



**DreamIAS**

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CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

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## INTERNATIONAL

### COMEBACK BID

What Donald Trump wanted to do was to make a grand announcement of his presidential bid, riding an expected Republican “red wave” that would have shattered the Democratic strongholds in the mid-term elections. But what he could pull off was an announcement at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida with much less fanfare and amid questions from within the party about his leadership after the GOP’s less-than-expected performance. The Republicans managed to wrest control of the House of Representatives from the Democrats, but failed to flip the Senate — far from a red wave. Several Republican lawmakers publicly blamed him for the party’s disappointing performance, while some others said Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who was re-elected with a landslide in the one-time swing State, is the party’s best bet for 2024. But Mr. Trump, who refused to recognise the 2020 results, does not seem to care or want to wait. At Mar-a-Lago, the twice-impeached (but not convicted) former President set the campaign tone with familiar slogans such as “make America great and glorious once again”. He painted a bleak picture about the U.S. under President Joe Biden (“America is being invaded by immigrants”) and projected himself as a saviour.

It is too early to say whether the GOP would pick Mr. Trump as its 2024 candidate; he is facing legal and political challenges. His business dealings are under the scanner and his alleged role in instigating the 2021 U.S. Capitol assault and other attempts to undermine the 2020 poll results are being probed. Separately, there is a criminal investigation by the Justice Department into classified files found at his resort. Besides, the mid-term poll results have showed his fading aura, which could strengthen the hands of his opponents. But still, it would be a mistake to rule him out so early. He has effectively transformed the GOP during his reign. What used to be a free market conservative party is now attracting more white working class voters. He has also shaped the party’s view on China, trade, globalisation, and immigration. Even his party rivals cannot ignore these issues during the campaign. And he has proved that he has a knack to turn opportunities into momentum. But at the same time, his refusal to accept the 2020 poll results, his impulsive, personalised ruling style and unsavoury attacks on opponents, and attempts to bend institutions have all posed challenges to American democracy. Mr. Trump has not changed his ways or views since his 2020 defeat. Rather, he plans to double down on his right-wing rhetoric to avenge his loss and take the White House back. Choppy days lie ahead for American democracy.

### POLAND SAYS MISSILE THAT HIT IT WAS UKRAINIAN STRAY

A missile that hit Poland was probably a stray fired by Ukraine’s air defences and not a Russian strike, Poland and NATO said on Wednesday, easing global concern that the war in Ukraine could spill across the border.

Nevertheless, NATO’s chief said Moscow, not Kyiv, was ultimately to blame, for starting the war in the first place and launching the attack that triggered Ukraine’s defences.

NATO Ambassadors were holding emergency talks to respond to the blast on Tuesday that killed two people at a grain facility in Poland near the Ukrainian border, the war’s first deadly spillover onto the territory of the Western military alliance.



“From the information that we and our allies have, it was an S-300 rocket made in the Soviet Union, an old rocket and there is no evidence that it was launched by the Russian side,” Polish President Andrzej Duda said. “It is highly probable that it was fired by Ukrainian anti-aircraft defence.”

Mr. Stoltenberg also said it was likely a Ukrainian air defence missile.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said Warsaw might not need to activate Article 4 of NATO’s treaty, which calls for consultations when a member country considers its security under threat. Earlier, U.S. President Joe Biden said the missile was unlikely to have been fired from Russia.

#### **Russian strikes**

The incident occurred while Russia was firing scores of missiles at cities across Ukraine.

Kyiv says it shot down most of the incoming Russian missiles with its own air defence missiles. Ukraine’s Volyn region, just across the border from Poland, was one of the many Ukraine says was targeted by Russia’s countrywide attacks. The Russian Defence Ministry said none of its missiles had struck closer than 35 km from the Polish border, and that photos of the wreckage in Poland showed elements of a Ukrainian S-300 air defence missile.

Asked whether it was too early to say if the missile was fired from Russia, Mr. Biden said: “There is preliminary information that contests that. I don’t want to say that until we completely investigate it, but it is unlikely in the lines of the trajectory that it was fired from Russia, but we’ll see.” The Kremlin said on Wednesday that some countries had made “baseless statements” about the incident, but that Washington had been comparatively restrained.

#### **Zelensky’s accusation**

Spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that Russia had nothing to do with the incident, which he said had been caused by an S-300 air defence system.

In a tweet issued hours after the incident, Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky blamed it on “Russian missile terror”. There was no immediate Ukrainian response on Wednesday to the suggestions that it was a Ukrainian stray.”

### **WHY HAS FRANCE ENDED ITS MILITARY OPERATIONS IN SAHEL?**

#### **The story so far:**

On November 9, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the end of the decade-long Operation Barkhane in Africa. Mr. Macron said that, “Our military support for African countries will continue, but according to new principles that we have defined with them.”

#### **What is Operation Barkhane?**

France began its military operations in Sahel in January 2013. Titled Operation Serval, it was limited to targeting Islamic extremists linked to al-Qaeda who took control of northern Mali. However, in 2014, the mission was scaled up, renamed Operation Barkhane and was aimed at counter-terrorism. The objective was to assist local armed forces to prevent the resurgence of



non-state armed groups across the Sahel region. Around 4,500 French personnel were deployed with the local joint counter-terrorism force.

#### **Has France achieved its objectives?**

French operations had two objectives in the Sahel. First, to liberate Mali from the insurgency in the north and second, to see through counter-terrorism operations in West Africa, including the neutralisation of key terrorists.

In its major successes, France regained Mali's northern regions from the extremists in 2014 through Operation Serval. In 2020, Abdel Malek Droukdel and Bah Ag Moussa, key leaders of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Qaeda-affiliate Groupe de Soutien à l'Islam et aux Musulmans were killed in French-led operations. The 2014 success led to the inception of Operation Barkhane aimed at counter-terrorism in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Chad. However, Operation Barkhane saw a series of failures.

First the region, despite the operation, witnessed the growth of new groups affiliated to terrorist organisations, including the Islamic State.

Second, the failure of the operation led to a humanitarian crisis. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), the violence had claimed 5,450 lives across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in just the first half of 2022, recording a significant increase from the previous years. Further, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies recorded 2,005 incidents of Islamist violence in the Sahel in 2021, compared to the 1,180 incidents in the previous year. Third, Operation Barkhane's unfulfilled objective to resolve the region's insurgencies sparked an increase in civilian support to the military and has contributed to the subsequent political uncertainties in the Sahel.

#### **Why did Mr. Macron pull out?**

First, France's relations with the military rulers grew hostile after a series of coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea. Relations between France and Mali soured after the latter expelled the French ambassador when he disagreed with the junta's decision to remain in power until 2025. In addition, France was contemptuous about Malian authorities negotiating a peace deal with insurgent groups. Secondly, since Operation Barkhane was widely perceived as a failure, anti-French sentiments and questions over France's intentions flared up, with a further demand for France's withdrawal from the region.

Finally, France, and other Western countries claim that the Wagner Group, a private military company close to the Kremlin, is playing a major role in fuelling the insurgency and discrediting French withdrawal. For Africa, the Wagner Group is an alternative that engages with military governments, without abiding to human rights and democratic standards.

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BALI G-20 SUMMIT

#### **The story so far:**

On Tuesday, leaders of the G-20 nations will gather at Bali's Nusa Dua resort for the 17th summit of the world's most advanced economies. G-20 countries represent 85% of the global GDP, 75% of global trade and 66% of the world population. While the focus will be on post-pandemic recovery and dealing with energy and food security impacted by the Russian war in Ukraine, much



interest will be around which leaders choose to hold bilateral summits on the sidelines. Notable by his absence is Russian President Vladimir Putin, who had earlier accepted Indonesian host President Joko Widodo's invitation, but as the war with Ukraine continues, has sent his Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to represent Russia.

#### **What is the agenda of this summit?**

The motto for this G-20 is Recover Together, Recover Stronger. President Jokowi has made recovering from the pandemic a major focus despite geopolitical tensions overshadowing the summit. The leaders will engage in discussions over three sessions: on Food and Energy security, Health Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, and Digital Transformation. In addition, to highlight the concerns over climate change issues, Mr. Jokowi will lead his guests to the Indonesian mangroves of Taman Hutan Raya, which have been restored over a 30-year project covering nearly 700 acres. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is also set to spell out his agenda for the year ahead under India's G-20 presidency, with special focus on the Global South and the problems it is facing due to geopolitical tensions, food and fuel shortages.

#### **What makes this G-20 different from others?**

For the world, this is the first G-20 since Russia began the war in Ukraine and the west imposed sanctions on Russia. Efforts will be made to build global consensus over issues that have clearly divided the world. For India, the importance of the summit of the world's most advanced economies is that it is India's turn to host the summit next. Mr. Modi will receive a handover from the Indonesian President Joko Widodo after which India will assume the presidency on December 1. Additionally, this is only the second time Chinese President Xi Jinping has travelled abroad since the COVID pandemic, and the first time since he was re-elected at China's Party Congress last month.

#### **Who all are attending and who is not?**

The summit in Bali will be attended by leaders of Argentina, Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, the U.K. and the U.S. Spain is a permanent invitee, and the special invitees this year also include leaders of Cambodia, Fiji, the Netherlands, Rwanda, Senegal, Singapore, Suriname and UAE. In addition, heads of several international agencies like the UN, the IMF, ASEAN, the African Union will attend the 2022 G-20. The Indonesian President has also invited the Ukrainian President to address the summit virtually, while Russian President Putin, and leaders of Mexico and Brazil (which is in a leadership transition), will not attend the summit.

#### **What do we know about the bilateral meetings?**

All eyes will also be on the bilateral summits happening by the sidelines — including the Biden-Xi summit, held on Monday at a time when U.S.-China tensions are at a high. While neither Delhi nor Beijing have confirmed a Modi-Xi meeting, any interaction between the two leaders will be the first since the military stand-off at the Line of Actual Control which began in April 2020. Mr. Modi is expected to meet many of the G-20 leaders and others, and will invite them to next year's summit in India.

#### **Why was the G-20 created?**

Created in 1999 as an acceptable medium between the more "elitist" G-7 (then the G-8), and the more unwieldy 38-member Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),



the G-20 was conceived in a more unified, post-Soviet era, when western economies made the rules, China was just on the rise and Russia was still recovering from its breakup. Over the past two decades, the global economic balance has shifted, and the G-20 has been seen as a more representative and egalitarian grouping of global leadership, and was particularly useful in steering the global economy after the global financing crisis and banking collapse of 2008. Significantly, next year the “Troika” of G-20 will be made up of emerging economies for the first time with India, Indonesia and Brazil — an indicator of the shift in the global economic agenda towards the Global South.

## GETTING READY

With the handover of the gavel from Indonesian President Joko Widodo, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took over leadership of the G-20 process on Wednesday, which will position India at the helm of forming consensus among the most advanced economies over the next year. India’s presidency, which begins on December 1, comes at a time when the world faces economic hardships and global recessionary trends. In addition, the political polarisation between the U.S. and European Union, and Russia, all G-20 members, will make every meeting that India will host fraught with tensions. But the G-20 summit in Bali provided some positive signals. Despite fears that G-20 members would fail to produce a joint statement, Sherpas of each delegation persevered to reach a 17-page consensus document. Expectedly, there was trouble over the paragraphs on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. India’s role in tempering some of the language during the negotiations has been highlighted, and Mr. Modi’s phrase at the SCO summit in September, that this is “not an era of war”, was included in the final statement. The majority of the G-20 leadership was not in favour of equivocating on the conflict, as India and a few other countries have been doing, and the joint communique said that “most members strongly condemned the war in Ukraine”. It was a positive sign that while Russia protested the statement, its Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was present, and President Putin’s absence actually contributed to a more manageable summit for Indonesia.

The fact that Mr. Modi also extended his hand to Chinese President Xi Jinping during the banquet is in contrast to their stony demeanour at the SCO summit in September and could signal a thaw in talks between them for the first time since the LAC standoff began in 2020. While Mr. Modi may have to explain the shift domestically, his decision to speak to the Chinese President also reflects the practical reality that India, as host of the G-20 and the SCO in 2023, will need to ensure the full participation of those groupings, that include rivals such as China and Pakistan. More such pragmatism will be necessary for India in its year of the G-20 presidency, with about 200 meetings planned. To achieve this New Delhi will have to bring on board all countries with its vision for the forum’s future — steering the world’s economic leadership through this difficult phase, and preparing for future perils including climate change and global warming, food and energy shortages, terrorism and conflict, and bridging the digital divide.

## HALTING THE SLIDE

The United States and China have agreed to more “responsibly” manage their increasingly fractious relations, following a meeting between Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping. In their first face-to-face meeting, since Mr. Biden assumed the U.S. presidency, in Bali on November 14, 2022 ahead of the G-20 summit, they appeared to agree that the downward slide in relations, especially in the wake of U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August, suited neither side. The biggest takeaway is an agreement that “competition should not veer into conflict” and that



both must, as the White House put it in a statement, “manage the competition responsibly and maintain open lines of communication”. Mr. Xi echoed that sentiment by saying “relations should not be a zero-sum game where one side out-competes or thrives at the expense of the other”. To that end, both sides have reopened dialogues that remained frozen since Ms. Pelosi’s Taiwan visit, starting with working together on climate change, a key challenge that cannot be addressed without the world’s two biggest polluters. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken will now travel to China, while other suspended joint working groups, including on global economic stability, debt relief, food security and health security, are likely to resume.

While the resumption in contact is certainly significant, it is, however, only a first and tentative step towards stabilising an increasingly fraught relationship; none of the substantive differences has been resolved. On trade, Mr. Xi noted China’s opposition to “starting a trade war or a technology war, building walls and barriers, pushing for decoupling and severing supply chains”, reflecting Beijing’s displeasure at Washington’s latest export controls on chips, which have dealt a hammer blow to its semiconductor ambitions. Human rights is another sticking point. Mr. Biden “raised concerns” about Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, while Mr. Xi retorted that “no country has a perfect democratic system” and “just as the United States has American-style democracy, China has Chinese-style democracy”. The biggest factor, however, remains the Taiwan question. While Mr. Biden assured Mr. Xi that there was no change in the “one China policy”, the view in Beijing is that the U.S. has been gradually “hollowing out” its Taiwan commitments. Should Ms. Pelosi’s likely successor, Republican leader Kevin McCarthy, go ahead with his already declared plan to visit Taiwan, relations may yet again be plunged into crisis. While the thaw in ties between the world’s two biggest powers will be welcomed in most Asian capitals that are wary of a brewing Cold War, the respite may yet turn out to be brief.

#### QATAR, THIRD-WORST WORLD CUP HOST IN TERMS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

With just days to go before the football World Cup begins, Qatar, the host country, and FIFA are embroiled in controversy. Since 2013, when Doha won the bid to host the World Cup, rights groups have called out Qatar’s poor human rights record, particularly on LGBT rights, civil liberties and treatment of migrant workers. Footballers and fans have expressed anger and disappointment at FIFA, and more so after the body issued a statement recently asking the 32 participating nations to “now focus on football.”

The Australian team released a video condemning Qatar’s human rights violations. The Denmark team will wear an all-black kit. England’s star player, Harry Kane, and captains of European teams will wear ‘OneLove’ armbands. Recently, fans at a Dortmund match in Germany unravelled a massive banner which read ‘Boycott Qatar 2022’. Pop star Dua Lipa distanced herself from the tournament, saying she will not be performing at the opening ceremony and looks forward to “visiting Qatar when it has fulfilled all the human rights pledges it made when it won the right to host the World Cup.”

The V-Dem Institute’s human rights index quantifies the human rights record of a country where 0 indicates ‘least rights’ and 1 indicates ‘most rights’. The index measures the extent to which people are free from government torture, political killings, and forced labour; have property rights; and enjoy the freedoms of movement, religion, expression and association. The 2006 World Cup was conducted in Germany, which scored 0.97 on the index that year. Qatar’s human rights record is the third worst in history for a host. For Qatar, the 2021 figures have been considered as the 2022 numbers have not been published yet. Qatar is only behind Argentina, which hosted the World Cup in 1978, and Italy, which was the host in 1934. The military junta, which was in power



in Argentina in 1978, suppressed civil rights and restricted freedom. In 1934, the second World Cup took place in Benito Mussolini's Italy.

