago.

The palm trees under the flyover will soon be joined by the Chinese fan palm or *Livistona chinensis*, a small tree that is native to subtropical parts of China and Japan. On Lodhi Road, the Chinese fan palm and foxtail palm (native to Australia) are among the species that are being planted. One side of the pavement on Nelson Mandela Marg is now lined with a row of date palms or the khajur tree.

What explains this new burst of palms on Delhi’s landscape?

Fruition of the problem

Around 70 palm trees have been planted so far on Narwana Road, while there are 122 date palms on Nelson Mandela Road. According to PWD officials, while some of these trees were purchased from nurseries in the city, others came from states such as Andhra Pradesh.

While the presence of the palm trees has divided ecologists and tree experts, the PWD says they serve the streetscaping purpose for which they were bought.

“Palm trees serve a purely ornamental purpose and are only for beautification. These are usually planted along with other trees that have more of a role to play — like those that give shade. These palms (California and date) survive in Delhi, but they need proper maintenance. Some casualties are only natural,” said a PWD official. Recently, at least two of the 30-odd trees at Sarai Kale Khan were found uprooted.

Experts, however, say the palms don’t serve much of an ecological purpose in Delhi. “The purpose of urban plantations is that they should have an ecological function and serve as a filter for air pollutants. The *Washingtonia* palm neither adds to the beauty of the landscape nor does it provide an effective filter for air pollutants. Also, as trees planted along avenues, these trees don’t provide any shade since they don’t have much of a canopy. There are better species with larger canopies and more leafy areas. The total leaf area in palm trees is a lot less than a tree species with a large number of leaves that can filter pollutants,” said ecologist C R Babu, adding that this is a species that might be better placed in parks or malls, but not along roads.

Faiyaz Khudsar, scientist in-charge of Biodiversity Parks Programme at the Centre for Environment Management of Degraded Ecosystems, said, “All plants have their role. But in a place like Delhi, where you need a bigger canopy to fight particulate matter and other emissions, you instead bring in something with small canopies, and that too a non-native one.”

He pointed out that Delhi already has an existing issue with the vilayati kikar or the *Prosopis juliflora*, a non-native, invasive species planted in Delhi by the British. The vilayati kikar, a tree native to Mexico, has taken over much of Delhi’s Ridge, suppressing the growth of other, native plants.



Both Babu and Khudsar said planting tall palms on the central verge is a bad idea. “We need shrubs on the verge that curtail the light from vehicles. Tall trees on the central verge can also be a problem when there are strong winds,” Khudsar said.

Some of Delhi’s palm trees

Common name Scientific name Native to California fan palm *Washingtonia filifera* Californi

Chinese fan palm *Livistona chinensis* Parts of China, Japan

Wild date palm/khajur *Phoenix sylvestris* India, Sri Lanka

Royal Palm *Roystonea regia* Parts of Cuba

GIRAFFES BROUGHT TO INDIA BY BRITISH MAY BELONG TO ENDANGERED SPECIES

About 150 years ago, British colonialists brought batches of what they thought were a single species of the northern giraffe to India, from their other colonial possessions in Africa. These now comprise a captive population of 29 northern giraffes across the country.

A recent genealogical study of the largest captive herd in India at the Alipore Zoological Garden in Kolkata has confirmed that the giraffes in this facility, at least, are most likely “critically endangered” Nubian giraffes (*Giraffa camelopardalis camelopardalis*) or the endangered Rothschild giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis rothschildi*).

Speaking to The Hindu, R. Sanil, Associate Professor, Molecular Biology Laboratory, Government Arts College, Udhagamandalam, where dung samples of the 10 giraffes from Kolkata were analysed, said that the Nubian giraffes are believed to be among three sub-species of the northern giraffe, according to a whole genome sequencing study conducted in 2021. He pointed out that there were giraffes in captivity in Mysuru, Chennai, Patna, Guwahati, and Hyderabad, and it was imperative to identify their species too.

A genetic distance analysis of the giraffes in Alipore showed that they were most closely related to Nubian and Rothschild giraffes. “As both the Nubian and Rothschild giraffes are listed as ‘critically endangered’ and ‘endangered’ by the IUCN [respectively], we think it’s imperative that the Central Zoo Authority conducts further studies of giraffes in captivity so that the species are not interbred with each other and the giraffes’ germplasm is preserved,” Mr. Sanil added.

Sulekha J. Backer, research scholar and one of the lead authors of the paper titled ‘Captive giraffes in Alipore Zoological Garden, Kolkata are Nubian!’, said “stud-books” maintained in zoos across India had little to no information on where the giraffes brought from Africa had been captured; so the only way to identify the species would be through a mitochondrial gene study.

SAVING THE VULTURES OF TAMIL NADU

The story so far:

On October 19, the Tamil Nadu government formed a committee to set up an institutional framework for the effective conservation of vultures. The State is home to four species of vultures — the white-rumped vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*), long-billed vultures (*Gyps indicus*), the Asian king-vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus*) and the Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*).



Which areas in Tamil Nadu have vulture populations?

While there have been reported sightings of vultures in other districts including Dharmapuri; essentially the Nilgiris, Erode and Coimbatore districts are believed to form one of the largest contiguous expanses where vultures are spotted. Home to the nesting sites of three of the four species of vultures seen in the State, the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, parts of the Nilgiris forest division and the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve are crucial strongholds for the vultures in southern India. Occasional migrants such as the Himalayan griffon vulture and the Cinerous vulture are also spotted each year. Tamil Nadu boasts the largest population of vultures south of the Vindhiya Mountain Range.

In the Nilgiris, researchers and forest department officials estimate that there are between 100 and 120 white-rumped vultures, 10 and 15 long-billed vultures and less than 10 Asian king vultures. Though Egyptian vultures are spotted in the Sigur plateau, encompassing the Nilgiris and Erode districts, they are not believed to use the landscape to breed, while researchers still remain unsuccessful in tracing the breeding sites of the critically endangered Asian king-vulture.

Are vulture numbers decreasing?

While the population of the vultures in the Nilgiris, Erode and Coimbatore districts has remained largely stable, experts state that the numbers are still extremely low, and that even a single poisoning event could lead to several of the species going locally extinct, especially the long-billed and Asian king vulture. Over the last few years, breeding seasons have also seen fewer hatchings than is the norm, with experts attributing the cause to lesser availability of prey as well as erratic weather.

Experts also agree that the use of some Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs) to treat cattle, such as diclofenac, nimesulide, ketoprofen among others, has led to the crash in vulture populations across India.

What role do vultures play in the local ecosystem?

As scavengers, vultures help prevent the spread of many diseases and can remove toxins from entering the environment by consuming carcasses of dead cattle/wildlife before they decompose. Unfortunately, their tolerance for harmful substances does not extend to man-made drugs.

What are the challenges which impact vultures in the State?

There are multiple. For one, temple tourism in the Sigur plateau is centred primarily around vulture habitats, such as Siriyur, Anaikatty and Bokkapuram. Over the last few years, there have been recorded instances of vultures abandoning nesting sites located too close to temples inside these reserves, with activists calling for strict controls on the amount of people allowed to attend these festivals.

Another threat is the spread of invasive weeds such as the Lantana camara in vulture-landscapes, which hinder the birds from scavenging as their large wing-spans require plenty of open area to safely land and to take to the skies in case of any major threats. Finally, due to the illegal tapping of water along the streams running through these areas, possible climate change, and forest fires, the Terminalia arjuna trees, that many vultures use as nesting sites are disappearing. Only through a multipronged approach of increasing the amount of food available to the birds and managing invasive species can vulture numbers start rebounding, say experts.



What are the steps taken to protect vultures in the State?

The State government has banned the use of diclofenac, a drug, to treat cattle, while there are strict restrictions for the sale of other NSAIDs in the Nilgiris, Erode and Coimbatore districts. Additionally, as the vultures in the Sigur plateau utilise landscapes in neighboring Karnataka and Kerala, experts have called for a synchronous vulture census to accurately identify vulture populations and nesting sites.

ARE CRITICALLY ENDANGERED GREAT INDIAN BUSTARDS NOW MIGRATING TO PAKISTAN?

An Islamabad-based wildlife photographer, Syed Rizwan Mehboob, released pictures and a video of the GIBs after spotting them in southern Punjab province's Cholistan game reserve earlier this month. Though he did not claim that the GIBs had arrived from India, environmental activists in Jaisalmer district say the birds might have migrated due to their shrinking habitat.

Conservation project

The GIB — the State bird of Rajasthan — is considered India's most critically endangered bird and is protected under the Wildlife Protection Act. Its population of about 150 in Rajasthan accounts for 95% of its total world population.

The captive breeding of GIBs was taken up in the DNP through a project executed by the Dehradun-based Wildlife Institute of India in 2019. As many as 24 GIB chicks are being reared in DNP by a team supported by the International Fund for Houbara Conservation of United Arab Emirates.

As Rajasthan shares the international border with Pakistan's Sindh and Punjab provinces, it is suspected that the GIBs might have flown across to the neighbouring country's desert amid fears that they could become easy prey for the poachers there.

DNP Deputy Conservator of Forests Ashish Vyas told The Hindu that several GIBs had been tagged for behavioural studies and monitoring of their movements. "They forage in the Thar desert area, which is their natural habitat, and no GIB from the Indian side has migrated to Pakistan," he said.

Tourism & Wildlife Society of India (TWSI) secretary Harsh Vardhan said the GIBs reaching Cholistan was a possibility if one considers the likelihood of their stoppage at several places to consume feed and replenish their energy lost in flying. "They would fly to that region only if there was no feed within and outside the DNP or if they felt there was less space for movement and raising their family," he said.

