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INTERNATIONAL

A KWASI U-TURN IN BRITAIN: QUESTION IS, WILL MARKETS HAVE LIZ TRUSS IN PM?

Exactly three weeks to the date Kwasi Kwarteng presented the “mini-Budget” as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Britain’s Prime Minister Liz Truss has sacked him. He was replaced by Jeremy Hunt — the fourth chancellor just this year. The slide started with Rishi Sunak resigning from the Boris Johnson cabinet in July.

This lady is for turning

In 1979, with an economy in recession and widespread unemployment, then PM Margaret Thatcher, under attack from all sides, gave an iconic speech, memorable for her statement, “This lady is not for turning”, as she refused to budge from her agenda to liberalise the economy. In sharp contrast, Truss, who has tried to present herself as a modern-day Thatcher, announced an almost complete abdication of her agenda.

In an unexpectedly brief press conference on Friday afternoon, Truss answered just four questions from a room full of journalists — all asking why she deserved to stay when Kwarteng had been sacked for essentially announcing a path that she rolled out in the lead-up to winning the Conservative leadership contest against Sunak. In response, Truss gave no real answers.

But before taking the questions, she announced that she would be reverting to Sunak’s plan of raising the corporate tax from 19% to 25%, aimed at raising revenue for the additional spending. This is expected to dent the UK’s attractiveness for companies — a key metric in the post-Brexit world — as its tax rates will be one of the highest among developed nations, and the highest in Europe.

Truss, who is yet to complete six weeks in office, said that she wants to deliver “a low tax, high wage, high growth economy” and while “that mission remains”, it is clear that “people across this country rightly want stability”, and that “parts of the mini-Budget went further and faster than markets were expecting”.

More turbulence ahead

Truss is facing extreme pressure from her political opponents both inside and outside the Conservative party, and the markets.

The latter’s reaction is always more readily available, and it suggests more turbulence ahead. The yields of 10-year, 20-year, and 30-year gilts all shot up while the pound wobbled even as the PM tried to extricate herself from the press conference.

Not having a convincing answer to why Kwarteng had to go for voicing her plan while she deserves to stay may prove critical to Truss’s political future.

WHO ARE IRAN’S MINORITY KURDS, IN FOCUS AFTER MAHSA AMINI’S DEATH IN CUSTODY

Nationwide protests over the death of a young Iranian Kurdish woman in the custody of Iran’s morality police have been at their most intense in the northwestern areas where the majority of the country’s 10 million Kurds live.



The protests, now in their fourth week as demonstrators defy a crackdown by security forces, pose the biggest challenge to Iran's clerical rulers in years.

The demonstrations began in reaction to the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini and then spread to every one of Iran's 31 provinces.

The death of the ethnic Kurd raised tensions between the establishment and Iran's Kurdish minority, which human rights groups say have been long oppressed by Iran's leadership. The Islamic Republic denies persecuting Kurds.

Tehran has blamed Kurdish dissident groups and foreign enemies for fomenting some of the protests, and its armed forces responded to the turmoil by striking Iranian Kurdish opposition groups inside neighbouring Iraq.

The elite Revolutionary Guards have put down unrest in the Kurdish community for decades, and the country's judiciary has sentenced many activists to long jail terms or death.

Here are some facts about Iran's Kurds, part of a community that is spread across several Middle East countries and one of the world's largest people without a state.

History

Minority Kurds, mainly Sunni Muslims in Shi'ite-dominated Iran, speak a language related to Farsi and live mostly in a mountainous region straddling the borders of Armenia, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey.

Kurdish nationalism stirred in the 1890s when the Ottoman Empire was on its last legs. The 1920 Treaty of Sevres, which imposed a settlement and colonial carve-up of Turkey after World War One, promised Kurds independence. Three years later, Turkish leader Kemal Ataturk tore up that accord.

The Treaty of Lausanne, ratified in 1924, divided the Kurds among the new nations of the Middle East.

Kurdish separatism in Iran first bubbled to the surface with the 1946 Republic of Mahabad, a Soviet-backed state stretching over Iran's border with Turkey and Iraq. It lasted one year before the central government wrested back control.

Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution touched off bloodshed in its Kurdistan region with heavy clashes between the Shi'ite revolutionaries and the Kurdish Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI) which fought for independence.

After the 1980 eruption of the Iran-Iraq war, regular Iranian armed forces and Revolutionary Guards doubled down on their repression of Kurds so as to prevent them becoming a fifth column in Tehran's fight against Saddam Hussein.

New militant groups such as the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) have emerged over the past two decades and have occasionally clashed with security forces. Their leaders have often sought refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan and have been attacked by Iranian missiles.

Kurdish claims have oscillated between full-on separatism and autonomy within a multi-ethnic Iranian state, spanning a wide political spectrum from left-leaning secularism to right-wing Islamist thought.



Society

With eight million to 10 million Kurds living in Iran, Tehran fears pressure for secession will grow among a minority with a long history of struggle for its political rights. Rights groups say Kurds, who form about 10 percent of the population, along with other religious and ethnic minorities face discrimination under Iran's Shi'ite clerical establishment.

"Kurds in Iran have long suffered deep-rooted discrimination. Their social, political and cultural rights have been repressed, as have their economic aspirations," human rights group Amnesty International said in a report. "Kurdish regions have been economically neglected, resulting in entrenched poverty. Forced evictions and destruction of homes have left Kurds with restricted access to adequate housing."

DANGEROUS SPIRAL

The massive Russian bombing of cities across Ukraine that followed a blast at the Kerch Strait bridge linking the Russian mainland to the Crimean Peninsula suggests that the Ukraine war is in a dangerous escalatory spiral with no way out in sight. Saturday's attack on the Russian-built bridge was cheered by many in Ukraine, with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's adviser Mykhailo Podolyak calling it "just the beginning". But Russia retaliated the next day with its broadest missile strike on Ukraine since the war began on February 24, targeting military and civilian infrastructure. The missile attack has demonstrated not just Russia's firepower eight months into the war but also its little regard for civilian lives and infrastructure. It also points to the desperation of Russia whose forces have suffered a series of setbacks in recent weeks. But besides this show of strength punishing Ukraine's population, the attack has little strategic value. It has not improved Russia's battlefield positions. And it has not weakened the resolve of Ukraine and its allies to continue to resist the Russian invasion either. On the contrary, the Group of Seven industrialised countries have vowed undeterred support for Ukraine "as long as it takes".

Typically, conflicts come to an end either with an outright victory by one side or through a negotiated settlement. Both possibilities look distant at this point in the Ukraine war. Russia wants to seize at least Ukraine's eastern and southern provinces. It has made some territorial gains but its advances have been stalled by the Ukrainian troops with backing from NATO. Ukraine wants to oust the Russian troops from all captured territories, including Crimea, which appears to be impractical. And Russian President Putin's unilateral decision to annex four Ukrainian provinces, in flagrant violation of international laws and norms, has made the prospects for peace extremely difficult. But the alternative to talks is continuation of the conflict — Europe's most dangerous land war since the Second World War, with its human and economic costs and growing fears of a nuclear attack. That is the last thing the world wants now. Even in 1962, when Soviet nuclear missiles were in Cuba and U.S. warships had quarantined the Caribbean Sea, Kennedy and Khrushchev had talked to each other, exchanged letters and found a solution to the missile crisis that had pushed the world to the brink of a nuclear war. Mr. Putin should back off from his maximalist threats and offer some concrete proposals for talks. His rivals in the West should also work towards creating conditions for negotiations that could bring this conflict, which has already wreaked havoc, to an end.

HOW CHINA REDUCED POVERTY; LESSONS FOR INDIA

Last week, the World Bank released its latest report on global poverty. It stated that "economic upheavals brought on by Covid-19 and later the war in Ukraine" had produced "an outright

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reversal” in poverty reduction across the planet. The pace of poverty reduction had been slowing down anyway since 2015, thanks to a slowdown in growth rates but the pandemic and war have caused an outright reversal. So much so that the “world is unlikely to meet the goal of ending extreme poverty by 2030”.

What is extreme poverty? How is it defined?

The World Bank (WB) defines extreme poverty by particular consumption level. This is called the poverty line and it is pegged at US\$2.15. In other words, anyone living on less than \$2.15 a day is considered to be living in extreme poverty. About 648 million people globally were in this situation in 2019.

But if you did a mental calculation — multiplying 2.15 by the rupee’s current market exchange rate with the US dollar (around 82) — and arrived at Rs 176 a day as the Indian equivalent of the international poverty line, you’d be wrong.

That’s because this \$2.15 level is based on purchasing power parity (PPP). Simply put, the PPP equivalent of \$2.15 is the number of Indian rupees an Indian would need to buy the same basket of goods in India that an American can buy with \$2.15 in the US. That equivalent in India is Rs 46, not Rs 176. This difference happens because the price of the same goods is different in different countries and it is quite likely that a dollar in India buys far more of the same commodity (say, an egg or banana) or service (say, a haircut) that it buys in the US.

So, the international poverty line of \$2.15 implies that any Indian who spends less than Rs 46 a day — in total — is considered to be living in extreme poverty. Try to recall the last time when your daily expenditure was that low and you’d understand why this is called the poverty line for abject or extreme poverty.

This international poverty line is revised periodically to account for rising prices of goods and services over time. The very first international poverty line — a dollar a day — was constructed in 1990 using the 1985 prices. It was then raised to \$1.08 a day in 1993, \$1.25 a day in 2005 and \$1.90 a day in 2011. The \$2.15 one is based on 2017 prices.

What has the World Bank stated about India’s poverty levels?

According to the WB, India is the country with the highest number of poor people.

What’s worse, when the World Bank used the data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), it found that the number of people living in abject poverty increased by 56 million (5.6 crore) in 2020. That’s almost 80% of the total 70 million the world over that the World Bank estimates to have been pushed into poverty in 2020. In other words, according to this estimate, 8 out of every 10 people in the world who were pushed into poverty during Covid were in India.

India’s problem, however, isn’t just that it has the largest number of people in the world living below the extreme poverty line. According to the Bank, close to 600 million Indians survive at less than \$3.65 (Rs 84) a day level of expenditure.

Now many may simply wish to deny or dispute these figures, partly because they use CMIE data. But the only reason why the World Bank was forced to use data from CMIE is that there are no official estimates of poverty available since 2011. “The government decided not to release the 2017/18 NSS round because of concerns about data quality,” it states.



Moreover, estimates of absolute levels of poverty in India, albeit unofficial, had been going up even before Covid and the war in Ukraine further impoverished Indians.

Who can India learn from?

Over the past week, there has been some acknowledgement, albeit in the RSS, that India faces three rather acute and growing problems: Widespread unemployment, widening inequalities and deepening poverty.

And here's the genuinely salient point: None of these will be resolved by electoral victories. They require actual policy solutions. Without the right policies, India's demographic dividend is looking more like a demographic bomb.

But there is one country — China — which is not only comparable to India in terms of the population size but is also globally recognised to have alleviated poverty at historically unprecedented speed and scale.

Perhaps, understanding what China did may provide some clues to Indian policymakers.

What did China achieve?

Intending to provide lessons to other developing countries, the World Bank and China's Ministry of Finance undertook a study in 2019 to understand what China achieved and how it did it. This study was finally published earlier this year.

The World Bank found that between 1978 and 2019, China's poverty headcount dropped from 770 million to 5.5 million people. In other words, China lifted 765 million (76.5 crore) people from extreme poverty in the past four decades. It means, on average, every year China pulled 19 million (1.9 crore) poor people out of extreme poverty for the past 40 years. In doing so, China accounted for almost 75 per cent of the global reduction in the number of people living in extreme poverty during this period.

In 2021, China declared that it has eradicated extreme poverty according to the national poverty threshold, lifting 765 million people out of poverty since 1978, and that it has built a "moderately prosperous society in all respects."

Decades of progress in China are also reflected in substantial improvements in other measures of well-being.

Life expectancy at birth went from 66 years in 1978 to 77 years by 2019, and the infant mortality rate dropped from 52 in 1978 to 6.8 per thousand infants in 2019.

Education achievements in China were also relatively higher than in its peers before 1978 and progressed further since, as the country universalised basic and secondary education.

Taken together, improvements in health, education, and income over the four decades are reflected in China's rising position in the Human Development Index from 106 (out of 144 countries) in 1990 to 85 (out of 189 countries) in 2019, and the narrowing of the gaps with other large developing countries.

How did China do it?

The main conclusion is that China's poverty reduction success relied mainly on two pillars.



1. The first pillar was rapid economic growth, supported by broad-based economic transformation, which provided new economic opportunities for the poor and raised average incomes

The report states that China's poverty reduction story is primarily a growth story. But rapid and sustained economic growth was accompanied by a broad-based economic transformation. In other words, reforms began in the agricultural sector, where poor people could benefit directly from improvements in productivity associated with the introduction of market incentives.

"The development of low-skilled, labor-intensive industries provided a source of employment for workers released from agriculture. Urbanization helped migrants take advantage of the new opportunities in the cities, and migrant transfers boosted incomes of their relatives remaining in the villages. Public investment in infrastructure improved living conditions in rural areas but also connected them with urban and export markets," states the report

A crucial point to note here from India's perspective is that reforms were gradual. Reforms in all these areas were incremental, which may have helped businesses and the population adjust to the rapid pace of change. "The gradualism adopted by China in reforming the economy (associated with Deng Xiaoping saying 'Crossing the river by feeling the stones') was reflected in the incremental approach toward the liberalization of agricultural and industrial product markets, the managed approach toward migration and urbanization, and a much larger role for the state in ownership of key assets and the allocation of resources than in other market economies," finds the World Bank.

2. The second pillar was government policies to alleviate persistent poverty, which initially targeted areas disadvantaged by geography and a lack of economic opportunities, but subsequently focused on poor households, irrespective of their location.

"Broad economic reforms were complemented by strategies, policies, and programs directly targeted at poverty alleviation. China's poverty alleviation strategy can be characterized as 'development oriented,' implying a focus on creating economic opportunities as a means to escape poverty. It evolved from an area-based approach, targeting poor counties and villages as a whole, to a set of interventions targeted at poor households," states the report.

A component of these policies were social protection policies for poor households and they included specific programs in social assistance, social insurance, social welfare, and other targeted social policies

Two other factors mattered heavily

3. "China's success benefited from effective governance, which was key to the successful implementation of the growth strategy as well as the evolving set of targeted poverty reduction policies," states the World Bank. This meant that the institutional arrangements China developed to deliver outcomes were shaped by its specific context.

For instance, China's size necessitated decentralised implementation arrangements, with significant scope for local experimentation, and a high degree of competition among local governments. Of course, to achieve coherence, local experimentation was subject to strong monitoring and accountability between levels of government.

4. China also benefited from some favourable initial conditions at the time of opening up, such as a relatively high level of human capital, which is widely recognised as a critical input for the population to rapidly benefit from new economic opportunities once market reforms set in.



The World Bank finds that for a country with a level of per capita income among the lowest in the world, China's population in 1978 had relatively high human capital endowments. In 1949, only 7 percent of those ages 15–64 had completed primary school in China.

“Massive investment in education and expansion of health care since the 1950s resulted in real achievements: in 1978, the infant mortality rate was 52 per 1,000 births, less than half of the average in China's income group; life expectancy at birth at 66 years far exceeded that of other developing countries; the primary school enrollment rate was 96 per cent; and the secondary school enrollment rate was 49.9 per cent,” it states.

CHINA DEFENDS POLICY ON XINJIANG, ASSERTS IT'S NOT ABOUT RIGHTS

China on Saturday defended its policies in Xinjiang and said issues there were “not related to human rights”, a day after India called for the human rights of the people of the region to be “respected and guaranteed”.

India was among the countries that did not vote in favour of a West-led United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) draft resolution on Xinjiang that failed to pass this week.

Explaining why New Delhi abstained on the vote, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on Friday cited India's long-held view that “country-specific resolutions are never helpful”, but at the same time also called for “the human rights of the people of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region [to] be respected and guaranteed.” “We hope that the relevant party will address the situation objectively and properly,” MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said Beijing had “noted” reports on India's abstention as well as the MEA's statement. “I want to stress that the issues related to Xinjiang are not related to human rights and are about countering violent terrorism, radicalisation, and separatism,” Ms. Mao said. “Thanks to strenuous efforts, there was no violent terrorist incident in Xinjiang for over five consecutive years.”

Ms. Mao said the UNHRC vote in its favour had affirmed China's position. “The voting results at the UNHRC reflect the position of the international community, especially of developing countries, in firmly rejecting the politicisation of the human rights issues,” she said.

Arbitrary detention

India said it had also taken note of concerns expressed by a recent report of the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR), which said China's “arbitrary detention” of Uighurs may have constituted crimes against humanity.

Beijing slammed the report and blamed Western interference. China initially denied the mass detention of Uighurs in “re-education” camps, but later claimed the vast network of centres in Xinjiang were for “vocational training”.

AMID ZERO-COVID PUSH, BEIJING SEES RARE PROTEST

Dashing expectations of many in China of an easing in the stringent “zero-COVID” regime following next week's Communist Party congress, the official People's Daily newspaper has defended a continuation of the policy as “sustainable”.



While sparing China mass deaths, the third straight year of “zero-COVID” has inflicted economic pain even as the testing and lockdown measures that held firm in 2020 and 2021 have been challenged by new variants, leading to harsher lockdowns. China is currently dealing with among its biggest spread of cases since the early days of the pandemic.

Social media showed images of a rare protest in Beijing on Thursday — despite the current blanket of security ahead of Sunday’s Party congress – with banners displayed on a bridge in the district of Haidian, home to universities and tech firms, calling for an end to the policy.

“Food, not COVID tests,” it read. “Reform, not a Cultural Revolution. Freedom, not lockdowns. Votes, not leaders. Dignity, not lies. Citizens, not slaves”. The banners were taken down by the police.

Days ahead of the October 16 congress that is set to confirm President Xi Jinping’s third term, the People’s Daily, however, strongly defended the policy, publishing, starting from Monday, three commentaries supporting the policy in three consecutive editions, and slamming those advocating a loosening for “lying flat”.

“If there is a large-scale COVID-19 resurgence, the spread of the epidemic will have a serious impact on economic and social development, and the final cost will be higher and the loss will be greater,” it said.

Political narrative

Zero-COVID has been framed as one of Mr. Xi’s key legacies as he completes a decade at the helm, and contrasted with mass deaths in the West. The political narrative surrounding it had been seen as one reason for its continuation until the congress.

However, there are few signs of loosening even as Mr. Xi’s third term begins. Chinese health experts have said a moving away from the policy would require a sustained vaccination booster campaign, as well as a significant change in the current government messaging that portrays COVID-19 as a life-threatening disease. A shift, experts say, would require several months of preparation on both fronts. The economic costs and lockdowns have, however, left the public less supportive of a policy that most backed in 2020 and 2021, as China enjoyed a degree of normalcy such as open schools and factories as the rest of the world reeled from the virus.



NATION

GERMAN CALL FOR UN ROLE IN J&K IS INJUSTICE TO TERROR VICTIMS: INDIA

The government took strong objection to German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's call for the "engagement of the United Nations" in solving the Kashmir dispute in response to a question during a joint press conference with Pakistan Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto in Bonn on Friday. The External Affairs Ministry called such comments a "grave injustice" to victims of terrorism.

In her remarks, Ms. Baerbock said Germany supported a UN role in resolving the Kashmir dispute, praised the Line of Control ceasefire agreement of February 2021, and called for a "political dialogue" between India and Pakistan.

"Germany has a role and responsibility with regard to the situation of Kashmir. Therefore, we support intensively the engagement of the United Nations to find peaceful solutions in the region," Ms. Baerbock said after bilateral talks with Mr. Bhutto. "There are tensions as [Mr. Bhutto] described, so we encourage Pakistan and we encourage India to follow the track of the ceasefire, to follow the track of the United Nations, and to intensify the political dialogue, and also the political and practical cooperation in the region," she added.

Reacting sharply to the wording of Ms. Baerbock's comments, Ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi on Saturday said the "role and responsibility" of any "serious and conscientious member of the global community" was to call out international, cross-border terrorism.

"The Indian Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir has borne the brunt of such a terrorist campaign for decades. This continues till now," Mr. Bagchi said referring to the unfinished prosecution of Pakistan-based terrorists involved in the Mumbai 26/11 attacks. "When states do not recognise such dangers, either because of self-interest or indifference, they undermine the cause of peace, not promote it. They also do grave injustice to the victims of terrorism," he added.

Agreeing with Ms. Baerbock on the UN role, Mr. Bhutto said peace in South Asia was not possible without the "peaceful resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, in accordance with the UN resolutions, in accordance with international law", and even sought to draw a parallel between "unilateral actions in Ukraine" and "unilateral actions in Kashmir", in reference to the government's August 2019 reorganisation of the State.

The comments came a day after a speech by Home Minister Amit Shah in Baramulla in Kashmir, where he ruled out a dialogue process with Pakistan, saying the Modi government would not talk to Pakistan but to "the people of Kashmir" only.