Qatar also featured at the bottom of several other humanitarian indicators. The scores of Qatar, along with those of Russia, are notably low on civil liberties, private civil liberties, equal rights protection, and freedom of expression.

Even the previous tournament, held in Russia, faced scrutiny. Russia ranks the fourth-worst host on the human rights count. However, Qatari officials say the vilification they are facing is worse than what was seen in the past and have denounced the "hypocrisy" of it. Responding to Germany's criticism in an interview with a German newspaper, Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani said, "On the one side, the German population is misinformed by government politicians; on the other, the government has no problem with us when it comes to energy partnerships or investments." Together, the nations have spent \$4.2 billion for importing mineral oil and fuel from Qatar in 2021. Qatar was also among the top 10 sources of oil for England and Belgium last year.



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## NATION

### INDIA TO HOST TERROR FUNDING MEET: SIGNIFICANCE, OBJECTIVES

India will host the Third No Money for Terror (NMFT) Conference on November 18-19. Delegates from 75 countries and international bodies are expected to attend the event, which will take up ways to combat global terrorist financing.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to inaugurate the conference, with Union Home Minister Amit Shah among the attendees.

#### **What is the Third No Money for Terror conference?**

The NMFT started in 2018 as an initiative of the French government which had, in 1989, laid the foundation of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the international body at the forefront of combating money laundering and terrorist financing.

Just like the FATF, which earlier focused only on money laundering but expanded to include terrorist financing after the 9/11 attacks, the continuing activities of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, despite territorial defeats in Syria-Iraq and Afghanistan respectively, necessitated the NMFT conference.

In fact, the 2018 event was titled “International conference on combating the financing of Daesh and Al-Qaeda (Paris, 25-26 April 2018)”.

#### **The Indian experience**

India has largely articulated its “zero tolerance approach” towards terrorism in these conferences and tried to attract the attention to the cross-border terrorism from Pakistan.

In the 2019 conference, India called for a “united global effort against all those who support terror or help generate finances for terror”. India pointed out how terror groups are active on social media and that undermines any ban the United Nations (UN) might place.

It called on nations to expedite the finalisation of a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism under the UN and asked for FATF Standards to be effectively enforced. Given its experience of China blocking its push for sanctions against Pakistan-based terror groups and terrorists, it called for UN listings and FATF to not be politicised.

It also asked the international community to initiate discussion on ‘Countering Financing of Radicalisation (CFR)’, which would prevent radicalisation, an essential prerequisite of terrorism.

#### **Agenda for 2022 terror conference**

India was supposed to host the conference in 2020, but it was postponed due to the pandemic. The agenda for the NMFT 2022 includes use of virtual assets and crowdfunding platforms by terrorist entities, their use of the dark web, the links between terror financing and legitimate economic activities, and payment intermediaries.

It is largely a build-up on concerns raised during the Interpol Conference and UN General Assembly’s Counter Terrorism Committee Conference held in Delhi recently.



Sources told The Indian Express that India will discuss the misuse of non-profit organisations and non-financial businesses and professions in terror financing, as well as such financing through the Money Transfer Service Scheme and hawala networks.

India will also focus on “the challenges faced by investigation agencies while probing terror financing crimes, the sharing of information among financial intelligence units, and recent trends in combating terror financing/money laundering risks”.

#### EXTRA-REGIONAL FISHING FLEETS PRESENT IN INDIAN OCEAN: NAVY

More than 200 Chinese fishing vessels have been monitored in the Indian Ocean in the first half of this year, according to the Indian Navy, even as illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing continues to rise beyond India’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Most of the illegal activities are found in the northern Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Such fishing depletes fish stocks, destroys marine habitats, puts fishermen at a disadvantage and affects coastal communities, especially in developing countries.

Vessels from China, European Union countries and other nations from outside the region were observed to be fishing in the Indian Ocean, the Navy said in its written reply to queries from The Hindu.

“The presence of extra-regional distant water fishing fleets has been monitored by the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC). Chinese fishing vessels numbering 200 to 250 have been monitored in the Indian Ocean, with a large concentration in the northern Indian Ocean,” said the Navy, in its written response, without giving any details of specific occurrences. “A total of 392 reported incidents of IUU fishing were monitored in 2021 compared to 379 in 2020 in the Indian Ocean.”

As reported earlier, there has been a growing incidence of Chinese deep-sea fishing trawlers in the Indian Ocean, in addition to an overall rise of China’s maritime presence in the region.

Two Chinese research vessels which can track missile tests are also currently in the IOR.

Chinese deep-sea trawlers have been a matter of concern for countries in the region, including India, as they are operating far from the Chinese coast and impacting local marine ecology. For instance, between 2015 and 2019, on an average, at least 500 Chinese deep-sea trawlers were present in the region.

#### **Unregistered vessels**

In a changing pattern, there is now a huge surge in unregistered Chinese fishing vessels among those operating in the IOR, it has been learnt.

An official in the know said that in the last couple of months, close to 140 Chinese fishing vessels have been monitored carrying out fishing beyond India’s EEZ, in the North Western IOR. “However, only approximately one-third of these had licences for such activities, which borders on the lines of being categorised as IUU,” the official stated.

As per United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), coastal nations are responsible for addressing IUU fishing issues within their respective EEZ. There are regional fisheries management organisations such as the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission and the Southern Indian



Ocean Fisheries Agreement operating under the mandate of UNCLOS as regulatory bodies to monitor IUU fishing on the high seas.

#### **Joint Quad monitoring**

Recognising the impact of such fishing which can lead to the depletion of fish stocks affecting marine ecology, the Quad, comprising India, Australia, Japan and U.S., in May 2022 announced a major regional effort within the ambit of the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA).

It aims to provide a more accurate maritime picture of “near-real-time” activities in the region. “It (IPMDA) is expected to catalyse joint efforts of India and other Quad partners towards addressing IUU in Indo-Pacific region,” the Navy said.

All vessel movements on the high seas are monitored by the Indian Navy’s IMAC in Gurugram and the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), which is co-located with it. IFC-IOR has been collaborating with other regional monitoring centres across the globe to enhance maritime safety and security, including efforts to monitor IUU, the Navy said, adding that it “undertakes satellite monitoring of vessels operating in the IOR to track such vessels.”

There are two main regulations globally on IUU fishing: the Cape Town Agreement and the Agreement on Ports State Measures. So far, India is not a signatory of either agreement.

Fishing vessels across the world are supposed to have vessel management systems installed which not only identify their position, but also requires them to record the volume and location of their catch, helping to tackle the issue of IUU fishing.

#### **TROOPS IN EASTERN LADAKH GET 3D-PRINTED HABITATS, DEFENCES**

As the stand-off began with China in eastern Ladakh in 2020 and the Army mobilised thousands of troops to the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the Corps of Engineers used 3D printing to construct 22,000 temperature-controlled, re-locatable habitat in the high-altitude areas, according to sources in the security establishment.

On the connectivity front, forward areas of Leh will have all-weather connectivity, with an alternate axis under construction, by 2026 boosting the Army’s movement and sustenance to forward areas, a source said.

“With progress on the alternate axis, we will have 365-day connectivity into Leh. It will be a big boost to our sustenance and logistics of the Army in the Ladakh sector,” one source said on Tuesday. “Work on 4.1 km long Shinkun La tunnel which will start shortly and the planned target is 2026, we should have the tunnel and entire axis coming through. Then it will be 365 days,” the source said.

#### **Continuous access**

Elaborating, the source said Atal tunnel provides unhindered access to Lahaul and Spiti valley and beyond that three more tunnels are required to be constructed, Baralacha La, La Chung La and Tanglang La tunnels, with total distance being approximately 35 km.

A road will provide alternative connectivity to western Ladakh and the Zaskar Valley directly from the Manali axis. It is a 298-km National High Double Lane (NHDL) specification road and is



65% completed. The road also includes the 4.1 km twin tube Shinkun La tunnel for providing all weather connectivity, officials noted.

Atal tunnel inaugurated in October 2020 was designed for 3,000 passenger cars per day but almost 7,500 vehicles are crossing it everyday.

Work on the 255 km long strategic Darbuk-Skyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) road is complete. The 35 bridges on it are currently being upgraded to Class-70 specifications, which will allow them to handle heavy tanks and artillery. The upgradation is expected to be completed in 1-2 years, the source said.

#### **Solar panels, fuel cells**

Sources said that in addition to 3D printing habitat, the Army's Corps of Engineers in consultation with Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar came up with 3D printed permanent defences for forward areas. Trials conducted in the deserts in Western sector have been successful and are now being implemented in the Northern borders as well, sources said. The 3D printed defences can take direct hit from T-90 tank from 100 metres away and can be constructed in a much shorter time frame compared to regular defensive bunkers, the source said.

Habitat and technical storage to include assets for 22,000 troops and approximately 450 A-vehicles, tanks and guns have been constructed in the last two years, the source said on the overall effort during the stand-off.

In addition to better habitat, solar panels and fuel cells have been deployed to make it sustainable, sources added.

Infrastructure development has gained urgency given China's massive expansion along the LAC since the stand-off which includes, roads, habitat, airfields and ammunition dumps among others. Referring to this Army chief Gen. Manoj Pande said last week that infrastructure development, that is going on "unabated" adding there are roads, helipads, airfields including roads right up to the passes.

### **INDIA DEPLOYS NEW DOCKS, UPGRADES SPEEDBOATS FOR PANGONG TSO PATROL**

The Army has deployed new landing docks and speedboats for patrolling on the Pangong Tso in eastern Ladakh, matching the Chinese deployments on the lake. This is part of an overall capability enhancement and infrastructure development taken up by India since the 2020 stand-off to plug deficiencies and catch up with the Chinese build-up along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The landing crafts are capable of carrying 35 troops or one jeep and 12 personnel, while the speedboats can reach speeds of 35 knots, the source stated.

The new landing crafts have also been deployed at Sir Creek in Gujarat facing Pakistan, sources stated. Pangong Tso has been an area of constant friction between India and China for a long time. India holds one-third of the 135-km-long boomerang shaped lake. The lake, a glacial melt, has mountain spurs of the Chang Chenmo range jutting down referred to as 'fingers' and the brackish water lake freezes in winter. India has always held until Finger 4 while it claims till Finger 8, which is where the Indian perception of the LAC lies. The north bank of the lake, which has a much more higher difference in perception of the LAC than the south bank, was the initial site of the clash in May 2020, the beginning of the stand-off. The Indian Army has a permanent position near Finger 3.



## MALADY AND REMEDY

The collegium system of making appointments to the higher judiciary has come under focus, largely due to critical remarks made by Union Law Minister Kiren Rijju. A lawyer has now formally approached the Supreme Court for reconsideration of its 2015 judgment striking down the Constitution amendment and the law creating a National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC). While the petition will be “listed in due course”, there is another aspect that flags the tension between the Government and the judiciary over judicial appointments. A Bench of the Court voiced its displeasure over the Government delaying its recommendations for appointment, as well as ignoring names that had been reiterated twice or even thrice. The result was that lawyers whose names had been recommended for appointment had withdrawn their consent to be judges. The Bench was forced to observe that keeping the recommendations on hold was “some sort of a device to compel these persons to withdraw their names”. The Government’s keenness to wrest back the power to make judicial appointments from the judiciary is clear. However, it is doubtful whether this can be achieved by a review petition. The 4:1 verdict can only be reviewed by a Bench of equal strength, and the Government has not sought a review all these years. Mr. Rijju did say, as part of his series of comments critical of the collegium system, that the Government had accepted the decision, but added that it could not be silent forever over the opaqueness and lack of accountability in the system.

Much of the criticism heaped upon the collegium system is not unfounded. It is opaque, it does limit the zone of consideration to those known to its members and judges who are consulted on appointments, and there is no indication that it is conducive to attracting the best legal talent. Some maladies it was supposed to remedy — mainly, the perception about the executive’s influence over the judiciary — persist. Even the judgment that struck down the 99th Constitution Amendment and the NJAC Act accepted that there were flaws, but the majority chose to retain the collegium system until it was improved. The exercise to improve it was also abandoned soon. However, if the Government is really keen to bring about a change, the petulant response of stalling appointments is not the way. It has to work towards an alternative mechanism, one that does not have the perceived infirmities that led to the invalidation of the earlier law. The NJAC mechanism enabled the outnumbering of judicial members by executive nominees. A better system than the present one should avoid such pitfalls in the name of executive primacy in judicial appointments.

## A SENSE OF AN ENDING

The release of the six remaining convicts in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case marks the end of a tragic episode that began with India’s disastrous involvement in Sri Lanka’s internal strife in the 1980s. The assassination in May 1991, ordered by the LTTE leadership and carried out by a suicide bomber, caused revulsion. However, over time, the prolonged incarceration of the seven persons ultimately found guilty evoked some public sympathy. Political parties in Tamil Nadu campaigned for the release of the four convicts on death row and three serving life terms. The Supreme Court commuted the death sentences to life in 2014. A resolution adopted by the Tamil Nadu Cabinet in 2018 for releasing them under Article 161 of the Constitution was not acted upon by the then Governor for a long time. Ultimately, he forwarded it to the Centre for its opinion. The Court, earlier this year, found no constitutional basis for the Governor’s action and invoked its extraordinary powers to order the release of A.G. Perarivalan. The same benefit has now been extended to others. While their release is no occasion to celebrate, contrary to what sections of the media and the political class seem to believe, it is not one for lamentation either. The plot’s



masterminds are dead and only mid-level operatives and some local collaborators were apprehended. A sense that 31 years of imprisonment is punishment enough does indeed prevail.

Their release is the culmination of due process in a vibrant legal system that is not without its flaws. A chilling trial court verdict that sentenced all 26 available accused to death in 1998 did not impress the Supreme Court. Based on a calmer appraisal of evidence, its 1999 judgment acquitted 19 of them of conspiracy charges, resulting in their release. Of the remaining seven, four were sentenced to death, and three to life. Nalini, recruited into the plot as a local chaperone to the potential suicide bombers, got the benefit of commutation in 2000 itself. So too did Ravichandran, who had hoped to lead an armed separatist movement in Tamil Nadu with the LTTE's help. The prison system, too, proved its benign side. Most of them acquired new educational qualifications, while one could even indulge in literary pursuits. Their freedom has come about through legal processes and legitimate advocacy. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that the victims' families have suffered a lot, with few offering them succour or sympathy over the years. The tragic episode should occasion a fresh evaluation of the remission system and norms for premature release of life convicts. Going by the glaring omission in this particular case, some indication of remorse on the part of the convicts should be a prior requirement.

## HOW HAS THE EWS RULING ALTERED RESERVATIONS?

### **The story so far:**

The Supreme Court, by a 3:2 majority, has upheld the validity of the Constitution (103rd Amendment) Act, 2019, providing reservation up to 10% for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in education and employment among those groups that do not come under any community-based reservation. The legislation marked a major change in the country's approach to reservation. From a form of affirmative action in which membership of a social group was the main basis for extending reservation, it moved towards using income and means as the basis for special provisions.

### **What did the amendment do?**

In *Indra Sawhney* (1992), a nine-judge Bench had ruled that there can be no reservation solely based on economic criteria, as the Constitution did not provide for it. The 103rd amendment introduced Article 15(6), an enabling provision for the state to make special provisions for "any economically weaker sections of citizens" other than those mentioned in the previous two clauses, namely, the "socially and educationally backward classes" and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. It also introduced a corresponding Clause 6 in Article 16 to enable reservation for "economically weaker sections", other than the SEBCs and SC/ST, in public employment and education. Article 15, which protects against discrimination on any ground, and Article 16, which mandates equality of opportunity in public employment, were thus changed to allow special provisions and reservations for the EWS category, subject to a maximum of 10%.

Following this amendment, the government also notified in 2019 the criteria to identify EWS. By this, anyone having an annual family income of less than ₹8 lakh from all sources in the financial year preceding the year of application would be identified as EWS for reservation purposes. Also excluded were those who had five acres of agricultural land, or a residential flat of 1,000 square feet, or a residential plot of 100 square yards and above in notified municipalities, or 200 square yards in other areas. The EWS quota has since been implemented in Central government and Central public sector recruitments.