CENTRE CONSIDERING SRI LANKA'S PROPOSAL TO TRANSLOCATE GAURS

Close on the heels of the project that translocated cheetahs from Namibia, the Indian government is considering a proposal from Colombo to export a number of gaurs, or Indian bisons, to Sri Lanka to revive the population of gavaras that have been extinct in the island since the end of the 17th century.

If the project is cleared, it would be the first such agreement between India and Sri Lanka, and part of a global trend of "wildlife or zoological diplomacy", say experts.



Sources said the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), which received the request in August, has now forwarded it to the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), “seeking comments” on the proposal to transport at least six specimens, including a bull and three to five cows. According to the proposal, the Sri Lankan Department of Zoological Gardens would then carry out “captive breeding a herd of about a dozen specimens over a five-year period before trial reintroduction to the wild could take place in accordance with [internationally mandated] guidelines for reintroductions”.

The suggestion for the proposal came from Sri Lankan conservationist Rohan Pethiyagoda, who was awarded the Linnean medal 2022 (U.K.-based equivalent of the Nobel prize for zoology) for his work on restoring fresh water and forest biodiversity. “As a scientific and cultural collaboration between our two countries, I felt this could be an immensely valuable initiative,” said Sri Lankan High Commissioner to India Milinda Moragoda who handed over the preliminary request.

Experts say that while “zoological diplomacy” had been practised worldwide, they draw a distinction between “gifts or loans” of animals in captivity to translocation and reintroduction of a species, particularly between neighbouring countries with similar eco-systems.

“Much depends on whether the conditions that caused the extinction have been removed but reintroduction has frequently been taken up between countries where the range is contiguous,” explained Mahesh Rangaran, Professor of Environmental Studies at Ashoka University

HAMPI, KHAJURAHO ON LIST FOR G20 CULTURE TRACK

AS PART of India’s G20 Presidency between December 2022 and November 2023, the Government is planning to host five key meetings focusing on the “culture track” at Khajuraho, Bhubaneswar, Hampi and Agra, The Indian Express has learnt.

These cities have been chosen mainly for well-known monuments and UNESCO World Heritage Sites such as Taj Mahal and Agra Fort (UP), the Hindu and Jain temples of Khajuraho (Madhya Pradesh), the Konark Sun Temple around 65 km from Bhubaneswar (Odisha), and the sites at Hampi (Karnataka). Agra will host two of the five meetings, it is learnt.

The Government had announced last month that there will be 215 meetings in all, spread across 55 sites, covering most states during India’s G20 presidency. The main summit will be held in September at Delhi’s International Exhibition Cum Convention Centre at Pragati Maidan, which is presently under construction and will be ready by mid-2023.

For the culture track, a G20 Secretariat has been set up in the Ministry of Culture, which will hire a professional agency “for research, documentation and coordination work for the G20 work-stream of culture”, according to records reviewed by The Indian Express. Besides the five meetings, around 250 cultural events will be held on the sidelines for delegates for the duration of the G20 presidency, officials said.

Setting the cultural agenda for the meetings, the records state: “This presidency also provides a fantastic opportunity for India to shape the global agenda on culture across multiple work streams and engagement areas. These include: a) protection and restitution of cultural property; b) advancement of traditional cultural practices for sustainable living; c) promotion of cultural and creative industries for livelihood generation; and d) preservation and dissemination of culture by leveraging technology.”



Earlier, Siliguri, Rann of Kutch, Kashmir and Goa had been finalised as destinations for various G20 meetings by the Ministry of Tourism. Officials said India's presidency will be used as an opportunity to push the country as a preferred tourist destination, with delegates to be taken on familiarisation tours.

During the G20 Presidency starting December 1 this year, India will invite Bangladesh, Egypt, Mauritius, Netherlands, Nigeria, Oman, Singapore, Spain and UAE as guest countries. The G20 is an intergovernmental forum comprising 19 countries — Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the UK, the US — and the European Union.

LOTHAL, 'OLDEST DOCK IN THE WORLD', TO GET HERITAGE COMPLEX: FEATURES, SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday evening reviewed the construction of the National Maritime Heritage Complex (NMHC) site at Gujarat's Lothal via video conferencing. "There are many such tales of our history that have been forgotten," the PM said. "Lothal was not only a major trading centre of the Indus Valley Civilisation, but it was also a symbol of India's maritime power and prosperity."

Here's a look at the ongoing project, and the importance of the site.

Where is Lothal?

Lothal was one of the southernmost sites of the Indus Valley civilization, located in the Bhāl region of what is now the state of Gujarat. The port city is believed to have been built in 2,200 BC. Lothal was a thriving trade centre in ancient times, with its trade of beads, gems and ornaments reaching West Asia and Africa. The meaning of Lothal (a combination of Loth and (s) thal) in Gujarati is "the mound of the dead".

Incidentally, the name of the city of Mohenjo-daro (also part of the Indus Valley Civilisation, now in Pakistan) means the same in Sindhi.

Indian archaeologists started the search for cities of the Harappan Civilisation post-1947 in Gujarat's Saurashtra. Archaeologist SR Rao led the team which discovered a number of Harappan sites at the time, including the port city of Lothal. Excavation work was carried out in Lothal between February 1955 and May 1960. According to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Lothal had the world's earliest known dock, connecting the city to an ancient course of the Sabarmati river.

Additionally, the National Institute of Oceanography in Goa discovered marine microfossils and salt, gypsum crystals at the site, indicating that sea water once filled the structure and it was definitely a dockyard.

In later excavations, ASI unearthed a mound, a township, a marketplace, and the dock. Adjacent to the excavated areas stands the archaeological site museum, where some of the most prominent collections of Indus-era antiquities in India are displayed.

Heritage Value

Lothal was nominated in April 2014 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and its application is pending on the tentative list of UNESCO. As per the nomination dossier submitted to UNESCO,
3RD FLOOR AND 4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



“The excavated site of Lothal is the only port-town of the Indus Valley Civilisation. A metropolis with an upper and a lower town had in on its northern side a basin with vertical wall, inlet and outlet channels which has been identified as a tidal dockyard.

Satellite images show that the river channel, now dried, would have brought in considerable volume of water during high tide, which would have filled the basin and facilitated sailing of boats upstream. The remains of stone anchors, marine shells, sealings which trace its source in the Persian Gulf, together with the structure identified as a warehouse further aid the comprehension of the functioning of the port.”

Its heritage value is comparable to other ancient port-towns around the world – including Xel Ha (Peru), Ostia (Port of Rome) and Carthage (Port of Tunis) in Italy, Hepu in China, Canopus in Egypt, Gabel (Byblos of the Phoenicians), Jaffa in Israel, Ur in Mesopotamia, Hoi An in Vietnam, as per the dossier. In the region, it can be compared with other Indus port towns of Balakot (Pakistan), Khirasa (in Gujarat’s Kutch) and Kuntasi (in Rajkot).

The Project

The project began in March 2022, and is being developed at a cost of Rs 3,500 crore. It will have several innovative features such as Lothal mini-recreation, which will recreate Harappan architecture and lifestyle through immersive technology; besides four theme parks – Memorial theme park, Maritime and Navy theme park, Climate theme park, and Adventure and Amusement theme park.

It will also house the world’s tallest lighthouse museum, 14 galleries highlighting India’s maritime heritage starting from the Harappan time till today, as well as a coastal states pavilion displaying the diverse maritime heritage of Indian states and UTs.

The Prime Minister said that the National Maritime Heritage Complex at Lothal will act as a centre for learning and understanding India’s maritime history. The NMHC is being developed with the aim of displaying India’s diverse maritime heritage and also help Lothal emerge as a world-class international tourist destination.

U.S. HANDS OVER 307 ANTIQUE ITEMS, VALUED AT NEARLY \$4 MILLION, TO INDIA

The U.S. authorities formally handed over 307 antiquities, estimated to be worth nearly \$4 million to Indian officials on Monday. These were recovered from international smuggler Subash Kapoor’s art gallery, other art galleries as well as multiple trafficking networks.

As many as 235 of the antiquities were seized pursuant to an investigation against Subash Kapoor, who helped traffic items from India and other countries. Five others were seized from a person, Nancy Wiener, in New York and one pursuant to an investigation against another person, Nayef Homsy. The remaining 66 antiquities were stolen from India by multiple smaller trafficking networks.

All the antiquities were returned during a repatriation ceremony on Monday evening at the Indian Consulate in New York attended by India’s Consul General Randir Jaiswal, and U.S. Homeland Security Investigations, Acting Deputy Special Agent-in-Charge, Tom Lau. Manhattan District Attorney Alvin L. Bragg said in a statement, “We are proud to return hundreds of stunning pieces back to the people of India. These were stolen by multiple complex trafficking rings – the leaders of which showed no regard for the cultural or historical significance of these objects.”



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

HOW IS THE ENERGY CRISIS IN EUROPE SHAPING UP?

The story so far:

As winter approaches, Europe faces an energy problem. The numerous leaks — apparently caused by explosions — to the Nord Stream 1, which is an energy pipeline connecting Russia to Germany, has driven supplies to a halt. Amid anxieties about building up energy reserves, the gas field in Groningen in the Netherlands has once again come under the spotlight.

Why is this gas field relevant?

The region of Groningen in the Netherlands has a gas field that began operations in 1963. During the 1980s, the area saw numerous earthquakes — minor enough to avoid large damage but big enough for local buildings to develop cracks. Following these quakes, the Dutch government had earlier said that it would shutter the field in response to local protests. The closure date was also advanced to 2022 from 2030.