Earlier this week, New Delhi conveyed objections to Washington over the visit of the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan to Muzaffarabad, and the U.S.'s reference to the area under Pakistani occupation as "Azad Jammu Kashmir", indicating concern within the government about global references to the Kashmir dispute.

INDIAN NAVY TO JOIN MALABAR EXERCISE AND INTERNATIONAL FLEET REVIEW IN JAPAN IN NOV.

This is the latest in a series of bilateral and multilateral exercises in which the Indian armed forces have taken part recently. In October-end, the India-U.S. bilateral Army exercise 'Yudh Abhyas' is



scheduled to take place in the high-altitude areas of Uttarakhand, around 100 km (aerial distance) from the Line of Actual Control.

“The initial and final planning conferences for Malabar have been completed. The exercise is scheduled to be held from November 8 to 18,” a second official source said. While the Navy has not yet given details of its participation, two frontline warships and a P-8I maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) are likely to be deployed, it has been learnt.

Australia is keen to host the exercise, but that has not yet been accepted by the partner countries, two official sources stated. Australia was included as a regular member in Ex Malabar in 2020.

The IFR to be held in the first week of November is being conducted during the 18th Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) ‘strategic discussion’ and ‘plenary session’ being hosted by Japan from November 5 to 10, according to a statement by the Royal Brunei Navy. However, it is not yet clear if India would be taking part in the WPNS. A decision from the Defence Ministry is awaited, said a defence source in the middle of last week.

India is currently hosting the multilateral anti-terror exercise ‘Manesar Anti-terror 2022’ under the ambit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure scheduled from October 8 to 13.

At the same time, Australia’s flagship regional engagement activities, Indo-Pacific Endeavour, is currently under way.

THE INTERPOL GENERAL ASSEMBLY MEETING IN DELHI

The story so far:

The General Assembly of the International Criminal Police Organisation (Interpol) is meeting in Delhi for four days from October 18. This is the second time since 1997 the 195 member-strong body is holding such a large conference in India.

What is the Interpol?

Set up in 1923, the Interpol is a secure information-sharing platform that facilitates criminal investigation of police forces across the globe through collection and dissemination of information received from various police forces. It keeps track of the movements of criminals and those under the police radar in various regions and tips off police forces which had either sought the Interpol’s assistance or which in its opinion will benefit from the particulars available with it. Aided by state-of-the-art databases and computer analytics, the Interpol operates round the clock and employs some of the best minds in the area of crime analysis and technology. It aims to promote the widest-possible mutual assistance between criminal police forces.

How is the Interpol organised?

The head of Interpol is the President who is elected by the General Assembly. He comes from one of the member-nations and holds office for four years. The day-to-day activities are overseen by a full-time Secretary General elected by the General Assembly, who holds office for five years. (currently Jurgen Stock of Germany, who has been Interpol’s chief executive since 2014), with its headquarters in Lyon, France, with a global complex for innovation in Singapore, and several satellite offices in different regions.



The General Assembly lays down the policy for execution by its Secretariat which has several specialised directorates for cybercrime, terrorism, drug trafficking, financial crime, environmental crime, human trafficking, etc. Every member-country is the Interpol's face in that country.

Interpol has a National Central Bureau (NCB) in each member country, which is the central point of contact for both the general secretariat and the other NCBs around the world. The CBI assumes this role in India with one of its senior officers heading its exclusive Interwing (the National Central Bureaus) for collation of information and liaison with the world body. Each NCB is run by police officials of that country, and usually sits in the government ministry responsible for policing. (Home Ministry in India.)

Interpol manages 19 police databases with information on crimes and criminals (from names and fingerprints to stolen passports), accessible in real-time to countries. It also offers investigative support such as forensics, analysis, and assistance in locating fugitives around the world, according to the Interpol website.

What does one expect from the Delhi meeting?

The entire global police leadership will be in Delhi for this session. Smuggling of arms and drugs continue to worry those who desire to see a stable world order. The session is also expected to throw up a few tricky questions involving protection given to deviance by the establishment itself in some regions of the world on grounds of dubious economic and sovereign considerations.

What are Interpol's future challenges?

The rising spectre of transnational, cyber and organised crime requires a globally coordinated law enforcement response. Interpol has a legacy of trust and reliability. It needs to acquire powers of sanction against a country which refuses to cooperate in implementing a Red notice. It is however highly unlikely that member-nations will ever agree to dilute their sovereignty and invest the Interpol with such authority.

What is the Red notice?

It is a structured communication issued by the Interpol to all member-nations notifying the name(s) of persons against whom an arrest warrant is pending in a particular country. The notice issued requests all member nations that if the named individual(s) is located in their country an immediate communication should be sent to the nation that wants him in connection with a criminal investigation.

As of October 12, the Interpol website contained a list of 7,135 public RNs in circulation. The number of valid RNs which are not public is several times more. These RNs are restricted for use by law enforcement authorities only. An RN is published on Interpol's website only in cases where the help of the public is needed to locate an individual, or if those individuals pose a threat to public safety. Among the most popular Indians on this list are jeweller Mehul Choksi and diamantaire Nirav Modi.

Is an RN a warrant of arrest?

An RN is only an international wanted persons' notice; it is not an international arrest warrant. Interpol itself does not want individuals; they are wanted by a country or an international tribunal.



This means the Interpol cannot compel law enforcement authorities in any country to arrest the subject of an RN. It is up to individual member countries to decide what legal value to give to an RN, and the authority of their national law enforcement officers to make arrests.

The Interpol says that an RN must comply with its constitution and rules. It says on its website that “every Red Notice request is checked by a specialised task force to ensure it is compliant with (Interpol) rules”.

The Interpol argues that an RN is issued only after a competent court has taken cognisance of a chargesheet against the fugitive.

India's request for action against Pannun rejected

The Interpol has rejected a second request by India to issue a Red Corner Notice against Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, the Canada-based founder and legal advisor of the pro-Khalistan outfit Sikhs for Justice (SFJ), whom the Union Ministry of Home Affairs has listed as a “terrorist” under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).

The Interpol has said India has failed to provide sufficient information to support its case, and that the UAPA has been criticised for being “misused” to target minority groups and human rights activists without “respecting” their right to due process and a fair trial, The Indian Express has learnt.

While acknowledging that Pannun is a “high-profile Sikh separatist”, the Interpol has said that his activities have a “clear political dimension”, which cannot be the subject of a Red Corner Notice according to Interpol’s Constitution, The Indian Express reported on October 12.

AS PRISONS OVERFLOW, BSF LETS MIGRANTS WITH CLEAN RECORD RETURN TO BANGLADESH

On the midnight of September 23, Sabana Begum (40) and Rehana Khatoon (30) were intercepted by the Border Security Force (BSF) near the border outpost of Jeetpur in North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal while illegally crossing the International Border from India to Bangladesh. Upon interrogation, they said that they had come to India six months ago, had been working in Bengaluru, and were heading back home.

On September 28, as many as four Bangladeshi nationals were intercepted near the border outposts of Jeetpur and Ranghat in the district. They said they had come to India some time ago in search of work and were returning to Bangladesh after visiting various cities.

If normal procedure were followed, all six would have been handed over to the police to be lodged in jail for several years for illegally crossing the border. They would have added to the number of foreigners sent to West Bengal’s correctional homes. But this time, the BSF authorities arranged meetings with their counterparts in Bangladesh, the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), and handed them over to the Bangladeshi authorities.

With overcrowding of prisons turning out to be a major challenge for security agencies, in several cases, the BSF is not arresting those crossing the border but handing them over to the BGB, often described as a “gesture of humanity and goodwill”.

Data from the South Bengal Frontier of the BSF reveal that in 2022, till October 5, the wing returned 287 persons, including 146 men, 102 women, 38 children and one transgender person.

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BSF authorities, however, insist that only those who are not involved in the smuggling of narcotics, cough syrup, fake currency, gold and other prohibited articles are handed over to the BGB.

Many cross the border looking for work and return home after working in India. Some of them try to sneak in to meet relatives or to get treatment, and in some cases, it's children who have run away from their homes.

What the stats show

A recent report on Prison Statistics of India (PSI), 2021 shows that of the 5,565 foreign inmates lodged in the country's correctional homes, West Bengal alone accounts for 1,746 (31%). The State has reported the highest number of foreign convicts lodged in its jails (30.5% or 329 persons) and the highest number of foreign undertrials (28.4% or 1,179 persons).

The report says among the foreign inmates, Bangladeshi nationals make up the majority — 40.5% — of all foreign inmates. It shows that a majority of the foreign nationals were arrested for crossing the border illegally.

Thousands of persons are apprehended every year for illegally crossing the border along the BSF's South Bengal Frontier. This wing guards a stretch of 913.324 km along the India-Bangladesh border, from Sunderbans in the south to Malda in the north, and is the most porous stretch of India's borders in the entire eastern theatre.

More than 40% of the border — over 360 km — is riverine, where rivers serve as boundaries between the two countries. Security agencies managing the border describe it as the most complex region with a high density of populations residing on either side of the border in close proximity, with significant ethnic and cultural similarities.

Delay in deportation

In 2021, the South Bengal Frontier arrested 2,036 Bangladeshis and 860 Indians for illegally crossing the border.

Contrary to the public perception, more arrests are made while Bangladeshi nationals are crossing over from India to Bangladesh than in the opposite direction.

According to officials of the State's Correctional Homes, other than the convicts and undertrials, there are many Bangladeshi nationals who have completed their term and are still languishing in the prisons. This is because deportation of such prisoners often referred to as "Jaan Khalash (having completed the prison term)" in the prison records is a lengthy process involving both the countries.

The prison occupancy rate in West Bengal as per the PSI stands at 120. Occupancy rate is defined as the number of inmates staying in jails the authorised capacity for 100 inmates.

THE COURT AND THE PROBLEM WITH ITS COLLEGIUM

Once again the collegium of the Supreme Court of India is in the news, and once again for the wrong reasons. This time, it is because of the difficulty that its five judges have in getting together for one meeting. The Chief Justice of India, Justice U.U. Lalit, assumed office on August 27, 2022. He has a short tenure and demits office on November 8, 2022. Nevertheless, he tries to set a scorching pace. He constitutes as many as five Constitution Benches to hear extremely important



matters which his predecessors put on the back burner. The CJI also takes it upon himself to fill six vacancies in the apex court. He sets in motion the procedure contemplated for the collegium of the Supreme Court which is enshrined in the Memorandum of Procedure of 1999.

A meeting was held on September 26 at which all the five members of the collegium were present. They decided affirmatively on one candidate, Justice Dipankar Datta, now Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court. There are several other names under consideration for the remaining slots, and these include four Chief Justices of High Courts and one lawyer practising in the Supreme Court. This is deferred to September 30. However, the meeting on September 30 is not held because Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, the seniormost puisne judge and in line to be the next CJI, sits in court till 9.30 p.m. Since the meeting cannot be held as scheduled, the CJI tries to obtain approval by circulation. Two judges accord approval but Justice Chandrachud and Justice Nazeer withhold approval. Apparently they do not object to the names but object to the procedure of circulation. In the meantime there is a letter from the Law Minister asking the CJI's view on the appointment of his successor. With that the curtain is brought down on the proposed appointments. For some reason no one can fathom, the CJI's collegium becomes a lame duck during his last month, while his court retains every power till the last minute of his last day in office.

Relevant questions

If this was any other body conducting business for selecting the highest officers for the organisation, those in charge would face both questions and flak. Simply put, since the matter is of obvious importance, why could not five people who work in the same building meet the next day, or the day after, to conclude the business? If meeting in person was so difficult, surely we are all used to online conduct of business. The court itself has been quite proficient in conducting judicial work online for many months after COVID-19 struck us. If any of the names are not good enough, why not say so in circulation? If they were good enough, then why not just make the appointments by following any procedure feasible, whether personal meeting, circulation or online meeting? If business has to be done, then there appears to be no good reason why it did not get done.

The problem, as has been the problem with the collegium, is that there is nobody in it to ask these questions. Time and again, it has been widely commented that this is an extra-constitutional or non-constitutional body brought in force by judgments of the Supreme Court virtually wresting the power of appointment of judges. The Constitution of India gave the last word to the President of India but mandated consultation with the Court. These judgments give the last word to the Court mandating consultation with the government. Not only that, what makes the problem even worse is that there is no seat in the collegium for any non judge — neither from the executive, the Bar or anywhere else. In other words, there is no one to offer suggestions or raise questions or even to observe what is going on.

In 2014, Parliament by unanimity — mark the word unanimity — backed by State legislatures enacted the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC); it comprised three judges, the Law Minister and two eminent persons to handle the task of appointing judges. By a 4:1 majority, the Supreme Court struck that down, setting at naught the entire legislative will of the country which was trying to reverse a constitutional coup. If the Court was concerned about being overruled in appointments, it could have just tinkered with and read down the Act, deleted the second eminent person and thus secured a situation where the judges were in the majority. This would have secured judicial primacy, provided for some executive involvement as well as had one person representing a larger public constituency. The point is that this will at least provide a place



at the table for the question why and the question why not to be asked. There can be accountability and perceived performance only when these questions can be asked and have to be answered. Otherwise there will be insularity and opacity.

On judicial appointments

In recent times, the Government seems to have given up on pursuing the commission for judicial appointments. One wonders why. Perhaps the answer partly lies in successive collegiums not putting forth names anathema to the Government, notably that of Justice Akil Kureshi (he retired in March as the Chief Justice of the Rajasthan High Court). This is hardly a satisfactory solution. It is time to revisit this question and secure a better, broad-based and transparent method of appointing senior judges to the High Courts and the Supreme Court. While doing so, we may also ask why there have been no appointments from the category of distinguished jurists which Article 124 of the Constitution contemplates. Appointments to the top court seem to be the preserve of judges from the High Courts with a handful of appointments from the Bar. Surely some nodding acknowledgement should be given to a specific provision made by the founding fathers in the Constitution. Or is it the view that in all these years we have produced no distinguished jurist worth the name?

SPLIT OVER HIJAB

A two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court has been unable to resolve the conflict between a girl student's freedom to wear a head-scarf and the state's interest in keeping schools a place of equality and secularism. It is unfortunate that a clear verdict did not emerge from the elaborate arguments advanced before the Court for and against the Karnataka government's bar on the wearing of the hijab. The split verdict perhaps reflects the division in the wider society on issues concerning secularism and the minorities. Justice Hemant Gupta, rejecting the idea that hijab could be worn in addition to the uniform, has held that permitting one community to wear religious symbols to class will be the antithesis of secularism. Justice Sudhanshu Dhulia, on the other hand, has ruled that asking to remove the head-scarf at an institution's gates is an invasion of their privacy and dignity. The issue is why a head-scarf that does not interfere with the uniform cannot be a matter of choice without being a target of hostile discrimination; and whether the hijab is going to be used to deny girl students their right to education. Justice Dhulia represents this viewpoint when he asserts that discipline should not be at the cost of freedom, when he wonders why a girl child wearing a hijab should be a public order problem and declares that 'reasonable accommodation' of this practice will be a sign of a mature society. He also empathises with the position of girl students who have to overcome greater odds than boys to get an education.

Justice Gupta, on the other hand, has foregrounded equality and discipline as the essential hallmarks of a secular institution in a diverse country, and rules that the Government violates no constitutional principle when enforcing a prescribed uniform. He goes to the extent of saying the constitutional goal of fraternity would be defeated if students are permitted to carry their apparent religious symbols with them to the classroom. The split verdict has given rise to the question of whether matters on which opinions could be sharply divided and have significant political implications should be placed before Division Benches of even number. In the prevailing political climate, the Karnataka government mandating either a prescribed uniform or any dress that was "in the interest of unity, equality and public order" was seen as majoritarian assertion in the garb of enforcing secular norms, equality and discipline in educational institutions. A verdict that legitimises this non-inclusive approach to education and a policy that may lead to denial of



opportunity to Muslim women will not be in the country's interest. Reasonable accommodation should be the course as long as the hijab or any wear, religious or otherwise, does not detract from the uniform.

THE GATEKEEPERS OF GARBA: SELF-APPOINTED GUARDIANS OF HINDUISM ARE BEING ALLOWED TO PERFORM THE ROLE OF JUDGE, JURY AND EXECUTIONER

Gujarat is known, among other things, for its traditional folk dance called garba. For the last several centuries, it is performed during the Navratri festival, celebrating fertility and womanhood. Like in all cultural artefacts, the form, content and scale of the celebration has undergone a change. Over time, garba has evolved a cosmopolitan character, involving a wide cross-section of society. Following the concluding session of the first Gujarat investors' summit in 2003, the state government under then Chief Minister Narendra Modi sponsored garba festivities inviting investors worldwide to participate. Thus, the garba gained recognition as a prominent festival of the people of Gujarat.

Of late, however, a handful of fanatics are bent upon deforming this joyous cultural festival in the name of religion, or rather their notion of it. These self-styled guardians of traditional garba folk culture under the banner of Bajrang Dal (BD) or Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) have arrogated to themselves the role of the festival's gatekeepers.

They bypass the local organisers/sponsoring agencies of the functions and decide, of their own accord, who can participate and who cannot in the publicly organised garba events. Such gatekeepers had emerged in the late 1980s during the VHP-BJP campaigns and mobilisations for arousing and stoking Hindu sentiments against "others" for their politics of Hindutva. That helped the BJP, besides other factors, in making its way in electoral politics and eventually paved its path to power. To consolidate and expand this power, the VHP, BD and other outfits of the Parivar intensified their hate campaign against the minorities, that is, Muslims and Christians. This involved taking the law into their own hands to "teach lessons" to minority communities in general and also to target those among Hindus who expressed a critical or different perspective of Indian culture, Hinduism and society than the fanatics on the fringe.

There were cases in which some Dalit youths were punished by these gangs when the former tried to participate in a village or locality garba. That occasionally led to clashes between caste Hindus and Dalits. Such instances continue in some villages. But in urban areas, as the numbers of middle-class Dalits have increased, Dalits organise garbas of their own to avoid clashes. In fact, now some Ambedkarite Dalit youths have started organising "Bhim garba" not only to spread Babasaheb Ambedkar's ideology but also to protest against the attempts by some to hijack the festival and project it as belonging exclusively to the savarna Hindu domain. They invite all — irrespective of caste, religion or gender — to participate in the Bhim Garba.

FROM PUBLIC FLOGGING BY POLICEMEN TO HATE SPEECH BY AN MP, THE RHETORIC OF HATE IS ENCOURAGED BY IMPUNITY

At a "Virat Hindu Sabha" organised by, among others, a unit of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in Delhi, BJP MP Parvesh Verma called for "sampoorna bahishkar" or total boycott of "these people". He did not name the community to be boycotted. He didn't need to. Listen in, and the other speakers in the same meeting — held reportedly to protest against the killing of a Hindu man in Sunder Nagri, with six men arrested, all Muslims — leave little to the imagination. In inflammatory speeches,



were exhortations to violence and hate. Calls to “take action against jihadis” and disregard the law. “Agar aise log hamare mandiron... ko unglee dikhayein... (if these people point a finger at our temples)”, “... ek bhi madrasa aur ek bhi masjid nahin bachegi (your madrasa and mosque will not be spared)”. The hate speaks for itself. It indicts not just MP Verma, who has invited similar notoriety before. In the campaign for the Delhi assembly elections in January 2020, Verma’s provocative remarks against the anti-CAA protesters at Shaheen Bagh had drawn the ire of the EC. The latest instance of unchecked hate speech points fingers, also, at seniors in his party and its government at the Centre. The silence at the top rings out loud. And enables the next public outburst of hate.

Before Verma’s hate speech, was the public flogging a few days ago of 10 Muslim men arrested for alleged stone-pelting at a garba event in Gujarat’s Kheda district, by a policeman in plain clothes. He was helped by his colleagues, a police van standing by, and the crowd cheering. The flagrant abuse of the rule of law by those entrusted with the responsibility of upholding it has brought on a police inquiry — but also praise for the policemen from no less than Gujarat’s minister of state for home. Apparently, in the BJP’s playbook only remarks against the Prophet are deemed beyond the pale, as former party spokesperson Nupur Sharma discovered in May. Outrage in the Muslim world carries a diplomatic cost so MEA mandarins rushed to damage control. But clearly, there is no political cost for viciousness and venom expressed by partymen, legislators and even ministers against the minority community.

And that’s the rub. Last month, the Supreme Court asked the Centre to explain its silence on hate speech and spoke of the need for stricter regulation. That’s a too-innocent reading of the problem. A more expansive law will, in fact, be used to curb free expression. Hate speech is a political problem, its solution must be found politically. Those whose writ runs in the government or party need to draw the line. But given the harvest of hate and the dividends of silence, that won’t happen in a hurry.

PM MODI INAUGURATES MAHAKAL LOK CORRIDOR AT MAHAKALESHWAR TEMPLE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday inaugurated the 900 metre-long Mahakal Lok corridor built at the Mahakaleshwar temple here.

The Mahakal Lok project cost is Rs 856 crore, with the first phase being developed for Rs 351 crore, an official said.

Modi, accompanied by Madhya Pradesh Governor Mangu Bhai Patel and Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, greeted sadhus present at the venue.