### **What were the main grounds of challenge?**

A law can be declared unconstitutional if the court finds that it violates fundamental rights. However, when the law is a constitutional amendment, it cannot normally be struck down, as it is part of the text of the Constitution. However, the Supreme Court evoked the 'basic structure doctrine' under which it has held that Parliament's power to amend the Constitution has some inherent limitations.

A substantive limitation is the principle that an amendment to the Constitution cannot abrogate or destroy its basic structure. While there is no exhaustive list, concepts central to the constitutional system such as secularism, federalism, independence of the judiciary, rule of law and equality before the law are considered its basic features.

Therefore, petitioners contended that the amendment violated the basic structure of the Constitution because it violated the equality code. The violation occurred (a) by the introduction of economic criterion when reservation was only meant for groups that were socially and educationally backward due to historical disadvantages and not due to individual lack of means, and by converting a scheme to overcome structural barriers for the advancement of social groups into an anti-poverty measure (b) by excluding OBC/SC/ST candidates from the EWS category and (c) by breaching the 50% ceiling on total reservation.

### **What is the majority's reasoning for upholding EWS quota?**

Justices Dinesh Maheshwari, Bela Trivedi and J.B. Pardiwala, the three judges who constituted a majority of the five-judge Bench, rejected the basic structure challenge completely. They held that there was nothing wrong in addressing economic weakness through reservation as an instrument of affirmative action. Reservation need not only be for socially and backward classes, but can also cover any disadvantaged section. Classifying a section based on economic criterion alone was permissible under the Constitution, and the EWS quota did not violate any essential feature of the Constitution.

The majority also ruled that the exclusion of the classes already enjoying reservation from the EWS category does not offend the equality principle. In fact, unless the EWS segment was exclusive, the object of furthering economic justice cannot be achieved. Regarding the breach of the 50% limit, the majority view was that the ceiling itself was not inflexible or inviolable. At the same time, another point in favour of the extra 10% quota was that the 50% limit was applicable only to the existing reserved categories (OBC/SC/ST), they said.

### **Why did two judges dissent?**

Chief Justice U.U. Lalit and Justice Ravindra Bhat differed from the majority, with the latter writing the dissenting opinion. At the outset, the minority too agreed that introducing special provisions on the basis of economic criteria is legitimate and does not per se violate the Constitution's basic structure.

However, they held that the exclusion of backward classes from the category violated the basic structure. Justice Bhat noted that reservation was a powerful tool to enable equal access and equal opportunity, but while introducing an economic basis for reservation, the socially and historically disadvantaged classes had been arbitrarily excluded. Excluding them "on the ground that they enjoyed pre-existing benefits is to heap fresh injustice based on past disability," he said. He termed as 'Orwellian' the net effect that although all the poorest were entitled to be considered regardless



of class or caste, only those from the forward classes or castes would be considered, and not those socially disadvantaged.

The conclusion was that the Amendment resulted in hostile discrimination against the poorest section of society that was socially and educationally backward, and that these classes were subjected to caste-based discrimination. Therefore, it violated the equality code, particularly the principles of non-discrimination and non-exclusion, which were part of the basic structure.

Justice Bhat had an additional ground to strike down Article 16(6). Article 16 mandates equality of opportunity in public employment, with representation for the unrepresented classes through reservation being the only exception. The EWS category “snaps this link between equal opportunity and representation” by introducing a category that is not premised on ‘inadequate representation’. This reservation for those already represented in public employment violates the equal opportunity norm, which is part of the basic structure.

### SC JUDGMENT PROVIDES IMPETUS FOR STATES LOOKING TO BREACH QUOTA CEILING

The Jharkhand government on Friday passed an amendment to raise the reservation for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) in State government posts to up to 77%. Without directly referring to the Indra Sawhney judgment of 1993, the Bill passed in Jharkhand Assembly noted that the 50% ceiling set out in the judgment never explicitly prohibited the breaching of the limit.

This was upheld earlier this week by the five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court in the EWS case, where the majority judgment held that the limit is “not inflexible or inviolable”. However, in the same Bench’s minority view, penned by Justice Ravindra Bhat, it was noted that allowing this would in effect “seal the fate” of laws like that of Tamil Nadu’s reservation law (allowing 69% quota), which is pending before the top court.

Now, after the Jharkhand Assembly’s move and the EWS judgment on this aspect, other States like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Karnataka are likely to get a fresh impetus to argue for extending reservations for Backward Classes beyond the 50% limit.

In Madhya Pradesh, the State government has from the get-go been arguing that the ceiling in the Indra Sawhney judgment was not sacrosanct, to defend their 2019 Ordinance that raised reservation for OBCs from 14% to 27% — thereby taking total reservation for SCs, STs, OBCs and EWS to 71%. However, this Ordinance was challenged in the Madhya Pradesh High Court, where it remains pending.

Advocate Rameshwar Singh Thakur, special counsel for the Madhya Pradesh government, told The Hindu, “The EWS judgment is further strengthening what we have been arguing before courts... The five-judge decision that reaffirms this will only help our case.”

The Chhattisgarh Government is fighting to raise reservations for OBCs to 32%, which will take the total quota in the State to 58%. After the Chhattisgarh High Court struck down the 2012 legislation, the Bhupesh Baghel-led Congress government this year went to the Supreme Court challenging this decision.

Further, the Karnataka Government too announced this year that it is looking to raise reservations in the State for SCs and STs, which will increase total reservations for SCs, STs, and OBCs to 56%.





State governments had earlier considered that the only way to raise reservations was through a Constitutional amendment that included their legislation in the Ninth Schedule, like the Tamil Nadu government's 69% reservation law was in 1994.

#### SC ORDERS TRIAL OF KEY ACCUSED AS AN ADULT IN KATHUA GANG-RAPE CASE

The top court gave credence to the medical board's report which estimated the age of the accused above 19 years at the time of commission of the crime and set aside the order passed by the Chief Judicial Magistrate of Kathua in Jammu and Kashmir and the High Court.

A Bench of Justices Ajay Rastogi and J.B. Pardiwala said though there was a "clear and unambiguous case" in favour of the accused person's juvenility on the basis of his birth certificate and school records, he cannot take shelter under such documents when a heinous crime has been committed. It also chastised the CJM and the High Court over their "casual and cavalier" approach while deciding the accused was a juvenile when the crime was committed.

"...when an accused commits a heinous and grave crime like the one on hand and thereafter attempts to take the statutory shelter under the guise of being a minor, a casual or cavalier approach while recording as to whether an accused is a juvenile or not cannot be permitted as the courts are enjoined upon to perform their duties with the object of protecting the confidence of a common man in the institution entrusted with the administration of justice," the court said.

Refusing to believe the birth certificate and school records which had established the juvenility of the accused, Justice Pardiwala, writing the 66-page judgement, said the medical reports cannot be brushed aside.

#### VICTIM BLAMING

The irrefutability of statistics indicates what the incessant debates over who is to blame cannot — that for women to feel safe in their homes and choices, it is necessary to extend solidarity during the formative years of their lives. The airing of patriarchal and communal prejudice is not the answer

In yet another all-too-familiar instance of victim blaming and stereotyping, Union Minister of State, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Kaushal Kishore, laid the blame of domestic violence on the shoulders of "educated women" who choose non-traditional relationships such as "live-in" over marriages. The minister was speaking in the context of the murder of a 27-year-old by her live-in partner in south Delhi's Mehrauli that recently came to light. Aaftab Poonawala allegedly strangled his partner Shraddha Walkar in May this year before dismembering her body and disposing of it across the city after that.

Unseemly as it is, and ironic in light of the Centre's push for women's emancipation through its many schemes such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao and Stree Manoraksha — the latter especially with the purpose of providing psycho-social and mental-health support to women in distress or facing violence — the minister's comment, unfortunately, is hardly an aberration. Despite pushbacks and movements such as MeToo, incidents of gender-based crime act as triggers for raising questions about a woman's choices, her morality, and, in this case, the bogey of a familiar ghost — "love jihad" and its attendant manifestations of Islamophobia. In the overarching patriarchal flex, systemically attuned to play judge and jury over the lives of women, what gets lost is the fact that crime against women by intimate partners remains a grim reality in India.



According to a report released by the National Crime Records Bureau in August this year, of the 4,28,278 instances of crimes against women in 2021, a 15 percent increase from the year before, the most cases, at 31.8 per cent, were recorded under “cruelty by husband or his relatives.”

For those caught in abusive relationships, it is often difficult to make sense of the coercive control that holds them hostage. But the irrefutability of statistics indicates what the incessant debates over who is to blame cannot — that for women to feel safe in their homes, in their choices and with their partners, it is necessary to extend to them the solidarity of support without the jagged edges of judgement. Support that is not dispensed by a parent or society as an act of benediction, but solidarity that recognises them as more than the sum total of their mistakes, as individuals with agency, deserving of institutional and societal mechanisms of redressal, should they be in need of them.

#### ON RELIGIOUS CONVERSION, SUPREME COURT MUST SET THE BAR HIGH, REMAIN MINDFUL OF DANGER OF SPECTRE-MONGERING ON A FRAUGHT ISSUE

While hearing a PIL on religious conversion, the Supreme Court said that “forced” religious conversions are “very dangerous” and may “ultimately affect the security of the nation as well as the freedom of religion and conscience of the citizens”. The bench urged the government to “make their stand clear and file counter on what steps can be taken by Union and/or others to curb such forced conversion, maybe by force, allurement or fraudulent means”. Over the last few years, religious conversion has become a politically fraught issue. When the court singles out the issue for its attention, asks what action the government proposes to take, it implies both that “forced” religious conversions are a significant problem and that existing laws are insufficient to deal with it. In a polarised moment, this could end up providing grist to political spectre-mongering about large-scale demographic change in the country, especially through conversions involving marriage.

Article 25 of the Constitution says “all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion”. But at least 10 states have legislated anti-conversion laws, beginning in the 1960s. The claim is that legal safeguards, including IPC provisions, have failed to stop religious conversions through “coercion”, “intimidation”, “allurement”, “threats”. However, these are loosely worded terms prone to misinterpretation. The bar for action against “fraudulent” conversions has to be set high so that it does not interfere with fundamental freedoms. Mass conversions in independent India, though rare, have been acts of protest against social discrimination. The conversion of BR Ambedkar and over three lakh followers, mostly Dalits, to Buddhism in 1956 as well as the 1982 Meenakshipuram conversions, when 180 Dalit families in a Tamil Nadu village embraced Islam, were acts of political revolt.

The current context of the conversion debate appears to be missionary activity in tribal areas and inter-religious marriages, labelled as “love jihad”. In the case of the latter, anti-conversion laws now demand that the bride and groom seek prior permission for marriage from the district magistrate. In the event of any complaint of “coercive conversion”, the burden of proof is on the groom’s party, which needs to disprove the charges of coercion to the authorities. In states such as UP, the anti-conversion law has been weaponised for political campaigns against inter-religious marriages. A judicial and judicious intervention on religious conversion must be mindful of the context, avoid vague terminology and carefully sidestep prejudice.



## BENGAL BJP MISSES A 'WELCOMING' GOVERNOR

Over the past three months, the common sight of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders in West Bengal marching towards the Raj Bhavan to take up their grievances with the Governor has become less frequent. Earlier, former Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar would acknowledge their demands and voice them during his interactions with mediapersons.

Since Mr. Dhankhar was elected as the Vice-President in August and Manipur Governor La. Ganesan was given additional charge of West Bengal, the BJP leaders feel that the Raj Bhavan has not been prompt in taking up their concerns. The bonhomie between Mr. Ganesan and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is also a cause for concern for a section of party leaders. Earlier this month, Ms. Banerjee had visited Chennai and participated in a family event of Mr. Ganesan, indicating that the frequent tussle between the Raj Bhavan and the Secretariat was now a thing of the past.

On November 14, dozens of BJP legislators had marched to the Raj Bhavan holding placards with the photograph of President Droupadi Murmu, seeking action against State Minister Akhil Giri who had allegedly made disparaging remarks against her. However, Mr. Ganesan was not present at his official residence. Leader of the Opposition Suwendu Adhikari, who had led the march, said he had not come to sip tea with officials and submitted a memorandum signed by 36 party MLAs demanding action against the Minister.

### 'Demand, not appeal'

"This is a demand, not an appeal. Since the Chief Minister has not acted against him [Mr. Giri], there is enough scope in the Constitution for the Governor to advise the Chief Minister to sack the Minister. Whether he is in Delhi, Imphal or Chennai, how he does it is his matter," Mr. Adhikari told mediapersons outside Raj Bhavan.

Till Thursday evening, Mr. Ganesan was not available in Kolkata and no meeting has taken place with the BJP leaders. The party's State-wide protests seeking Mr. Giri's resignation have also stopped.

Several party leaders are not reluctant to admit that they miss Mr. Dhankhar. Agnimitra Paul, BJP MLA from Asansol Dakshin who took part in the march, said Mr. Dhankhar was like an "abhibhavak (guardian)" and the BJP leaders miss him.

### Glimmer of hope

However, their woes could come to an end soon with a communique from the Rashtrapati Bhavan on Thursday announcing that C.V. Ananda Bose has been appointed as the new Governor of West Bengal.

## UNKNOWN SOURCES OF INCOME SPIKED AFTER ELECTORAL BOND ENTRY

Two developments have put the spotlight again on the controversial electoral bond scheme. On November 7, the Centre amended the scheme to allow an additional period of 15 days for electoral bond sales in years which have State elections. Whereas when it was introduced, these bonds were made available for a period of 10 days each in January, April, July and October with an exception in years with the Lok Sabha polls.



On October 14, the Supreme Court agreed to schedule a hearing of a petition challenging the scheme on December 6. While considering the petitions, Justice B.R. Gavai asked the government whether the scheme is transparent, to which Solicitor General Tushar Mehta replied, “The methodology of receiving money is absolutely transparent... It is impossible to get any black or unaccounted money.” The NDA government has consistently claimed that the scheme has ushered in an era of transparency since it was introduced in 2018.

However, data analysed from the Association of Democratic Reforms’ (ADR) annual reports reveal that the share of “unknown sources of income” has increased following the introduction of electoral bonds, achieving the opposite of what it was intended to do.

The ADR classifies income of political parties into two major types — known and unknown. The known sources of income are further classified into two types — voluntary donations made above ₹20,000 whose donor details are submitted to the ECI and “other sources of known income” such as sale of movable and immovable assets, etc.

The unknown sources include donations below ₹20,000 via electoral bonds, sale of coupons, etc., for which the details of donors are not available for the public. An amendment to the Representation of the People Act by the Finance Act, 2017, created a provision to exempt parties from declaring funds collected using electoral bonds.

The share of such unknown sources of income for national parties increased from 66% between FY15 and FY17 to 71% between FY19 and FY21. The transition year FY18 was not considered for analysis. In the same period, the share of unknown sources of income increased from 55% to 68% for regional parties. The BJP’s share of unknown income increased from 58% to 68% in the period, while the Congress’ remained at around 80%.

Also, the electoral bonds’ share formed 57% and 64% of the national and regional parties’ total incomes in the FY19-FY21 period, respectively. So, the unknown share of income went up and electoral bonds were a major reason behind the rise. “Other known sources of income” was not considered while calculating total income in both periods as it is not dependent on donations.

After the introduction of the scheme, the burden of unknown income has merely shifted from other routes such as donations below ₹20,000 and coupon sales to electoral bonds.

Meanwhile, the expenditures for elections and otherwise, have surged. Both the BJP’s and the Congress’ election expenses increased by more than 60% between FY19 and FY21, as compared to FY15 and FY17

The BJP has cornered a lion’s share of the electoral bond income. The party received 67% of funds through electoral bonds by all parties between FY18 and FY21. If only national parties are considered, the share goes up to 81%.