However, due to recent geopolitical tensions, the Dutch government wants to keep options open. A Bloomberg report earlier this month said that if allowed, the additional supply from the field could go up to a level that would make up for what Germany imported last year from Russia. It said that the field still had potential for about 450 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas to be extracted.

Can oil or gas exploration cause earthquakes?

Examples of human activity that could lead to ‘induced seismicity’ are damming of rivers to create reservoirs, oil or gas extraction, and mining. Fluid extraction from hydrocarbon reservoirs (rocks that hold hydrocarbons which are oil and gas) causes an increase in net effective stresses, which, when supported by the geomechanics of the rock, may lead to development of new faults and fractures. In the case of Groningen, the ground subsiding has been caused by extraction alone over several years. Such extraction causes rocks to contract — as the pores get to hold less and less hydrocarbons over time.

Should India be concerned about gas in the Netherlands?

India’s domestic gas price is determined from the average of four global indices viz U.S.’s Henry Hub, the U.K.’s National Balancing point, Canada’s Alberta and Russian gas. Compared with pre-pandemic times, the average domestic price of gas has more than doubled from \$5.08/MMBTU to \$11.62 and CARE Edge Director of Ratings, Sudhir Kumar, estimates that this is bound to rise again when the six-monthly reset takes place for April-September 2023. India consumed about 63.9 bcm in FY22, about 3.1 bcm more than in the previous year. Imports alone accounted for close to 50% of consumption, at about 30 bcm. Global production is estimated to decline from 4,109 bcm in calendar 2021 to 4,089 bcm in 2022. The situation would become challenging for the government unless the formula for determining domestic gas price is reviewed, he says. Till then, the government has to bear the higher subsidy burden on fertilizer — in the manufacture of which natural gas is used — as well as for the LPG sector.



THE MSP CARD: HIKE ANNOUNCED IS JUST RIGHT TO INDUCE FARMERS TO SOW WHEAT

The Narendra Modi government has raised the minimum support price (MSP) of the 2022-23 wheat crop by Rs 110 to Rs 2,125 per quintal. This increase is more than the Rs 40 and Rs 50/quintal hikes of the preceding two years, but justifiable for three reasons. The first is that public wheat stocks, at 22.75 million tonnes (mt) as on October 1, are only below last year's 46.85 mt, but close to the 20.52 mt required buffer for this date. Farmers, therefore, need to be paid enough for refilling the Food Corporation of India's warehouses. Second, benchmark prices of wheat at the Chicago Board of Trade exchange, at about \$312 per tonne now, are 13.3 per cent higher than a year ago. Third, the rupee has fallen 9.7 per cent against the dollar during this period, further widening the wedge between domestic and global prices. The cheapest wheat from Russia will cost Rs 30/kg-plus at Indian ports today.

Simply put, the MSP increase announced is neither too much nor too little. It's just right to induce farmers to sow wheat in the coming weeks. They will also be encouraged by the extended monsoon rains, which have recharged aquifers and ensured that current water levels in major reservoirs are 8.6 per cent higher than last year and 117.3 per cent of the 10-year average for this time. The combination of remunerative prices and excellent soil moisture conditions should also help boost acreages under rapeseed-mustard, whose MSP has been hiked by a record Rs 400 (to Rs 5,450 per quintal) for a second successive year. It makes sense, especially given India's edible oil imports of \$19 billion in 2021-22, likely to top \$22 billion this fiscal. However, the MSP of chana (chickpea) has gone up by a mere Rs 105 to Rs 5,335 per quintal. And with open market prices ruling at Rs 4,200-4,300, farmers have no real incentive to plant chana or other pulses where government procurement is also limited.

The government should use MSP as a signaling tool for farmers to grow crops based on both market dynamics as well as resource use efficiency and environmental sustainability. The MSP-based procurement regime has done the opposite — promoting water-intensive crops (specifically rice, sugarcane and wheat) prone to surplus production. MSP, by definition, is supposed to be a “minimum” price that recovers the basic cultivation cost of a crop. Any price over and above has to be based on supply and demand. This is a rare year where wheat and possibly rice supplies are under pressure, which justifies more than normal procurement price increases for them. By the same token, farmers should be prepared for lower increases or even MSP freezes down the line.

TREAD CAREFULLY

India's latest inflation data present policymakers with a fraught choice: whether to respond to the latest acceleration in retail price gains to a five-month high with more sizeable interest rate increases, or pause the monetary tightening so as to allow fragile growth to gain more traction. Inflation figures based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) show retail price gains on a resurgent trajectory with food prices leading the charge. Vegetables and cereals were the biggest culprits, with the prices of the former surging 18% from a year earlier and rising a substantial 2.6% from the preceding month; staple grains, including rice and wheat, climbed 11.5% from September 2021 and increased 2% from August levels. These two food items have a combined weight of 15.7% in the overall CPI and account for more than a third of the food and beverages category's cumulative weight. Rice prices have continued to rise in the face of a projected 6% shortfall in kharif output, the Government's efforts to ease supply through export curbs on non-Basmati rice notwithstanding. Heavy rains at the monsoon's tail end have hit vegetable output, causing



wholesale level prices to accelerate by an eye-watering 39.7% in September, with month-on-month gains alone exceeding 10%. The forecast for food prices, therefore, remains clouded with uncertainty, at least in the short term, with the risks tilted to the upside.

The rupee's continuing depreciation against the dollar has further roiled the outlook for price stability, with imported inflation hard to counter through monetary measures. As RBI Deputy Governor Michael Patra noted in the central bank's Monetary Policy Committee meeting last month, that India is a 'net commodity importer, with over a third of the CPI being imported' complicates policymaking, especially when the terms of trade turn unfavourable. Also, with five of the six services categories registering sequential inflation as well, it is hard to disagree with RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das's argument that policy must be aimed at preventing price pressures from broadening. Still, with the latest private sector output trends in S&P Global's survey-based manufacturing and services PMI data for September flagging a renewed slowdown, and a looming global recession pointing to a decline in demand for India's exports, the outlook for growth appears tenuous. Given that monetary policy affects real interest rates with a distinct lag, it may be a difficult but wiser choice to heed the MPC's dissenting voices of Ashima Goyal and Jayanth Varma and refrain momentarily from raising interest rates till the fog of uncertainty lifts and a clearer picture of price and growth trends emerges.

STRENGTHENING DOLLAR SHRINKS FOREIGN RESERVES ACROSS NATIONS

The rupee's weakening exchange rate and the pace at which India's foreign exchange reserves are dwindling are back in focus. The Ukraine crisis and the U.S. Federal Reserve's aggressive monetary tightening have led the rupee to depreciate past the 82 per dollar mark, while India's reserves have shrunk to a two-year low.

Reserves include foreign currency assets, gold, special drawing rights with the International Monetary Fund, and reserve tranche position. These external assets, controlled by the monetary authority, are used to absorb shocks during times of crises; provide confidence to the market that external obligations can be met; and build capacity for intervention in foreign exchange markets.

Forex reserves are a crucial indicator of a country's economic health and its import capacity. As per a Bloomberg report, dwindling forex reserves have led to a shortage of dollars in many import-reliant economies. As a result, countries that are dependent on overseas food purchases are finding it hard to pay for commodities such as rice and wheat.

The Fed's steep increases in interest rates have made the dollar more attractive. Consequently, the dollar index has soared by 15% this year – a two-decade high – while other currencies have declined.

Strong currencies such as the pound (-21.62%) and euro (-17%) have also weakened against the dollar. The Japanese yen, considered a safe haven, has slipped to a 24-year-low. Several currencies, like the rupee, have touched their all-time lows, but the fall of the rupee has been relatively more moderate.

Central banks across the world have stepped in to defend their currencies. As a result, reserves have depleted by more than \$100 billion each in China, Japan, Switzerland and Singapore. While Singapore's reserves saw the sharpest decline in percentage terms, China's fell the most in absolute terms. As the yen breached the 145 per dollar mark, Japan's reserves fell by \$54 billion in the last one month.



In the last nine months, India's reserve stockpile fell by \$97 billion. This is significantly higher than the drawdown of reserves during the 2008 global financial crisis (\$37.3 billion) and the period of the taper tantrum in 2013 (\$16.6 billion). A crucial difference between this crisis and the other two has been the size of India's reserves. While India has the fifth-highest reserves in the world, the pace at which they are depleting is causing concern. Reserves as of September 2022 were equivalent to nine months of import cover compared to more than 15 months in September 2021. India's reserves are by and large a product of capital flows (funds through foreign investments, borrowings) and not so much from the current account (net income earned through exports of goods and services and remittances), which is currently in deficit. As foreign investments eased, accumulation in India's foreign reserves also dropped.

With the dollar strengthening, the value of the euro, pound and yen (also part of India's foreign reserves) took a beating. This too led to a reduction in India's reserves. This is called a valuation loss.

PM MODI INAUGURATES 'ONE NATION, ONE FERTILIZER' SCHEME

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday inaugurated 600 Kisan Samridhi Kendras and 'One Nation, One Fertilizer' scheme and said that these steps were being taken to modernise agriculture.

The Kisan Samridhi Kendras would function as helping centres for farmers in this process, he added.

The PM was speaking at a conclave of farmers and 1,500 start-ups in the agriculture sector, where he also released the 12th instalment of the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi. Under the scheme, ₹16,000 crore will be credited into the bank accounts of over 8.5 crore farmers. Over ₹2 lakh crore has been transferred to farmers, helping them manage costs, he said.

The amount under the scheme would be credited directly into the accounts of farmers. "There will be no mediators for this," Mr. Modi added.