He pressed a remote button to unveil a Shivling replica to dedicate Mahakal Lok to the nation.

The Mahakaleshwar Temple Corridor Development Project will provide better amenities for those visiting the temple which is dedicated to Lord Shiva and houses one of the 12 Jyotirlingas (representation of Lord Shiva) in India.

The corridor has around 108 aesthetically ornate pillars made of intricately carved sandstones that depict the Anand Tandav Swaroop (Lord Shiva’s dance form), 200 statues and murals of Lord Shiva and goddess Shakti.

Modi offered prayers at the temple before he inaugurated the corridor project.



THE QUESTION OF SANCTION UNDER UAPA: WHY BOMBAY HC HAS ACQUITTED G N SAIBABA

The Nagpur Bench of Bombay High Court on Friday set aside the conviction of former Delhi University professor G N Saibaba, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2017 by the sessions court in Gadchiroli for alleged links with the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist). The High Court ruled that the trial of Saibaba and five others were “null and void” in the absence of a valid sanction under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967.

The case against Saibaba and others

In 2013, police in Gadchiroli claimed to have received secret information about active members of the CPI (Maoist) and its front, the Revolutionary Democratic Front. Police arrested Mahesh Tirki, Pandu Narote, Hem Mishra, Vijay Tirki, and journalist Prashant Rahi that year. On May 9, 2014, Saibaba was arrested.

All six accused were charged with criminal conspiracy to wage war against the Government of India through unlawful activities by use of violence. The accused, including Saibaba, were alleged to have been found in possession of documents and electronic gadgets containing Maoist literature, letters, correspondence, pamphlets, and audio-video clips of meetings of the CPI (Maoist).

On March 7, 2017, the Gadchiroli sessions court pronounced the accused guilty of charges including unlawful activities, conspiracy, membership and support of terrorist gang under the UAPA, and criminal conspiracy under the Indian Penal Code. Five of the accused, including Saibaba, were sentenced to life in prison, the maximum punishment under these sections. Vijay Tirki was sentenced to 10 years. Twenty-three witnesses were examined, and heavy reliance was placed on the seizures made from the accused.

Sanction to prosecute under UAPA

Section 45(1) of the UAPA says no court shall take cognizance of any offence under the Act without the previous sanction of the central or state government or any officer authorised by them. Under Section 45(2), the sanction for prosecution has to be given within a prescribed time only after considering the report by the competent authority. The authority is expected to make an independent review of the evidence gathered by the investigation agency before making a recommendation to the government for the sanction.

In this case, the investigators sent the evidence to the Directorate of Prosecution for an independent review. The Directorate through its director recommended that there was a prima facie case against the accused, and hence sanction could be accorded. Based on this, the additional chief secretaries of the Home Department of Maharashtra granted sanction. The first sanction was received on February 15, 2014 against the five accused arrested in 2013. The second sanction, to prosecute Saibaba, was received on April 6, 2015.

What the High Court said on sanction

In their 101-page judgment, the Division Bench of Justices Rohit Deo and Anil Pansare refrained from dealing with the merits of the case, and instead considered the point of invalidity and absence of sanction under UAPA. The court dealt with the legislative intent of the makers of the law in inserting the requirement of a sanction to prosecute accused under UAPA.



The court noted that UAPA did not originally cover terrorist activities. Other laws, including the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA), 1987, and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), 2002, dealt with terrorism until they were repealed or allowed to lapse. Both these laws were criticised for being draconian, and the central government was sensitive to criticism. The UAPA has been amended from time to time to cover various facets of terrorism while also responding to concerns about its misuse.

The 2008 amendment to Section 45 of the UAPA specified that sanction to prosecute would be given “only” after considering the independent review of an authority appointed by the government. This ensured an “additional safeguard or filter”, the High Court said. The legislative intent was to ensure that the sanctioning authority is aided, assisted, and guided by the independent review of the evidence gathered in the course of investigation, it said.

The court also referred to then Home Minister P Chidambaram’s statement in Lok Sabha when the amendment Bill was moved in 2008. Chidambaram said that while the executive arm investigates, the evidence must be reviewed by an independent authority with a “legally trained mind”, which would act as a “clean sanction filter” for any case where the evidence did not warrant prosecution. The law was being strengthened, but safeguards too were being provided, Chidambaram had argued.

According sanction is not a “ritualistic formality”, the court said. “Sanction serves the salutary object of providing safeguard to the accused from unwarranted prosecution and the agony and trauma of trial, and in the context of the stringent provisions of the UAPA, is an integral facet of due process of law.” The report by the Directorate “was nothing more than a communication conveying the conclusion in the form of a recommendation”, and stood on the same footing as the absence of a report, it said.

The order noted that the sessions court had taken cognizance of the offence, framed charges, and examined the first witness even before the sanction in Saibaba’s case. The court rejected the prosecution’s argument that the invalidity or absence of a sanction was a “curable” defect that should not lead to an acquittal or discharge — every legislatively provided safeguard, however minuscule, must be “zealously protected”, it said.

A REPORT ON THE NORTH-EAST DELHI RIOTS

The story so far:

Two-and-half years after communal clashes rocked the streets of north-east Delhi killing 53 people and injuring hundreds, an independent fact-finding Committee has blamed the breakout of violence to a deliberate build-up of polarised hate between communities, particularly anti-Muslim hate. The report titled ‘Uncertain Justice: A Citizens Committee Report on the North-East Delhi Violence 2020’ released last week was commissioned by the Constitutional Conduct Group, a group of former civil servants, who wanted an impartial probe into the events which led to the riots.

What did the report state?

Unlike previous fact-finding reports on the February 2020 riots, the ‘Uncertain Justice’ report is authored by a former judge of the Supreme Court, three high court retired judges and a retired IAS officer. It relies heavily on legal documents including FIRs, chargesheets, and orders passed by courts. The report puts into perspective the events triggered by the amendments passed to the



citizenship law, the build-up to the violence, its trajectory, and the state's response as it unfolded. The report stated that the Muslim community was grappling with deep fears of loss of citizenship, stemming from the combined effect of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA), passed in December 2019 and the potential exclusion through the National Register of Citizens (NRC) process. Deepening their fears, a campaign of hate against anti-CAA protesters, and more broadly against Muslims, had been a steady feature in political speeches and election campaigning in the months immediately preceding the violence.

"Speeches, statements and slogans by BJP functionaries, prominently Kapil Mishra and Anurag Thakur, characterised the protesters as traitors, enemies, and violent troublemakers, within a divisive Hindu-Muslim binary," the report stated.

Was the police complicit?

The material analysed in the report demonstrates that the Delhi Police failed to prevent the violence even though there were enough warning signs since January 2020 indicating a tense build-up. "There were also instances of police complicity of varying degrees," the report said.

"Even though it can order central paramilitary forces whenever necessary, it seems the MHA (Ministry of Home Affairs) failed to ensure increased police deployment in North East Delhi during the initial phase of the violence," the Committee said adding, "This was a prime factor in the galloping spread of the violence". The Committee also found that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in Delhi did "precious little during this entire time to mediate between the communities, even with the warning signs". The Delhi government, and its popular Chief Minister, displayed an entirely ineffectual, seemingly helpless stance rather than doing all it could on the back of its emphatic mandate.

Additionally, the report states that there was a targeted application of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) by the state. A few weeks into investigating, the police applied the (UAPA), an anti-terror legislation, into one of the FIRs connected with the riots, severely restricting the avenues of the accused to get bail during the course of the trial.

The report stated that the prosecution case at its highest would be that the conspirators, in their zeal to force a repeal of the CAA, participated in various criminal acts and created a situation so imminently dangerous "leading to death and bodily injury" in a localised area. "These acts do not constitute a terrorist offence. Applying Section 15, UAPA to the present case is not merely stretching the law, but a perversion of the law," the report said.

What role did the media play?

The report squarely condemned news media for mirroring the politicians' hate narrative directed at anti-CAA protesters and Muslims, beginning from December 2019 and continuing into 2020. It said that Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube were widely used to propagate divisive Hindu-Muslim narratives and calls for violence.

What does the report aim to do?

The Constitutional Conduct Group had envisioned the report to contribute to the understanding of the riots and the after-effects. While the report has sparked discussion on these matters, it is unclear whether it can alter the course of the trials related to the riots which are currently underway.



DEBATE OVER AUDIO VVPAT SLIPS FOR VISUALLY CHALLENGED

A petition admitted by the Supreme Court last month that called for the introduction of technology to allow visually challenged voters to verify their votes has set off a debate, with some disability rights activists raising concerns over the practical issues that may crop up.

On September 23, the court admitted the petition filed by Mumbai-based activist Akshay Bajad that suggested that image text to speech (ITTS) conversion software be added to the electronic voting machines (EVM) and voter verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) units used for elections. The court ordered notices to be sent to the respondents, the Election Commission (EC) and the Law Ministry, to be replied by October 21.

Dr. Bajad, an ayurvedic doctor, said he had decided to file the petition as there had been no progress after writing to both. In an RTI Act reply to him on July 4 about the status of his representations, the EC said they were “still under consideration”.

The petition sought directions to the EC and the Ministry to embed ITTS software into EVMs “so as to ensure that voters with sight disability can exercise their right to vote in an autonomous and independent manner with the means of verification of the vote cast by them”.

Mr. Bajad submitted in an annexure to the petition that the ITTS device could be automated to activate itself once the voter casts the vote and the VVPAT prints the slip. This, he said, could be done by having a camera that senses the motion of the paper trail and then activates the optical character recognition (OCR), which is the conversion of images of text into machine-encoded text. The text would then be converted to speech that could be heard by the voter through headphones, he suggested.

Santosh Kumar Rungta, the general secretary of the National Federation of the Blind, said though the idea was “noble”, there were some “practical concerns”, including issues with the text-to-speech conversion software.

“There should be intensive analysis of any technology being proposed. The introduction of such technology should not mean that blind voters cannot take an escort along with them, as we do right now,” he said.

WHY HAS THE ELECTION COMMISSION FROZEN THE SHIV SENA’S SYMBOL?

In an interim order passed late on Saturday (October 8) evening, the Election Commission of India (ECI) froze the well known ‘bow and arrow’ election symbol of the Shiv Sena until the competing claims for recognition by the two rival factions is decided.

In the operative part of its order, the ECI said that (a) “neither of the two groups led by Sh. Eknathrao Sambhaji Shinde (Petitioner) and other led by Sh. Uddhav Thackeray (Respondent) [shall] be permitted to use the name of the party ‘Shivsena’ simplicitor”; (b) “neither...group shall...be permitted to use the symbol ‘Bow & Arrow’, reserved for ‘Shivsena’”; and (c) “both...groups shall be known by such names as they may choose”.

This had been done “in order to place both the rival groups on even keel and to protect their rights and interests, and going by the past precedence,...to cover the purpose of the current Bye-elections and to continue till the final determination of the dispute in the matter...”, the ECI said.



“For the purposes of the current bye-elections”, the order said, the two groups “shall...be allotted such different symbols as they may choose from the list of free symbols...”.

The by-election to the Andheri East Assembly seat will be held on November 3. The Shinde faction had moved the ECI in an attempt to deny the Uddhav Thackeray faction the use of the ‘bow and arrow’ symbol in the bypoll.

Is all of this unusual?

When a prominent party splits, a tussle often ensues for its election symbol, which is frequently the embodiment of its very identity, and its fundamental connection with voters. Indeed, Indian voters are commonly heard saying that they would vote “kamal ka pool” or “panja” or “jhadu” while indicating their preference for the BJP, Congress, or Aam Aadmi Party, as the case may be.

The last time the ECI took a similar decision was in October 2021, when it froze the ‘Bungalow’ election symbol of the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP). Like in the case of the Shiv Sena, the intention on that occasion was to ensure that neither of the two factions of the LJP — led by Chirag Paswan, son of the late Ram Vilas Paswan, and Pashupati Kumar Paras, the senior Paswan’s brother — could use it in the Assembly byelections for the Kusheshwar Asthan and Tarapur seats in Bihar, which were scheduled for October 30 that year.

The LJP had split in June 2021.

Before that, tussles over the election symbol had been witnessed in 2017 after the Samajwadi Party (Cycle) and the AIADMK (Two leaves) split.

How does the ECI decide who gets the symbol?

Para 15 of the Symbols Order, 1968 — which has been cited by the ECI in the case of the Shiv Sena — states: “When the Commission is satisfied... that there are rival sections or groups of a recognised political party each of whom claims to be that party the Commission may, after taking into account all the available facts and circumstances of the case and hearing (their) representatives... and other persons as desire to be heard decide that one such rival section or group or none of such rival sections or groups is that recognised political party and the decision of the Commission shall be binding on all such rival sections or groups.”

This applies to disputes in recognised national and state parties (like the Shiv Sena or LJP). For splits in registered but unrecognised parties, the ECI usually advises the warring factions to resolve their differences internally or to approach the court.

But what happened in such cases before 1968?

Before 1968, the EC issued notifications and executive orders under the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961. The most high-profile split of a party before 1968 was that of the CPI in 1964. A breakaway group approached the ECI in December 1964 urging it to recognise them as CPI(Marxist). They provided a list of MPs and MLAs of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and West Bengal who supported them.

The ECI recognised the faction as CPI(M) after it found that the votes secured by the MPs and MLAs supporting the breakaway group added up to more than 4% in the 3 states.

And what was the first case decided under the 1968 Order?

It was the first split in the Indian National Congress in 1969.



Indira Gandhi's tensions with a rival group within the party came to a head with the death of President Dr Zakir Hussain on May 3, 1969. The Congress old guard, led by K Kamaraj, Neelam Sanjiva Reddy, S Nijalingappa and Atulya Ghosh, known as the Syndicate, nominated Reddy for the post. Indira, who was the Prime Minister, encouraged Vice-President VV Giri to contest as an Independent, and called for a "conscience vote" in defiance of the whip issued by party president Nijalingappa.

After Giri won, Indira was expelled from the Congress, and the party split into the "old" Congress (O) led by Nijalingappa and the "new" Congress (J) led by Indira.

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

Is there a way other than the test of majority to resolve a symbol dispute?

In almost all disputes decided by the EC so far, a clear majority of party delegates/office bearers, MPs and MLAs have supported one of the factions. In the case of the Shiv Sena, the majority of the party's elected representatives have switched over to Shinde's side.

Whenever the EC could not test the strength of rival groups based on support within the party organisation (because of disputes regarding the list of office bearers), it fell back on testing the majority only among elected MPs and MLAs.

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

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

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

This principle was followed up to 1997. However, things changed when the Commission dealt with the cases of splits in the Congress, Janata Dal, etc. — disputes which led to the creation of Sukh Ram and Anil Sharma's Himachal Vikas Congress, Nipamacha Singh's Manipur State Congress, Mamata Banerjee's West Bengal Trinamool Congress, Lalu Prasad's RJD, Naveen Patnaik's Biju Janata Dal, etc.

The EC in 1997 did not recognise the new parties as either state or national parties. It felt that merely having MPs and MLAs is not enough, as the elected representatives had fought and won polls on tickets of their parent (undivided) parties.

The EC introduced a new rule under which the splinter group of the party — other than the group that got the party symbol — had to register itself as a separate party, and could lay claim to national or state party status only on the basis of its performance in state or central elections after registration.



A TIT-FOR-TAT CORRUPTION BATTLE

Congress's 'PayCM' campaign was a big talking point in Karnataka last month, with posters of Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai's image superimposed on what resembled a QR code of PayTM pasted on city walls. As the campaign, aimed at highlighting corruption allegations against the BJP government, gained traction online too, the Karnataka unit of the BJP released a counter-poster and a 28-page booklet targeting the Leader of the Opposition, Siddaramaiah. The poster had a caricature of the former Chief Minister with 16 arms, each depicting an alleged scam during Congress rule (2013-2018). In parallel, Karnataka's legislature session ended amid vociferous protests by the Congress on being denied time to debate the "40% commission" allegation that was first raised by the Karnataka Contractors' Association with the Prime Minister's Office, accusing bureaucrats and people's representatives of fixing "exorbitant rates" for award of tenders and clearing of bills.

The State BJP's response to the PayCM campaign pretty much sums up the tenor of the present government's response to all allegations of corruption and maladministration levelled against it. Far louder than the denial of charges has been the counter-charges by the ruling regime, which has gone to great lengths to show that the Opposition party was no better or worse when in power.

The government put on public display this strategy first during Jana Spandana, an event held to mark the BJP government's third anniversary in office on September 10. At the function, Mr. Bommai announced that his government would expose every scandal of the Siddaramaiah-led Congress regime. Even though this was ostensibly an event to display the BJP government's "achievements", the dominant narrative was one of pulling skeletons out of the Congress's cupboard.

Mr. Bommai has stuck to his word on this count. For instance, when the Opposition raised the issue of an alleged scam in the recruitment of police sub-inspectors and demanded a judicial probe, the BJP resurrected an alleged scam in teachers' recruitment that dates back to Mr. Siddaramaiah's time and ordered a CID probe. Similarly, when heavy rains and flooding of Bengaluru's IT corridor drew widespread attention, the government was at pains to state that encroachments were aplenty during the previous regimes. In the Assembly, Revenue Minister R. Ashok stated that 42 lakes had disappeared in Bengaluru since 1963, dwelling at length on encroachments during previous regimes, even as the Opposition cried foul over this "diversionary" tactic to "hide present failures". The BJP clearly hopes to dent the Congress's attack on the corruption front by matching every allegation with a counter-allegation dating back to Congress rule from 2013 to 2018.

On his Bharat Jodo Yatra, currently passing through Karnataka, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has been highlighting corruption as one of the issues with the present regime. Back in 2018, during election rallies, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had described the Congress government as "10% sarkar", referring to the "system" of commissions and cuts, and promising cleaner governance.

Much water has flown under the bridge in Karnataka since then. A Congress-JD(S) coalition stitched together post-polls fell after the infamous 'Operation Kamala' resulted in 17 defections to the BJP, amid allegations of MLAs being "bought over" by the saffron party. A year ago, the BJP changed its Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa amid another string of corruption allegations and installed Mr. Bommai, but this has not resulted in the image makeover that it had hoped for.



With another election slated in mid-2023 and the poll fever already high, the moot question is whether the BJP can achieve its ambitious target of winning 150 seats by exposing corruption of the previous regime alone or whether it will have to have something to show as its own achievement. BJP leaders, led by Mr. Bommali and Mr. Yediyurappa, embarked on a three-month State tour from October 11 as part of poll preparations. It remains to be seen if the same strategy will continue.

Behind all this hides a more important and sinister question: If corruption is an equaliser, what makes the BJP a “party with a difference”? In a State that has seen a sharp rise in communal divisions and violence over the last year, it is not a hard answer to seek.

UNFILLED VACANCIES, STAGNANT WORKFORCE DELAY RTI REPLIES

Data show that the number of information officers and first appellate authorities in the Central government has remained stagnant in the last few years. In contrast, the new Right to Information (RTI) applications filed as well as pending applications are increasing every year. Worryingly, the Central Information Commission and State Information Commissions, the final recourse in matters concerning RTI, also face manpower shortage. As a result, appeals and complaints are piling up.

The RTI Act is implemented using a three-level structure. At the first level is the Central Assistant Public Information Officer/Central Public Information Officer (CAPIO/CPIO). Once an RTI query reaches the CAPIO/CPIO, they are expected to reply within 30 days. If the reply is not satisfactory or does not arrive on time, a first appeal can be made to the First Appellate Authority (FAA). If the FAA does not answer or if its answer is not satisfactory, the Central Information and State Information Commissions can be approached.

A report released in October by the Satark Nagrik Sangathan, titled ‘Report Card on the Performance of Information Commissions in India, 2021-22’, states that the number of appeals and complaints pending before the Central and State Information Commissions as of June 30, 2022 was 3,14,323. The figure is based on data gathered from 26 Information Commissions obtained through 145 RTI applications. There is increase in the number of pending appeals and complaints from 2.18 lakh to 3.14 lakh in the last three years.

The State-wise backlogs in the 26 Information Commissions and the Central Information Commission as of June 30, 2022 shows that Maharashtra leads the list with nearly 1 lakh appeals and complaints pending followed by Uttar Pradesh (44,482) and Karnataka (30,358). Data were not available for Tamil Nadu’s State Information Commission. The Commissions in Jharkhand and Tripura were defunct.

Using the backlog data and the monthly disposal rate, the Satark Nagrik Sangathan calculated the time it would take for an appeal/complaint filed on July 1, 2022 to be disposed of by the Central and State Information Commissions. The Sangathan assumed that appeals and complaints would be disposed of in a chronological order. The chart shows that it would take the West Bengal State Information Commission 24 years and 3 months to dispose of a complaint filed on July 1, 2022. A similar analysis in Odisha and Maharashtra showed that it would take five years. Only Meghalaya and Mizoram showed no waiting time. Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand and Tripura could not be plotted for reasons mentioned above.



So, while the number of new and pending RTIs is rising at a rapid pace, the number of officers required to answer them has remained stagnant.