## THE BAN ON VIOLENT SONG IN PUNJAB: A KNEE-JERK REACTION BY THE AAP GOVERNMENT

The order of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)-led Punjab government, banning songs that glorify weapons and violence, is a knee-jerk reaction to simmering anxieties on law and order in the state. It is not for the first time that a government in Punjab has resorted to a superficial response to genuine concerns – in February 2020, then chief minister Amarinder Singh ordered a crackdown on makers of movies promoting the “gun culture”. Such blunt instruments have proved to be futile,



and even counter-productive. The question also is: How will the government enforce its writ in the social media age?

While many factors contribute to the sense that all is not well on the law and order front, and several can be traced back to a time when the AAP was yet to firm up its foothold in the state, a spate of eye-catching incidents in its short tenure in power have stoked the worries. Not long after the AAP formed government, international kabaddi player Sandeep Singh Nangal Ambian was shot dead in broad daylight at a tournament in a village near Jalandhar on March 14. Another prominent kabaddi player, Dharminder Singh, was killed in Patiala on April 6. Subsequently, the murder of internationally acclaimed Punjabi singer and rapper Shubhdeep Singh Sidhu Moosewala, and the fleeing from police custody of gangster Deepak Tinu and drug smuggler Amrik Singh, underscored anxieties over the state's loosening grip on law and order. Shiv Sena leader Sudhir Suri was shot dead more than a week ago, and only last week, a follower of Dera Sacha Sauda, who was accused of sacrilege, was killed in Kotkapura.

Such incidents take a mounting toll in a state with a troubled history. Punjab saw terrible bloodshed from the mid-1980 to mid-1990s. During the days of militancy, about 35,000 persons were gunned down by the terrorists, including several political leaders. Punjab continues to pay the price for the decade it lost to militancy — industry fled to safer havens in neighbouring Himachal Pradesh and entrepreneurs shifted base to Haryana. Given a mounting cynicism about the capacity and credibility of the older political players in addressing the special needs and crises of the state that was once the host of the Green Revolution, great expectations have been vested in the AAP, which is seen as an outsider to politics-as-usual, and a possible harbinger of change. At the same time, the AAP also needs to live down some of its own controversial moves – it has been accused of warming up to secessionist elements in its bid for power. As the Bhagwant Mann government gets down to the challenge of governing a complex state, it must know that it will take more than the banishing of a few songs.

## SAVING THE PRECIOUS

The Ministry of Water Resources recently made public a report that gives a snapshot of India's groundwater situation. On the surface, there is good news: the total annual groundwater recharge — defined as the groundwater stored — for the entire country is 437.60 billion cubic metres (bcm) out of which the quantity extracted was 239.16 bcm. A similar assessment in 2020 found that the annual groundwater recharge was 436 bcm and extraction 245 bcm. In 2017, recharge was 432 bcm and extraction 249 bcm. The 2022 assessment suggests that groundwater extraction is the lowest since 2004, when it was 231 bcm. A decrease in groundwater extraction may indicate better water management; however, the report — called the National Compilation on Dynamic Groundwater Resources of India — itself says that the improvement is only “marginal” and may be explained by natural conditions and changes in methodology that the Central Ground Water Board and States, which conduct the survey, adopt. In fact, the number of groundwater blocks, or wells, used for estimation were more than those in previous years and it turns out that the percentage of blocks where groundwater was ‘critically’ low was around 14%, or roughly similar to that in previous years.

Regions with the most blocks with critical groundwater levels are in Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and western Uttar Pradesh, where, despite replenishable systems, indiscriminate groundwater withdrawal has depressed the water table. Other endangered blocks are in Rajasthan and Gujarat, where due to an arid climate, groundwater recharge itself is limited, and finally, parts of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, where due to inherent characteristics of



crystalline water-storing aquifers, groundwater availability is low. That much more needs to be done to conserve groundwater is a foregone conclusion. There is no central law governing the use of groundwater and various States have their own laws on regulating its extraction that are deployed in a perfunctory manner. A draft National Water Policy has recommended a shift in usage from water-guzzling crops and prioritising recycled over freshwater for industrial purposes. Water ought not to be considered a free, private resource but one whose costs must be measured and borne equitably. While water remains a politically contentious subject in India, the climate crisis should inspire consensus across the political spectrum on disincentivising wasteful consumption of this precious resource.

## NEW FRONTIERS

On Friday, India's space programme accomplished a landmark when the country's first privately-developed rocket lifted off from ISRO's launch pad in Sriharikota. Developed by the Hyderabad-based Skyroot Aerospace, the 550-kg vehicle, Vikram S, is the forerunner of the much-larger Vikram series rockets, the first of which is slated for launch next year. Friday's mission will help test the technology systems of these satellite carriers that hold exciting possibilities. Small satellites developed by businesses, universities, private laboratories, even students, can hitch a ride on these vehicles and send back information that's today the preserve of super speciality institutions — data on weather and earth sciences, for instance. Vikram S carries a 2.5 kg payload developed by students from India, the US, Indonesia and Singapore. The government estimates that more than 20,000 small satellites will be launched in the next decade.

According to industry data, India has more than 350 private firms in the space sector making it the fifth-largest in the world in this respect after the US, UK, Canada and Germany. But the country's share in the global space economy is barely 3 per cent. The government intends to increase this to 10 per cent by 2030. In June 2020, it approved the participation of private players in all sectors of space activity — earlier they could only be vendors or suppliers. It also instituted the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre, a unit of ISRO, to enable private companies to become independent players. There are early indications that these initiatives are paying off. According to this year's Economic Survey, the country's space regulator has received close to 40 proposals from the private sector and the academia "for activities ranging from manufacturing launch vehicles to earth observation applications". Other private firms are close to emulating Skyroot. Agnikul Cosmos, a Chennai-based start-up, is planning the commercial launch of its rocket Agnibaan in the first quarter of next year. Last week, the company test-fired its first rocket engine — manufactured in one go, unlike conventional engines which are assembled using thousands of parts — from the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre in Thiruvananthapuram.

Small satellites can be assembled today in less than a week at a fraction of the cost of conventional satellites. But the constraints of piggy-backing on vehicles designed for satellites weighing around 1,500 kg are beginning to show. In a good year, ISRO launches about five satellites. Compare that to the 143 satellites launched by a rocket developed by the US-firm SpaceX last year. Companies such as Skyroot and Agnikool promise cost-efficiency as well as innovation. But developing an ecosystem for private players will not be possible without the ISRO's handholding. In the US, where private rocket ventures have a long head start over their Indian counterparts, NASA still reserves a part of its budget for such enterprises. In the coming years, the collaboration between India's premier space research institution and private players will be keenly tracked.



## WHAT ARE THE HURDLES TO BUILDING SCHOOLS FOR TRIBALS?

### The story so far:

The Narendra Modi-led government is pushing to set up 740 Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) for tribal students — one each in every sub-district that has at least a 20,000-odd Scheduled Tribe population, which must be 50% of the total population in that area. The government is persisting with its mission despite the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Justice and Ministry noting this year that the population criteria was “impractical” and needed an “immediate review”.

### When was the idea mooted?

The EMRS model was first introduced in 1997-98 to provide quality education to tribal students with residential facilities in remote corners. The aim was to build schools at par with the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas and Kendriya Vidyalayas. Until 2018-19, the scheme was overseen by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs with maximum control of identifying new schools, recruiting, management and admissions lying with State governments. While the Union government had sanctioned a certain number of preliminary EMRS, the guideline of the scheme noted that States and Union Territories would be responsible for seeking sanction of new schools as and when they needed it. The funds for these schools were to come from the grants under Article 275(1) and the guidelines mandated that unless States finished constructing the schools sanctioned by the Centre, they would not be entitled to funds for new ones. Apart from the infrastructural requirements of 20-acre plots for each EMRS, the guidelines did not have any criteria of where the EMRS could be set up, leaving it to the discretion of State governments.

### When was it revamped?

In 2018-19, at the bidding of Mr. Modi, the Cabinet approved the revamping of the EMRS scheme. The new guidelines gave the Union government more power to sanction schools and manage them. A National Education Society for Tribal Students (NESTS) was set up and entrusted with the management of the State Education Society for Tribal Students (SESTS), which would run the EMRS on the ground.

The new guidelines set a target of setting up an EMRS in every tribal sub-district and introduced a “population criteria” for setting them up. The new guidelines also reduced the minimum land requirement from 20 acres to 15 acres. Since the new scheme was put into place, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs sanctioned 332 of the targetted 452 schools till 2021-22. However, the Standing Committee in its report noted that a large number of schools were being delayed because the area (15 acre) requirement and the population criteria were making identification and acquisition of land “more cumbersome”, especially in hilly areas, leftwing extremism-affected areas and the northeast. It noted that even though the new guidelines provided for relaxations in these areas, other problems with land acquisition continued to persist. The Standing Committee noted that the population criteria ran the risk of depriving a “scattered tribal population” of the benefit of EMRS, “which are a means towards their educational empowerment”.

### What is the current status?

The Tribal Affairs Ministry insists on maintaining the new criteria. Ministry officials said that as of November, a total of 688 schools have been sanctioned, of which 392 are functional. Of the 688, 230 have completed construction and 234 are under construction, with 32 schools still stuck due



to land acquisition issues. As for serving less dense tribal populations, Minister of Tribal Affairs Arjun Munda said that the government will take care of it after the targeted 740 schools under these criteria are built.

## NEW REGULATIONS FOR AWARDING PHDS

### The story so far:

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has made sweeping changes in its latest regulations governing the award of PhDs. Important changes such as abolishing of MPhils, relaxing course work for obtaining PhDs and allowing candidates to register for a PhD after finishing four years of a graduation programme, have been seen as steps that could lead to diminishing academic rigour as well as impediments to inclusivity in higher education.

### What are the key changes?

The UGC on November 7, 2022 notified the University Grants Commission (Minimum Standards and Procedures for Award of PhD Degree) Regulations, 2022. One of the notable changes it made was to the evaluation and assessment criteria for the award of the degree, where it has waived the need to mandatorily publish a research paper in a peer-reviewed journal. This is accompanied by completely abolishing MPhil, which has been a gateway for PhD programmes, in line with the recommendation in the National Education Policy 2020. The eligibility criteria for admissions too have been revised, and a candidate can register after completing a one-year (or two semester) master's degree programme after a four-year (or 8-semester) bachelor's degree programme or a two-year (or four-semester) master's degree programme after a three-year bachelor's degree programme with at least 55% marks or its equivalent grade.

There are also important changes to course work. Earlier, the description of course work candidates needed to finish was more detailed, with at least four credits assigned to courses on research methodology. Candidates were also required to finish this either in the first semester, or by the second semester. Only candidates who were awarded MPhil or had completed their MPhil were exempted. But the new regulations leave it more open ended and says that all PhD scholars "shall be required to train in teaching/ education/ pedagogy/ writing related to their chosen PhD subject." They can also now be assigned 4-6 hours per week of teaching/research assistantship for conducting tutorial, or laboratory work and evaluations.

The UGC now also allows part-time PhDs, a practice that was disallowed under the 2009 and 2016 regulations.

### How will research scholars be evaluated under the new regulations?

PhD scholars will be required to undertake research work after completing their course work, make a presentation and produce a draft dissertation or thesis. If the evaluation of the submission is satisfactory, the candidate will have to defend the thesis in a public viva voce. They will not have to publish a research paper in refereed journal and make two paper presentations in conferences or seminars before submitting the thesis. The Chairman of UGC M. Jagadesh Kumar says that while publishing a paper in a peer-reviewed journal is not mandatory anymore in order to curb unethical practices such as pay-to-publish or plagiarism, students should be motivated and trained to publish in peer-reviewed journals and present at conferences. He says that a one-size-fits-all approach is not desirable as doctorals in computer science prefer presenting their papers at conferences rather than publishing them in journals. Former UGC Chairman and Ambedkarite,





Sukhdaeo Thorat, welcomed the move to discontinue publishing papers in journals as it would often lead poor candidates to pay to get published like their peers, as well as put them at a disadvantage as they wouldn't have contacts to get published. However, Jamia Milia Islamia Professor Furqan Qamar says that while these concerns are valid, there is a need to provide enhanced and cost-effective opportunities to the researcher to publish as there is a limited availability of quality journals but far more researchers. He cites from the Scopus database of scientific publications for 2020 to point out that India accounted for only 4.52% of total research papers in the world though it accounts for 12% of the global faculty pool.

#### Are there other concerns?

Experts like Professor Thorat say that discontinuing MPhils, along with the introduction of four-year BA course and 2-year MA course with multiple exits will hurt socially disadvantaged groups who may not be able to pay for longer-duration courses and may have to exit earlier, which will put them at a disadvantage in the job market. He adds that while a four-year Bachelors course will allow some students to pursue Masters abroad without studying for one more year, others will be discriminated against. Though UGC says the move is intended to attract younger students for research.

There are also concerns over diminishing scholarships and fellowships to support PhD scholars as well as severe shortage of teachers, impacting the number of research supervisors available.

### HOW WE CAN MAKE THE DIGITAL SPACE SAFER FOR ALL, PARTICULARLY WOMEN

India has one of the youngest youth demographics in the world (27 per cent are Gen Z while 34 per cent are Millennials) and among the most active online. As online interactions increase, more and more content is created and shared among people, helping them form new and wonderful connections. Sometimes, however, these interactions also make them vulnerable to harm.

Women are often particularly vulnerable. "What should I do, I can't tell my family!" is a common refrain, heard from young women across the country when they grapple with the fallout of their private pictures being leaked online — sometimes from a hacked account, other times because of a soured relationship. In a culture where mobile phones sell because of the quality of their cameras, it should be no surprise that young men and women are exploring new ways to express their sexuality and navigate relationships, including through the taking and sharing of intimate images. However, it is increasingly evident that these new social norms have created new forms of abuse, as intimate images are being used to blackmail, shame, coerce, and control. Women are usually the victims.

Often, crimes that disproportionately impact women devolve into mass panic and lead to an all too predictable top-down discourse around the need to "protect our sisters and daughters". This reaction, however well intentioned, will end up denying women their freedom and agency by their so-called "protectors", many of whom are simply telling women to go offline, to be ashamed of expressing themselves, to stay in their lane.

Fortunately, leading academics — many of them women — are spearheading research around the topic, so that we may more accurately discuss and grapple with the evolution of technology-facilitated abuse, including intimate image abuse. Industry, too, has a role to play. If platform providers could be more responsive to the concerns and experiences of women then, to some extent, better design can help mitigate such issues.



A simple example is that of “unwanted contact”, one of the reasons why women avoid online spaces. This could mean design choices that help women stay in control of who they engage with, thereby reducing unwanted messages or advances. It could also mean leveraging open source technology that detects and blurs lewd images so that women don’t need to see unsolicited pictures. Therefore, focussing on safety tools and features — across the spectrum of websites and apps — could bring forward more ideas for creating a safer internet experience.

Various parliament committees in India have held meetings to discuss the issue of online safety of women over the years, and part of the government’s motivation in notifying the new IT rules had been rooted in the growing concern regarding the safety and security of users, particularly women and children. These are very good tangible steps. With the IT Act coming up for a rehaul, there is an opportunity to discuss in detail the nature of technology-facilitated abuse, capturing what this means, understanding how cases impact individuals as well as communities, the language needed to capture such offences and the punishment — penalties, jail or even rehabilitation programmes for perpetrators. This could be the start of an era of evidence-based discussion. Already, we know that crimes against women are the top category in India’s crime statistics, with cyber crimes a few rungs lower on the scale. Where the two intersect is where we need to focus if we are to make online space safe.

Despite these efforts, it is clear that women in India won’t feel safe online anytime soon unless society lets them. What could be helpful here is to elevate the public discourse around technology-facilitated abuse.

#### BLOCKED IN APRIL, IT MINISTRY LIFTS VLC MEDIA PLAYER BAN

The Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) has lifted the ban on the website of VLC Media Player, nearly nine months after first issuing directions to block the website of VideoLAN, the non-profit that operates VLC Media Player and from where the application can be downloaded.