He said that earlier urea factories in the country were closed down to benefit importers and added that after 2014, the government took several steps and now the country was marching towards self sustenance in liquid nano urea production. "Nano urea will help farmers to address the issue of scarcity," Mr. Modi said.

He said fertilizers would be rebranded as "Bharat" to help farmers and it would reduce the prices of major fertilizers as transportation cost would be regulated.

He added that as part of observing the Millets Year in 2023, the Centre would promote cultivation of millets. New varieties of seeds were also being produced to meet the challenges of climate change.

PROMOTER SHARES WITHIN LOCK-IN PERIOD NOT 'QUOTED' FOR GIFT TAX PURPOSES: WHAT SUPREME COURT HAS RULED

Last week, while passing its order in the 30-year-old matter of BPL Ltd vs DCIT over gift tax in a share transaction, the Supreme Court ruled that shares within the lock-in-period are not 'quoted shares', and thus they need to be valued as 'unquoted shares' to determine the gift tax liability.



The matter related to the transfer of shares of a listed company held as part of the promoter's quota that was subject to a lock-in period of three years. Experts said that the order in a way clarifies the legal position on such share transfers, and will ease transactions of this type in the future without attracting legal troubles.

What was the matter?

The issue related to whether the gifting of the promoter's locked-in shares should be treated as quoted or unquoted shares for the purpose of valuing the gift for taxability under the Gift Tax Act, 1958.

In March 1993, 29,46,500 shares of BPL Sanyo Technologies and 69,49,900 shares of BPL Sanyo Utilities and Appliances were gifted by the respondent-assessee, BPL Limited, to Celestial Finance. The shares of both the companies were listed and quoted on the stock exchanges. However, these gifted shares, being promoter-quota shares, allotted to the assessee between November 1990 and July 1991, were under a lock-in period up to November 1993 and May 1994 respectively.

The question arose that the shares were not valued as per the quotation of these shares on the stock exchange. The tax authority characterised such a transfer as having been effected for an inadequate consideration, and hence treated it as a "deemed gift" chargeable under the Gift Tax Act. The tax authority valued them by treating them as 'quoted shares'.

What did the SC say?

Dismissing the appeal by 'Revenue', the Supreme Court held that the equity shares of a listed company that form part of the promoter's quota within a lock-in period are not 'quoted shares', and hence they have to be valued as 'unquoted shares'.

"These equity shares being under the lock-in period could not be traded and, therefore, remained unquoted in any recognised stock exchange. There, therefore, would be no current transactions in respect of these shares made in the ordinary course of business," the court said.

The SC noted that when equity shares are in the lock-in period, as per guidelines issued by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), there is a complete bar on transfer, which is enforced by inscribing the words "not transferable" in the relevant share certificates.

"This position is accepted by the Revenue, which, however, has relied upon a general circular issued by SEBI, wherein it is stated that the shares under the lock-in period can be transferred inter se the promoters. This restricted transfer, in our opinion, would not make the equity shares in the lock-in period into 'quoted shares'."

What are quoted and unquoted shares?

According to the Wealth Tax Act, 'quoted share' in relation to an equity share or a preference share means a share quoted on any recognised stock exchange with regularity from time to time. The quotations of such shares are based on current transactions made in the ordinary course of business. An 'unquoted share' is simply a share that is not a quoted share.

So according to the SC order, if the locked-in shares of the promoter falls in the 'unquoted share' category, their price treatment can't be that of the 'quoted shares', and so gift tax will not be applicable.



DIGITAL BANKING UNITS DEDICATED TO NATION BY PM: WHAT ARE THEY AND WHAT WILL THEY DO?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday (October 16) dedicated 75 digital banking units to the nation, taking forward an announcement that was made in the 2022-23 Union Budget by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. Speaking virtually at the event, Modi said that the digital banking units will “further financial inclusion” and “significantly improve banking experience for the citizens”.

What was the initial announcement?

In the Budget for 2022-23, the Finance Minister said: “In recent years, digital banking, digital payments and fintech innovations have grown at a rapid pace in the country. The government is continuously encouraging these sectors to ensure that the benefits of digital banking reach every nook and corner of the country in a consumer-friendly manner. Taking forward this agenda, and to mark 75 years of our independence, it is proposed to set up 75 Digital Banking Units (DBUs) in 75 districts of the country by Scheduled Commercial Banks”.

What are these DBUs?

In April this year, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) announced the guidelines for DBUs, following the report of a working group of the Indian Banks Association (IBA). A digital banking unit is a specialised fixed point business unit or hub, housing a certain minimum digital infrastructure for delivering digital banking products and services as well as servicing existing financial products and services digitally in self-service mode at any time.

Who will set up these DBUs?

Commercial banks (other than regional rural banks, payment banks and local area banks) with past digital banking experience are permitted to open DBUs in tier 1 to tier 6 centres, unless otherwise specifically restricted, without having the need to take permission from the RBI in each case.

What services will be provided by these units?

As per the RBI, each DBU must offer certain minimum digital banking products and services. Such products should be on both liabilities and assets side of the balance sheet of the digital banking segment. Digitally value-added services to conventional products would also qualify as such. The services include saving bank accounts under various schemes, current accounts, fixed deposit and recurring deposit accounts, digital kits for customers, mobile banking, Internet banking, debit cards, credit cards, and mass transit system cards, digital kits for merchants, UPI QR codes, BHIM Aadhaar and point of sale (PoS). Other services include making applications for and onboarding customers for identified retail, MSME or schematic loans. This may also include end-to-end digital processing of such loans, starting from online application to disbursement and identified government-sponsored schemes that are covered under the national portal.

How will these DBUs compete with fintechs?

Currently, fintechs operating as neobanks offer digital banking services but they do so in partnership with non-banking financial companies (NBFCs). Some of the neobanks offering services in India are Jupiter, Fi Money, Niyto, Razorpay X.



Compared to conventional banks with online and mobile banking facilities, neobanks or digital banks excel at product innovation and offer far better digital solutions. However, given the arrangement they have currently with NBFCs or scheduled banks to conduct the actual banking part, some in the industry have pegged these digital banks as “glorified digital distribution companies”.

INDIAN TRAVELLERS TO EUROPE CAN NOW MAKE PAYMENTS VIA UPI, HERE'S HOW

Indian travellers to Europe would soon be able to make payments from their Indian bank accounts using the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) with the National Payments Corporation of India's (NPCI) international arm entering into a pact with payments services operator Worldline.

How will users be able to make payments in Europe using UPI?

It will be mandatory for users to have an Indian bank account with an UPI activated on their accounts. The users will also need an app to make UPI payments, like the BHIM app. The service will be available at point-of-sale terminals deployed by Worldline. Alongside UPI, NPCI's card network RuPay will also be accepted. The UPI will be facilitated by QR code. However, it is noteworthy that the payments made by customers using UPI will be charged in the local currency and not INR. This will attract a currency conversion charge levied by the banks, as it is in the case of card payments.

Will UPI be accepted everywhere in Europe?

In a statement, NPCI and Worldline said: “Facilitated via Worldline QR, the company's universal product for the acceptance of all QR-based payments, the first target markets for NIPL (NPCI International Payments Ltd) are set to include BENELUX (Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg) and Switzerland with further plans for expansion, as Worldline QR is rolled out in more European countries”.

Does NPCI have other such international arrangements?

Earlier this year, NPCI and the UAE-based Mashreq Bank's NEOPAY entered into a partnership, which allowed tourists and migrants to the UAE with Indian bank accounts to be able to make UPI payments at shops, retail establishments and other merchants in the gulf nation. Additionally, NPCI's international arm NIPL has several other such arrangements with international financial services providers for its products, including UPI and RuPay cards. Globally, UPI is accepted in Bhutan and Nepal. Further, in Singapore, a project to link UPI with the city-state's instant payment system PayNow is being undertaken by the RBI and the Monetary Authority of Singapore.

WHY DID BANK BAILOUT RESEARCH GET THE NOBEL?

The story so far:

On October 10, The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences unveiled the names of the winners of the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 2022. Three economists were jointly bestowed the honour of the final set of Nobel laureates to be announced this year: former U.S. Federal Reserve chairperson Ben S. Bernanke, a doctorate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Douglas W. Diamond and Philip H. Dybvig, both of whom are doctorates from Yale University.



Why were they chosen for the award?

The Nobel in Economics has been awarded to Bernanke, Diamond and Dybvig for their “research on banks and financial crises” undertaken in the early 1980s which have formed the foundations of what constitutes most modern banking research. Their analyses nearly four decades ago, still inform efforts to emphasise the vitality of banks to keep the economy functioning smoothly, the possible mechanisms to make them more robust amid crises periods, and how bank collapses can fuel a larger financial crisis that can rattle economies. Moreover, their work went beyond the realm of just theory and has had significant practical import in regulating financial markets and pre-empting or coping with crises.

What are the key insights gleaned from these economists’ work?

Bernanke, who was the U.S. Federal Reserve chief from 2006 to 2014, had analysed the worst modern economic crisis — the Great Depression of the 1930s that began in the U.S. but bludgeoned economies across the world for several years — in a 1983 article. He turned conventional thinking of the time on its head by arguing that bank failures in the 1930s were not just a result of the Depression but, in fact, a contributing factor to the lingering scars on economic activity. Apart from the obvious impact of collapsing banks on its depositors’ fortunes, he argued that critical borrower profiles were lost when banks imploded, thus hindering the ability to channelise savings to investments that could have revived the economy faster. Previous economic historians had only focused on those banks’ failures as a factor that affected the economy in as much as there was a contraction in money supply. Bernanke proved otherwise by using ‘historical documentary evidence and empirical data to uncover the importance of the credit channel for the propagation of the depression’, the Academy pointed out.