CLEAN SWIPE FOR MGNREGS ATTENDANCE APP ONLY IN 8 STATES

Five months after the Union government's order making it mandatory to record attendance of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) workers through a government mobile application, National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS), at work sites where 20 or more people are employed, at least three States — Tamil Nadu, Odisha and Assam — are pushing for making it universal, though a majority of the States still have concerns about it.

September data put out by the Union Rural Development Ministry show only eight States have recorded usage of the app at 90% or more worksites. They are Assam (93.42%), Odisha (92%), Tamil Nadu (93%), Karnataka (92%), Kerala (91.5%), Tripura (91%), Uttarakhand (91%) and Puducherry (99%). In Puducherry, though the usage is high, the number of worksites in September was just 774.

"We have listened to complaints and made several tweaks to make it easier for the end user. One big change is allowing offline use of the app. The mates can record the attendance even if there is no Internet connectivity and it will get uploaded whenever they reach a place which has the necessary signal strength," the official said. The official further added that based on complaints, the app and procedures were constantly evolving.

Many shortcomings

There are still a host of shortcomings for which the worker ends up paying the penalty. The data from the Ministry reveal that in nine States and Union Territories, the usage of the app is 50% or less. These States are Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Goa, Nagaland, Andaman and Nicobar and Jammu and Kashmir. In case of Goa and Nagaland, the usage is zero.

Andhra Pradesh, which has one of the largest MGNREGS workforce, used the NMMS app for recording attendance in September only in 21.48% of over 92,000 work sites. In August, this number was at 9.56%. In Uttar Pradesh, another State which receives a significant percentage of total MGNREGS national funds, in September, out of 1.3 lakh work sites, only in 50.19% the muster roll was filled via the app. The September numbers are marginally better than August's 48.31%.

In the States which have been reporting high usage too, many workers end up suffering wage losses due to technical glitches. Nikhil Shenoy, divisional secretary, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, Jodhpur, Rajasthan has an illustrative example. Rajasthan has reported an 86.75% rate of usage of the app. "We tallied the physical muster rolls with the digital one captured by the NMMS app for 14 gram panchayats in Dungepur district of Rajasthan for the month of September. Our analysis shows that 302 labour days are missing from the attendance records in the app. It is well and good that the government wants to bring in more transparency via the app. Why should the workers have to pay the penalty. For them, loss of wages even for one day could be catastrophic," he said.

Another example is Bihar, where a sharp dip was reported in app usage from 75.15% in August to 54.26% in September.



FOR YOUNG LOVERS, A HARROWING SEARCH FOR SAFE HOUSES

With their homes barely a kilometre apart in Garhwa district of Jharkhand, Renu knew her family would never approve of the match. The couple decided to run away and tie the knot in another State. And thus began their tale of unending harassment and tragedy.

The couple married at a temple in Dehradun and got their marriage registered there. They had just about settled down at Paonta Sahib in Himachal Pradesh when, in a midnight raid, the Uttar Pradesh Police took away Renu, claiming that she had been abducted. Amit and Renu have not seen or spoken to each other since that fateful night of August 13, 2021.

Amit's life has been a quagmire of legal battles and dismissed habeas corpus petitions since then. "I fear my wife is no more," he told The Hindu.

Activists say such tragic situations can be avoided if couples like Amit and Renu are provided safe houses and special protection by the State governments as mandated by the Supreme Court.

According to data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the number of "honour killings" in the country was 24, 25 and 33 in 2019, 2020 and 2021, respectively. Punjab, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand topped the list in 2021 and 2020, and Manipur in 2019.

The government in 2021 informed Parliament that there were 145 "honour killing" incidents in the country between 2017 and 2019.

Interestingly, though the NCRB report attributed only 25 deaths to "honour killings" in 2020, it said there were 27 deaths due to casteism and 1,558 due to "illicit relationship". Similarly, in 2021, 33 deaths were listed under "honour killings", but 1,544 and 1,532 under "illicit relationship" and "love affairs", respectively. So far, only Delhi, Haryana and Punjab have safe houses for inter-faith and inter-religious couples. Kerala has only announced the setting up of a safe house.

The Supreme Court had in 2018 directed that safe houses be set up in every district as well as a special cell in States for couples facing opposition from families and community.

An example is of Ravikant Chandrawanshi and Alisha, who had a harrowing time getting married under the Special Marriage Act in Chhattisgarh.

The inter-faith couple at first decided to elope and marry in Bilaspur. However, a lack of support system and security saw them return home in Kawardha within four days.

"As my wife's family were well to do and politically connected, they kept up the pressure on us. Finally, we approached the High Court asking them to direct the State administration to provide the mandated safe house and police protection," Mr. Chandrawanshi said.

"We were informed that there was no safe house and Alisha had to go to a sakhi centre or a women's safe house," he added.

According to Asif Iqbal of Dhanak for Humanity, most States send the girl to a Nari Niketan after couples approach them. "It is here that a girl's family mostly approaches her and puts pressure to go back. Many a time, this also leads to what is known as honour killing of the girl."

Mr. Iqbal, whose organisation has helped couples seek legal recourse to get married, said that of the distress calls he receives, the most were from Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan.



OPEN NETWORK FOR DIGITAL COMMERCE BETA TESTING LIKELY IN DELHI: HOW DOES THE SYSTEM WORK?

The Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC), which is a government-backed project aimed at enabling small merchants and mom-and-pop stores in parts of the country to access processes and technologies that are typically deployed by large e-commerce platforms such as Amazon and Flipkart, is expected to extend beta testing in Delhi after having commenced services in Bengaluru.

What is ONDC?

It is an initiative aimed at promoting open networks for all aspects of exchange of goods and services over digital or electronic networks. ONDC is to be based on open-sourced methodology, using open specifications and open network protocols independent of any specific platform. It is being developed as a counter to the current stranglehold of two big players in the Indian e-commerce market, which is largely dictated by Amazon and Walmart-owned Flipkart. In May this year, the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) went live with a test run of ONDC in cities like Delhi-NCR, Bengaluru, Coimbatore, Bhopal, and Shillong where it plans to onboard 150 sellers. On September 30, the services launched across 16 pin codes in Bengaluru.

What are the plans for Delhi?

According to reports, ONDC is expected to expand beta testing into areas with strong delivery and logistics footprint of its network participants, as well as the capacities of these logistics players that can be deployed. Further, the segments to be launched initially are expected to be electronics, home decoration and fashion.

How does ONDC work?

The ONDC platform lies in the middle of the interfaces hosting the buyers and the sellers. So far, the buyer side interface is being hosted by Paytm, whereas the seller side interface is being hosted by other players like GoFrugal, etc. When a buyer searches for an item on the Paytm app, from where ONDC has gone live, the app will connect to the ONDC platform, which will connect it to seller side interfaces that will list all the companies from where you can buy the particular item. On ONDC, there will be several other backend partners such as logistics service providers, enterprise resource planners, e-commerce store hosting service providers, etc.

What are the challenges ONDC aims to address?

An ONDC strategy paper published earlier this year has flagged the rising dominance of global players in India's e-commerce ecosystem, pointing out that the large quantum of investment required to build competitors to the integrated solutions offered by the big players has become an entry barrier for digital marketplaces. It also flagged the inability of marketplace sellers to move out of the platform ecosystem, given that the value created by these small players is stored with the larger platforms. With this in mind, ONDC aims to transform the marketplace ecosystem from an operator-driven platform-centric model to a facilitator-driven interoperable decentralised network. News reports also pegged that the Bengaluru launch only saw 600 orders between ONDC launch on September 30 and October 6. Industry players also point to multiple gaps in the arrangement, including clarity over data handling, end to end linkages and supplier liability.



THE ONLINE GAMING MARKET IN INDIA, AND PROPOSED RULES TO REGULATE IT

An inter-ministerial task force, set up by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) to propose contours of a national-level legislation to regulate online gaming, has proposed the creation of a central regulatory body for the sector, clearly defining what games of skill and chance are, and bringing online gaming under the purview of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, among other things.

The task force, set up by MeitY in May 2022, included the CEO of government think tank Niti Aayog, and secretaries of ministries including IT, Home, Finance, Information and Broadcasting, and Consumer Affairs, among others. The task force is understood to have prepared a final report of its recommendations and submitted it to the IT Ministry.

Why a central-level law?

Online gaming so far has been a state subject, but state governments have said they find it extremely difficult to enforce certain rules like geo-blocking certain apps or websites within the territory of their state. Also, there is a concern that rules passed in one state are not applicable in another, which has caused inconsistency in how the online gaming industry is regulated in the country. State governments also do not have enough blocking powers like the Centre to issue blocking orders for offshore betting sites.

Stakeholders have highlighted a number of societal concerns that can arise from the proliferation of online games in the country. There have been a number of reported incidents of people losing large sums of money on online games, leading to suicides in various parts of the country. Along with that, there is currently no regulatory framework to govern various aspects of online gaming companies such as having a grievance redressal mechanism, implementing player protection measures, protection of data and intellectual property rights, and prohibiting misleading advertisements.

For online gaming businesses, the inconsistency has led to uncertainty. The thinking within the government is to have a nodal agency that will address all issues related to online gaming, including introducing a uniform law to determine what forms of online gaming are legally allowed.

How big is the online gaming market in India?

The revenue of the Indian mobile gaming industry is expected to exceed \$1.5 billion in 2022, and is estimated to reach \$5 billion in 2025. The industry in the country grew at a CAGR of 38% between 2017-2020, as opposed to 8% in China and 10% in the US. It is expected to grow at a CAGR of 15% to reach Rs 153 billion in revenue by 2024. India's percentage of new paying users (NPU) in gaming has been the fastest growing in the world for two consecutive years, at 40% in 2020 and reaching 50% in 2021.

According to a report by EY and FICCI, transaction-based games' revenues grew 26% in India, with the number of paying gamers increasing by 17% from 80 million in 2020 to 95 million in 2021.

What are the recommendations of the task force?

According to a source aware of the task force's report, a central-level law for online gaming should apply to real money and free games of skill, including e-sports, online fantasy sports contests, and card games among others. Casual games with no real money element in the form of stakes may be



kept outside the scope of such rules, unless they have a high number of users in India, or permit the publication or transmission of information in the nature of any inappropriate content like violence, nudity, addictive content or misleading content.

It has also recommended creating a regulatory body for the online gaming industry, which will determine what qualifies as a game of skill or chance, and accordingly certify different gaming formats, seek compliance and enforcement.

A three-tier dispute resolution mechanism, similar to that prescribed under the Information Technology Rules, 2021 for online streaming services, consisting of a grievance redressal system at the gaming platform level, self regulatory body of the industry, and an oversight committee led by the government should be put in place for online gaming.

Any online gaming platform – domestic or foreign– offering real money online games to Indian users will need to be a legal entity incorporated under Indian law. These platforms will also be treated as ‘reporting entities’ under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, and will be required to report suspicious transactions to the Financial Intelligence Unit-India.

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Which ministry will be in charge of the regulation?

The task force has suggested that MeitY may act as the nodal ministry to regulate online gaming, except for the e-sports category on which the Department of Sports can take the lead. The scope of the regulation by MeitY should only cover online gaming, that is, games of skill, and the issues of online betting and gambling being games of chance in nature should be excluded from its scope, the task force is learnt to have recommended.

Certain other aspects of online gaming such as advertisements, code of ethics relating to content classifications etc. could be regulated by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, while the Consumer Affairs Ministry can regulate the sector for unfair trade practices.

What did the task force say about offshore betting apps?

On the aspect of prohibiting games of chance, gambling websites or apps being played online, the proposed Digital India Act can include it in the list of prohibited user harms that will not be permitted, the task force has said.

“Many offshore betting and gambling websites which are illegal in India have become popular among Indian users. Despite being based outside India, some of these websites are widely advertised in Indian newspapers and TV channels, and allow users to transact in Indian rupees through popular digital payment modes such as internet banking, UPI and popular wallets,” the task force is learnt to have said in its report.

Last month, The Indian Express had reported that betting websites such as 1xBet and FairPlay had placed surrogate advertisements on streaming services during the Asia Cup and the US Open.

VLC SITE BAN: DATA TRANSFERS TO SERVERS IN ‘HOSTILE COUNTRY’

Earlier this month, VideoLan had sent a legal notice to MeitY and the Department of Telecommunications (DoT), seeking to know the reasons for which the site had been blocked in India, and demanding a copy of the blocking order issued for blocking its URL.



The Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) ordered the blocking of the website of VLC Media Player after it found that the site was communicating with servers of a previously banned app by the ministry which was transferring sensitive personal data of Indians to a “hostile country,” The Indian Express has learnt.

The request to block the website of VideoLAN, the non-profit that operates VLC Media Player, was sent by the Home Ministry.

VideoLan’s URL, videolan.org, from where the VLC Media Player software could be downloaded, was blocked in the country under Section 69(A) of the Information Technology Act sometime in February. However, the VLC Media Player software is available for download on Google and Apple’s app stores.

Earlier this month, VideoLan had sent a legal notice to MeitY and the Department of Telecommunications (DoT), seeking to know the reasons for which the site had been blocked in India, and demanding a copy of the blocking order issued for blocking its URL.

MeitY is learnt to have prepared an internal note in response to the legal notice – which VideoLan had issued with assistance from the Delhi-based digital rights group Internet Freedom Foundation – and is in the process of sharing it with VideoLan.

According to a source familiar with the contents of the ministry’s note, VideoLan’s website was “communicating” with an app called Onmyoji Arena and the data collected by the site was transferred through this app to a “hostile country”. A separate technical evaluation committee has also confirmed this fact, the note is understood to have mentioned. The app in question here, Onmyoji Arena, was one of the 54 apps that MeitY had ordered to block in February for alleged Chinese-links and for posing a national security risk to India.

The ministry is also said to have relied on various “open source threat intelligence reports” to conclude that VLC Media Player was used by a China-backed hacking group called ‘Cicada’ for carrying out cyber attacks. These threat intelligence reports also purportedly revealed a malicious campaign from hackers associated with the Chinese government who were using VLC Media Player to “launch a custom malware loader”. In cybersecurity parlance, a loader is essentially a malicious code used for communication between the attacker and the compromised system.

However, it is worth noting that the various threat intelligence reports that MeitY is learnt to have mentioned in its note are from between April and August this year, whereas the VideoLan website was banned before that time period, in February. As such, VideoLan is not a China-based entity, but is headquartered in France.

Queries sent to MeitY and VideoLan remained unanswered until publication.

In its legal notice, issued on October 4, Jean-Baptiste Kempf, the president and lead VLC developer of VideoLan had expressed shock at the blocking of the website despite the “Government of India itself endorsing the use of VLC as a part of its Digital India initiative”.

“By blocking the URL, your offices are in violation of international obligations to protect free speech in India. This incident also affects the fundamental rights of all Indian users of VLC who have the right to receive the information freely available on the URL,” VideoLan’s legal notice had said.



ISRO'S OWN NEXT-GEN LAUNCH VEHICLE MAY ASSUME PSLV'S ROLE

PSLV, often dubbed the 'trusted workhorse', "will have to retire" one day, Mr. Somanath said during a three-day Engineers Conclave 2022, which opened at the Liquid Propulsion Systems Centre, Valiyamala, on Thursday.

In NGLV, ISRO is understood to be looking at a cost-efficient, three-stage, reusable heavy-lift vehicle with a payload capability of 10 tonnes to Geostationary Transfer Orbit. NGLV will feature semi-cryogenic propulsion for the booster stages which is cheaper and efficient, he said.

"We believe at least 10 tonne capability to GTO is needed. Correspondingly, the Low Earth Orbit (LEO) capability will be twice that. However, payload capability will be lower when the rocket is reusable," he said.

Simple, robust design

NGLV will feature a simple, robust design that allows bulk manufacturing, modularity in systems, sub-systems and stages and minimal turnaround time.

Potential uses will be in the areas of launching communication satellites, deep space missions, future human spaceflight and cargo missions. On PSLV's future, Mr. Somanath said it will be operated as long as there is a commercial demand for it.

"The technologies, the manufacturing and cost associated with the systems, all go through changes. Same is the case with the Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV). But GSLV Mk-III (LVM3) is just a few years old. If you look at launch vehicles, technology induction at the appropriate time is essential," he said.

Mr. Somanath said it is also important to develop a "business model" for NGLV so that it serves its aims. This will include launching commercial satellites and national missions as well as ensuring industry participation from the start. "With the backing of ISRO's knowledge, it is possible for industries to support and create this rocket as a national asset," he said.

NUCLEAR-POWERED INS ARIHANT CARRIES OUT SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH OF SLBM

INDIA'S STRATEGIC Strike Nuclear Submarine INS Arihant on Friday carried out a successful launch of a Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM). The Ministry of Defence has said that the test is significant for the SSBN programme, which is a crucial element of India's nuclear deterrence capability.

"The missile was tested to a predetermined range and impacted the target area in the Bay of Bengal with very high accuracy. All operational and technological parameters of the weapon system have been validated." the MoD said in a press statement on Friday. The Ministry has described the launch as a user training launch.

"The successful user training launch of the SLBM by INS Arihant is significant to prove crew competency and validate the SSBN programme, a key element of India's nuclear deterrence capability. A robust, survivable and assured retaliatory capability is in keeping with India's policy to have 'Credible Minimum Deterrence' that underpins its 'No First Use' commitment." the Ministry added. The statement did not specify the exact specifications and range of the missile



that was launched on Friday. While some sources hinted that the missile tested on Friday could have been the K-15 also called Sagarika, there was no official confirmation on it.

Commissioned in 2016, INS Arihant is India's nuclear powered ballistic missile capable submarine, classified under the SSBN programme. SSBN is a hull classification symbol for nuclear powered ballistic missile carrying submarines. The operations of the SLBM from the SSBN are under purview of India's Strategic Forces Command, which is part of India's Nuclear Command Authority.

Officials said that the capability of being able to launch nuclear weapons from submarines has a great strategic importance in the context of achieving a nuclear triad, especially in the light of the 'no first use' policy of India. The sea based underwater nuclear capable assets significantly increases the second strike capability of a country and thus boosts its nuclear deterrence. These submarines can not only survive a first strike by the adversary but also can launch a strike in retaliation thus achieving Credible Nuclear Deterrence.

The family of indigenously developed Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), sometimes referred to as K family missiles, are codenamed after Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, the centre figure in India's missile and space programmes who also served as the 11th President of India.

Under the SLBM family, missiles of various ranges have been developed including K-15 also called B-05 or Sagarika, which has a range of at least 750 kilometers. India has also developed and tested the K-4 missiles from the same family which has a range of 3500 kilometers. Both K-4 and K-15 have been designed to be operated from Arihant class of submarines.

It is said that more members of K-family with higher ranges are also on cards. INS Arihant, which is a 6000 tonne submarine with a length of 110 metres and a breadth of 11 metres, can carry a dozen canisterised Sagarika missiles on board.

Launched in 2009, INS Arihant was commissioned in 2016. The next in the class, INS Arighat is reported to have been launched in 2017 and said to be undergoing sea trials at present. In December last year, UK-based Janes Defence Weekly reported, citing satellite imagery sources, that India had launched its third Arihant class submarine.

In November 2018, after INS Arihant became fully operational, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had tweeted, "In an era such as this, a credible nuclear deterrence is the need of the hour. The success of INS Arihant gives a fitting response to those who indulge in nuclear blackmail." MoD statement after Friday's test stressed on the strategic postures of 'credible minimum deterrence' and 'No First Use' which are pivotal to India's nuclear doctrine, first published in 2003.

The pointers from the doctrine are: Building and maintaining a credible minimum deterrent. Posture of 'No First Use', meaning nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere. The nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to 'inflict unacceptable damage.'

The doctrine also states that the nuclear retaliatory attacks can only be authorised by the civilian political leadership through the Nuclear Command Authority. While India maintains the 'Non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states' the doctrine states that 'in the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces anywhere, by biological or chemical weapons, India will retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons.'



CENTRE TO HELP SET UP PADDY STRAW PELLET UNITS TO ARREST STUBBLE BURNING

With winter approaching and instances of stubble burning in Punjab and Haryana rising, the Union Environment Ministry announced a ₹50 crore scheme on Thursday to incentivise industrialists and entrepreneurs to set up paddy straw pelletisation and torrefaction plants.

Paddy straw made into pellets or torrefied can be mixed with coal in thermal power plants. This saves coal as well as reduces carbon emissions that would otherwise have been emitted were the straw burnt in the fields, as is the regular practice of most farmers in Punjab and Haryana.

New units set up after Thursday would be eligible for government funding in the form of capital to set up such plants. The estimated cost of setting up a regular pelletisation plant, which can process a tonne per hour, is ₹35 lakh. Under the scheme, the Centre will fund such plants to a maximum of ₹70 lakh subject to capacity.

Similarly, the cost of establishing a torrefaction plant is ₹70 lakh. Under the scheme, it is eligible for a maximum funding of ₹1.4 crore. Torrefaction is costlier but can deliver a product whose energy content is much higher and theoretically substitute for more coal in a power plant.

One-time measure

The Centre has underlined that this would be a “one-time only” scheme and regular pellet plants would be eligible for ₹40 crore of the overall pie.