In October, MeitY had sent a letter to VideoLAN detailing the reasons behind blocking its website in the country, saying that the site was censored for allegedly communicating with servers of a previously banned app, called Onmyoji Arena, which was transferring sensitive personal data of Indians to a “hostile country”, The Indian Express had first reported. MeitY’s letter had come after VideoLAN, with assistance from the Delhi-based digital rights group Internet Freedom Foundation, had issued a legal notice to the ministry seeking to know the reasons for which the site had been blocked in India. On Monday, the ministry sent an email to VideoLAN saying that the “competent authority has approved unblocking the domain videolan.org,” The Indian Express has learnt.

While the email did not entail any reason as to why it decided to lift the ban on VideoLAN’s website, it came after VideoLAN sent a detailed response to MeitY’s October letter, explaining the issues with MeitY’s reasoning. Last week, the government also convened a virtual hearing where representatives of VideoLAN, this paper has learnt. In its response to MeitY, sent on November 6, VideoLAN denied claims that its website was communicating to servers in the “hostile country”. It said that its website does not transmit any user data to its servers, which are all located in the geographical territory of France, with the sole exception of the name of the operating system and its version.



VideoLAN also said that the VLC Media Player is being used by 80 million Indian users who would be forced to download the application and its updates from unauthorised third-party websites, making them “even more vulnerable to data theft and cybersecurity incidents”.

In its October letter, MeitY had 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. However, in response, VideoLAN said, “Neither the details of this ‘custom malware loader’ nor the manner in which the alleged hackers associated with the Chinese government use the VLC media player have been provided (by the ministry)”.

#### NEXT DOOR TO DELHI, A ‘BANK’ TO STORE COUNTRY’S DIGITISED BIOLOGICAL DATA

The government has for the first time set up a digitised repository where Indian researchers will store biological data from publicly funded research, reducing their dependency on American and European data banks.

The ‘Indian Biological Data Bank’ has come up at the Regional Centre for Biotechnology in Faridabad. The digitised data will be stored on a four-petabyte supercomputer called ‘Brahm’. A petabyte equals 10,00,000 gigabytes (gb).

The government has mandated that data from all publicly funded research should be stored in this central repository. So it will not only provide a platform to researchers to securely store their data within the country, it will also provide access to a large database of indigenous sequences for analyses.

Such databases have traditionally played a key role in determining the genetic basis of various diseases and finding targets for vaccines and therapeutics.

“At present, most Indian researchers depend on the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) and National Center for Biotechnology Information databases for storing the biological data. There are other smaller datasets available with some institutes, but those are not accessible to all. This will be the first national data repository, where the data will not only be submitted from across India but can be accessed by researchers from across India,” said Dr Sudhanshu Vrati, director of the Regional Centre for Biotechnology.

At the inauguration of the centre on Thursday, Union Science Minister Jitendra Singh said the bio-bank will create “Indian data for Indian solutions”.

“Many of our researchers still depend on other countries for such large databases, but the Indian phenotype is very different and solutions based on others’ data might not be optimal. We also need to look beyond. We can even provide our data to Western countries. You go to any of our public hospitals and you can find a patient with any disease you want to study; Western countries hardly see cases of tuberculosis or many other tropical diseases,” said Singh.

The bio-bank, which cost about Rs 85 crore to set up, currently accepts nucleotide sequences — the digitised genetic makeup of humans, plants, animals, and microbes. There are now 200 billion base pair data in the bio-bank, including 200 human genomes sequenced under the ‘1,000 Genome Project’, which is an international effort to map the genetic variations in people. The project will also focus on populations that are predisposed to certain diseases.



The database also contains most of the 2.6 lakh Sars-Cov-2 genomes sequenced by the Indian Sars-CoV-2 Genomic Consortium (INSACOG). These sequences, which are also uploaded to a global database, have helped the consortium keep track of Sars-CoV-2 variants circulating in the country and warn authorities about any emerging variant that might lead to more cases. For instance, the government learnt from this data that the Omicron sub-variant BA.2.75 was being overtaken by a recombinant variant XBB — which is a combination of two Omicron sub-lineages, BJ.1 and BA.2.75.

Other than human and Sars-CoV-2 genomes, the database will also store the 25,000 sequences of mycobacterium tuberculosis that another national consortium is trying to sequence. This will help not only in understanding the spread of multi-drug and extremely drug resistant TB in the country, but also aid the search for targets for new therapies and vaccines.

The database currently also stores the genomic sequences of crops such as rice, onion, tomatoes and mustard, among others. With genomes of humans, animals, and microbes present in the same database, it will also help researchers in studying zoonotic diseases, that is, diseases that jump from animals to humans.

Department of Biotechnology Secretary Dr Rajesh Gokhale said: “Take for example the BRCA gene that we know is associated with breast cancer. If we have a geographically representative database, we can actually determine the prevalence of breast cancer risk in the country by region. Or, if we compare our genes with sequences available from other parts of the world, we may detect mutations that are present only in our population.”

Although the database currently only accepts such genomic sequences, it is likely to expand later to storage of protein sequences – strings of amino acids that join together to form various proteins found in these organisms – and imaging data such as copies of Ultrasound and MRI.

The database currently offers two mechanisms for data submission to researchers. One, open access where the data uploaded can be immediately used by other researchers from across the country and two, controlled access where the data will not be openly shared for a number of years before being opened up to all.

The biobank also has a backup data ‘Disaster Recovery’ site at National Informatics Centre (NIC)-Bhubaneswar.

“We are thinking of providing controlled access for a six year period — the government has to take a call on that. During this period the data will be stored on our servers but be accessible to only the researchers who have uploaded it. After the period, it will be made openly available to others,” said Dr Vrati. The data will also be tagged with an accession number that will make it searchable not only in the Indian database but also in international databases.

#### PRECISION MEDICINE SUCCESSFUL IN TREATING RARE GENETIC DISEASE

The Genome Foundation, Hyderabad and the Dermatology Association, Telangana have announced the successful result of a precision medicine on a nine-year-old boy suffering from a rare genetic disease, Cerebrotendinous xanthomatosis (CTX), on Thursday.

The CTX is a lipid storage disease characterised by infantile-onset of diarrhoea, childhood-onset of cataract, and adolescent-to adult onset of progressive neurologic dysfunctions. Apparently,



there are only four such cases in the country, all diagnosed in adulthood after the onset of serious neurological conditions with morbidity and mortality.

While there is no cure for CTX, its progression can be slowed or stopped if detected early by genetic testing, leading to administration of 'precision medicine'.

The nine-year-old had abnormal levels of cholesterol in blood serum. He was administered Cholic acid for three months and subsequent diagnosis showed 'cholestenol' levels decreasing resulting in 70% improvement in ophthalmological evaluation.

### INDIA'S POPULATION GROWTH IS STABILISING, IT IS AN INDICATOR OF EFFECTIVE HEALTH POLICIES, SAYS UN

The world population touched eight billion on Tuesday and India was the largest contributor to the milestone, having added 177 million people of the last billion people born in the world, the UN said.

For China, which added 73 million people, the projection is that its contribution to the next billion in the global population will be in the negative.

"The good news is that India's population growth appears to be stabilising. The Total Fertility Rate — more or less the average number of children born per woman — has declined from 2.2 to 2.0 at the national level," the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) said.

#### Good record

A total of 31 States and Union Territories (constituting 69.7% of the country's population) have achieved fertility rates below the replacement level of 2.1, it said.

The main reasons for the decline in fertility include increase in adoption of modern family planning methods (from 47.8% in 2015-16 to 56.5% in 2019-21) and a reduction in unmet need for family planning by four percentage points over the same period, it said. "This indicates significant improvements in access to family planning related information and services. In summary, it shows that India's national population policies and health systems are working," the UN organisation said.

India is a youthful nation with the largest cohort of young people anywhere in the world, with major potential to achieve its demographic dividend. While many parts of the world are ageing, India's youthful population can be a global resource to solve global problems, the UNFPA said.

### WITH CAMELS MISSING, PUSHKAR FAIR LOSES ITS CHARM

The world-famous Pushkar Fair organised in Ajmer district's Pushkar town lost its charm this year because of the absence of camels and other animals, whose entry was banned as a precautionary measure to check the spread of lumpy skin disease. The nine-day-long fair, known earlier for trading of livestock, ended last week with a lot of revelries and colourful events.

The Pushkar Fair, which has always been drenched in a cultural and religious spirit, was the most anticipated event in Rajasthan after a gap of two years when it was not held on account of the pandemic. Both the foreign and domestic tourists arrived in the holy town, situated 150 km away from Jaipur, in large numbers.



However, the animal rearers who came with their camels, horses and cattle heads camped outside the town, as they were stopped near Motisar village, five km away from the fair grounds. Most of them had no prior information that they would not be allowed to sell the animals in the fair. The tourists were also in for disappointment when they did not get to see the tastefully decorated camels.

Bajrang Lal Sain, a horse breeder from Gorau village in Nagaur district, camping at Motisar with four horses, told The Hindu that he would return without finding any buyers for his animals. Mr. Sain said several of the cattle rearers had sold their animals at a pittance because they could not afford the expenditure on taking them back to their villages.

Narain Chhogaji, a farmer in Motisar village, said a large number of camel herders had arrived at the beginning of the fair, but all of them were asked to leave after camping for a couple of days. The animal rearers coming to Pushkar to buy and sell animals for generations as an annual ritual were a dejected lot this year.

Arif Qureshi, a regular visitor to the fair from Ajmer, pointed out that the lumpy skin disease had only affected bovine animals and no camel in the State had been infected. The government's move to ban the entry of all the animals was probably guided by caution to prevent the spread of the disease from cows to camels and horses.

#### **Cultural events**

With the animals missing from the fairgrounds, the authorities pulled out all the stops to make the event attractive for tourists. While the bathing ghats along the Pushkar lake were decorated with lamps, a Maha Aarti was organised with a huge participation and cultural events and competitions were held for tourists. Thousands visited Pushkar on Kartik Purnima for taking a dip in the lake.

### **THACKERAYS' OLD LINK TO SAVARKAR, BURNISHING HINDUTVA CREDENTIALS: WHY UDDHAV DISAPPROVED OF RAHUL'S REMARKS**

Of the many people who would meet up with Vinayak Damodar Savarkar when he was confined to Ratnagiri after being released from Andaman jail in 1921 was one Prabodhankar Thackeray. A known social reformer, Thackeray would often discuss various political and social issues with Savarkar.

Almost four decades later, his son Balasaheb Thackeray formed the Shiv Sena and remained a lifelong exponent of the ideology of Hindutva espoused by Savarkar whom, in reverence, he referred to as a "great leader".

While Savarkar's idea of Hindu nationalism has had a massive impact on modern political thought in India, his contributions to Marathi culture in terms of poems and his attempt to purify the Marathi language have bestowed a hallowed position to Savarkar in the state.

It is this context, coupled with the Thackerays' close familial links with Savarkar, that prompted Shiv Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray to disagree with Rahul Gandhi's criticism of the Hindutva ideologue. "We do not approve of Rahul Gandhi's remarks on Savarkar. We have immense respect and faith for Swatantra Veer Savarkar and it cannot be erased," Thackeray said on Thursday.

On Tuesday, Gandhi said at a rally in Washim district, "He (Savarkar) was jailed in Andaman for two to three years. He started writing mercy petitions." The former Congress president claimed



Savarkar “wrote a book on himself with a different name and highlighted how brave he was”. He added, “He used to take pension from the British, work for them, and work against the Congress.” Gandhi stuck to his comments on Thursday.

In 2003, when Savarkar’s portrait was unveiled in the Lok Sabha for the first time, Shiv Sena MPs celebrated. Though the Uddhav-led faction of the Sena has now hitched its wagon to Congress and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), the current episode shows it cannot let pass any perceived insult of Savarkar. One of the reasons why the Eknath Shinde-led group of Sena leaders rebelled against Uddhav was the fear that by joining hands with secular parties, the Sena was diluting its Hindutva politics that has worked for the party since the days of Balasaheb Thackeray. Shinde has claimed that it is the true inheritor of Thackeray’s legacy and accused Thackeray of betraying the ideals of his father as well as the ideology of Hindutva.

Savarkar’s popularity can be gauged from the fact that NCP chief Sharad Pawar in December 2021 praised him. Pawar said the Hindutva icon held a scientific approach to Hinduism and was one of the earliest to promote temple entry reforms for Dalits.

“It was Savarkar who advocated the utility of cow meat and milk for human consumption. He was a rationalist. He approached the issue scientifically, which cannot be undermined.” Pawar said in his address on the concluding day of the Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Sahitya Sammelan in Nashik in December 2021.

The adulation reserved for Savarkar made the Sena raise the demand for honouring Savarkar with the Bharat Ratna. “Hindu Hriday Samrat Veer Savarkar should be honoured with Bharat Ratna. Like Savarkar, Hindu Hriday Samrat Balasaheb Thackeray should also be honoured with Bharat Ratna,” said Sanjay Raut, chief spokesperson of the Shiv Sena (UBT), at his customary press conference in Mumbai on Thursday.

## RAJASTHAN’S JALLIANWALA BAGH: A LOST STORY

On November 17, 1913, six years before the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of April 13, 1919, a horrifying tragedy occurred in Mangarh (Banswada, Rajasthan). While 379 lives were lost in Jallianwala, British cannons and machine guns are known to have killed more than 1,500 tribals in Mangarh.

Yet, unlike the Jallianwala massacre, this heinous crime against the tribals of Rajasthan could not find its place in the history of India’s freedom struggle. While Amritsar was closer to Delhi and in the hands of prominent politicians and freedom fighters, the same was not the case with Mangarh. Much like today, the tribals of Mangarh struggled to find their place in Indian society even as they fought with all their might for India’s Independence.

A noteworthy name in these lost pages of history is that of Govind Guru, a revolutionary leader of the tribals of the region that included present-day Udaipur, Dungarpur and Banswara in Rajasthan, Gujarat’s Idar and Malwa in Madhya Pradesh. Guru was a living legend among the Bhil and Garasiya tribal communities, a man who united thousands of tribals with his voice.

Bhil soldiers also played a significant role in the battlefields of Mewar — the erstwhile Mewar army’s emblem that portrayed a Bhil archer next to a Rajput warrior is further proof of their importance. In fact, their significance can be traced in the battlefields of Haldighati to Maharana Pratap’s slogan “Bhili jayo rani jayo bhai-bhai (A Bhil’s son and that of a queen are brothers)”.



Before Govind Guru became a leader in India's freedom struggle, he played an important role in India's renaissance movement. At the age of 25, he impressed Swami Dayanand Saraswati, a central figure of that movement in north India. Those days, Dayanand Saraswati was in Udaipur; a sanyasi, he was raising issues related to swaraj, swabhasha and swadeshi (self-rule, self-language, and self-reliance) in the country and was spearheading social reforms in the Rajputana. These two figures together initiated a wave of social reforms in the tribal areas.

In 1903, Govind Guru pledged not to drink alcohol, shifting his focus to eradicating social evils, boycotting foreign goods, ending forced labour, educating girls, and resolving mutual disputes among tribes instead of taking them to the courts. This led to the creation of a Sump (Unity) Sabha, whose first meeting was held on the hilltop in Mangarh. This historical event solidified Mangarh's significance in Indian history as it became central to the tribal movement in this area. Like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, this incident worried the British government and the local princely states. While the British were worried about their participation in the freedom struggle, the princely states were more concerned about social reform that could lead to the tribes demanding an independent Bhil state.

Consequently, there were many attempts to suppress the movement that started in 1883 but had spread like wildfire by 1903. Called the Bhagat movement, the gathering of tribals around the fire to reaffirm their oath was seen by the British as a threat. By 1913, the movement had turned into a revolution that made British officers even more wary as the tribals pledged to fight against suppression.

In November 1917, thousands of tribals gathered on the call of Govind Guru to decide on a decisive action against the suppression being faced by them in the form of forced labour, bonded system, and taxes on farmers during the famine.

In what is today known as the Mangarh massacre, British soldiers fired cannons and machine guns at a large crowd of unarmed tribals who had gathered in an open space on the hilltop of Mangarh. More than 1,500 tribals were killed in the massacre and hundreds were injured.