Diamond and Dybvig, who completed their doctorates at Yale a year apart in the late 1970s, came together in 1983 to postulate theoretical models on banks’ role in an economy and what makes them vulnerable to ‘runs’ on their deposits. While depositors want any-time access to their savings parked with banks, banks don’t keep the money idle, investing and lending it onwards to borrowers for longer tenures. This tenure mismatch in banks’ asset-liability profiles mean that even rumours about a bank’s imminent collapse could become a self-fulfilling prophecy as all savers make a beeline to hastily withdraw their money though a bank only keeps part of those savings handy to meet routine withdrawals from a part of their depositor base. To meet a simultaneous withdrawal rush, a bank would be compelled to sell its long-term investments, even if at a loss, in the hope that the deposit bleeding stops before it runs out of cash in hand.

What framework did they propose?

The two economists not only came up with a logical framework for understanding this informally understood Achilles’ heel for banks, but also provided solutions such as deposit insurance or a ‘lender of last resort’ policy that governments can consider to avoid such failures. “When depositors know that the state has guaranteed their money, they no longer need to rush to the bank as soon as rumours start about a bank run,” they explained. Most countries have deposit insurance schemes in place now, even as they hope and strive to ensure the eventuality of these risk covers being tapped doesn’t arise. The jury in charge of picking the Nobel said their work stimulated a flurry of subsequent studies yielding new fundamental insights on issues such as financial contagion, inside money creation, financial propagation, and financial regulation.

In a 1984 paper, Diamond also demonstrated banks’ ‘societally important function as intermediaries between many savers and borrowers’ as they are best placed to assess the latter’s



creditworthiness and ‘ensuring that loans are used for good’ investments. This line of thought was also part of Bernanke’s analysis. “The theoretical and empirical findings of Bernanke, Diamond, and Dybvig thus reinforce each other. Together they offer important insights into the beneficial role that banks play in the economy, but also into how their vulnerabilities can lead to devastating financial crises,” the Committee that deliberated on the Economic Sciences Nobel explained in a note.

Why have they been picked now?

The world economy is in the throes of a fresh crisis, just as it was emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic-induced haemorrhaging. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has warned that the ‘worst is yet to come’ and recessionary conditions loom for many countries, as the war in Europe stretches on amid a ‘cost of living’ crisis vitiated by food and energy worries. The Nobel jury’s picks may well be construed as a reminder to governments about lessons that would come in handy again as the current tumult unfolds with fears about impending shocks to the banking system. These economists’ findings have been proven ‘extremely valuable for policymakers, as is evident in the actions taken by central banks and financial regulators in confronting two recent major crises — the Great Recession [triggered by the global financial crisis between 2007-09 when shadow banks like Lehman Brothers collapsed] and the economic downturn that was generated by the COVID-19 pandemic,’ it underlined.

Does this have any resonance for India?

Indian households as well as policy makers are all too familiar with bank failures in the recent past, starting from the trouble at the privately run Global Trust Bank to freezes in withdrawals at several co-operative banks. Government and regulatory interventions to sustain faith in the banking system have included higher deposit insurance cover, facilitating takeovers of weaker lenders and steps to rein in bad loans. The key learnings from the Nobel Laureates’ work seem to have been embraced by Indian authorities. But as the government pursues privatisation of banks while aiming to consolidate lenders to create larger entities to finance bigger investments and higher growth, utmost regulatory and legislative vigil is warranted to pre-empt any mishaps in the financial sector.

HOW DOES TOKENISATION PREVENT ONLINE CARD FRAUD?

The story so far:

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has mandated the tokenisation of credit/debit cards for online merchants from October 1. Till then, card details for online purchases were stored on the servers of these merchants in order to help customers avoid keying in their details every time they shopped with that merchant.

What is tokenisation?

As per the RBI’s FAQ on tokenisation updated late last month, tokenisation “refers to the replacement of actual card details with an alternative code called the ‘token’, which shall be unique for a combination of card and the token requestor (i.e. the entity which accepts the request from the customer for tokenisation of a card and passes it on to the card network to issue a corresponding token).” So, if you use a mobile app or a website for online purchases, the merchant can, on your behalf but only with your explicit consent, raise a request for a token with the card issuing bank or the card network such as MasterCard.



Why is tokenisation necessary?

When you visit a restaurant, or even an ATM machine, it is possible for card thieves to clone your card with a skimmer, a gadget that quietly reads the magnetic strip at the back of your card. Similarly, hackers can also break into online websites and mobile apps that store your credit card details. Such data breaches could give con artists access to millions of cards in one go which are then sold on the dark web.

To help lessen the chances of such fraud, some banks have mandated the use of an OTP delivered to your registered mobile number to withdraw cash at ATMs. Other banks have enabled the use of their mobile app to allow cash withdrawal without the physical use of cards. Some credit card-issuing banks allow limits that you can set up yourself, per day, per transaction, etc on the bank's app. The tokenisation mandate of the RBI is a similar exercise in caution.

As per the RBI annual report 2021-22, in FY20 there were a reported 2,677 cases of card fraud via the internet involving ₹129 crore. While in FY21, the number of cases decreased to 2,545, it further increased to 3,596 cases in FY22 with the amount involved being ₹155 crore.

What are the benefits of tokenisation?

The RBI says that a tokenised card transaction is safer as the actual card details are not shared with the merchant.

Even if a hacker/scammer were to get their hands on one's token number, they would not be able to make indiscriminate use of it. Deep Agrawal, head of payments at PhonePe explains: "The token generated upon request for a specific merchant is unique to a specific card number and is usable only on that particular site or mobile app. The token is useless outside of that merchant's ecosystem." He also added that the "new mandate is only for the use of credit/debit cards online. For offline merchants, users would continue to swipe the cards on the POS machines as per previously existing guidelines."

Popular card network Visa further explains the concept of tokenisation through the example of a metro train ticket. It is useful only for that route and not on any other. Similarly, the unique token generated for a specific site is only applicable on that site and nowhere else. And if an undesirable third-party gains access to that specific token and shops within that specific website, the chances of identifying the party are more as their login and phone details would be with the site. However, regardless of whomever you shop with, be it Amazon or Ola or Swiggy, the app should ask your permission to use your credit card details for it to tokenise your card.

MAKING A CASE FOR THE OLD PENSION SCHEME

After Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, Punjab is the latest State that has announced its plan to revert to the Old Pension Scheme (OPS). Many have argued that this is a fiscally irresponsible move. We argue why and how we must go back to the OPS.

The OPS is an assured inflation-indexed monthly family pension till you (and your spouse) live(s). The OPS level is linked to the last pay you drew. The NPS is a corpus from which you can draw a pension after retirement. Its value is determined by the market prices in which the corpus is invested.



There are many issues with the NPS. One, the amount of monthly pension you would draw (for the same contribution during service) with three hypothetical market rates of return is significantly lower for NPS.

Two, it is dependent on the vagaries of the market prices of equity/bonds in which the corpus is invested. To be sure, the markets do not crash often and in the long run they go up rather than down. But it is still a lottery. If there is a crash, the downside has to be absorbed by the retirees. According to a 2008 OECD study, the global financial crisis had wiped a total of \$5 trillion off the value of private pension funds in rich countries compared to the start of the year. It's true that this is the value of assets on paper, but such a fall can, and did, induce withdrawals among panic-stricken retirees who didn't have age on their side to be in the long game of speculation.

Three, the OPS is a fixed government expenditure irrespective of an economic slowdown or a stock market crash, which makes it a good counter-cyclical policy measure during a crisis. In fact, the Sixth Pay Commission in India did precisely this during the Great Recession of 2008.

It has been argued that the OPS is a big hole in the exchequer's pocket (25% of the States' budget). This number is misleading because three other parts of States' revenue receipts — tax the Centre collects on behalf of the States (SGST, a part of direct taxes, etc.); non-tax revenue that the States collect; and non-tax grant that the Centre shares with the States — have not been taken into account. OPS outlays, when calculated correctly, are less than half of 25%. Additionally, when the revenues (as a share of State GDP) go up, the share of pensions falls. So, shouldn't the focus then be on mobilising revenues instead of cutting expenditures? But how?

On tax-GDP ratio (State plus Centre's taxes) for 18 of the G20 countries. India is the fifth country from the bottom and performs poorly among BRICS nations. Even within that, two out of three rupees comes from indirect taxes, for which the poor have to pay the same as the rich for a commodity. So, by increasing direct taxes — in particular corporate taxes — enough room can be created to ensure decent pensions for all.

Not only is there enough room in corporate taxes, a lot more can be mobilised if India were to target property and wealth taxes, which are almost zero. Not surprisingly, India ranks the lowest among the 18 of G-20 countries. At one point, India did have some property tax, however insignificant, which rose between 2005 to 2012 but has fallen precipitously since.

Perhaps there is a need to rationalise the level of pensions under the OPS to make room for non-permanent workers. But doing away with the old pension altogether is like throwing the baby with the bath water.

'INDIA'S COAL MINES ARE SEVERELY UNDER-UTILISED AMID PUSH FOR NEW ONES'

On average, India's coal mines use only two-thirds of the capacity, with some large ones using only 1%, says an analysis by Global Energy Monitor (GEM), a firm that tracks utilisation of the fuel-source internationally.

This suggests that 99 of India's coal mine projects, expected to yield 427 million tonnes per annum (MTPA), under development are unnecessary, and opening new coal mines would not contribute to easing short-term supply-crunches.