Every year, about 27 million tonne of paddy straw is generated in Punjab and Haryana. The problem is that about 75% or 20 million tonne is from non-basmati rice that cannot be fed to cattle because of its high silica content. “About 11 million tonne can be managed in the field and the rest is usually burnt which adds to the air pollution crisis in Delhi,” said MM Kutty, Chairman, Commission Air Quality Management (CAQM), at an event here to announce the scheme.

Through the years the government has attempted to dissuade farmers from burning straw through penalising them as well as incentivising them.

“The Environment Ministry has so far been seen as an organisation that stops everyone. But I’d like to congratulate the Central Pollution Control Board for devising this scheme that will help convert waste to wealth and provide job opportunities to our rural youth in Punjab and Haryana,” said Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav.

THE ACTION PLAN AGAINST DELHI’S AIR POLLUTION

The story so far:

A revised action plan to fight the serious challenge of air pollution in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) has come into force after a sudden dip in air quality in the capital and its neighbouring areas. On October 6, the first stage of the revised Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) was implemented.

How did GRAP come into being?

To deal with the multi-faceted risks linked to air pollution, the Central Pollution Control Board submitted a list of measures to address different levels of air pollution to the Supreme Court in January 2016. These measures coalesced into GRAP — a set of anti-air pollution measures which

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



are to be followed in Delhi and its vicinity according to the severity of the situation. The GRAP was approved by the SC after modifications and notified by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change on January 12, 2017.

With multiple State and central bodies working on the problem, a need was felt to consolidate resources to efficiently tackle the problem of toxic air. The Centre thus set up the Commission for Air Quality Management in National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas. This powerful body, which coordinates with other States to plan and execute strategies to prevent and control air pollution in the NCR, has been enforcing GRAP since 2021.

Have anti-pollution policies changed?

Under the revised action plan, restrictions on polluting activities will be dependent on Air Quality Index (AQI) rather than PM2.5 and PM10 concentration. As per experts, the “finer” version of GRAP could prevent the air quality crisis in Delhi-NCR after Diwali. “Stubble burning peaks in November and Diwali is on October 24. This is a crucial factor. So, it may not lead to a severe situation on Diwali provided all other measures are followed strictly...The government has provided more machines for the management of stubble this year. We hope for better results,” Dr. Mahesh Narang, the head of the farm engineering department at Punjab Agricultural University told PTI.

How will the action plan function?

The GRAP for Delhi-NCR is divided into four stages of air quality — Stage one for “poor” AQI ranging between 201 and 300, Stage two for “very poor” AQI of 301-400, Stage three for “severe” AQI of 401-450 and Stage four for “severe plus” AQI more than 450.

In stage one, a ban on construction and demolition activities at specific sites will be implemented. Also, agencies should ensure that all solid waste is lifted from dedicated dump sites, and none is dumped on open land. Heavy fines are to be imposed for openly burning municipal solid waste and biomass. Roads will be mechanically cleaned and water sprinkled from time to time. The ban on firecrackers should be followed as per the directions of respective courts. In stage two, mechanised sweeping of roads will be done daily, while water will be sprinkled using dust suppressants at least on alternate days. Authorities would need to ensure an uninterrupted power supply to discourage the use of generators.

At stage three, the frequency of cleaning roads intensifies. Water would be sprinkled daily before peak traffic hours. Authorities will levy different rates on public transport services to encourage off-peak travel. A strict ban will be enforced on all construction activities, except ongoing construction of railway, metro, airport and hospital projects. The State government will be empowered to impose restrictions on BS-III petrol and BS-IV diesel light motor vehicles (LMVs).

During stage four, when the air quality rises to dangerous levels, entry of all trucks, except those carrying essential commodities, will be restricted. Four-wheeler diesel LMVs would also be banned except those used for essential or emergency services. All construction and demolition activities would have to be stopped. The respective governments could, meanwhile, take a call on allowing public, municipal and private offices to work on 50% strength. Additional emergency measures like closing schools, non-emergency commercial activities and plying of vehicles on an odd-even basis may also be enforced.



Do citizens have a role?

Along with instructions for authorities, the GRAP also includes a graded advisory for the public. The measures include properly tuning engines of their vehicles, ensuring accurate air pressure in tyres and updating PUC (pollution under control) certificates.

NO TIME FOR PLACEBO

India's apex drug regulator, the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), has barred Haryana-based Maiden Pharmaceuticals Limited from manufacturing medicinal drugs. This was after some of the cold-and-cough syrup it manufactured and exported to The Gambia were marked out by the World Health Organization (WHO) as being linked to the deaths of 66 children there. The concoctions were apparently contaminated with diethylene glycol (DEG) and ethylene glycol that may have caused acute kidney failure. The Indian government has said that a full report from WHO, establishing a clear, causal link is awaited. The Union Health Ministry has constituted a technical committee to advise the Government on its future course of action against the company. The provisions of India's Drugs and Cosmetics Act, in theory, come down heavily on manufacturers for making adulterated drugs, and on gross violations of prescribed manufacturing practices with imprisonment up to 10 years and fines up to ₹10 lakh. These provisions have been rarely executed despite multiple instances of DEG poisoning in India. In 2020, cough syrup made by the Himachal Pradesh-based Digital Vision killed 13 children in Jammu and Himachal Pradesh; tests showed the presence of DEG. Other inspections by regulatory bodies found that Digital Vision had violated mandatory manufacturing practices that would have ensured drugs were not contaminated with DEG. However, there have been no successful prosecutions, because, as in other instances of adulteration, there is little sustained follow-up to prove to the courts that the products were directly responsible for the deaths.

Given that the deaths in The Gambia have evoked an international outcry — it was highlighted by WHO and India has a reputation as a major global supplier of drugs and vaccines — there will likely be greater scrutiny of India's actions. Early responses from India's health establishment have not been encouraging, with assurances that the drugs were only cleared for export to The Gambia and not for sale in India. In any case, this is disingenuous as Maiden Pharmaceuticals, whose products were banned in Kerala earlier and flagged for substandard quality in Tamil Nadu, has marketed the same formulation under different names, and there is no reason to assume that their domestic wares undergo a higher standard of production. In the global market of pharmaceuticals, the pandemic burnished the credentials of India's vaccine manufacturers as vital to ensuring that the whole world accessed medicine equitably. To rise up the value chain, whether it be vaccines or drugs, India has to work harder at its image of having an impartial and independent regulator that can be trusted internationally as well as domestically.

BLAMING TECHNOLOGY FOR DEATHS BY SUICIDE IS MISGUIDED

Two decades into the 21st century, deaths by suicide remain a major source of social distress and public policy concern in India. Any loss of life is deeply unfortunate, but the notion of suicide is especially disturbing and beyond rationalisation for the affected family.

Blaming technology

One of the causes of suicide, which has been prevalent in contemporary discussions, is the expanding role of digital technologies. Aggravation of depression and other mental health issues



leading to suicide is being repeatedly attributed to technology. Factors such as cyberbullying, loss of self-esteem due to social media, extreme binge-watching of online content or heavy reliance on virtual followers/communities for validation are all said to be contributing to the issue. It is clear that the more technology gains influence over the human condition, the starker will be its role in the best and worst of human experience.

However, it will serve us well to realise that technology is neither at the core of the problem nor the perfect solution for it. Suicide is a reality which society must respond to in the most sensitive and holistic manner possible. It is not the case that technology has no role to play in adverse mental health conditions or related cases of suicide; the issue is the sensational and misdirected analysis of the causes of suicides. This takes the focus away from a comprehensive understanding of the issue and a more appropriate solution to it.

For example, no one can deny the link between cyberbullying and suicidal thoughts and attempts. According to a study funded by the National Institutes of Health in the U.S., participants who experienced cyberbullying were more than four times as likely to report thoughts of suicide and attempts as those who did not. However, similar results are true even for those who are bullied in person. The conclusion is that the medium of bullying is not the sole culprit; it is the act of bullying itself that needs to be addressed. Awareness campaigns, sensitisation programmes, community support and counselling services are usually considered good solutions against bullying — cyber or otherwise.

The case of Tamil Nadu

News reports regarding a spate of suicides, specifically in Tamil Nadu, also illustrate this point. Preliminary news reports associated several suicide incidents with gaming addiction, particularly with online rummy games. These reports elicited a heavy policy response from the Tamil Nadu government in the form of an ordinance, which banned most online games played for money, including rummy and poker. On closer examination, multiple independent studies, such as the one by Rotary's Rainbow Project, found a high degree of exaggeration in reports associating deaths by suicide in the State with online rummy games.

The real reasons for these deaths were different from those earlier reported. Moreover, experts researching suicide, including Sandip Shah, Professor of Psychology at Shri Govind Guru University, Gujarat, made a direct representation to the Tamil Nadu government on insufficient data for the correlation between suicide and online gaming.

Analysis of the data from the NCRB on deaths by suicide in Tamil Nadu makes it evident that the policy response is not adequate to address the magnitude of the crisis in the State. Tamil Nadu has consistently had among the highest shares of reported deaths by suicide in the country, reporting over 11% of total cases for much of the previous decade, and nearly 19,000 cases in 2021 alone.

According to the NCRB, family problems, illness, substance abuse, and marriage/love-related issues alone contribute to more than two-thirds of the deaths by suicide in India. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the Tamil Nadu government to address these root causes and evolve a holistic policy response to minimise future cases. Rather than top-down policy formulations, focusing only on a few high-profile incidents, an inclusive community-based mental health and suicide-prevention approach may prove to be more effective in saving lives. Further, the State may consider how technological measures from service providers can also become a part of this policy response.



Use of technology

The Central government, on its part, is already embracing the potential role of technology in improving mental health outcomes for citizens. In February, it announced the National Tele-Mental Health Programme to provide access to free, round-the-clock mental health interventions in remote and underserved areas. Acknowledgement of suicidal thoughts and attempts to address a host of inter-related causes and effects are necessary to design effective and proportionate policy prescriptions. While technology is certainly an agent of this complex matrix, it can neither be seen as a root cause nor as a panacea.

THE LINGERING MONSOON

Incessant rain over Delhi and several other parts of North and Northwest India over the last few days provide further evidence of the shifting patterns in monsoon activity over the Indian subcontinent.

Not only has monsoon rainfall become more erratic — fewer rainy days but more intense rain — the monsoon season, earlier confined neatly to the four-month June-September period, is clearly spilling over into October now.

This has been officially recognised. Three years ago, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) had revised the expected dates of onset and withdrawal of the monsoon for several regions of the country. The withdrawal dates for North, Northwest and Central India were pushed back by one to two weeks to account for the trends witnessed over the last 50 years.

Thus, the October rainfall over North India of the kind that happened over the last few days should no longer surprise anyone. It should in fact, be increasingly seen as the norm rather than an exception.

“People will have to get used to it. These are not freak events. We are likely to see these happening in the coming years as well,” M Rajeevan, former Secretary, Ministry of Earth Sciences, said about the October rainfall over North and Northwest India.

Delhi and its surrounding areas had received pretty good rainfall in October 2021 as well — so much so that Delhi had its fourth wettest October of the last 120 years. Considering the huge amounts of rain that have fallen in the first 10 days of this month — eight times more than the normal — this October could turn out to be even wetter than last year’s.

A longer rainy season

In any case, rainfall in October — after the traditional date of withdrawal of the southwest monsoon — isn’t entirely unheard of. It has happened in several previous years as well. But the rain in those years was mostly caused by different, often local, atmospheric phenomena.

What is being witnessed in more recent years is a clear prolongation of the monsoon season. As such, the nature of rainfall is very different — it is not a short-duration heavy downpour, but sustained rain over a few days.

The recent spell of rainfall over Western Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Eastern Rajasthan and Delhi were a result of the interaction of monsoon winds, moving east to west, with the western disturbance wind system. Such interactions happen several times during the monsoon season.



Is it climate change?

Like most of the changes being witnessed in global weather patterns, the changing trends in the Indian monsoon are also being driven primarily by climate change. In line with the experience in many other parts of the world, rainfall in India is increasingly taking place in short, intense bursts. Extreme rainfall events are increasing both in intensity and frequency.

The extension of the monsoon season could also be seen as a consequence of global warming, said Dr Rajeevan.

“A robust study to establish the cause and effect relationship is yet to be done, but one possible reason for the spillover of monsoon rainfall to October could be the fact that the oceans (Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea) are now warmer than earlier,” he said.

“Warmer ocean currents help the formation of monsoon winds. Earlier, rainfall during the monsoon season would bring down the temperature of the ocean. But possibly because of global warming, the oceans continue to remain warm even after the traditional monsoon season is over. The oceans could thus be playing a role in keeping the monsoon alive beyond the traditional period,” Rajeevan said.

Global warming is affecting rainfall patterns in other ways too. A warmer atmosphere has a greater capacity to hold water. When this water is finally released, it often results in a heavier downpour than would be expected otherwise. This accounts in part for the increasing instances of extreme rainfall events.

A challenge for forecasting

The changing patterns and increased instances of erratic monsoon behaviour is creating forecasting complications for the IMD. Once infamous for its unreliable and generic forecasts, the IMD has over the past 10-12 years, invested heavily in setting up observational equipment, upgrading computing resources, and fine-tuning weather forecast models. And while it continues to battle public perception in many cases, the IMD’s forecasts are now not just far more accurate and specific, they are also impact-based and actionable. The increased variability in weather systems brought about by climate change is threatening to dilute the gains made in recent years. IMD Director General Mrutyunjay Mohapatra acknowledges this challenge.

“If we had not augmented our resources in the last few years, we would have been in a very difficult situation. Today, IMD is able to provide fairly good forecasts. It may not be 100 per cent accurate, but it is at par with any other weather forecasting agency in the world. The current spell of rain in Delhi and other areas was forecast accurately well in advance. But climate change is posing a big challenge. We need to set up more observation stations, collect more data, and do more computing. Capacity upgradation has to be a continuous exercise,” Dr Mohapatra said.

Impact on other sectors

Monsoon rainfall is not just a weather phenomenon. It is a key driver of the Indian economy. A significant part of Indian agriculture still depends on monsoon rainfall for irrigation. The supply of drinking water and the generation of electricity are also linked to the monsoon.

Changes in the period and duration of the monsoon requires follow-up action from these sectors. Not just the preferred time of sowing of crops, but the entire cropping cycle — even the choice of crops — might need to be changed.



There are implications for dam management as well. Most reservoirs in the northern and central parts of the country seek to attain full capacity levels by the end of September because not much rain is expected after that. But if the monsoon consistently spills over into October, as is being predicted, this practice would need to be revised as well.

Government officials said the other sectors are yet to react to the change in monsoon calendar that was announced by the IMD three years ago, but it will not be long before they are forced to respond.

THE ASHOKA VIJAYA DASHAMI CONTROVERSY

The story so far:

On October 5, Mission Jai Bhim and The Buddhist Society of India organised a public meeting in Delhi to commemorate Buddhist Conversion Day. Every year Dussehra is also celebrated as Ashoka Vijaya Dashami to commemorate Buddhist Conversion day. On October 14, 1956, B. R. Ambedkar along with more than half a million followers had embraced Buddhism in Nagpur, Maharashtra. This year, a Minister in the Aam Aadmi government in Delhi, Rajendra Pal Gautam, participated in the event in his personal capacity. Along with the thousands of people assembled, he recited the 22 vows, which is part of the ritual. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) objected to Mr. Gautam's presence at the event and his recitation of the vows. He was accused of spreading anti-Hindu sentiments. The BJP sought the resignation of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and following the uproar, Mr. Gautam resigned on October 9.

Are the 22 vows controversial?

Modern history has admired Ambedkar as a revolutionary social reformer. His writings on social questions offer deep intellectual and critical inquiry about the problems of an exploitative Hindu caste order. He wanted to end the inhuman practice of untouchability. His academic work is well-known for the scrutiny of Hindu philosophical texts. Though several nationalist leaders, including Gandhi, disagreed with Ambedkar, they accepted him as a committed leader who wanted to liberate socially marginalised communities from the stranglehold of caste.

Ambedkar opted for Buddhism for its rational and progressive values that challenge some of the fundamental beliefs of Hinduism. The 22 vows he delivered during the conversion ceremony initiated a radical escape for the convert from Hindu caste and cultural folds. The vows are divided into three major sections. In the first part, it pledges to refuse to worship the Hindu pantheon or to follow Hindu religious dogmas (vows no. 1, 2, 3, 5 and 21). Second, it challenges the authority of the Brahmin priest (vows no. 4, 6, 8 and 19). The rest promises to follow Buddhist principles.

What is Navayana Buddhism?

On October 13, 1935, Ambedkar, as president of the 'Yeola Conversion Conference' near Nasik, announced his decision to renounce Hinduism, as a path to contest the Hindu caste order. He asked the assembled members from the depressed castes to abandon struggles such as the temple-entry agitations and advised them to leave Hinduism entirely and embrace another religion. However, the decision to adopt Buddhism was not announced then. For the next two decades, Ambedkar was engaged in social and political deliberation to draft policies and find avenues for the emancipation of the socially marginalised communities. The decision to embrace Buddhism arrived after a detailed contemplation on various religions to understand the suitability of each to liberate socially marginalised communities. He reached the conclusion that Buddhism



is an appropriate choice as it had challenged the Brahmanical caste-based social hierarchies in the past; it focused on modern ethical values and a scientific temperament and preached peace and compassion for social coexistence. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in a grand ceremony at Nagpur's Deekshabhoomi, where more than five lakh followers had assembled to follow his decision. Under the presence of monk Chandramani, Ambedkar and his wife took the Buddhist vows. He then recited the three jewels (Trisharan), five precepts (Panchsheel), pronounced the self-crafted 22 vows for the assembled people and renounced Hinduism. The event is marked as the renaissance of Buddhism in India. In the post-event deliberation, Ambedkar called his version of Buddhism Navayana (followers are called neo-Buddhists), differentiating it with the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions of Buddhism. Every year in October, lakhs of people assemble at Nagpur's Deekshabhoomi to pay homage to Ambedkar and to celebrate the historic day.

What is the demographic status of neo-Buddhists in India today?

The Buddhist population is a mere 0.70%, of which 87% are neo-Buddhists. Further, a large majority of it (around 80%) reside in Maharashtra (5.8% of the total population). The rest are traditional Buddhists and are scattered mainly in north-eastern States like Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Tripura, etc. There has been a decline in the growth rate of Buddhists in India in recent years.

The 22 vows

- On October 15, 1956, at Deeksha Bhoomi in Nagpur, Dr Ambedkar, along with 365,000 of his Dalit followers, left the folds of Hinduism. On the occasion, he took 22 vows, which are:
- I shall have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh nor shall I worship them.
- I shall have no faith in Rama and Krishna who are believed to be incarnation of God nor shall I worship them.
- I shall have no faith in 'Gauri', Ganapati and other gods and goddesses of Hindus nor shall I worship them.
- I do not believe in the incarnation of God.
- I do not and shall not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda.
- I shall not perform 'Shraddha' nor shall I give 'pind-dan'.
- I shall not act in a manner violating the principles and teachings of the Buddha.
- I shall not allow any ceremonies to be performed by Brahmins.
- I shall believe in the equality of man.
- I shall endeavour to establish equality.
- I shall follow the 'noble eightfold path' of the Buddha.
- I shall follow the 'paramitas' prescribed by the Buddha.
- I shall have compassion and loving kindness for all living beings and protect them.



- I shall not steal.
- I shall not tell lies.
- I shall not commit carnal sins.
- I shall not take intoxicants like liquor, drugs etc.
- I shall endeavour to follow the noble eightfold path and practise compassion and loving kindness in every day life.
- I renounce Hinduism which is harmful for humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion.
- I firmly believe the Dhamma of the Buddha is the only true religion.
- I believe that I am having a re-birth.
- I solemnly declare and affirm that I shall hereafter lead my life according to the principles and teachings of the Buddha and his Dhamma.

Tweeting a 39-second video of the event, Delhi BJP MP Manoj Tiwari tweeted, “Why is the AAP anti-Hindu? This AAP minister is taking a vow against Hindu religion and also making other people take it.”

The vows, however, have nothing to do with Gautam or the AAP, and certainly nothing with skullcaps. They are part of the 22-point pledge made by Dr BR Ambedkar when he renounced Hinduism and converted to Buddhism in 1956. Since then, such events have regularly been organised, where people, mainly from oppressed castes, recite the 22 vows and embrace Buddhism.

Conversion versus ‘anti-Hindu-ness’

With BJP leaders choosing to suddenly take offence to the vows 66 years after they were first made, many have pointed out that the pledge does not contain derogatory words for Hindu gods and goddesses, but simply asserts that the speaker shall not worship them. If one is renouncing a religion and embracing another, it stands to reason that they will not worship deities of their former religion.

What Ambedkar did believe, and what the vows also say, is that the caste system is too deeply embedded in Hinduism to ever be uprooted, and that Dalits would never find equality and respect within the religion.

Dr Sanjay Paswan, BJP leader, former central minister and Bihar Member of Legislative Council (MLC), told The Indian Express, “Dr Ambedkar through his vows was not trying to insult Hinduism, but was trying to irritate the ‘upper caste’ Hindus. He had spent his life fighting caste discrimination and indignities, and he wanted to make them realise the sufferings Dalits experienced. Had he been ‘anti-Hindu’, he would not have accepted the Uniform Civil Code, he would not have agreed to Sanskrit being part of the 22 official languages of India.”