While during the Jallianwala massacre, thousands of shots were fired after closing the only gate of the garden, it is said that five times as many rounds were fired by the British officers in Mangarh. Like Jallianwala, anecdotes say, the firing stopped only when the soldiers ran out of ammunition. Yet, amid this brutality, the tribals of the area are said to have continued singing, "Hey Bhuretia Nai Maanu Re, Nai Manu Re (Hey, British, we will not agree)!". Their song about standing up to British suppression was as scary as it was magnificent.

The consequence of the Mangarh massacre was cruel. Unlike in the Jallianwala Bagh case, no Dyer was held responsible or punished here. Rather, Govind Guru was given a death sentence, and his wife was arrested. But fearing that the movement of tribal Bhils would turn violent, the British postponed his execution and sentenced him to 20 years of imprisonment on an isolated island. When he was released from jail, all the princely states came together to exile him. He lived his last years in Kamboi, Gujarat, where he died on October 30, 1931.

The cruel irony is that this extraordinary incident, which tells the story of tribal contributions to India's struggle for Independence, has still not found its rightful place in history. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's November 1 visit to Mangarh Dham, it was expected that he would finally announce it as a national monument. However, for whatever reasons, it was not declared so.





## PM'S GIFTS FOR G20 LEADERS: WHO GOT WHAT

At the G20 summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gifted heads of states curated craft pieces from Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, the two states he visited recently for election rallies.

US President Joe Biden was presented with miniature paintings from Kangra, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak received Mata Ni Pachedi, a sacred textile piece made by nomadic communities in Gujarat, officials said.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni was presented a Patan Patola scarf, a colourful dupatta woven in the northern part of Gujarat, which was encased in a decorative sadeli box, a wooden craft native to Surat. The double ikat scarf can be worn on both sides. Officials said the motifs weaved on Meloni's scarf were inspired from the Rani Ki Vav, a stepwell in Patan, built in the 11th century AD.

The miniature pahari painting presented to Biden is based on the theme of love as a means of devotion. Among other items from the hill state were a Kinnauri shawl, presented to the President of the host country, Joko Widodo. The design on this specific piece shows influences from Central Asia and Tibet. Widodo was also presented with a silver bowl from Surat.

Agate bowls from Kutch were presented to the leaders of France, Germany and Singapore. The semi-precious stone is found in underground mines of Rajpipla and Ratanpur in riverbeds, and extracted to produce a variety of ornamental objects.

PM Modi gifted a tribal art piece, Pithora, to his Australian counterpart Anthony Albanese. Pithora paintings, ritualistic tribal folk art by the Rathwa artisans from Chhota Udaipur in Gujarat, are based on the cave paintings that tribal people used to make, reflecting their social, cultural and mythological life and beliefs. These paintings resemble the aboriginal dot paintings of the indigenous communities of Australia.

## BALIYATRA: CELEBRATING ODISHA'S ANCIENT LINKS WITH INDONESIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

In his address to the Indian diaspora in Bali on the sidelines of the G20 summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned the annual Baliyatra on the banks of the Mahanadi in Cuttack, which celebrates the ancient trade relations between India and Indonesia.

This year's Baliyatra, which concluded on Thursday, also found a place in the Guinness World Records for achieving an impressive feat of origami, the creation of beautiful paper sculptures.

### Historical significance

Baliyatra, literally 'voyage to Bali', is one of the country's largest open-air fairs, which is organised every year to commemorate the 2,000-year-old maritime and cultural links between ancient Kalinga (today's Odisha) and Bali and other South and Southeast Asian regions like Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Burma (Myanmar) and Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

The origins of the festival, which begins on Kartik Purnima (full moon night in the month of Kartik) can be traced back more than 1,000 years. The Bay of Bengal region had several ports, and sadhavas (traders) traditionally began their voyage across the sea on this auspicious day, when the winds were favourable for the boats, known as boita, to sail.



According to historians, popular items of trade between Kalinga and Southeast Asia included pepper, cinnamon, cardamom, silk, camphor, gold, and jewellery.

Even today, thousands of people across Odisha sail decorative miniature boats made of banana stems, paper, or thermocol to celebrate boita bandana, or the worshipping of the boats.

#### **Business of festivities**

The festival is organised by the Cuttack district administration and Cuttack Municipal Corporation in association with several other government agencies. Lakhs of people from Cuttack and neighbouring districts throng the fair site by the Mahanadi through the nine-day festival.

Besides the cultural and historical aspects, Baliyatra has an important commercial dimension. It is a time when people purchase everything from automobiles and electronic devices to local artisanal products at prices that are comparatively low. The district administration allots more than 1,500 stalls to traders through an auction, and the fair is estimated to see business worth more than Rs 100 crore over its nine days.

In October, a delegation of ambassadors and heads of missions in India of ASEAN countries visited Odisha to explore business opportunities. During a business summit, Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik spoke of Odisha being a “gateway to the ASEAN region”.

#### **Bigger after pandemic**

Massive arrangements were made for this year’s Baliyatra after the Covid-induced disruptions in 2020 and 2021. The festival, which is usually held in a 35-acre area, sprawled over 85 acres this year.

At a special event organised at the Barabati Stadium this year, over 2,100 students made over 22,000 paper boats at a single venue in 35 minutes, an achievement that was recognised by Guinness, and achieved the objective of getting global attention for the festival.

### **KASHI TAMIL SANGAMAM BEGINS THURSDAY: WHAT IS THE ANCIENT CONNECT BETWEEN KASHI AND THE TAMIL LAND?**

Legend has it that King Parakrama Pandya, who ruled over the region around Madurai in the 15th century, wanted to build a temple to Lord Shiva, and he travelled to Kashi to bring back a lingam. While returning, he stopped to rest under a tree — but when he tried to continue his journey, the cow carrying the lingam refused to move.

Parakrama Pandya understood this to be the Lord’s wish, and installed the lingam there, a place that came to be known as Sivakasi. For devotees who could not visit Kashi, the Pandyas had built the Kasi Viswanathar Temple in what is today Tenkasi in southwestern Tamil Nadu, close to the state’s border with Kerala.

#### **What is the history of ties between Kashi and Tamil Nadu?**

The connection between Kashi and the Tamil region is deep and old, said Dr Vinay Kumar of the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, at Banaras Hindu University (BHU). “Much later, another king, Adhivir Ram Pandyan, after returning from a pilgrimage to Kashi, constructed another Shiva temple in Tenkasi in the 19th century,” Dr Kumar said.



There's more: "Sant Kumara Gurupara from Thoothukudi district had negotiated with the princely state of Kashi to get a place for the consecration of Kedarghat and Vishvesvaralingam in Varanasi. He also composed Kashi Kalambagam, a collection of grammar poems on Kashi," Dr Kumar said.

#### **What is the Kashi Tamil Sangamam?**

The month-long Kashi Tamil Sangamam, which begins in Varanasi on Thursday, will celebrate the many aspects of the historical and civilisational connection between India's North and South. Some 2,400 people from Tamil Nadu will be taken to Varanasi in groups for visits that will last eight days and will include, besides an immersive local experience, trips to Ayodhya and Prayagraj.

"The broader objective is to bring the two knowledge and cultural traditions (of the North and South) closer, create an understanding of our shared heritage and deepen the people-to-people bond between the regions," the official note for the event, organised by the Ministry of Education, says.

This is in sync with the National Education Policy, 2020 which emphasises "on nurturing a generation that is modern and in sync with the 21st-century mindset, while being rooted in the Indian culture and ethos", officials said.

BHU and IIT-Madras are knowledge partners for the event, and the Ministries of Culture, Tourism, Railways, Textiles and Food Processing have been roped in as stakeholders, besides the government of Uttar Pradesh and the Varanasi administration.

Educationist Chamu Krishna Shastry, chairman of the Bharatiya Bhasha Samiti under the Ministry of Education that proposed the Sangamam, said that since ancient times, higher education in Southern India was not considered complete without a visit by the scholar to Kashi.

"The connection between the two centres of knowledge (Kashi and Kanchi) is evident in the similar themes in literature, and the presence of the name Kashi in every village in Tamil Nadu," Shastry said. "Kashinath is a popular name in Tamil Nadu."

Besides the Kasi Viswanathar temple in Tenkasi, there are hundreds of Shiva temples in Tamil Nadu that bear the name of Kashi — there are some 18 of them in the area around Chennai alone, Shastry said.

"People from Rameswaram would take a dip in the Koti teertha (in the temple) before visiting Kashi for darshan; and they would bring back (Ganga) water from Kashi for abhiseka at the temple in Rameswaram. Only this would complete their pilgrimage at a time when it took six months to travel between Kashi and Rameswaram," he said.

Shastry also mentioned the connection between the traders dealing in silk saris and textiles from Banaras and Kanchipuram, and architectural, culinary, and other kinds of connections. "We have just started the process of discovery and reconnection," he said.

### **THE SWORD OF SHIVAJI, WHICH THE MAHARASHTRA GOVT WANTS THE UK TO RETURN TO INDIA**

The Maharashtra government on Thursday (November 10) announced that it is working to bring back the sword of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj from London to India.



Cultural Affairs Minister Sudhir Mungantiwar on Thursday said the state government would hold discussions with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to bring back the “Jagdamba” sword of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj by 2024, to mark the completion of 350 years of the coronation of the Maratha king. (Shivaji was crowned emperor of his realm at Raigad fort on June 6, 1674.)

Mungantiwar said the Maharashtra government had begun correspondence with the central government on this issue after Sunak became Prime Minister of the UK.

#### **What is the history of the sword of Shivaji?**

According to historian Indrajit Sawant, who has written a book (‘Shodh Bhavani Talwaricha’) tracing the journey of the sword, it was given to Edward, the Prince of Wales (the later King Edward VII), by Shivaji IV in 1875-76.

“The Chhatrapati of Karveer was in possession of this sword which was used by Shivaji Maharaj. The catalogue of his armoury is available, which describes this sword as that of Shivaji Maharaj, and has its description, including how many diamonds it has. The meeting between the two (Edward and Shivaji IV) was held in Mumbai, and as a return gift, the Prince of Wales presented another sword to Shivaji IV,” Sawant said.

#### **Where is the sword of Shivaji now in London?**

According to Sawant, the sword is part of the Royal Collection Trust at Saint James’s Palace in London. A catalogue of the weapons of King Edward VII that was printed in London, describes the sword as “a relic of Shivaji the Great”, Sawant said.

The website of the Royal Collection Trust has a picture of an 18th century “sword and scabbard” from Maharashtra, which it says was “Presented to King Edward VII, when Prince of Wales, during his tour of India in 1875-76”. The website gives the dimensions of the “whole object” as “127.8 x 11.8 x 9.1 cm”, and its “blade length” as “95.0 cm”, or a little more than 3 feet.

#### **Why was the sword of Shivaji gifted to Prince Edward?**

This was not so much a genuine “gift” and a mark of respect as it was a coercive extraction by the British. Shivaji IV was barely 11 years old then, and like many other Indian kings of the time, he was forced by the British to “gift” them valuable presents, which included weapons with historical significance.

Prince Edward was especially fond of collecting weapons. His return gift to the Maratha king, which was another sword, is now at the New Palace Museum in Kolhapur. The specifications of this sword are inscribed on it.

Edward returned to England after an eight-month tour of India in May 1876. That same month, the British Parliament bestowed his mother, Queen Victoria, with the title of Empress of India. Upon her death in 1901, Edward became King Edward VII and Emperor of India and reigned until 1910, when he was succeeded on the throne by George V.

#### **What efforts have been made in the past to bring the sword back?**

The first of these efforts was made by Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, when he visited London to fight a suit of libel he had filed against the journalist Sir Valentine Chirol for derogatory references



made in Chiroi's book, 'Indian Unrest'. Subsequently, the Marathi poet and playwright Ram Ganesh Gadkari, who wrote under the pen name of Govindagraj, made references to the sword in a poem.

After independence, the first Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Yashwantrao Chavan, pursued the matter. Later, Chief Minister A R Antulay announced efforts to bring the sword back, and started collecting documents to build a case for India. At the time, however, the sword was referred to as the "Bhavani" sword, and the British argued that a sword of that name is already there in Maharashtra's Satara district.

#### **What is the difference between the "Bhavani" and "Jagdamba" swords?**

The "Bhavani" sword, now in Satara, was also used by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, who had at least three swords. But this sword is different from the one in London, which is called "Jagdamba" in the catalogue of Chhatrapati of Karveer.

"While putting our demand to the British, we must not name the sword. That can help them to find an excuse. We should only say that we want the sword given to the Prince of Wales in 1875-76 by Shivaji IV," Sawant said.

#### **ECHOES OF KASHMIR'S LONG-LOST PERSIAN INFLECTION**

Being the official language of courts and commerce in Jammu and Kashmir, Persian adorned verbal transactions in the Valley up until 1889, when Urdu replaced it under Maharaja Pratap Singh, the third Dogra ruler. Now, an exhibition of Persian manuscripts by Khwaja Muhammad Amin Darab, poet and chronogram writer, here puts a spotlight on the fast-fading language in Kashmir. The exhibition is an attempt to revive the language in the Union Territory.

A total of 73 rare manuscripts, including 11 books, written by Darab have been put on display at the Amar Singh Club in Srinagar on Monday. Among the exhibits are a chronogram on Neil Armstrong's landing on the moon, a tahnayat nama (congratulatory message) from traders of Srinagar to Dogra Maharaja Hari Singh on his accession to the throne in 1923 and a number of elegies of prominent scholars, including Muslim scholar and jurist Maulana Anwar Shah Kashmiri, who served as the principal of Darul Uloom, Deoband, Uttar Pradesh, prior to 1933.

Darab, who died here in 1979, is considered among the last transmitters of traditional Muslim learning, grounded in Persian adab or literature, in Kashmir. He was considered a master of Persian Qitah-i-Tarikh (chronogram), besides Naats in praise of Prophet Muhammed and Manqabats.

#### **SWEET, NOT PROTEIN, IN BAMBOO FRUITS TRIGGERS RAT BOOM**

A study spanning 13 years has shed interesting light on flowering in *Melocanna baccifera*, a tropical bamboo species that has long fascinated researchers for its association with the occurrence of 'bamboo death,' 'rat floods' and famines in northeast India.

Among other things, researchers detected a correlation between the sugar content in the fruit of *Melocanna baccifera* and the frenzied feeding and population boom in rats during 'Mautam', the cyclical, mass bamboo flowering that occurs once in 48 years.



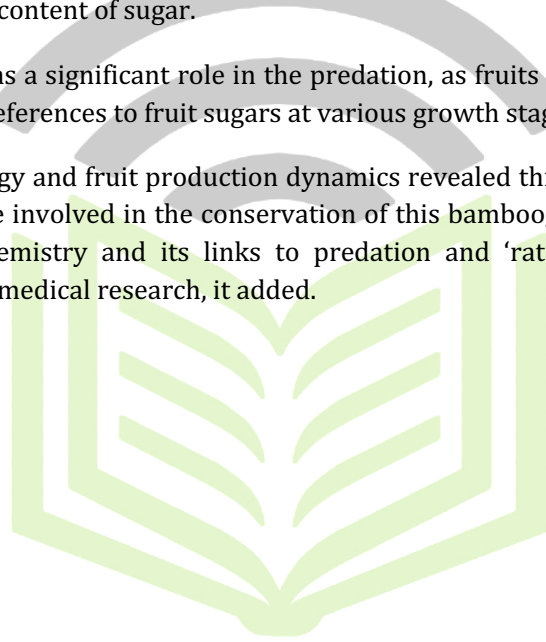
Researchers observed and listed a surprisingly large variety of animal visitors/predators attracted by the fruit and flowers of this bamboo. They also reported the highest-ever fruit production in a bamboo clump (456.67 kg).

Called 'Muli' in northeast India, *Melocanna baccifera* is the largest fruit-producing bamboo and is native to the northeast India-Myanmar region. During its gregarious flowering, the bamboo produces large fruits which draw animal visitors/predators. Of these, black rats greatly relish the fleshy, berry-like fruit. During this period, they also multiply rapidly, a phenomenon dubbed as 'rat flood.' Once the fruits are gone, they start devouring standing crops, causing famines that have claimed thousands of human lives.