At least twice last year, India experienced severe coal crises, with more than 100 of 285 thermal power plants witnessing coal stocks fall below the critical mark of 25% of the required stock. In



over 50 plants, it fell below 10%. This led to power shortages in several States, including Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh.

GEM performed its analysis by surveying annual reports of Coal India, the largest coal producer in the world, and its subsidiaries and underlines that the company has not listed capacity constraints as among the reasons it fails to reach production targets.

Instead, it blames “..competition from renewables, infrastructure impasses, and land-use concerns for hindering output...” the report notes.

Coal mines under development threaten to displace at least 165 villages and affect 87,630 families, of which 41,508 live in areas where the predominant population is tribal communities. These also threaten 22,686 hectares (ha) of agricultural land and 19,297 ha of forest, and will consume at least 168,041 kilolitres of water per day, comparable to the daily water needs of over one million people, according to GEM.

On the heels of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s announcement of a net zero target of 2070, these new mines “... increase India’s likelihood of stranded assets, delay a clean energy future — and in the process pose irreversible impacts on India’s rural communities and environments for the sake of economically precarious mining ventures”, the report underlines.

‘Warning signs ignored’

“The signs warning against the massive expansion of coal mining are easy to see, but the Indian government is not heeding them,” Ryan Driskell Tate, project manager for GEM’s Global Coal Mine Tracker, said in a statement.

“New mines can’t make the industry’s old problems go away. The irony of this expansion is that opening new mines today could intensify the sector’s weaknesses and inefficiencies tomorrow, especially as competition from renewables and conflicts over land use continue to emerge.”

PADDY PELLET SCHEME DOES NOT ACCOUNT FOR PRODUCTION COST, SAY ENTREPRENEURS

Days after the Union Environment Ministry announced a scheme to incentivise entrepreneurs to manufacture pellets from paddy stubble, beneficiaries say that the scheme does not account for the actual costs of manufacturing and is unlikely to help with reducing pollution from stubble burning.

Pellets, which are manufactured out of agriculture biomass, when properly made would provide much more heat, emit fewer than 50% of the particulate matter and only a fraction of the ash from burning an equivalent amount of coal, according to Gurugram-based Amitabh Malaviya, who is in the business of pellet manufacturing.

“Also they constitute a reliable source of income for farmers who can sell their agriculture byproducts — I won’t call it waste — instead of merely burning it and causing pollution,” he said.

The Ministry of New and Renewable Energy estimates about 270 million tonnes of such agricultural waste is annually available in India that can produce 28,000 MW of power. By comparison, about 818 million tonnes of coal was consumed by thermal power plants for producing electricity in 2021-22, according to figures from Coal India Ltd. “About 800 kg of pellets can replace a tonne [1,000 kg] of coal,” Mr. Malaviya added.

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



However, establishing a plant with a single pellet-making machine that produces a tonne of pellet an hour would cost ₹1 -1.5 crore, he estimates.

To assist, not subsidise

A senior official in the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), which manages the scheme, told The Hindu that the intent of the scheme was not to entirely subsidise every plant but assist an aspirant entrepreneur.

“This is a start. There may be changes in technology and widely different estimates on the cost of a pellet plant in the future. and the intention is to incentivise — not fully fund an entrepreneur. Any serious entrepreneur will surely welcome the opportunity,” he told The Hindu but declined to be identified. The entire outlay of the government project, described as a “one-time” scheme was ₹50 crore of which ₹40 crore was for pellet plants and ₹10 crore for torrefaction plants.

Meerut-based Ajay Mittal, who runs a pellet manufacturing plant, said that narrowing the scheme down only for those who convert paddy stubble to pellets was restrictive. Sugarcane biomass from western Uttar Pradesh and mustard residue from Rajasthan too could be useful but neither of them was eligible for the government grant. “To solve the problem of air pollution it is not enough to reduce it to rice paddy. The benefit of the scheme must come to all,” he told The Hindu.



DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

WEBB SPACE TELESCOPE RENDERS PILLARS OF CREATION WITH NEW DEPTH, CLARITY

One of the most celebrated, awe-inspiring images of modern astronomy, revealing colossal spires of interstellar gas and dust called the Pillars of Creation, has been rendered anew with greater depth, clarity and color by the James Webb Space Telescope.

The new view of the pillars, first made famous when captured in 1995 by Webb's predecessor observatory, the Hubble Space Telescope, was unveiled by NASA on Wednesday, three months after Webb's inaugural batch of cosmic photos was unveiled as it began full operations.

The spellbinding images show vast, towering columns of dense clouds of gas and dust where young stars are forming in a region of the Eagle Nebula, in the Serpens constellation, some 6,500 light-years from Earth.

The image became a worldwide cultural phenomenon, emblazoned on to everyday objects ranging from T-shirts to coffee mugs.

Revisited by Hubble's visible-light optics to create a sharper, wider scene in 2014, the pillars were rendered by Webb in the near-infrared spectrum with even greater translucency, bringing many more stars into view while revealing new contours of the gas-and-dust clouds.

The new view "will help researchers revamp their models of star formation by identifying far more precise counts of newly formed stars, along with the quantities of gas and dust in the region," NASA said in material accompanying the latest image.

Bright red orbs appearing just outside of the pillars are infant stars, where enormous knots of gas and dust have collapsed under their own gravity and slowly heated up, giving birth to new stellar bodies, according to NASA.

Wavy crimson lines that look like lava at the edge of some pillars are ejections of matter from stars still forming within the gas and dust and are estimated to be only a few hundred-thousand years old, the U.S. space agency said.

Nearly two decades in the making under contract for NASA by aerospace giant Northrop Grumman Corp, the \$9 billion Webb infrared telescope was launched to space on Dec. 25, 2021, in partnership with the European Space Agency and the Canadian Space Agency.

It reached its destination in solar orbit nearly 1 million miles from Earth a month later and is expected to revolutionize astronomy by allowing scientists to peer farther than before and with greater precision into the cosmos, to the dawn of the known universe.

THE ILLUSION OF BEING FASTER THAN LIGHT: HOW A STAR PROBLEM WAS SOLVED

In 2017, astrophysicists observed an unusual feat among the stars. The Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave (LIGO) observatories recorded a signal which indicated that two massive and dense stellar bodies had merged to form a third body, likely a black hole. In the process they gave off vibrations that quite literally shook the universe and its very fabric of space-time. For the very first time, scientists noted that this observation of the LIGO observatories coincided with the measurements made by other telescopes that measured visual and electromagnetic signals. Was



this light given off by the merging bodies? Evidence seemed to suggest that it was. From this, scientists, piecing together evidence from complementary measurements, surmised that the event they had observed was of two neutron stars merging and forming a black hole and, in the process, giving off light. An unusual jet of matter was observed that gave an illusion of travelling faster than light. These were all exciting phenomena observed for the very first time by telescopes and observatories.

Crossing the speed of light

Now, using data that had been recorded by the Global Astrometric Interferometer for Astrophysics (GAIA) spacecraft and Hubble Space Telescope instruments, scientists have confirmed that the above picture is correct. They have made it more precise and descriptive.

In a paper published in Nature, they describe measuring the “apparent speed” of the jet to be about seven times the speed of light.

They have also measured more accurately a factor called the Lorentz factor which scales with the actual speed of the particles in the jet. Unlike earlier estimates which placed this factor at about 4, the present paper estimates this factor to be over 40. This is because they measure the speed of the relativistic jet to be close to $0.9997c$, where “ c ” is the speed of light.

This resolves the earlier fuzziness about what the source was and puts the source clearly as massive neutron stars merging to give a black hole and throwing off relativistic jets of particles in the process.

Merging neutron stars

Neutron stars are stellar corpses, left behind after a star has undergone a supernova explosion and reached the end of its lifetime. They are extremely dense, containing more mass than the sun in a sphere that is a few tens of kilometre wide.

The observation of particles moving at seven times the speed of light is an illusion. “This happens in cases where a source moves (towards us) with a velocity that is very close to light's velocity. This phenomenon is known to astrophysicists earlier,” says Resmi Lekshmi, a scientist with the Department of Earth and Space Sciences, Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology, Thiruvananthapuram, who has worked in this area.

This has been seen in many active galactic nuclei — galaxy centres that harbour black holes — and binary star systems within our galaxy, where one of the stars is a black hole. “Mostly, black holes are responsible for producing such fast-moving material,” she explains.

Impact of the study

The significance of the paper is that now, we have learnt that neutron star mergers can result in material moving with speeds as high as $0.9997c$.

Earlier results using Very Long Baseline Interferometry had pegged this value at about $0.938c$. And with the new results this lower limit has been improved. Even earlier, with VLBI, it was understood that it was a neutron-star merger that produced such ultra-relativistic material.

This paper, in turn, strengthens the hypothesis that such neutron star mergers are responsible for a class of gamma-ray bursts. Gamma-ray bursts are flashes of extreme gamma ray photons that



release a huge amount of energy — nearly ten-raised-to-47 joules. They come from different galaxies in the universe and are observed here quite frequently.

LEARNING FROM NEW LIFE FORMS

The Geological era that we live in is called the anthropocene. This is because of the global impact that humans and their activities have made after they evolved. A notable effect of changes seen in the anthropocene has been a rapid increase in the rate of extinction of other species.

However, skeptics of climate change keep pointing to the large discrepancies in the extinction rates published by various researchers. The online magazine, Yale Environment 360, has reported a range of 24 to 150 species lost per day. Either of these numbers is alarming. A total of about 1,000 species of animals have been actually documented to have gone extinct in the last 400 years.

We do not have a reasonably complete inventory of the animals and plants on our planet. New species are still being found and documented. For instance, a report in The Hindu dated March 3, 2021, described five new frogs from the Western Ghats.