Why Ambedkar renounced Hinduism

Between Dr Ambedkar first talking of conversion at a public gathering and him actually converting to Buddhism lie 20 years. In 1936, addressing a gathering of Mahars in Mumbai, Babasaheb said, "I tell you all very specifically, religion is for man and not man for religion. To get human treatment, convert yourselves."

He spent the next 20 years reading up on all religions, and eventually chose Buddhism.

On another occasion, he wrote that while he had initially thought Hinduism could be reformed from within – as Mahatma Gandhi believed – he later changed his mind. "I thought for long that we could rid the Hindu society of its evils and get the depressed classes incorporated into it on terms of equality... Experience has taught me better. I stand today absolutely convinced that for the depressed classes there can be no equality among the Hindus because on inequality rest the foundations of Hinduism," he said.

In a speech he wrote for the 1936 Annual Conference of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore, Ambedkar argued that Hindus follow caste hierarchies not because they are "inhuman or wrong headed", but simply because it is integral to their religion.

"They observe Caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing Caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of Caste," he wrote.

In the same speech, he went on to add, "It is no use seeking refuge in quibbles. It is no use telling people that the Shastras do not say what they are believed to say, grammatically read or logically interpreted. What matters is how the Shastras have been understood by the people. You must take the stand that Buddha took. You must take the stand which Guru Nanak took. You must not only discard the Shastras, you must deny their authority, as did Buddha and Nanak. You must have courage to tell the Hindus, that what is wrong with them is their religion—the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of Caste."

This speech, however, was never made, because the reception committee was not happy with the views Ambedkar expressed and the conference was cancelled.

POLITICAL PARTIES TODAY ARE LETTING AMBEDKAR DOWN

The controversy over AAP minister Rajendra Pal Gautam's presence at a Dalit conversion rally in Delhi last week and his resignation in the aftermath reveal the double speak of political parties who invoke Babasaheb Ambedkar's ideals and claim him as their icon. Gautam got into trouble after the BJP released a video clip that revealed his presence at the meet where hundreds of Dalits embraced Buddhism. The BJP accused Gautam of speaking against Hindu gods and demanded that he be sacked from the Kejriwal government. On Sunday, Gautam resigned from the Delhi cabinet.

In his letter of resignation, Gautam said he was quitting the ministry to shield the party and the chief minister from the attack of the BJP. However, his exit as social welfare minister was foretold after his party refused to stand by him. Gautam had said he attended the meeting in his individual capacity. Attendees at the conversion rally recited the 22 vows formulated by Babasaheb, including one that asks new converts to Buddhism to pledge that they will not henceforth worship Hindu gods. The vows are an essential part of the Ambedkarite path to liberation, which includes adoption of the way of the Buddhist Dhamma. Since the BJP and AAP claim to be guided and inspired by Ambedkar and pay loud obeisance to him, they must clarify where they stand on his



liberal vision that respects the right of the individual to leave and adopt any faith, which he also enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The fact is that political parties acknowledge Ambedkar in perfunctory ways on special days associated with him mostly because Dalits, who revere him, constitute an influential votebank. Beyond such acts of tokenism, parties, be it AAP or BJP, refuse to follow or practise Ambedkar's radical worldview that privileges the agency and dignity of the individual and rejects all forms of oppression. This, perhaps, explains why Dalits continue to face caste-based exclusion and violence despite a Constitution that upholds the principles of equality and fraternity.

The targeting of Gautam must also be seen in the context of the political campaign in Gujarat, where assembly elections are due later this year. Both the BJP and AAP are squaring off in the state over their commitment to "Hindu" causes. The BJP wants to frame Gautam's presence at the Dalit rally as evidence of the AAP's "animosity" towards Hindus whereas the AAP fears that a public defence of Gautam could be a ruse for shifting the poll debate to issues of religious identity. Whatever their reasons, in the present controversy, neither party has lived up to what it says on Ambedkar.

'HUMAN SACRIFICE' IN KERALA: TWO WOMEN KILLED, COUPLE AMONG THREE PERSONS HELD

The overnight interrogation of the accused — Mohammad Shafi, alias Rasheed, a resident of Perumbavur in Ernakulam, and a couple, Bhagaval Singh and Laila of Elanthoor — by the Kochi City Police led to the revelation of the twin murders.

The bodies, hacked into pieces, were exhumed from the property of the couple. The Kochi City Police recorded the arrest of the three accused.

Padmam, a lottery vendor from Ponnuruni in Ernakulam, and Rosli, a resident of Kalady, near Angamaly, were suspected to have been brutally murdered as part of an occult rite for the prosperity of the couple.

Both women had been missing, leading to registration of cases by the Kadavanthra Police in Kochi city and the Kalady Police in Ernakulam Rural.

The accused were taken into custody in connection with the case registered by the Kadavanthra Police. It was during interrogation that the accused confessed to have "sacrificed" another woman in a similar manner months ago.

While Padmam was murdered in the last week of September, Rosli was killed in June, said C.H. Nagaraju, District Police Chief (Kochi City).

"All three accused were involved in the murder of both women and their bodies were buried side-by-side within the property of the couple. Whether there was a racket engaged in such human sacrifices remains to be investigated," said Mr. Nagaraju.

TAMIL NADU NOTIFIES INDIA'S FIRST SLENDER LORIS SANCTUARY

Slender lorises, which are small nocturnal mammals, are arboreal as they spend most of their life on trees.



The species acts as a biological predator of pests in agricultural crops and benefits farmers. Listed as an endangered species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, slender loris has a wide range of ecological roles in the terrestrial ecosystem.

Habitat improvement

The survival of the species depends on habitat improvement, conservation and mitigation of threats, Supriya Sahu, Additional Chief Secretary, Environment, Climate Change and Forests, said in a statement. Realising the need for immediate conservation of this species, the State government identified forest areas measuring 11,800 hectares in Karur and Dindigul districts.

The sanctuary will cover Vedasandur, Dindigul East and Natham taluks in Dindigul district and Kadavur taluk in Karur district.

In significant steps towards conservation of wildlife, the State government notified India's first Dugong Conservation Reserve in the Palk Bay, Kazhuveli bird sanctuary in Villupuram, Nanjarayan Tank birds sanctuary in Tiruppur and the State's fifth elephant reserve at Agasthyamalai in Tirunelveli. Further, 13 wetlands were declared as Ramsar sites. These path-breaking initiatives in 15 months have put Tamil Nadu at a pivotal position in the field of conservation, Ms. Sahu said.

GOD'S OWN CROCODILE: KERALA TEMPLE ACCORDS 'BHU SAMADHI' TO BABIYA

In a rare gesture, a Kerala temple on Monday accorded "bhu samadhi" to a crocodile, named Babiya, that died in the shrine's pond on Sunday night and a post-mortem cited the death due to old age.

Since crocodile has been part of the lore of Sree Ananthapadmanabha Swamy Temple at Kumbla in Kasaragod district, Babiya was given a ceremonial burial with all prayers envisaged for the last rites of a Hindu 'sanyasi'. Before the burial, Babiya's body was kept in a mobile freezer for several hours to enable the devotees to pay homage to the 'divine soul'.

"We had the rituals and prayers associated with the burial of a Hindu swamiji. The body was lowered to the pit near the temple. In future, devotees can come and pray at the 'samadhi'," said temple trust board chairman Udaya Kumar.

Earlier, Babiya had hit the headlines after devotees claimed that it was a vegetarian crocodile and eventually attained a divine status after it was seen consuming the offerings at the temple (rice and jaggery).

"We don't claim that the crocodile was fully vegetarian. However, it used to consume the offerings of the temple," Udaya Kumar said.

Condoling Babiya's death, Union Minister of State for Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare Shoba Karandlaje tweeted: "Babiya, the God's own crocodile of Sri Ananthapura Lake temple has reached Vishnu Padam. The divine crocodile lived in the temple's lake for over 70 years by eating the rice & jaggery prasadam of Sri Ananthapadmanabha Swamy & guarded the temple."

The crocodile was never known to have turned violent or attacked a devotee. It lived in the temple pond along with fish. Two years back, it was spotted on the steps of the temple's sanctum sanctorum.



There are no records at the temple to show how this crocodile reached the temple pond even as there is no river or any other water body in the vicinity. Temple lore says a British soldier had shot a crocodile at the shrine in 1945 and within a few days another one appeared. Hence, Babiya was believed to be in its 70s.

The temple trust board chairman said nobody knows when and why the male crocodile was given the name Babiya.

Another version about the presence of the crocodile is that the centuries-old temple, which is situated in a pond, had a huge stock of valuables. To dissuade thieves or enemies from plundering the wealth, the temple authorities had reared a crocodile in the pond. In the past, one could reach the temple only after crossing the pond. Later, a bridge was constructed over the pond up to the temple.

A DAY TO EXPLORE BEAR NECESSITIES

The first World Sloth Bear Day was observed on Wednesday to generate awareness and strengthen conservation efforts around the unique bear species endemic to the Indian subcontinent. Classified as “vulnerable” on the IUCN Red List, sloth bears are endemic to the Indian sub-continent and 90% of the species population is found in India.

A proposal for observing World Sloth Bear Day was mooted by Wildlife SOS India, an organisation involved in sloth bear conservation and protection for over two decades and the IUCN-Species Survival Commission sloth bear expert team accepted the proposal and declared the day to be celebrated worldwide.

Listed under Schedule I of the (Wildlife Protection) Act of India, 1972, the species has the same level of protection as tigers, rhinos and elephants.

A press statement issued by Wildlife SOS on Wednesday said the organisation rescued and rehabilitated over hundreds of “performing dancing bears, thereby resolving a 400-year-old barbaric tradition (of dancing bears) while also providing alternative livelihoods to the nomadic Kalandar community members”.

Nishith Dharaiya, co-chair of the IUCN sloth bear expert team, told The Hindu that the sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus*) was an important species and endemic to the Indian subcontinent with small populations in Nepal and Sri Lanka. “For a long time, sloth bears were exploited as dancing bears. Though the practice has been banned there are still a few cases of rescue,” Mr. Dharaiya said. He explained that sloth bears were omnivorous and survived on termites, ants and fruits.

“Over the past few years there has been a rise of incidents of human sloth bear conflict in States like Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra among other states,” Mr. Dharaiya said.

THE POLITICAL CHALLENGE BEFORE ROGER BINNY AS HE SETS OUT TO BE THE NEXT BCCI PRESIDENT

Indian cricket will continue to have a player of repute as its president, as the quietest member of Kapil Dev’s 1983 Dream Team, Roger Binny, is all set to replace the Dada of aggressive cricket, Sourav Ganguly. But does it also mean that the voice of cricketers gets feeble in the new power panel that is expected to have the son of the Union home minister, Jay Shah, and BJP MLA and the party’s Mumbai chief, Ashish Shelar? The fact is, however, that Ganguly did not quite put his



stature to good use during his BCCI stint, and that his was an underwhelming tenure, riddled with allegations of conflict of interest.

Over the years, political heavyweights like NKP Salve, Madhavrao Scindia and Sharad Pawar had made the BCCI their second office. Historically, cricket administration has been a convenient vehicle to remain visible, connect with the masses and oblige VVIPs with corporate passes. Of course, BCCIs have also had a parallel power centre. There was always some influential businessman or lawyer — Jagmohan Dalmiya, N Srinivasan, Shashank Manohar — with the heft to take on the political establishment. The BCCI election days, unlike now, would see an intense contest. The Justice RM Lodha reforms would stress on having players' representatives and post the Supreme Court intervention, Ganguly would make it as BCCI president. To the disappointment of the judges, cricket, even off the field, remained a game of uncertainty. It didn't unfold as expected. Players didn't seize the moment or take control.

After the SC amended its earlier order and allowed MPs and MLAs to be cricket administrators, politicians consolidated their position in the BCCI. And the players lost again. Unlike in other countries, Indian cricketers aren't organised. There is an official players' body but it remains toothless, and dependent on BCCI largesse. For Binny, it will be a tough task to make himself heard over the political noise and ensure that players' representation in the BCCI isn't mere tokenism.



DreamIAS



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

INFLATION PEAKS IN EUROPE AS RUSSIA SQUEEZES OIL SUPPLY

In the seven months following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the tables have turned. Initially, major financial and commercial sanctions were imposed on Russia by the U.S., the U.K., the European Union and other nations. This had a telling effect on the rouble, which was trading at 81 per dollar before the invasion and by March fell to 151. However, the rouble recovered quickly in the following months, and by May, it went back to the pre-invasion levels.

In the months following the invasion, tougher sanctions against Russian oil and gas remained a contentious subject for countries in the European region. This was because a quarter of the region's oil needs were met by Russia before the war. After much deliberation, the 27-nation bloc decided to cut off Russian oil that comes by ship from December 5. Russia also has increasingly decreased its oil exports to the European region and is planning to reduce it further if the U.S. and other nations go ahead with a price cap on its oil.

Data shows that a combination of supply-squeeze from Russia and self-imposed import restrictions have led to a sudden surge in Europe's energy prices. Inflation across the European region spiraled up uncontrollably since the Ukrainian invasion.

Energy-related inflation started to rise post the war and accelerated to over 40% in recent months. While the overall inflation and food-related inflation have surged to 10-year highs in recent days, their increase pales in comparison to the rise in energy prices.

The impact of rising energy costs was felt across all European nations. In the U.K., energy inflation crossed the 70% mark, and in Spain, it crossed the 60% mark, while in the Netherlands it almost touched 100%. In all the nations analysed, the energy-related inflation levels have reached at least a 10-year peak.

Such a drastic increase in inflation levels in Europe is understandable given the very high levels of dependency on Russian oil. Oil supplies from Russia formed 38% of Germany's domestic oil demand. Countries such as Belgium, Finland and Netherlands too had a very high dependency on Russia for their oil needs.

In some countries, the figure exceeded 100% as a nation may import more fuel than it consumes in a year. Some may stock, re-export or convert it into other petroleum products and export them.

Despite such high dependence, following the Ukraine invasion, the oil supply from Russia to most of the European countries has taken a hit. The data is provided for two periods — February 2021 to June 2021, and February 2022 to June 2022. For instance, Russia formed 60-75% of Finland's total oil imports in 2021. However, it reduced to 10-30% in April-June 2022.

A similar decreasing trend was observed in the U.K. Before the invasion, Russia formed 15-20% of U.K.'s total oil imports. However, between April and June 2022, it reduced to 2-5%.

With the U.S. and a group of seven major democracies working out the details on a price cap on Russian oil and the EU approving a measure along those lines this week, more Russian oil may get taken off the market, pushing the prices even higher.



WINTER IS COMING

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), in its latest World Economic Outlook report, has retained global growth hopes for 2022 at 3.2%, and lowered next year's projection to 2.7% from 2.9%. The year 2023 will feel like a recession for many people in the world, the Fund has cautioned, as 'the worst is yet to come' amid tighter monetary policies to curb stubbornly high inflation and a spiralling energy and food crisis. While it retained India's 2023-24 growth estimate at 6.1%, the IMF slashed this year's forecast to 6.8%, from 7.4% in July. This is the second significant estimate after the World Bank's 6.5% assessment that pegs India's GDP rise below 7%, which the Reserve Bank of India and North Block mandarins are expecting this year. The downgrade is attributed to 'weaker than expected outturn' in the second quarter and subdued external demand. The slowing growth in tax collections, industrial output and exports, back this prognosis. The road ahead — rendered tortuous by the lingering Russia-Ukraine conflict, a slowdown in China and what the IMF has eloquently termed a 'cost of living crisis' — is not much travelled on. The risk of monetary, fiscal or financial policy miscalibration has risen sharply amid high uncertainty and growing fragilities, the Fund has emphasised.

After likely losing the tag to Saudi Arabia this year, the IMF expects India to become the fastest growing major economy in the world again next year. But private forecasters such as Nomura believe policy makers' optimism about 2023-24 prospects may be misplaced as the global downturns' ripple effects may be underestimated, and growth could well slip to 5.2%. Either way, relative prosperity compared to the world alone will not suffice. India needs to not only grow significantly faster than its faltering pre-pandemic trajectory but also deliver better quality growth that is inclusive and meets the aspirations of millions of its youth who constitute its demographic dividend. The country has only a small window now to cash in on this sweet spot. Moreover, given India's low per capita income, the sustained surge in prices has hit most households' spending capacity, and could even cramp their ability to invest in the next generation's education. Ministers' assertions that India had managed to rein in inflation and it is not a priority concern may have been premature as August and September witnessed a resurgence in price rise from July's minor relief of 6.71% after staying above 7% in the first quarter. The Government has begun work on Budget 2023-24, but the second half of this year still needs to be navigated deftly.

WERE OBJECTIVES OF DEMONETISATION ACHIEVED, SC BENCH ASKS CENTRE, RBI

"What about black money and terror funding?" Justice S. Abdul Nazeer, heading the five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court, asked while hearing 58 petitions challenging demonetisation.

The court's question came despite the government urging the Bench not to "waste" judicial time on the issue. Attorney-General R. Venkataramani termed the case "academic" in nature as things had long settled.

"You may not be able to undo something that has happened, but whether in the future such power can be exercised or not can be looked into," Justice A.S. Bopanna said.

Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta questioned the very maintainability of the case which concerned a purely economic policy of the government.

Senior advocates P. Chidambaram and Shyam Divan, for petitioners, said the issue was "very much alive". Demonetisation in 1946 and 1978 were implemented through separate Acts debated by



Parliament. In 2016, it was done through a mere notification issued under provisions of the Reserve Bank of India Act, 1934. He said the court should declare the law or nothing would stop the government from repeating the exercise which had seen “horrendous consequences”.

Mr. Chidambaram, citing the RBI’s annual report, submitted that ₹15.44 lakh crore worth of currency was demonetised. The withdrawn money amounted to 86.4% of the currency in circulation at the time. Only ₹16,000 crore out of the ₹15.44 lakh crore was not returned. He said only .0027% fake currency was “captured” following demonetisation.

But Justice V. Ramasubramanian, on the Bench, said may be all fake currency holders had not dared to come forward to try and exchange their counterfeit currency for the new ones... Their currency out there might have been rendered useless by demonetisation.

Mr. Chidambaram said crucial documents leading to the massive exercise were not in the public domain — he asked the court to call for them. The Cabinet took an “instantaneous decision” to clear the withdrawal and the Prime Minister announced it on TV on November 8.

“Is it a reasonable and prudent decision-making process that you withdraw 86.4% of currency in 24 hours and do not place the documents in the public domain?” Mr. Chidambaram asked in court.

The court wondered whether the government had thought about the consequences before going ahead with the withdrawal of the banknotes. It scheduled the next hearing on November 9 and directed the government and the RBI to file comprehensive affidavits in response to Mr. Chidambaram’s submissions.

WHY THE RBI COMMUNICATION TO GOVERNMENT ON THE FAILURE TO MEET INFLATION TARGET MUST BE PLACED IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

On Wednesday, data released by the National Statistical Office showed that retail inflation, as measured by the consumer price index, rose to a five-month high of 7.41 per cent in September. Taking this into consideration, inflation has now stayed above the upper threshold of the Reserve Bank of India’s inflation targeting framework for three consecutive quarters. In fact, from April 2019 onwards, inflation has stayed above the upper threshold of the framework for around half the period. To tackle the inflationary pressures in the economy, the monetary policy committee has in response raised the benchmark repo rate by 190 basis points so far. While concerns are now being voiced about the growth sacrifice, the MPC must stay the course, continue to focus on preserving macroeconomic stability.

The disaggregated inflation data shows that food inflation has continued to edge upwards. The consumer food price index rose to 8.6 per cent in September, up from 7.62 per cent in August. It stood at 6.69 per cent in July. A sharp uptick was seen in cereals, vegetables, milk and spices in the month of September. Equally worrying, core inflation, which excludes the volatile food and fuel components, continues to remain elevated, driven by clothing and footwear, household goods and services, personal care and effects and recreation and amusement. As per the RBI’s most recent forecast, the central bank expects inflation to begin to trend lower in the second half of the year, falling to 6.5 per cent in the third quarter and thereafter to 5.8 per cent in the fourth quarter. But prices may well prove to be sticky on the downside. For one, low wheat stocks and uncertainties over the kharif rice crop on account of erratic and extended monsoon rainfall are likely to continue to impart upward pressure to cereal inflation.



As per section 45 of the RBI Act, if the central bank fails to meet the inflation target, it will have to write to the government, laying down the reasons for the failure to achieve the target, the remedial actions it proposes to take and the estimated time period within which the target will be achieved. This communication forms an integral part of holding the RBI/MPC accountable for monetary policy decisions. However, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das is reported to have said that the central bank will not place this report in the public domain as “it is privileged communication from the central bank to the government”. This may not be the correct approach. The Union government must place this communication in the public domain. Doing so will not only provide greater clarity on the trajectory of monetary policy, but will also ensure greater accountability and transparency in its making.