Earlier, it was presumed that 'high protein in fruits/seeds' was attracting the rats. However, a JNTBGRI study in 2016 found that the fruit actually contains very little protein. The predation is mainly due to the high content of sugar.

"The fruit chemistry has a significant role in the predation, as fruits are consumed by predators based on their taste preferences to fruit sugars at various growth stages," the researchers noted.

The flowering phenology and fruit production dynamics revealed through this study are helpful to foresters and people involved in the conservation of this bamboo, the JNTBGRI said. Further, the study on fruit chemistry and its links to predation and 'rat flood' could help identify biomolecules useful in medical research, it added.



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## BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

### MUTUAL BENEFIT

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen's visit to India last week highlights the renewed focus in the U.S. on strengthening economic ties with Asia's third-largest economy and 'one of America's indispensable partners'. In Delhi, Ms. Yellen emphasised that "the United States and India share an interest in strengthening our supply chains in a world where certain governments wield trade as a geopolitical weapon". The U.S. was particularly keen to minimise its vulnerability to supply-chain disruptions and was therefore pursuing a strategy of 'friendshoring', with India, a key element in the plan to cut its reliance on 'countries that present geopolitical and security risks' to the supply chain. Citing the Ukraine invasion and asserting that Moscow had 'weaponised' its supply of natural gas to Europe, as well as the challenges of China's dominance in the production of products such as solar panels, she underlined Washington's keenness to nurture local partners in developing countries to help mitigate over-concentration on select suppliers.

Ms. Yellen's visit also highlights the opportunities and challenges in the bilateral economic relationship, especially as the current dispensation in Washington moves to mend the ruptures caused by the Trump administration's antagonistic decisions on trade including the withdrawal of duty-free access to Indian exporters under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) as well as a 2020 decision to put India back on the U.S. Treasury's 'Monitoring List' over its currency practices. The U.S. is still to reinstate the GSP benefit and exporters on both sides still face challenges, notwithstanding the fact that the U.S. is one of India's largest trading partners. In fact, the International Trade Administration of the U.S. notes in its investment climate summary on India that "new protectionist measures, including strict enforcement and potential expansion of data localisation measures, increased tariffs... and Indian-specific standards not aligned with international standards effectively closed off producers from global supply chains and restricted the expansion in bilateral trade and investment". With India set to take up the reins of the G-20 presidency, New Delhi has a chance to steer the global economic and trade agenda towards greater equity, including on climate change, especially given Ms. Yellen's vocal assurance of U.S. backing. Both sides stand much to gain by enhancing mutual trust and cooperation, particularly on trade.

### WHAT DOES THE WORLD BANK REPORT SAY ABOUT INDIA'S CITIES?

#### The story so far:

According to the World Bank, India would need to invest \$840 billion over the next 15 years, that is, an average of \$55 billion each year, to meet the demands of its fast-growing urban population. Its latest report, titled 'Financing India's Urban Infrastructure Needs: Constraints to Commercial Financing and Prospects for Policy Action', puts forth the urgent requirement to leverage greater private and commercial investments to meet the emerging financial gaps.

#### Who provides finances to build cities?

Financing on a repayable basis can be done either through debt, private lending or public-private partnership investments. These require a recurrent source of revenue to meet obligations, thus, mandating raising adequate resources.

Much of the urban infrastructure in India is financed by tied intergovernmental fiscal transfers, that is, vertical and horizontal transfer of finance for attaining certain objectives sub-nationally.



Of the finances needed to fund capital expenditures for Indian cities, 48% is derived from State governments, 24% from the Central government and 15% from urban local bodies' own surplus. The rest includes public-private partnership (3%), commercial debt (2%) and loans from Housing and Urban Development Corporation, or HUDCO (8%).

As for private debt, the World Bank observed, that only a handful of large cities have accessed institutional banks and/or loans. In fact, the volume of commercial debt financing might not be an accurate indicator, for States might accord loans to their entities via their self-regulated financial institutions at concessional terms. For example, Tamil Nadu Urban Development Fund and Tamil Nadu Urban Finance and Infrastructure Development Company provide loans on concessional terms.

#### **What are some of the constraints?**

The report argues that the overall funding base to raise commercial revenues “appears to be low” owing to weak fiscal performance of cities and low absorptive capacity for execution of projects.

Broadly, the global financial institution has argued that low service charges for municipal services undermine financial sustainability and viability. It goes to the extent that urban bodies are unable to recover operations and maintenance costs, thus, constraining their ability to further execute projects. In a related context, the report states that city agencies have been unable to expand their resource and funding base to support private financing for services such as water supply, sewerage networks and bus services, as they are highly subsidised. These are sourced from either their general revenues, own-source revenues (such as house tax, professional tax, property tax among others) or fiscal transfers.

Additionally, as for private-public partnerships, it states that revenue sharing designs between the two entities is not particularly viable for private investors and does not fully account for risk-sharing or risk-transfer mechanisms for project risks. Thus, problems arise during unanticipated demand shocks alongside legal and technical challenges that require restructuring to an entire public ownership.

#### **Does the report propose solutions?**

The central idea is to increase cities' fiscal base and creditworthiness. For improving their fiscal base, it states, cities must institute a buoyant revenue base and be able to recover the cost of providing its services. The latter could be attained by revising property taxes, user fees and service charges, among other streams, from the current low base.

### **TRADE TUMULT**

For the first time since February 2021, India's goods exports shrank this October, dropping 16.7% from last year (and 16% from September 2022) to slip below \$30 billion after a 20-month-streak above that mark. Most sectors were hit hard: engineering goods, pharmaceuticals and chemicals and employment-intensive gems and jewellery, textiles and handlooms. Just six sectors recorded an uptick, with electronics goods being the only manufacturing segment. Imports grew 5.7% year-on-year, expanding the country's trade deficit over 50% to \$26.9 billion. This is the fourth straight month of a \$25 billion-plus goods trade deficit that hit a record \$30 billion in July. To be sure, imports have now been moderating sequentially for four straight months and dropped 7.3% from September to an eight-month low of \$56.7 billion. But a marginal dip in petroleum imports, along with a 10.3% shrinking of non-oil, non-gold imports from September, can also be construed as a

**3<sup>RD</sup> FLOOR AND 4<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR**





sign of slackening domestic demand. India's trade deficit so far this year is now over \$175 billion, from \$94.2 billion a year ago. With high energy prices likely to escalate with winter's onset, a significant easing in deficit levels is not on the horizon yet.

While the Government acknowledged forecasts of a slump in global shipments growth to just 1% in 2023, it attributed the October trade blip to a seasonal Deepavali effect — production dips as workers go on leave and imports rise with festive demand. Though the pre-Deepavali and Deepavali month exports did have a \$5 billion gap in 2021, this was not the case in pre-COVID 2019. Officials conveyed there is no need to be 'overly depressed' as India has a very low share of global trade which can only grow. But that growth will not accrue automatically — in a shrinking buyer's market, rivals such as Vietnam cannot be expected to simply wait out the slump. In contrast, a new Foreign Trade Policy to replace the current policy from 2015, was recently deferred yet again till April 2023 for reasons that included waiting out the current global turmoil. If anything, the tumult in trade flows will be much worse by then. Policymakers must stop dithering and be more pro-active in recalibrating their stance — for instance, the steel export duty amid lower global prices has triggered higher imports, while exports, including those of engineering goods, have collapsed. The Finance Ministry recently identified external pressures as a key challenge — with a depreciating rupee making imports pricier and slowing global demand hurting exports. More actions are needed to match these concerns; waiting and watching is not an option.

## WHAT IS THE TARGET LEVEL OF RETAIL INFLATION?

### The story so far:

India's retail inflation dropped to a three-month low of 6.77% in October when compared to the same month last year. Wholesale price inflation also dropped significantly from rising at double digit rates in earlier months to 8.3% in October. The drop in inflation has led to hopes that the RBI has managed to gain control over price rise.

### What caused the drop in inflation?

Economists attribute the drop in inflation in October to a favourable base effect. It should be remembered that retail inflation since the pandemic has been affected by lockdowns which served as a severe shock to the economy. Lockdowns affected the demand and supply sides in different ways, both when they were first imposed and subsequently lifted by the government. This may have led to unusual volatility in inflation figures since the pandemic. Hence, it may be hard to compare inflation figures of the current year, in which normalcy has largely returned to the economy, with those from previous years marred by stringent lockdowns. Easing food prices have also been cited as a reason for the recent drop in inflation. But it should be remembered that inflation refers to a general rise in the price level regardless of changes in individual prices. So, rise or fall in inflation cannot really be attributed to changes in the prices of individual goods and services.

### How will the RBI react to the latest inflation figures?

Retail inflation at 6.77% is still above the RBI's target inflation range, which is between 2% and 6%. Retail inflation has, in fact, remained above the RBI's target inflation range for ten months now, due to which the RBI has had to write to the government explaining why it failed to meet its inflation mandate. So, despite the slight cooling down of inflation, economists expect the RBI to



continue hiking interest rates over the coming months; the RBI may even want inflation to drop to around 4%. They, however, expect the pace of rate hikes to slow down with inflation seeming to ease gradually. It should be noted that the RBI raised rates by 50 basis points in its last three monetary policy committee (MPC) meetings this year. Economists believe that the RBI may opt for a 35 basis points hike during the next MPC meeting scheduled for December. If inflation continues to fall, the challenge for the central bank will be to control the pace at which it slows down rate hikes. This is because there is usually a time lag between monetary policy and its impact on inflation, which makes the setting of interest rates a tricky affair.

#### **Has inflation peaked yet?**

It is unclear whether the drop in retail inflation in October marks the beginning of a sustainable downtrend in inflation figures. In the past, inflation figures have cooled down temporarily only to rise again in subsequent months. So, it may be too soon to conclude that October's inflation figures mark a turning point in inflation trends. Monetary policymakers are likely to be aware of this and may decide to wait and watch before signalling a decisive change in their policy stance. The RBI may also decide to keep the rate hike cycle going due to external pressures, particularly if domestic economic growth does not slump to alarmingly low levels as it raises rates. Although inflation in the U.S. has cooled down a little to 7.7% in October, it is still way above the U.S. Federal Reserve's inflation target of 2%. This means that the U.S. Federal Reserve is likely to continue tightening its monetary policy stance well into next year. If so, the RBI may be forced to raise domestic interest rates as well or dig deeper into its foreign exchange reserves in order to prevent a slide in the rupee against the U.S. dollar.

#### **WHAT ARE VOSTRO ACCOUNTS, 9 OF WHICH HAVE BEEN OPENED WITH 2 INDIAN BANKS? (AND WHAT IS A NOSTRO ACCOUNT?)**

On Tuesday (November 15), the government announced that nine special Vostro accounts have been opened with two Indian banks after permission from the RBI to facilitate trade in rupee in the wake of sanctions on Russia by the US and European countries.

#### **What is a Vostro account?**

A Vostro account is an account that a domestic bank holds for a foreign bank in the domestic bank's currency — which, in the case of India, is the rupee. The RBI allowed nine such accounts, including IndusInd Bank and Uco Bank.

In the case of trade with Russia, payments in rupee for the export and import of goods will go to these Vostro accounts. The owners and beneficiaries of this money will be the exporters and importers in both the countries. The banks will keep the record of money transferred.

#### **And what is a Nostro account?**

Two kinds of accounts, Vostro and Nostro, are often mentioned together. Both Vostro and Nostro are technically the same type of account, with the difference being who opens the account and where.

So, if an Indian bank like the SBI wants to open an account in the United States, it will get in touch with a bank in the US, which will open a Nostro account and accept payments for SBI in dollars.



The account opened by the Indian bank in the US will be a Nostro account for the Indian bank, while for the US bank, the account will be considered a Vostro account.

Literally, Nostro means 'ours' and Vostro means 'yours' in Latin. Therefore, the accounts opened by IndusInd and UCO are Vostro, and the ones opened by Russia's Sberbank and VTB Bank are Nostro accounts.

#### **What led to creation of the Vostro accounts?**

On July 11, the RBI put in place a mechanism to settle international trade in rupees "in order to promote growth of global trade with emphasis on exports from India and to support the increasing interest of the global trading community in the rupee".

The central bank's move has come in the wake of increasing pressure on the Indian currency in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and sanctions by the US and the EU.

According to the central bank, AD (authorised dealer) banks in India have been permitted to open rupee Vostro accounts. Accordingly, for settlement of trade transactions with any country, an AD bank in India may open special rupee Vostro accounts of correspondent banks of the partner trading country.

#### **DISCLOSURE TIME: SEBI PROPOSES TO HALVE IT FOR TOP 250 COMPANIES**

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has proposed stipulating top 250 listed companies to confirm or deny any information reported in the mainstream media that could have material impact on the listed entity and has reduced the disclosure timeline to 12 hours from the occurrence of events.

Earlier, the company has to disclose information to the stock exchanges within 24 hours. Currently, a listed entity may on its own initiative, confirm or deny any reported event or information to stock exchanges under the Sebi regulations.

It has proposed a quantitative criterion of minimum threshold for disclosure of events based on the value or the expected quantitative impact of the event, Sebi said in its consultation paper made public on Monday. These proposals are aimed at streamlining the disclosure requirements for material events or information required under LODR (Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements) rules and keeping pace with the changing market dynamics, Sebi added.

"Verification of reported events or information which may have material effect on the listed entity is essential to avoid establishment of a false market sentiment or impact on the securities of the entity," Sebi said.

Listed entities should provide additional quantitative thresholds or criteria for determining materiality of events in their "materiality policies". Such policy should be framed in a manner so as to assist employees in identifying potential material events which would be escalated and reported to the relevant key managerial personnel for determining materiality of the event and for making disclosure to stock exchanges, it said.

Sebi has proposed the rules for listed entities, whose threshold value, or the expected impact in terms of value, exceeds the lower of two per cent of turnover or two per cent of net worth as per the last audited standalone financial statements or five per cent of three-year average of absolute value of profit/loss after tax. In the case of information which emanates from a decision taken in

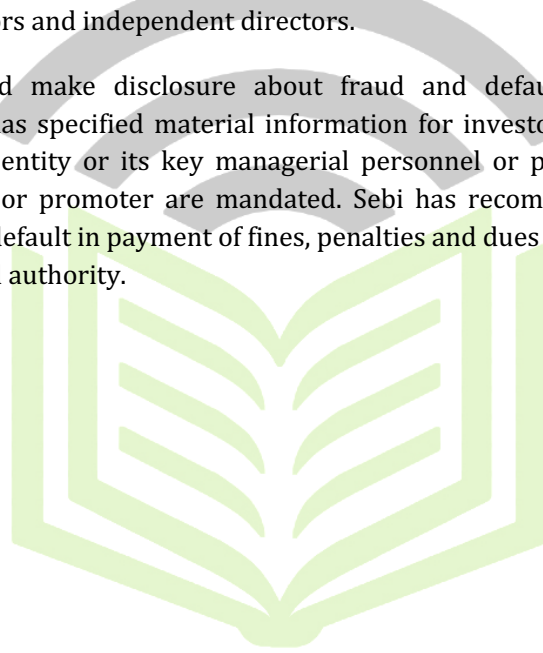


a meeting of the board of directors, the disclosure should be made within 30 minutes from the closure of such meeting, the regulator added. Sebi has proposed mandating disclosure of all announcements and communication made by the listed entity or its officials at one place for the benefit of the investors.

The regulator proposed that announcement to any form of mass communication media or action taken by directors or promoters or key managerial personnel, in relation to the listed entity, which is not already made available in the public domain, should be disclosed.

Such listed entities should make disclosures about the name of the authority, nature and details of the action taken or initiated, details of the violation committed and its impact on financial or other activities. Sebi has suggested making a letter of resignation, with detailed reasons, for key managerial personnel, senior management and directors. Such disclosure is mandated only in case of resignation of auditors and independent directors.