In India, a few groups (at the IISc Bengaluru, University of Delhi, Kerala Forest Research Institute, etc.) have made stellar contributions to lists of new discoveries.

Looking for new species

Finding new species can be a painstaking work. Many new species are found in biodiversity hotspots that are heaven for snakes and mosquitos, but are not very hospitable to humans.

Scientists from the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), Kolkata found a new species of shrew on the island of Narcondam, a part of the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and named it *crocidura narcondamica* (Scientific Reports, 2021). This shrew is found nowhere else.

Narcondam is a small island and has a dormant volcano. Nearly all of it is densely forested.

Shrews earned an undeserving, ill-tempered reputation in a work of Shakespeare. But the animal itself is rather secretive. They are small in size; our own recent discovery being about 10 cm long. Their hearts can beat at 1,000 times per minute.

Of what potential use could such discoveries be? A few shrew species are venomous, which is highly unusual for a mammal. A few studies, not very detailed, have indicated that this venom contains chemical entities of interest to health professionals.

The accelerated extinction of life forms has led to major initiatives to sequence as many species as possible. There is a hope that with scientific advances, we may have 'Jurassic Park' scenarios where at least some extinct life forms are brought back to life. At a more prosaic level, comparing genomes can provide clues for the betterment of human health. A regularly updated Wikipedia list of completely sequenced genomes lists 100 bird species and 150 mammals. Many more are needed.

The Nicobar treeshrew

It is, therefore, heartening to know that the laboratories of the ZSI have published the mitochondrial genome sequence of another rare mammal endemic to the Nicobar Islands — the Nicobar treeshrew (Scientific Reports, 2022).



Treeshrews are not really shrews; more closely resembling squirrels. They are considered to be promising models for the study of influenza H1N1 and Hepatitis virus infections.

Let us hope that the ZSI will sequence the whole genome of the Nicobar treeshrew soon.

TIPPING POINTS OF GLOBAL WARMING

While the world is worried about restricting global warming to within 1.5 degree or 2 degree Celsius, a new study has found that even the current level of average global temperatures — about 1.1 degree Celsius higher than preindustrial times — is enough to trigger catastrophic changes in several climatic systems. The study, published recently in Science journal, has warned that the thresholds for many of these systems could be crossed at the current levels of warming, setting off self-perpetuating changes that could put living beings at serious risk.

The research is an updated assessment of important climate tipping points, or the thresholds beyond which changes in the earth's systems become uncontrollable and irreversible. Its findings could lead to a reassessment of global efforts to fight climate change, and are being widely discussed in scientific circles.

Tipping points

The discussion on climate tipping points is not new, and several studies in the past 15 years have identified different tipping points such as the disintegration of Greenland ice sheet, a spontaneous reduction in Amazon forest cover, melting of glaciers, or softening of the permanently frozen grounds in the polar regions that have large amounts of carbon trapped in them.

Over the years, researchers have identified at least 15 tipping points, each correlated with different levels of temperature rise. The latest study has identified nine global and seven regional tipping points, and has re-assessed their dynamics and correlation with global warming.

Tipping points at work

Rising temperatures are causing largescale changes in these climatic systems. Glacial melt, thinning of Arctic ice, rise in sea-levels are all well-documented and visible changes. However, it is still possible, at least theoretically, to arrest these changes, or even reverse them over time. But once the tipping points are crossed, this possibility no longer exists. It is like the dam burst moment.

The process of change becomes self-perpetuating. It feeds into itself and accelerates the process. What is worse, it also feeds into and accelerates other linked processes.

The Greenland ice sheet, which is already melting, is a good example to illustrate this process. As it melts, the height of the ice sheet gradually reduces. In the process, a larger part of it gets exposed to warmer air. That is because air is warmer at lower altitudes than at higher altitudes. The exposure to warmer air expedites the process of melting. Once the tipping point is crossed, this becomes a self-sustaining and cyclic system. The system does not reverse even if the global temperatures stop rising.

Similar is the case with Amazon forests. These play a very important role in causing rains in the region. If deforestation continues unabated, there would be fewer and fewer trees, which would reduce rainfall, causing further stress on the trees. Once again, it develops into a self-perpetuating process.



Several areas of the world remain frozen throughout the year. These are known as permafrost. Because they have remained in this state for centuries, they hold large amounts of carbon — from plants and animals that died and decomposed over the years — trapped in them. It is estimated that the permafrost layers hold as much as 1,700 billion tonnes of carbon, mainly in the form of carbon dioxide and methane. In comparison, the global emissions of carbon in a year are in the range of 40 billion tonnes.

The softening or melting of permafrost layers is already releasing some carbon into the atmosphere. This release of carbon is adding to the warming, which in turn is expediting the process of softening of permafrost layers. This too has a tipping point beyond which it would become a self-perpetuating cycle.

New findings

When the discussion on tipping points had first emerged about two decades ago, most of these were considered plausible only in warming scenarios exceeding 5 degree Celsius. But more recent information, including those presented by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), suggest that most of these tipping points would be crossed between 1 and 2 degree Celsius temperature rise.

The latest study has presented evidence to suggest that some of these tipping points could be met even at the current levels of warming. It has shown that the present 1.1 degree Celsius warming was within the lower end of temperature ranges for at least five tipping points. It means that these self-perpetuating changes could possibly have already begun. For warming between 1.5 degree and 2 degree Celsius, six tipping points become “likely” and four more become “possible”, the study has said.

“Our assessment provides strong scientific evidence for urgent action to mitigate climate change. We show that even the Paris Agreement goal of limiting warming to well below 2°C and preferably 1.5°C is not safe as 1.5°C and above risks crossing multiple tipping points. Crossing these CTPs (climate tipping points) can generate positive feedbacks that increase the likelihood of crossing other CTPs,” the authors have said in the study.

Policy response

The findings of this study are expected to further amplify the voices asking for increase in efforts to restrict global warming. The sixth assessment report of the IPCC released earlier this year had said that global emissions of greenhouse gases needed to peak by 2025, and reduce by 43 per cent from current levels by 2030, if the 1.5 degree Celsius target was to be achieved. With the current level of efforts, the world is on the path to become more than 2 degree warmer by the year 2100.

However, it is unlikely that countries would significantly increase the ambition of their climate action in the next few years. If anything, the progress is only likely to slow down because of the impacts of the Ukraine war on the energy supply chains across the world.

CLIMATE CHANGE COULD TRIGGER VIRAL SPILLOVERS, NEW PANDEMICS: STUDY

The effects of climate change are visible across a range of environments, from changes in crop yields due to unreliable weather conditions to the extinction of species. According to new research, another effect may be seen in an increased risk of a “viral spillover” in some regions, which could trigger new pandemics in coming years.



Climate change could shift the species range of certain viral vectors and reservoirs northward, and the High Arctic zone could become a fertile ground for emerging pandemics, scientists said in research published on Wednesday.

Viral spillover

Viruses are among the most abundant entities on Earth, but they need to infect a host cell in order to replicate. These virus/host relationships are relatively stable within superkingdoms, the major groupings of organisms. However, below this rank, viruses may infect a new host from a reservoir host (in which it usually resides) by being able to transmit sustainably in a novel host, a process known as viral spillover.

Study of an Arctic lake

To study the possibility of a viral spillover, researchers from the University of Ottawa collected sediment and soil samples from Lake Hazen in Canada, the largest High Arctic lake by volume in the world, and the region's largest freshwater ecosystem.

Then they undertook DNA and RNA sequencing to reconstruct the lake area's viral composition. They estimated the spillover risk and found that the chances of a virus moving to a new host increases with runoff from glacier melt, treated as a proxy for climate change. As temperatures increase, the melting of glaciers increases as well, and there is a greater possibility for previously ice-trapped viruses and bacteria to find new hosts.

Disease potential

While the risk of viral spillovers increases with changes in the environment at a particular location driven by global warming, this does not in itself mean a higher possibility of a viral pandemic there. "Altogether, we provided here a novel approach to assessing spillover risk...This is not the same as predicting spillovers or even pandemics," the authors said.

This is because there is another important link in the process. As long as viruses and their 'bridge vectors' — which act as hosts and lead to their spread — are not simultaneously present in the environment, the likelihood of dramatic events probably remains low. However, said the authors, "Climate change leads to shifts in species ranges and distributions, new associations can emerge, bringing in vectors that can mediate viral spillovers, as simulations recently highlight."

A NEW LEASE OF LIFE FOR CLIMATE ACTION

Our world today is in turmoil, facing multiple, mutually reinforcing crises. Even as we mount a fragile recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, war fuels a devastating energy, food, and cost-of-living crisis. And for the first time since it began over 30 years ago, the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report has warned that global human development measures have declined across most countries in the past two years. This comes against the backdrop of the greatest existential threat of all — the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. Nine of the warmest years on record have come in the past decade alone. This year's record-breaking heat waves, floods, droughts, and other extreme forms of weather have forced us to face these increasingly devastating impacts. Climate change is a disruption multiplier in a disrupted world, rolling back progress across the global Sustainable Development Goals.



The Paris Agreement and the COP26 summit in Glasgow represent urgent, collective steps countries are taking to limit emissions. Yet, the window for action is closing fast. Commitments we have now will not keep warming below the 1.5°C target that gives us the best chance of averting catastrophe.

With the narrative so focused on geo-politics, the scope for each of us to make a difference as individuals seems increasingly lost. While governments and industry carry the lion's share of responsibility for responding to the crisis, we as consumers play a large role in driving unsustainable production methods.