PILOT LAUNCH OF E-RUPEE FOR SPECIFIC USE CASES: WHAT IS THE RBI’S PLAN

On Friday, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) indicated that it will soon commence limited pilot launches of e-rupee (e₹), or Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) or digital rupee, for specific use cases. It has hinted at two broad categories for the use of e-rupee — retail and wholesale — taking the payment system in the country to a new level where the common people and businesses will be able to use the digital currency seamlessly for various transactions.

What’s RBI’s plan?

The central bank said that the development of CBDC could provide the public a risk-free virtual currency that will give them legitimate benefits without the risks of dealing in private virtual currencies. The approach for issuance of CBDC will be governed by two basic considerations — to create a digital rupee that is as close as possible to a paper currency and to manage the process of introducing digital rupee in a seamless manner. The central bank also feels that it is desirable for CBDCs to have offline capabilities to make it a more attractive and accessible medium of payment for a wide category of users.

E-rupee is the same as a fiat currency and is exchangeable one-to-one with the fiat currency. Only its form is different. It can be accepted as a medium of payment, legal tender and a safe store of value. The digital rupee would appear as liability on a central bank’s balance sheet.

What are the types of e-rupee?

Based on the usage and the functions performed by the digital rupee and considering the different levels of accessibility, CBDC can be demarcated into two broad categories — general purpose (retail) (CBDC-R) and wholesale (CBDC-W), the RBI’s concept note says.

Retail CBDC is an electronic version of cash primarily meant for retail transactions. It will be potentially available for use by all — private sector, non-financial consumers and businesses — and can provide access to safe money for payment and settlement as it is a direct liability of the central bank. However, the RBI has not explained how e-rupee can be used in merchant transactions in the retail trade.

Wholesale CBDC is designed for restricted access to select financial institutions. It has the potential to transform the settlement systems for financial transactions undertaken by banks in the government securities (G-Sec) segment, inter-bank market and capital market more efficiently and securely in terms of operational costs, use of collateral and liquidity management.



What are the forms of CBDC?

The central bank says e-rupee, or CBDC, can be structured as token-based or account-based. A token-based CBDC would be a bearer instrument like banknotes, meaning whosoever holds the tokens at a given point in time would be presumed to own them. In a token-based CBDC, the person receiving a token will verify that his ownership of the token is genuine. A token-based CBDC is viewed as a preferred mode for CBDC-R as it would be closer to physical cash.

An account-based system would require maintenance of record of balances and transactions of all holders of the CBDC and indicate the ownership of the monetary balances. In this case, an intermediary will verify the identity of an account holder. This system can be considered for CBDC-W, the RBI said.

What's the model for issuance?

There are two models for issuance and management of CBDCs under the RBI's consideration — direct model (single tier model) and indirect model (two-tier model). In the direct model, the central bank will be responsible for managing all aspects of the digital rupee system such as issuance, account-keeping and transaction verification.

An indirect model would be one where the central bank and other intermediaries (banks and any other service providers), each play their respective role. In this model, the central bank will issue CBDC to consumers indirectly through intermediaries and any claim by consumers will be managed by the intermediary.

What are the advantages of e-rupee?

The RBI said the key motivations for exploring the issuance of CBDC in India among others include reduction in operational costs involved in physical cash management, fostering financial inclusion, bringing resilience, efficiency and innovation in the payments system. It will add efficiency to the settlement system and boost innovation in cross-border payments space and provide the public with uses that any private virtual currencies can provide, without the associated risks.

Can e-rupee be transacted in offline mode?

The offline functionality as an option will allow CBDC to be transacted without the internet and thus enable access in regions with poor or no internet connectivity. It will also create digital footprints of the unbanked population in the financial system, which will facilitate the easy availability of credit to them. However, the RBI feels in the offline mode, the risk of 'double-spending' will exist because it will be technically possible to use a CBDC unit more than once without updating the common ledger of CBDC. But it can be mitigated to a larger extent by technical solutions and appropriate business rules including monetary limits on offline transactions, the central bank says.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN RUPEE: BIG BANKS DRAG FEET ON MECHANISM

Nearly three months after the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) put in place a mechanism to settle international trade in rupees, only two Indian banks – Uco Bank and Yes Bank – have opened special Vostro accounts to facilitate the process. Other Indian banks, including State Bank of India



(SBI), the largest in the country, are yet to initiate the process amid fears that any financial transaction with Russia may attract sanctions from the US.

Though banks claim that they are still waiting for clearances from the RBI, the rupee trade is yet to kickstart for all practical purposes. The trade with Russia is done more at the country level and bulk of the business relates to oil imports with exports falling after the Ukraine war started. “For banks, the US is more important than Russia. Banks get most businesses from their US operations as compared to Russia. Banks don’t want to be on the wrong side of the US as they fear that any agreement with a Russian bank for rupee trade may attract sanctions on them also (from the US),” said an official of a nationalised bank who preferred anonymity.

When contacted, the official of a bank said, “all banks are getting into a pact but there is some reluctance from those lenders who have overseas operations, especially in the US and Euro zone.” As trade with Russia is less than two per cent of the total trade, the thinking among bankers is that why should they invite sanctions and put their operations at risk for a small business with Russia.

Bankers, the RBI and the Finance Ministry officials had a meeting last month to thrash out various issues faced by the banks wherein the government offered full support to banks and allayed fears about sanctions. Despite the push from the Finance and External Affairs Ministries, banks, especially larger ones, are slow to respond to the cues.

Although A Shaktivel, President of the Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO), recently said SBI has come forward for facilitation of rupee trade with Russia, SBI is yet to make any announcement on this front. SBI did not respond to the mail sent by The Indian Express. “We’re expecting the government to come out with a standard operating procedure to deal with the issues arising from the rupee trade,” said an official of FIEO.

INDIA GETS 4TH SET OF SWISS BANK ACCOUNT DETAILS: SIGNIFICANCE, WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

India has received the fourth set of Swiss bank account details of its nationals and organisations as part of an annual information exchange, under which Switzerland has shared particulars of nearly 34 lakh financial accounts with 101 countries.

What is this information, how significant is it, and what happens next?

Significance of India receiving information from Switzerland

This is the fourth tranche of information that India has received from Switzerland since the two countries entered into an Automatic Exchange Of Information (AEOI) agreement in January 2018. The first such exchange with India took place in 2019.

In an effort to bring in transparency and restrict money laundering, the Swiss Federal Office has given a detailed account of the massive AEOI 2022 exchange exercise: the country has just concluded its exchange of information with 101 countries; with details of around 3.4 million financial accounts.

Some countries which have been added to the Swiss AEOI list for the first time are Turkey, Peru and Nigeria. The Swiss Federal Tax Administration office has also informed that with 74 of these 101 countries, the information exchange was reciprocal.



What is the volume, nature of data?

In 2019, prior to India receiving its first batch of banking information via the AEOI, officials had told The Indian Express that India would be among 73 countries that would be receiving the data and in their (India's) case "several dispatches" would be required, giving an indication of the large volume of account holders.

This time, the Federal Tax Administration has informed that the nature of the financial information includes the name, address, country of residence, tax identification number, information concerning the reporting financial institution, and account balance and capital information, giving an insight into the exact nature of the transmitted data.

Guidelines for exchange of such sensitive banking information

The guidelines and parameters for the AEOI are set by the Paris-based international body, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The annual exercise of AEOI exchange, such as the current Swiss bonanza of banking details, is strictly meant for "tax only" purposes and in India, kept in the custody of and for action by the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT).

Under the OECD's guidelines, no details of the quantum of funds or the names of account holders are to be publicised. In 2014, the OECD developed the Common Reporting Standard (CRS) which allows every country to obtain data from Financial Institutions (FIs) and "automatically" exchange it with countries with which AEOI agreements are in order every year.

What is the scope of India's AEOI network?

Under the OECD umbrella of AEOI, India presently shares bulk financial and banking information with 78 countries and receives the same from 107 countries, with Switzerland known to be sharing some of the most voluminous data.

Due primarily to the large volume of FI data coming in from now a 100 countries, the CBDT last year set up a network of Foreign Asset Investigation Units (FAIUs) in 14 of its investigation wings, to which the information of that region which has reached India via the AEOI route is transmitted in a secure manner.

It is the FAIUs that do the follow-up probe of the FI data, and to begin with, investigate whether the taxpayer has declared the foreign bank account/s in tax returns or not.

GOVT LINKS WAGE HIKE FOR PSU INSURANCE STAFF WITH PERFORMANCE

The government has asked the unions of the PSU general insurance (GI) industry to accept "performance linked future wage revision" before it approves the pending wage revision along with arrears since August 2017. There will be a total outgo of Rs 8,146 crore from all four companies and fresh capitalisation by the government for meeting wage revision expenses.

According to an official, in a meeting of the officials of Department of Financial Services (DFS), GIPSA, the coordinating agency of four PSU general insurers, GIC Re and recognised unions, a senior DFS official categorically said that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman wanted an assurance from the unions for implementation of performance linked wage revision before approving the pending wage revision for the industry. Industry observers say the government has



to provide capital to the three companies (United India, National Insurance and Oriental Insurance) for implementing their new wages.

With the 12 per cent hike along with five years of arrears, wage bill for National Insurance will be around Rs 2,177 crore, Rs 2,080 crore for New India Assurance (NIA), Rs 2,135 crore for Oriental Insurance and Rs 1752 crore for United India Insurance.

DFS officials informed the unions that wage revision could be released within five days if the union gives an assurance that they would allow smooth implementation of performance-based wage revision in the industry. GIPSA had called for an urgent meeting of unions after the Finance Minister refused to give her nod to the 12 per cent final wage revision proposal of the industry unless the unions agreed for the new revision method. However, in the meeting, the unions responded by reminding the earlier assurance of DFS Joint Secretary Sourabh Mishra and the GIPSA towards sharing the consultant report prepared by Ernst Young (E&Y).

The unions wanted the report of E&Y — hired by GIPSA to turn the PSU general insurers into agile as well as profitable — to study the consultant's proposals, including performance linked future wage revision, before its implementation. The unions have further clarified that they were not against KPI (key performance indicator) being the sole criteria for assessing the performance and pay structure of PSU insurers in the future but these concepts need detailed and serious discussion, sources said.

Moreover, the unions had asked the DFS and GIPSA to clear the pending wage revision at par with Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) without any condition or linking it with “performance linked future wage revision” before Diwali and then to come out with a new proposal for wage revision with effect from 2022-23.

Observers point out that the condition of performance linked revision may not be accepted by the unions easily and will further delay the conclusion of ongoing wage negotiation for the industry. The ministry while finalising the wage revision had earlier informed the unions that the next wage revision will be based on the performance of each PSU general insurer and each individual within the company.

The unions had reservations in accepting it and wanted more details on the issue.

It is now almost over a month since the Finance Ministry had finally rejected the demands of unions for a wage revision on par with LIC and was expected to notify a 12 per cent hike for the industry soon though unions had not agreed with the proposals.

The government last year had approved a 16 per cent wage revision with arrears for the employees of IPO-bound LIC and had even finalised a hike of 15 per cent with arrears for the PSU banking industry in 2020.

RISING INFLATION, STRONG USD: FOREX RESERVES PLUMMET \$110 BILLION IN 13 MONTHS

India's forex reserves have fallen by \$110 billion in the last 13 months as the rising inflation, capital outflows and appreciating dollar created a turmoil in the foreign exchange market.

According to the RBI, forex reserves fell by \$4.854 billion to \$532.664 billion during the week ended September 30 as the strong dollar and adverse external factors reduced India's forex kitty.



The reserves had declined by over \$8.134 billion to \$537.518 billion in the previous week. The central bank has been selling dollars from the forex kitty to defend the rupee amid pressures caused majorly by global developments. The rupee hit a record low of 82.33 against the dollar on Friday.

With this, forex reserves have plummeted by \$110 billion from the record high of \$642.45 billion registered on September 3, 2021.

Another major reason for the decline in forex reserves is capital outflows by foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) as the US Federal Reserve started the monetary policy tightening and interest rate hikes. The valuation loss, reflecting the appreciation of the US dollar against major currencies and decline in gold prices also played a part in the decline in foreign exchange reserves.

RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das had recently said that about 67 per cent of the decline in reserves during the current financial year was due to valuation changes arising from an appreciating US dollar and higher US bond yields. "During the current financial year (up to September 28), the US dollar has appreciated by 14.5 per cent against a basket of major currencies. It (rupee) has depreciated by 7.4 per cent against the US dollar during the same period — faring much better than several reserve currencies as well as many of its EME and Asian peers," he said.

Das said the rupee is a freely floating currency and its exchange rate is market determined. "The RBI does not have any fixed exchange rate in mind. It intervenes in the market to curb excessive volatility and anchor expectations," he said while unveiling the monetary policy.

The aggressive policy course by the US Fed to curb rising price pressures is exacerbating fears of a weakening global growth outlook and leading to risk aversion in the markets. Global currencies depreciated against the dollar as a hotter than expected US inflation report drove the currency higher.

Meanwhile, FPIs have resumed withdrawals from the Indian markets. "FPIs again turned sellers in India in September with a net equity sell figure of Rs 7,643 crore. FPIs were sellers in financial and IT services and buyers in telecom and capital goods. The renewed selling can be attributed to the steady rise in dollar which has triggered capital outflows from most emerging markets," said V K Vijayakumar, chief investment strategist at Geojit Financial Services.

"FPIs turned marginal buyers in early October but there is no consistency in FPI activity. FPIs will turn sustained buyers only when dollar peaks and shows a sustained downtrend," he said.

HIGH SUBSIDY OUTGO COULD MAKE IT DIFFICULT TO MEET OUR FISCAL DEFICIT TARGET

Even as concerns over the country's medium-term economic outlook are beginning to be voiced, central government tax collections continue to fare better than expected. As per data released by the finance ministry, gross direct tax collections have touched Rs 8.98 lakh crore till October 8, up almost 24 per cent over the same period last year. Adjusting for refunds, collections stood at Rs 7.45 lakh crore, or almost 53 per cent of the budget estimate for 2022-23. Considering that the government had been rather conservative in its revenue projections for this year — the Union budget had pegged direct tax collections at Rs 14.2 lakh crore in 2022-23, up only 2.5 per cent over the previous year — this latest data only reaffirms the view that tax collections will exceed budget estimates by a significant margin this year.



Under the broad rubric of direct taxes, the disaggregated data shows that so far personal income taxes have grown by a robust 32 per cent over this period, even as corporate tax collections have grown at a healthy 17 per cent. On the indirect tax side, GST collections have also stabilised at a higher level. Higher central government tax collections also imply that tax devolution to states will be significantly higher than the budgeted amount of Rs 8.16 lakh crore this year. In fact, the central government has already stepped up devolution to the states over the past few months. On the expenditure side, even as the Centre's revenue spending is only marginally higher this year, capital expenditure has so far grown at a brisk pace, particularly by the ministries of roads and railways — together, they account for a significant share of overall central government capex. As reported in this paper, of the Rs 85,279 crore spent by Railways so far, Rs 67,245 crore or 79 per cent was on account of capital expenditure. For the ministry of road transport and highways, it was even higher.

However, notwithstanding the healthy growth in tax revenues and collections from other levies such as the windfall taxes on domestic crude oil production, there are concerns that a higher subsidy outgo will pose upside risks to the fiscal deficit target. In the budget, the food subsidy had been pegged at Rs 2.06 lakh crore, while the fertiliser subsidy has been budgeted at Rs 1.05 lakh crore. However, considering the extension of the free food scheme, and higher prices of fertilisers and their inputs post the Russia-Ukraine conflict, it is likely that the subsidy outgo of the government will exceed the budgeted allocations significantly. This could make it challenging to meet the fiscal deficit target of 6.4 per cent of GDP.

THE ADVERSE ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF FESTIVALS

As the festival season kicks off in India, businesses are excited about rising sales as consumers spend more money on buying new stuff. Many economists view the festival season as a great time for the economy, as they believe increased consumer demand will boost economic activity. But what impact do festivals have on the supply side of the economy? After all, as some heterodox economists would argue, there can be no consumption until there is production of goods and services in the first place. So, do festivals help the economy grow faster or do they slow down the pace of economic growth?

The impact on supply

“Religious festivals and economic development: Evidence from the timing of Mexican saint day festivals,” a paper by Eduardo Montero and Dean Yang, tries to answer this question. The authors study the impact of Catholic patron saint day festivals in Mexico on agricultural output and its long-term economic effects on different communities. The patron saint day festivals happen at different times in different municipalities of Mexico depending on local customs. This gives the researchers the opportunity to determine how the timing of these festivals could affect economic output in different municipalities.

Montero and Yang argue that when festival dates fall during the planting and harvesting seasons, this can negatively affect economic output. This is because labour and other resources get redirected towards festival-related activities rather than being invested in agricultural activities. When this happens, the negative economic effects may be particularly pronounced. In other words, festivals can come with a higher opportunity cost when they happen during certain seasons of the agricultural cycle. Festivals may also lead people to increase their consumption, which in turn lowers investment and significantly affects long-run economic growth. To be precise, the authors estimate that in the long-run, that is over two centuries, regions in which

festivals coincided with the planting and harvesting seasons can end up with 20% lower household incomes.

Community ties

The authors, however, note that the festivals that coincide with crucial agricultural seasons may have some benefit in terms of promoting bonds within the community. In such cases, it could very well be that certain communities are willing to pay the economic price for better community ties. But one of the reasons people are willing to pay this economic price for festivals, the authors argue, could be that they do not really understand the actual long-term costs of their religious traditions. For example, as Montero and Yang note in their paper, an annual economic underperformance of even just 0.1% when compounded over 200 years can cause a 20% lesser income. This fact may not always be clear to people when they make their choices.



DreamIAS

**LIFE & SCIENCE****SMASH HIT**

For the very first time, NASA scientists have succeeded in slightly altering the trajectory of an asteroid by using a spacecraft to slam into it. On September 27, 4.44 a.m. IST, a small spacecraft DART (Double Asteroid Redirection Test) was aimed at a 160-metre-wide asteroid Dimorphos, which was orbiting a larger asteroid Didymos, both of which were circling the sun, 11.2 million kilometres from the earth. Since neither body would have come closer than about 6.4 million km of the earth in their lifetime, they did not pose any threat. However, DART was a test mission to see if this technique, known as kinetic impactor, would give the necessary 'nudge' to an asteroid and alter its course by a desired amount. After studying the two bodies for nearly 10 days, NASA announced that the course of the smaller asteroid has indeed been altered a little: initially, the orbit of Dimorphos around Didymos took 11 hours and 55 minutes. After the impact, a 32-minute alteration in its orbital period has taken place — it is now 11 hours and 23 minutes only. The reason for this test is to learn how to use the kinetic impactor technique to 'nudge' earth-bound asteroids out of the way, years before impact. This is not a last-minute effort. A word of caution: all asteroids are not similar, so more tests have to be done to perfect this technique.

The U.S. is not alone in attempting this. China has a plan to deflect a 40 m wide, earth-crossing asteroid named 2020PN1 by 2026. There is a need to develop this technique because an impact with even a small asteroid can have serious consequences. The Chicxulub crater is a reminder of the impact of a 10 km wide large asteroid that fell on the earth 66 million years ago and wiped out nearly 75% of plant and animal life. An impact with an asteroid even about 100 m wide can destroy a city the size of Chennai. The other question is whether this technique can be used to deflect asteroids bearing rich bounties of minerals and moving them to closer locations from where these can be harvested. No country has made this an explicit aim till now. This first move by NASA to alter the course of a celestial body is a perfect theme for fiction and film; most recently, the film "Don't Look Up" dealt with this theme directly. However, there are many more threats to life on earth, climate change being the most imminent and definite. It is to be hoped that this demonstration of the power of engineering and science can be extrapolated to 'kick-start' a move to avoid the drastic impact of such disasters too.

CHANDRAYAAN-2 GAUGES SODIUM CONTENT ON MOON'S SURFACE

This is the first effort to provide a global-scale measurement of sodium on the lunar surface using X-ray fluorescent spectra. The results have been published in a recent edition of The Astrophysical Journal.

A non-destructive way

X-ray fluorescence is commonly used to study the composition of materials in a non-destructive manner. When the sun gives out solar flares, a large amount of X-ray radiation falls on the moon, triggering X-ray fluorescence. The CLASS measures the energy of the X-ray photons coming from the moon and counts the total number. The energy of the photons indicates the atom (for instance, sodium atoms emit X-ray photons of 1.04 keV) and the intensity is a measure of how many atoms are present.



When compared to Earth, the moon is significantly depleted of volatile elements such as sodium. “The amount of volatiles on the moon today can be used to test formation scenarios of the Earth-Moon system. Sodium can be used as a tracer of the volatile history of the moon,” explains the scientists from the Space Astronomy group of ISRO’s U.R. Rao Satellite Centre.

New findings

Earlier moon missions, like Apollo-11, Luna and Chang’e-5, brought back rock samples. The amount of sodium in the rocks was precisely gauged. The new study by the Chandrayaan group shows that there is a thin veneer of sodium atoms that are weakly bound to the lunar surface apart from the minor quantities found in lunar rocks (as mentioned earlier).