LIFE, a fresh perspective

LIFE, or Lifestyle for Environment, announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at COP26 in November 2021, brings a fresh and much-needed perspective. Rather than framing climate change as a 'larger than life' challenge, LIFE recognises that small individual actions can tip the balance in the planet's favour. But we need guiding frameworks, information sharing and the scale of a global movement. Mindful choices cultivated by LIFE animate this spirit — actions such as saving energy at home; cycling and using public transport instead of driving; eating more plant-based foods and wasting less; and leveraging our position as customers and employees to demand climate-friendly choices.

Many of the goals of LIFE can be achieved by deploying 'nudges', gentle persuasion techniques to encourage positive behaviour. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) employs proven nudging techniques such as discouraging food waste by offering smaller plates in cafeterias; encouraging recycling by making bin lids eye-catching; and encouraging cycling by creating cycle paths. According to the UNEP, more than two-thirds of greenhouse gas emissions can be attributed to household consumption and lifestyles — the urgent cuts to global emissions we need can only be achieved through widespread adoption of greener consumption habits.

And while LIFE is a global vision, India is an excellent place to start. With over 1.3 billion people, if we achieve a true jan andolan here, the momentum generated will be enormous. As India leads, we see the world increasingly follow.

India's track record

Today, in Gujarat, from the Statue of Unity, this vision of LIFE is taking flight as a global mission launched by Mr. Modi together with UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who has come to India to show his support. The Prime Minister and Secretary-General are calling on all consumers across the world to become "Pro Planet People" by 2027, adopting simple lifestyle changes that can collectively lead to transformational change. India has a proven track record translating the aspirations of national missions into whole-of-society efforts. The success of the Swachh Bharat Mission, which mobilised individuals and communities across socio-economic strata to become drivers of collective good health and sanitation is an example.

The LIFE mission also recognises that accountability is relative to contribution. Emissions across the poorest half of the world's population combined still fall short of even 1% of the wealthiest. Those who consume the least, often the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society, will not be asked to consume less, but rather supported to participate in the green economy. Each 'Pro Planet' stakeholder is nudged according to differentiated approaches.



Onus on the developed world

The same applies across countries. LIFE resonates with the global climate justice India has rightfully called for — highlighting enhanced obligations those in developed countries bear, to support climate adaptation and mitigation for those most affected, yet least responsible. The average carbon footprint of a person in a high income country is more than 80 times higher than that of a person in a least developed country. It is common sense and only fair to call on the developed world to shoulder a proportionate share of this transition. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, “the world has enough for everyone’s need, but not enough for everyone’s greed.”

And there has never been a better time for India’s leadership on climate action, at home and on the international stage. From the Panchamrit targets announced by Mr. Modi at COP26, to support for the International Solar Alliance, the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure and South-South cooperation platforms, from the world’s fifth largest economy with vibrant businesses making enormous investments in renewables and electric mobility, to a world class public digital tech stack, India brings scale, expertise and legitimacy; a well-positioned founding UN Member State bridging the G20 and G77.

With COP27 next month, and India set to assume the G20 Presidency weeks after, followed by the halfway mark to Agenda 2030 next year, we at Team UN India and our 26 entities are proud and committed partners in this mission to help give a new lease of LIFE to climate action.

JAPAN SEEKS GI TAG FOR NIHONSHU, AN ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE

It is learnt that this is the first time a product from Japan has filed for a tag at the Geographical Indication Registry in Chennai.

According to details provided in the filing, in Japan, nihonshu is regarded as a special and valuable beverage made from fermenting rice. People traditionally drink nihonshu on special occasions, such as festivals, weddings or funerals, but it is also consumed on a daily basis. Thus, it is an integral part of the lifestyle and culture in Japan. The sake market (almost all are nihonshu) is the second largest brewed liquor (such as beer) market in Japan.

For making nihonshu three main raw materials – rice, koji-kin (a type of fungal spore) and water – are required. The production of nihonshu follows an alcoholic fermentation method called parallel multiple fermentation and involves raw material treatment, koji making, starter culture making, mash making, pressing, heat sterilisation and bottling. The rice and koji used should originate in Japan.

The Embassy of Japan, in the filing, also mentioned that in the past, the economy of Japan was based around rice, which was used as a sort of quasi-money before the establishment of a monetary economy in the Meiji period (1869-1912). As a result, nihonshu production was thoroughly under the government’s control. As nihonshu’s production became more industrialised in the Edo period (1603-1868), those who had special licences began hiring many farmers in the agricultural off-season. They gradually won a reputation as craftsmen, which resulted in the establishment of the hierarchical Toii system (Toii is the person responsible for sake brewing), likened to an apprenticeship or guild system.



NEW COVID-19 VARIANTS LIKE BF.7, XBB SPREADING ACROSS GLOBE: WHAT RISK DO THEY POSE?

Even as cases of Covid-19 are at an all-time low – 2,060 new infections were recorded in the country over the last 24 hours – omicron sub-variants such as the BF.7 and recombinant variants such as XBB are spreading in several countries.

The BA.5 sub-variant of omicron continues to be the dominant one across the globe, accounting for 76.2 per cent of the cases, according to the latest situation report by the World Health Organisation.

In India, BA.4 and BA.5 sub-variants never became the dominant variants. At present, BA.2.75 continues to cause most of the infections.

New variants scientists are watching out for

In the United States, BQ.1, BQ.1.1, and BF.7 are being monitored as variants of concern because of an increase in cases caused by them. As per data from the Centre for Disease Control-USA, BQ.1 and BQ.1.1 each accounts for 5.7 per cent of the total cases, while BF.7 accounts for 5.3 per cent.

In the United Kingdom, the BQ.X variant and BF.7 are under the scanner as they gain ground over the dominant BA.5. According to the UK Health Security Agency, BF.7 accounted for 7.26 per cent of the Covid-19 cases and is showing a relative growth advantage of 17.95 per cent over BA.5.

Closer home, recombinant variant XBB – which is a combination of two omicron sub-lineages BJ.1 and BA.2.75 – is driving up infections in Singapore, accounting for 54 per cent of the local cases.

XBB is spreading in India too. “BA.2.75 was the dominant variant in India, accounting for almost 98 per cent of cases till as recently as last week. However, XBB is on the rise, causing 20 to 30 per cent of infections in some states, like Maharashtra,” a scientist who is part of the country’s Sars-CoV-2 sequencing consortium said.

The scientist, however, added that the three big labs in Maharashtra, Gujarat, and West Bengal have been sequencing more samples than other parts of the country, and hence newer variants are being identified there.

Risk posed by new variants

Although these variants are causing a larger share of infections, they are not leading to more hospitalisations and deaths.

The CDC data show that the number of cases reported in the US in the week ending on October 12 was 11.9 per cent less than the previous week. Hospitalisation was down 4.4 per cent and deaths 8.5 per cent.

United Kingdom, on the other hand, has seen an increase in hospitalisations and deaths in October. Singapore has also reported an increase in hospitalisation, but the number of severe cases has remained low.

As for India, the scientist quoted above said, “Although XBB seems to be more transmissible, there hasn’t been any increase in hospitalisations or deaths. There is no clinical significance of the newer variants.”



Dr Sudhanshu Vrati, director of Regional Centre of Biotechnology, Haryana, said, “The emerging variants are becoming more transmissible and better able to escape immunity. A large chunk of the population now has immunity either through vaccination or infection, so the virus needs to adapt to continue to survive. However, it is not leading to severe cases and hospitalisations. In most Covid-19 cases, people are getting sore throat, cough, and fever and are up and running in three days.”

Can winter see a big surge?

Dr Vrati said that could be likely because of people gathering in crowded places during the festival season. “Cases are likely to increase, but not because of any variant. It would be because people are coming together during the festivals, hardly masking anymore,” he said.

On being asked whether the disease has started following a seasonal pattern, Dr Vrati said, “There is no clinical evidence to suggest that Covid-19 has a seasonal pattern as of now. It was thought that the numbers may go up during the rainy season or may go down during the summer months. But that hasn’t happened.”

A severe disease from these variants is highly unlikely. Dr Ekta Gupta, virologist at the Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences, New Delhi, said, “The new variants usually show mutations in the spike protein, mainly because that is the part of the virus used in our vaccines and therapies. However, the rest of the virus is mostly the same and those who have had the infection can mount a defence against the variants. So, even if re-infections happen, they are unlikely to be severe.”

MONTHS LATER, 4 IN 10 PATIENTS HAD NOT FULLY RECOVERED FROM COVID: STUDY

A study of tens of thousands of people in Scotland found that one in 20 people who had been sick with Covid-19 reported not recovering at all, and another four in 10 said they had not fully recovered from their infections many months later.

The authors of the study, published last week in the journal Nature Communications, tried to home in on the long-term risks of Covid by comparing the frequency of symptoms in people with and without previous Covid diagnoses. (‘Outcomes among confirmed cases and a matched comparison group in the Long-COVID in Scotland study’)

People with previous symptomatic Covid infections reported certain persistent symptoms, such as breathlessness, palpitations and confusion or difficulty concentrating, at a rate roughly three times as high as uninfected people in surveys from six to 18 months later, the study found.

Those patients also experienced elevated risks of more than 20 other symptoms relating to the heart, respiratory health, muscle aches, mental health and the sensory system.

The study did not identify greater risks of long-term problems in people with asymptomatic coronavirus infections. It also found, in a much more limited subset of participants who had been given at least one dose of Covid vaccine before their infections, that vaccination appeared to help reduce if not eliminate the risk of some long Covid symptoms.

People with severe initial Covid cases were at higher risk of long-term problems, the study found.