These sodium atoms on the surface are liberated when enough energy is given to them by solar ultraviolet radiation and solar wind ions. The study shows a pattern in time that supports this, said the scientists. Sodium is the only element apart from potassium that can be observed through telescopes in the lunar atmosphere (its exosphere). This new map of sodium would enable understanding of the surface-exosphere connection.

“As the solar cycle is in its ascending phase, we expect more solar flares that would ensure a larger coverage of all elements on the moon by CLASS at the highest spatial resolution ever,” said the scientists.

PEACE, PRIZE, POLITICS

By choosing a Belarusian human rights campaigner and two civil liberty-focused organisations from Ukraine and Russia for this year’s Nobel Prize for Peace, the Norwegian Committee has once again offered its redoubtable support for voices that are critical of the authoritarianism and militarism of Moscow and its allies. This is the second year in a row that Russians who demand accountability and respect for human rights from authorities have been chosen for the Prize. In 2021, Dmitry Muratov, editor-in-chief of the Russian Novaya Gazeta, one of the few independent newspapers in Vladimir Putin’s Russia, was a co-winner of the Prize for his “efforts to safeguard freedom of expression”. This year, Memorial, an organisation that has been documenting alleged state abuses in Russia since 1987, shared the Prize with Ales Bialiatski, the Belarusian activist, and the Center for Civil Liberties (CCL) in Ukraine. Memorial is one of the few independent NGOs in Russia that continue to demand accountability from the country’s rulers. It has a database of both the victims and perpetrators of state abuses that date back to the Stalin era. Mr. Bialiatski, who is the founder of the rights group called Viasna (Spring), has been campaigning for democracy in Belarus since the 1980s. The CCL, which was founded to promote democracy in Ukraine, is known for documenting Russia’s alleged war crimes in Ukraine.

Of the three recipients, Mr. Bialiatski and Memorial continue to face the wrath of the state. Mr. Bialiatski was jailed from 2011 to 2014 by the regime of Aleksandr Lukashenko. When street protests broke out across the country in 2020 after the disputed presidential election in which Mr. Lukashenko “won” a sixth term, authorities arrested Mr. Bialiatski again. He is currently in jail without trial. Memorial, founded in the Soviet Union’s internal reform period, has had several run-ins with the Putin administration. Last year, the NGO was disbanded by a Moscow court and last week, a judge ruled in favour of the seizure of the organisation’s office by the authorities. CCL, founded in 2007, rose to prominence in Ukraine’s 2014 pro-western Maidan protests that brought down the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich. Since the February 24 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the CCL has been documenting Russia’s alleged atrocities. The Peace Prize has often



been criticised as a political award shorn of credibility, but it could strengthen the voices of peace and human rights globally.

DOES PALAEOGENOMICS EXPLAIN OUR ORIGINS?

The story so far:

The Nobel Prize for Physiology this year has been awarded to Svante Pääbo, Swedish geneticist, who pioneered the field of palaeogenomics, or the study of ancient hominins by extracting their DNA.

What is the significance of Pääbo's work?

Pääbo is the Director of the Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany and has, over three decades, uniquely threaded three scientific disciplines: palaeontology, genomics and evolution. The study of ancient humans has historically been limited to analysing their bone and objects around them such as weapons, utensils, tools and dwellings. Pääbo pioneered the use of DNA, the genetic blueprint present in all life, to examine questions about the relatedness of various ancient human species. He proved that Neanderthals, a cousin of the human species that evolved 1,00,000 years before humans, interbred with people and a fraction of their genes — about 1-4% — live on in those of European and Asian ancestry. Later on, Pääbo's lab, after analysing a 40,000-year-old finger bone from a Siberian cave, proved that it belonged to a new species of hominin called Denisova. This was the first time that a new species had been discovered based on DNA analysis and this species too had lived and interbred with humans.

How can DNA be extracted from fossils?

The challenge with extracting DNA from fossils is that it degrades fairly quickly and there is little usable material. Because such bones may have passed through several hands, the chances of it being contaminated by human as well as other bacterial DNA get higher. This has been one of the major stumbling blocks to analysing DNA from fossils. One of Pääbo's early forays was extracting DNA from a 2,500-year-old Egyptian mummy and while it caused a stir and helped his career, much later in life he said that the mummy-DNA was likely contaminated.

DNA is concentrated in two different compartments within the cell: the nucleus and mitochondria, the latter being the powerhouse of the cell. Nuclear DNA stores most of the genetic information, while the much smaller mitochondrial genome is present in thousands of copies and therefore more retrievable. In 1990, Pääbo, as a newly appointed Professor at the University of Munich, took the call to analyse DNA from Neanderthal mitochondria. With his techniques, Pääbo managed to sequence a region of mitochondrial DNA from a 40,000-year-old piece of bone. This was the first time a genome from an extinct human relative was pieced together. Subsequently, he managed to extract enough nuclear DNA from Neanderthal bones to publish the first Neanderthal genome sequence in 2010. This was significant considering that the first complete human genome was published only in 2003.

What has Pääbo's work shown?

Pääbo's most important contribution is demonstrating that ancient DNA can be reliably extracted, analysed and compared with that of other humans and primates to examine what parts of our DNA make one distinctly human or Neanderthal. Thanks to his work we know that Europeans and



Asians carry anywhere between 1%-4% of Neanderthal DNA and there is almost no Neanderthal DNA in those of purely African ancestry. Comparative analyses with the human genome demonstrated that the most recent common ancestor of Neanderthals and Homo sapiens lived around 8,00,000 years ago. In 2008, a 40,000 year-old fragment from a finger-bone, sourced from a Siberian cave in a region called Denisova, yielded DNA that, analysis from Pääbo's lab revealed, was from an entirely new species of hominin called Denisova. This was the first time that a new species had been discovered based on DNA analysis. Further analysis showed that they too had interbred with humans and that 6% of human genomes in parts of South East Asia are of Denisovan ancestry.

What are the implications of palaeogenomics?

The study of ancient DNA provides an independent way to test theories of evolution and the relatedness of population groups. In 2018, an analysis of DNA extracted from skeletons at Haryana's Rakhigarhi — reported to be a prominent Indus Valley civilisation site — provoked an old debate about the indigenesness of ancient Indian population. These fossils, about 4,500 years old, have better preserved DNA than those analysed in Pääbo's labs as they are about 10-times younger. The Rakhigarhi fossils showed that these Harappan denizens lacked ancestry from Central Asians or Iranian Farmers and stoked a debate on whether this proved or disproved 'Aryan migration.' Palaeogenomics also gives clues into disease. Researchers have analysed dental fossils to glean insights on dental infections.

Genome-wide association studies, where segments of DNA from species are compared, have found that Neanderthal DNA may be linked with autoimmune diseases, type 2 diabetes, and prostate cancer. A study co-authored by Svante Pääbo and Hugo Zeberg linked an increased risk of severe respiratory failure following COVID-19 with a set of genes that are inherited from Neanderthals and is present in 50% of South Asians and 16% of Europeans. "However, with respect to the current pandemic, it is clear that gene flow from Neanderthals has tragic consequences," they say in their paper published in Nature in September, 2020. The presence of Neanderthal and Denisovan DNA in people also raised questions on whether there are hard genetic distinctions between people and their extinct evolutionary cousins.

WHY EGYPT HISTORIANS WANTS THE UK TO RETURN THE 2,000-YEAR-OLD ROSETTA STONE

An object that helped create a new domain of history, is referenced in the name of an Apple translation software, and is the most-visited item at the British Museum is at the centre of demands by historians in Egypt. According to a Reuters report, the UK is being asked to return the Rosetta Stone, a large stone slab that has fascinated the world since its discovery around two centuries ago.

The calls also reflect the growing acceptance towards the idea of Western countries returning historically and culturally important artefacts taken largely from the global South during the colonial era. Many such objects are housed in various museums or owned by private collectors in the West.

Monica Hanna, acting Dean of the College of Archaeology in the Egyptian city of Aswan, told Reuters, "I am sure all these objects eventually are going to be restituted because the ethical code of museums is changing, it's just a matter of when." She added, "The stone is a symbol of cultural violence, the stone is a symbol of cultural imperialism."



What is the significance of the Rosetta Stone?

The Rosetta Stone is a large stone slab with inscriptions on it and is believed to be a piece of a bigger rock. It has inscriptions in three scripts, all of which convey a decree or public message. This is similar to how in Ancient India, King Ashoka ordered stambhas or edicts that had messages of Buddha's teachings and news about victory in a war inscribed. These were then placed throughout the kingdom for the public to see.

The Reuters report mentioned that when the representatives of the British Museum were contacted regarding the Stone's return, they said that of the 28 stelae or stones with inscriptions of the same decree discovered afterwards, 21 remain in Egypt.

"The British Museum greatly values positive collaborations with colleagues across Egypt," said the statement from a spokesperson.

But as the museum's own website states, the inscriptions themselves are as not important. "The Rosetta Stone is one of these copies, so not particularly important in its own right. The important thing for us is that the decree is inscribed three times, in hieroglyphs (suitable for a priestly decree), Demotic (the cursive Egyptian script used for daily purposes, meaning 'language of the people'), and Ancient Greek (the language of the administration – the rulers of Egypt at this point were Greco-Macedonian after Alexander the Great's conquest".

Therefore, the Rosetta Stone stands out for being the discovery that helped develop the specific field of ancient Egypt studies, Egyptology. Before it was found, there was no knowledge of what Egyptian hieroglyphs meant and how they were translated. But as the stone conveyed the same information in three languages, including Ancient Greek that was understood by scholars, information on hieroglyphics was finally within the grasp of modern historians.

How did the Rosetta Stone reach Britain?

According to the British Museum, the engraving was done during the reign of King Ptolemy V who ruled from 204–181 BC. This puts the stone's age at well over 2,000 years. It is believed to carry messages by some priests in support of the king. With time the stone, among other inscriptions, was displaced.

This stone was 'rediscovered' in the time of French king Napoleon Bonaparte, who launched a campaign in Egypt from 1798 to 1801 "with the intention of dominating the East Mediterranean and threatening the British hold on India", as per the Museum website. While details of its discovery are vague, it is said to have been found by Napoleon's soldiers accidentally in 1799 in the city of Rashid (called Rosetta by the French) in the Nile Delta.

On Napoleon's defeat later at the hands of the British, the Treaty of Alexandria (1801) led to its transfer and it has been at the British Museum since then.

While this current request is not backed by the government officially, such calls have been made before.

Dr Zahi Hawass, an Egyptologist and former Minister of State for Antiquities Affairs in Egypt, has repeatedly demanded the return of the Rosetta stone to Egyptian museums. He also modified this demand later and suggested that Britain loan the stone to Egypt for a few months, but the plan did not go through.



Often, the argument is that some countries might be unable to care for or hold onto high-value items. Dr Hawass told the BBC in 2009 that the response from some museums had been “not good”, and they questioned if it could be guaranteed that the artefacts would be returned at the end of the loans. “We are not pirates of the Caribbean. We are a civilised country. If I sign something I will do it...We have the right for our monuments to be shown,” he said.

However, a few requests have been getting approved of late by museums. According to a Reuters report, London’s Horniman Museum said in August this year that it would return 72 artefacts, including the Benin Bronzes that were looted from Benin City by British soldiers in 1897, to the Nigerian government.

Scotland’s Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum also signed a similar deal with India in the same month, which was “thought to be the first repatriation to India from a UK museum”, the BBC said. The seven items included 14th Century carvings and 11th Century stone door jams, that were stolen from shrines and temples in the 19th Century.

DOGS SNIFFING STRESSED HUMANS

The physiological processes associated with an acute psychological stress response produce changes in human breath and sweat that dogs can detect with an accuracy of 93.75%, according to a new study (PLOS ONE).

The researchers from Queen’s Belfast University collected samples of breath and sweat from non-smokers who had not recently eaten or drunk. Samples were collected both before and after a fast-paced arithmetic task, along with self-reported stress levels and objective physiological measures: heart rate (HR) and blood pressure (BP). Samples from 36 participants, who reported an increase in stress and experienced an increase in HR and BP because of the task, were shown to trained dogs within three hours of being collected.

As per the release, at testing, dogs were asked to find the participant’s stress sample while the same person’s relaxed sample was also in the line-up. Overall, dogs could detect and perform their alert behaviour on the sample taken during stress in 675 out of 720 trials, or 93.75% of the time.

CAN WE REVERSE DIABETES WITH DIET?

Recently, a 40-y-old man asked me, “doctor, can I reverse (permanently eliminate/cure) diabetes?” I stated, “reversal is a definitive word, let us just stick to remission (normalisation of blood glucose without use of medicines with no guarantee of permanent reversal)”. I further told him “I will now explain whether or not it can be applied to you.”

A decade earlier, reversal of diabetes was considered the ‘holy grail’ of medicine. Physicians dreamt about it but could not achieve it. Behind this failure was inadequate knowledge about physiology of diabetes. As research progressed, we started getting more insights about the role being played by the liver in generating and sustaining diabetes. When a person eats a lot of saturated fats and calories, liver fat cells rapidly increase in numbers, and when the liver is full of fat, it starts to leak creamy substances (known as free fatty acids) in the blood. Such cream has a great tendency to get deposited in muscle, pancreas, and heart arteries as well. Deposition in pancreas impairs functioning of vital insulin producing cells, thus critically decreasing in insulin levels in the body. The blood sugar rises and does not go down easily.



Having known this cascade of events now, the next big question was how to remove this creamy layer from various organs? Simple solution is take away the hand that feeds the cream! A nice experiment in the UK made it look all so easy and started the ball rolling for 'reversal of diabetes'. Ten years ago, 12 patients with diabetes were given very low calorie liquid meals (less than half of the calories that we require daily) for eight weeks under controlled conditions. Investigators were immensely surprised when blood sugar of all patients normalised within a couple of days. Half of the fat and cream from liver and pancreas rapidly disappeared in 4 to 6 weeks. Patients remained without medications for a short period of time.

An important question was if such remarkable results could be duplicated in free living people over a long period of time. Another study from the UK, carried out in patients living in community, employed the same principles of diet over one year. First participants were given severely restricted calories for 12-20 weeks, followed by food reintroduction, and then long-term weight loss maintenance. An interesting observation was that those who lost 10-15 kg weight normalised their blood glucose. Further, in some people this remission disappeared in about a year, and they were back to diabetic state. Since then, other experiments (and massive weight loss after bariatric surgery) have supported these observations.

Based on these studies elsewhere, many commercial clinics in India are offering "reversal of diabetes" to all patients with diabetes. This is an incorrect practice. An apt person for remission of diabetes by diet and lifestyle is the one who has been recently diagnosed, is clearly obese and willing for difficult and rigorous diet and lifestyle practices over long periods. Those with longstanding diabetes, with complications of diabetes, type 1 diabetes and pregnant women should not attempt such modalities.

Overall, about 10-20% of patients of diabetes may be good candidates for remission.

What are the modalities? Diet alone could be used as has been stated. It could be a very low calorie diet, or low calorie, low carbohydrates, high fat, or high protein diets. The primary aim is to lose a considerable amount of weight. Bariatric surgery is a remarkable modality because if patients are chosen carefully, there is 80-100% changes of remission after major weight loss. Currently, with incredible progress in antidiabetic medications, we have drugs and non-insulin injections which can produce substantial weight loss and remove fat/cream from organs, thus demonstrating potential for remission of diabetes.

Science has given us this great research, which must be applied judiciously; counselling to my patient continues. After evaluating his clinical profile, I considered him to be a correct candidate for attempting remission of diabetes. Then I tell him; "in this remission protocol the most crucial fact has not yet been written that your strong will to achieve, and then maintain this goal is the most important driver". That, unfortunately, is not the case with many individuals.

ADDRESS STIGMA IN MENTAL HEALTH, SAYS LANCET COMMISSION

On Monday, observed as World Mental Health Day, The Lancet released a new report calling for radical action to end stigma and discrimination in mental health, indicating that 90% of people living with mental health conditions feel negatively impacted by stigma and discrimination.

Further, 80% said stigma and discrimination can be worse than the condition itself. Additionally, 90% of those surveyed felt that media could play a major role in reducing stigma. The report was



the result of the labours of the new Lancet Commission on Ending Stigma and Discrimination in Mental Health.

As per the commission, stigma can “cause social exclusion and disempowerment of people with mental health conditions leading to discrimination and human rights violations, including problems in accessing healthcare, challenges in securing employment, and increased likelihood of health complications leading to early death”.

Thara Rangaswamy, The Lancet commissioner and co-founder, Schizophrenia Research Foundation, Chennai, said though there is a gradual reduction of stigma in the country, it continues to be a real and present problem. She said women with a diagnosis of severe mental disorder and their family members face more stigma which has ramifications for marriage and employment. She also made a mention of the Indian visual media that still perpetuate mental illnesses negatively.

The commission called for immediate action from governments, international organisations, healthcare provider and media organisations, along with active contributions from people with lived experience, to work together to eliminate mental health stigma. For instance, it is recommended that countries take action to decriminalise suicide, therefore reducing the stigma around it. Employers are to promote full access to educational opportunities, work participation and return-to-work programmes for people with mental health conditions, and the school curriculum should include sessions to improve understanding of mental health conditions.

WHY KAPIL DEV IS WRONG: MENTAL HEALTH IS NOT A FIRST-WORLD PROBLEM

There are takeaways for young students from Kapil Dev’s talk at an event organised by a private educational institute. Arguably one of India’s biggest sporting stars, Dev talks of how building character is as important as getting high marks and respecting teachers. He weighs in on how one should be true to oneself and why talent can only blossom if backed by passion and hard work.

However, the short clip doing the rounds on social media does not contain his well-meaning advice to the next generation. In the edited video, which surfaced on Twitter on the eve of World Mental Health Day, the Haryana Hurricane downplays the adverse impact of pressure on mental well-being, be it on the cricket field or the examination hall.

In the viral video, he sounded like someone who lives under a rock. When asked by badminton star Saina Nehwal what it means to be a champion, Kapil put his foot in his mouth.

“I think I had a passion to play... I will change the subject slightly. Today, on TV I hear a lot about players talking about facing so much pressure when playing the IPL. I want to tell them one thing. Don’t play then.”

(Applause from the audience, including men in suits who run student coaching centres).

“What is pressure? If a player has passion, there should not be pressure... this American word ‘pressure’, ‘depression’, I don’t understand these things. I am a farmer and I played to enjoy and in enjoyment, there can’t be pressure”.

(Applause again).



He then waded into academics.

“I went to this school and the children in Class XI and Class XII said we face a lot of pressure. I said ok, even you face pressure? They study in air-conditioned schools, parents pay their fees, teachers can't hit them but they feel the pressure. In my time, what was pressure... teacher used to first hit and then used to ask. Can teachers even touch a student today? I tell them (students) to change this pressure to fun, pressure is a very wrong word.”

Kapil says he looked forward to playing in front of packed crowds instead of letting the stadium pressure get to him as hundreds of students listen to his every word intently as they step into a dog-eat-dog world.

But what the gifted cricketer with the ability to turn around a game with bat and ball forgot is that not everyone is a Kapil Dev. His famous 175, when India was 17 for 5 versus Zimbabwe in the World Cup, is still talked about as an example of nerves of steel. He may have not cracked under pressure but encouraging others, be it the world's best cricketers or students appearing for exams to bottle up stress, sends out a dangerous message.

In this day and age when mental health is discussed in dressing rooms, locker rooms and in school staff rooms, Kapil's words are insensitive and not in tune with the times. Seemingly indestructible players like Virat Kohli and Ben Stokes taking breaks to prioritise their well-being, shows pure passion for the game can't heal a weary mind.

Suffering a panic attack at dawn when sitting on the bathroom floor was Stokes' nadir, Kohli has admitted to faking intensity when he was down in the dumps. Stepping back, taking a month-long break and not touching a bat during that time has helped Kohli find a better mental space.

By asking modern players to wear passion as an armour day in and day out and telling students to get on with it, Kapil is discouraging them from seeking professional help. Kapil has also ignored the fact that cricket has changed drastically since he hung up his boots. Not only is the schedule more taxing but the scrutiny is unforgiving, thanks to social media.

There is no off-season anymore with three formats being played right around the year. Constantly being on the road — playing, training, travelling — can take its toll both mentally and physically. The big names have set an example by taking time out. But those yet to seal their spots, be it international cricket or T20 leagues, think twice before taking a break lest someone takes their place or they lose out on a lucrative IPL contract at the next auction.

An unqualified Kapil lecturing on depression and mocking psychological stress as a first-world problem is a disservice to those slowly opening up about their mental health. Sportspeople these days also have to deal with the double-edged sword called social media. Most of them have lakhs of followers, a captive market they can tap to endorse products but the fan following cuts both ways. Being trolled after a poor day on the field can give even the most assured of players sleepless nights and affect their peace of mind.

Kapil Dev should be thanking his stars there were no keyboard warriors when he overstayed his welcome in quest of the world record for most Test wickets or when he broke down on national television as match-fixing allegations swirled.

The next time he is on the dias, Kapil should remember to think before talking. For, that is as important as wearing pads before walking out to the middle.