“Listed entities should make disclosure about fraud and defaults by director or senior management as Sebi has specified material information for investors,” it said. Currently, such disclosure by a listed entity or its key managerial personnel or promoter, and arrest of key managerial personnel or promoter are mandated. Sebi has recommended that listed entities should disclose about default in payment of fines, penalties and dues to any regulatory, statutory, enforcement or judicial authority.



# DreamIAS



## LIFE & SCIENCE

### ATTEMPT NO. 3 FOR ARTEMIS 1, WITH THE PROMISE OF A NEW SPACE AGE

At 1.04 am Eastern time in the United States on Wednesday (11.34 am in India), a two-hour window will open for NASA to make a third attempt to send its new 322-foot-tall, multi-billion-dollar rocket known as the Space Launch System (SLS), to the Moon.

The debut flight of the rocket was scrubbed twice earlier, on August 29 and September 3, after technical issues were detected during the countdown. This mission, known as Artemis 1, is unmanned, and is intended to test the rocket and the Orion space capsule, in which astronauts will ride on future missions. If Wednesday's launch takes place, Orion will spend a couple of weeks in lunar orbit before returning for a Pacific Ocean splashdown next month.

#### Why Artemis 1 matters

It's been a half century since the six Apollo human Moon landings between 1969 and 1972. Since then, spacecraft have travelled beyond the solar system, exploratory missions have probed Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, more than 500 astronauts have made return trips to space, and permanent space labs have been set up.

What remains to be achieved, however, is the promise of transporting humans to new worlds, of landing and living on other planets, or maybe meeting aliens.

Artemis 1 is seen as the first step into that new space age. In the missions that will follow, human beings will go back to the Moon, explore the possibilities of long lunar stays, and assess the potential of the Moon as a launch pad for explorations into deep space.

While the mission objectives of Artemis 1 itself are humble — it is only a lunar Orbiter mission even though, unlike most Orbiter missions, it has a return-to-Earth target — it is intended to lay the foundations for more complex and ambitious missions.

The CubeSats it will carry are equipped with instruments meant for specific investigations and experiments, including searching for water in all forms and for hydrogen that can be utilised as a source of energy.

Biology experiments will be carried out, and the impact of deep space atmosphere on humans will be investigated through the effect on dummy 'passengers' on board Orion. The SLS rocket, the most powerful ever built, will also be on test for its potential for more ambitious missions in the future.

### COP27: UN TO SET UP SYSTEM TO TRACK METHANE EMISSIONS FROM SPACE

In keeping with the relatively new focus on cutting methane emissions, the UN has decided to set up a satellite-based monitoring system for tracking it and alerting governments and corporations to respond.

The Methane Alert and Response System, or MARS, will integrate data from a large number of existing and future satellites that have the ability to detect methane emission events anywhere in the world, and send out notifications to the relevant stakeholders to act on it.



In the last few years, there has been a lot of emphasis on reducing methane emissions. Methane is the second-most common of the six major greenhouse gases, but is far more dangerous than carbon dioxide in its potential to cause global warming. Accounting for about 17 per cent of the current global greenhouse gas emissions, methane is blamed for having caused at least 25 to 30 per cent of temperature rise since the pre-industrial times.

However, unlike carbon dioxide, methane is largely a sectoral gas, and there are only a few sources of emission. It is possible, therefore, to cut down on methane emissions without having widespread impact on the economy. Because its global warming potential is about 80 times that of carbon dioxide, a reduction in methane emissions also brings big benefits in a short time.

“Fortunately, action on methane emissions is one of the most cost effective and impactful actions a country can take,” Marcelo Mena, CEO of Global Methane Hub, said.

At the Glasgow climate conference last year, nearly 100 countries had come together in a voluntary pledge — now referred to as the Global Methane Pledge — to cut methane emissions by at least 30 per cent by 2030 from the 2020 levels. More countries have joined in this initiative since then, bringing the total to nearly 130. A 30 per cent reduction in methane emissions by 2030 is expected to result in avoiding 0.2 degree rise in temperature by the year 2050, and is considered absolutely essential in the global efforts to keep the temperature increase below the 1.5 degree Celsius target.

The MARS initiative is intended to strengthen these efforts. It would feed into the recently formed International Methane Emissions Observatory of the UN Environment Programme. To start with, MARS will track the large point emission sources, mainly in the fossil fuel industry, but with time, would be able to detect emissions from coal, waste, livestock and rice fields as well, a UN statement said.

US President Joe Biden, who came to the climate conference for a few hours on Friday, announced, among other things, a proposal to strengthen domestic standards with the aim of reducing methane emissions from the oil and gas sector by 87 per cent from 2005 levels.

#### WHY ARE TALKS ON 1.5°C AT A CLIFF EDGE AT COP27?

##### **The story so far:**

After the ratification of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change of 2015, the focus is on voluntary national actions to drive down greenhouse gas emissions and keep the rise in average global temperature to well below 2°C and as close to 1.5°C as possible by the end of the century. All nations that signed on to the pact under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) are meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, at the COP27, to review progress, raise ambition on emissions cuts and draw up funding plans to help vulnerable countries adapt to climate change. But the scientific community is losing hope that temperature rise can be stopped in time, before uncontrollable tipping points are reached, leading to catastrophic climate change.

##### **Why is the 1.5°C goal seeming unattainable?**

Scientific reports from the UN released ahead of the COP27 meeting in Egypt point to the extremely narrow window available to close the emissions gap and prevent rise in average temperature beyond 1.5°C.



The UNEP's Emissions Gap Report 2022 says, even if all the conditional Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) — voluntary pledges submitted under the Paris pact — followed by targets to reduce emissions to net-zero are implemented, global warming is projected to rise to 1.8°C with a 66% probability. The report also points out that global annual emissions during 2021 at 52.8 Gigatonnes (GtCO<sub>2e</sub>), represents a slight increase compared to 2019, the pre-COVID year, and that the outlook for 2030 is not bright. Collectively, G20 members account for 75% of emissions, although it is the richer countries that are responsible for accumulated emissions since the industrial revolution.

At the Egypt conference, scientist Johan Rockstrom said the key tipping points are the potential Greenland ice sheet collapse, West Antarctic ice sheet collapse, thawing of the boreal permafrost, and tropical coral reef die offs, all of which are expected to happen at 1.5°C. These and other estimates of temperature impacts were reported in a recent paper in the journal Science by Armstrong McKay and others. Tipping points represent moments that cascade into irreversible changes, with a domino effect on other elements such as monsoons and heat waves. To put things in perspective, Prof. Rockstrom said current temperature rise stands at 1.2°C to 1.3°C over the pre-industrial average, the highest in about 12,000 years since the last Ice Age. With the present soft approaches to limiting atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>, it will be almost impossible to achieve the 1.5°C target.

#### **What do scientific reports say on the fallout?**

The COP27 is described as the conference of implementation, given that UN climate talks are often criticised as a 'talk more, do little' exercise. Yet, official reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which inform the UN system have reminders for the participating leaders, whose national pledges fall well short of the reductions needed. The latest Sixth Assessment Report (SAR) of the IPCC, with high confidence in its conclusions for the near term (until 2040), says that biodiversity loss, Arctic ice loss, threat to coastal settlements and infrastructure will all be experienced, while conflicts, migration of affected people and urban challenges to energy and water access could also arise. Beyond 2040 and until the end of the century, the IPCC report paints a grim picture. At 2°C, up to 20% decline in snowmelt water for irrigation, diminished water for farming and human settlements due to glacier mass loss, and a two-fold increase in flood damage could happen, while up to 18% of species on land could go extinct.

Of particular concern in the tropical regions is the projected increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as cyclones, particularly in the medium to long term until 2100.

#### **What is the focus of negotiations at COP27?**

Countries most affected by the effects of a changing climate have been seeking loss and damage payments from the richer industrialised nations, who have contributed the bulk of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere. Firming up this compensation mechanism is a major area of focus at Sharm el-Sheikh.

The emissions background is explained as follows: CO<sub>2</sub> level at the Mauna Loa observatory in Hawaii stood at 416.22 parts per million (ppm) on November 11. The level was 315 ppm in 1958 and the pre-industrial revolution level was 280 ppm, U.S. records show. The emerging economies and small climate-affected countries argue that they were not responsible for this stock of CO<sub>2</sub>, and many want a massive loss and damage fund created, separate from the \$100 bn per year agreed to under the Paris Agreement. At the last conference in Glasgow, this agenda was kicked



down the road. Some communities in countries ranging from Peru to Pakistan and even India have started filing climate cases, seeking restraints or damages.

More fundamentally, activists are seeking a sharp move away from fossil fuels to peak emissions by 2025. A special report titled “10 New Insights on Climate Science” released at COP27 by Prof. Rockstrom points to continuing high emissions from fossil fuels because “success is still measured predominantly by GDP and affluence, rather than through improvements in resource use efficiency and advancing human well-being within the biosphere’s constraints.” World leaders and the financial system investing in polluting companies worldwide are, therefore, under pressure to divest from fossil fuels and support greener renewable options at COP27.

## WHO SHOULD PAY FOR CLIMATE DAMAGE?

### The story so far:

At the G-20 summit in Bali, rich nations including the U.S., Japan and Canada have pledged \$20 billion to wean Indonesia off coal. The U.S. and Japan have led the International Partners Group to mobilise funds from the public and private sector to support Indonesia’s efforts to reach carbon neutrality by 2050. But a lot more needs to be done, and in that context it is significant that at the ongoing Climate Change Conference (COP27) in Egypt, compensation against loss and damage due to climate change is finally on the main agenda, unlike previous years.

### Why is compensation critical?

Between 1900 and now, developed countries have benefitted from industrial development, which also led to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Developing countries were relatively late in starting out on economic development. They may be contributing to emissions now, but that is a weak reason to ask them to stop economic development. A farmer in rural Africa can claim that his country has not added to emissions historically, but because of the U.S. or Russia’s industrialisation, his agriculture yields are declining. Or an urban worker in South America has to work, without choice, in unforgiving heat wave conditions caused by the developed world’s emissions of the past. Therefore, options like financing the developing or underdeveloped countries by the developed world have been discussed.

But as a popular newsletter Finshots asked, who decides who should pay whom and how much? Ourworldindata.org cites data from the Global Carbon Project to show that between 1751 and 2017, 47% of the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions came from the U.S. and the EU-28. In total, just 29 countries.

### How badly do their emissions hurt?

A paper published by Springer Link under the Climate Change umbrella earlier this year shows that emissions attributable to the U.S. over 1990-2014 caused losses that are concentrated around 1–2% of per capita GDP across nations in South America, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia, where temperature changes have likely impacted labour productivity and agricultural yields.

But emissions may have also helped a few countries, such as those in Northern Europe and Canada. Moody’s Analytics estimates that by the middle of the century, Canada would see a rise in GDP of 0.3% (about \$9 billion a year) as warmer climates spur agriculture and labour productivity. The Canadian Climate Institute cautioned that such a claim was not wholly true and that other factors must be considered. For example, climate change-spurred floods could cost Canada \$17 billion annually by 2050.





In these war of words, the only certainty is the fast-approaching calamity. The UN Environment Programme's annual emissions gap report for 2022 released late last month said the "international community is falling far short of the Paris goals, with no credible pathway to 1.5°C in place. Only an urgent system-wide transformation can avoid climate disaster.... The world must cut emissions by 45% to avoid global catastrophe."

#### **Where about India's emissions?**

The report says that India is among the top seven emitters (others being China, the EU-27, Indonesia, Brazil, the Russian Federation and the U.S.). These seven, plus international transport, accounted for 55% of global GHG emissions in 2020. Collectively, G-20 members are responsible for 75% of global GHG emissions.

If we seek economic development, some GHG emissions are unavoidable. But, put in the context of India's population, its emissions are far lesser per head, than for others. World average per capita GHG emissions were 6.3 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent (tCO<sub>2</sub>e) in 2020. The U.S. is way above this level at 14, followed by 13 in the Russian Federation and 9.7 in China. India remains far below the world average at 2.4.

In addition to last year's pledge of net-zero emissions by 2070, India has also committed to generate 500 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2030, bringing down emission intensity of GDP, as also raising forest cover. Last year, India was responsible for the wording of the agreement on coal. It was changed from "phase-out" to "phase-down" of coal — which reflects the country's ground realities of large energy requirements, met predominantly by thermal power, to spur economic development.

In sum, the headlines that dominated the first week of the COP27 summit showed that there has been little sign of a concerted effort the world over to keep emissions low so as to retain global warming within the 1.5°C range.

### **IS CLIMATE CHANGE AFFECTING GLOBAL HEALTH?**

#### **The story so far:**

Even as countries are meeting at the ongoing Climate Change Conference (COP27) in Egypt, a recent report by Lancet, has traced in detail the intimate link between changing weather events and their impact on the health of people. The 2022 Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change: Health at the Mercy of Fossil Fuels points out that the world's reliance on fossil fuels increases the risk of disease, food insecurity and other illnesses related to heat.

#### **What does the report outline?**

The 2022 Lancet Countdown report comes at a time when the world is face-to-face with the threat of climate change.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), climate change affects the social and environmental determinants of health — clean air, safe drinking water, sufficient food and secure shelter.

The Lancet report indicates that rapidly increasing temperatures exposed people, especially vulnerable populations (adults above 65 years old and children younger than one) to 3.7 billion more heatwave days in 2021 than annually in 1986–2005.



### **How is it leading to rise in infectious diseases?**

The changing climate is affecting the spread of infectious disease, raising the risk of emerging diseases and co-epidemics. For instance, it records that coastal waters are becoming more suited for the transmission of *Vibrio* pathogens. It also says that the number of months suitable for malaria transmission has increased in the highland areas of the Americas and Africa.

The WHO has predicted that between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 2,50,000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress.

### **What about food security?**

Every dimension of food security is being affected by climate change. Higher temperatures threaten crop yields directly, with the growth season shortening for many cereal crops. Extreme weather events disrupt supply chains, thereby undermining food availability, access, stability, and utilisation. The prevalence of undernourishment increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, and up to 161 million more people faced hunger in 2020 than in 2019. This situation is now worsened by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the report underscores.

### **Is the world dependent on fossil fuel?**

The war has led many countries to search for alternative fuels to Russian oil and gas, and some of them are still turning back to traditional thermal energy. The report argues that even if implemented as a temporary transition, the renewed clamour for coal could reverse whatever gains have been made in air quality improvement and push the world towards a future of accelerated climate change that would threaten human survival. Instead, a transition to clean energy forms would undeniably be the sustainable way ahead.

### **Are there any solutions?**

But the report is not all gloom and doom. A health-centred response to the coexisting climate, energy, and cost-of-living crises provides an opportunity to deliver a healthy, low-carbon future, it states. This is the way a health-centred response would work – it would reduce the likelihood of the most catastrophic climate change impacts, while improving energy security and creating an opportunity for economic recovery. Improvements in air quality will help prevent deaths resulting from exposure to fossil fuel-derived ambient PM<sub>2.5</sub>, and the stress on low-carbon travel and increase in urban spaces would result in promoting physical activity which would have an impact on physical and mental health. The report also calls for an accelerated transition to balanced and more plant-based diets, as that would help reduce emissions from red meat and milk production, and prevent diet-related deaths, besides substantially reducing the risk of zoonotic diseases. The report indicates that this sort of health-focused shifts would reduce the burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases, reducing the strain on health-care providers, and leading to more robust health systems.

These incrementals notwithstanding, it is true that data shows that the pace and scale of climate change adaptation, planning, and resilience is insufficient. In this context, the report calls for global coordination, funding, transparency, and cooperation between governments, communities, civil society, businesses, and public health leaders, to reduce or prevent the vulnerabilities that the world is otherwise exposed to.



## AT COP-27, INDIA AND THREE OTHERS OPPOSE 'CARBON BORDER TAX'

With the 27th edition of the Conference of Parties (COP) in Sharm El-Sheikh nearing its final stages and efforts being ramped up to arrive at a conclusive agreement, a consortium of countries, including India, jointly said on Wednesday that carbon border taxes, which could result in market distortion and aggravate the trust deficit among parties, must be avoided.

The European Union has proposed a policy called the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism to tax products such as cement and steel, which are extremely carbon intensive, with effect from 2026.

BASIC, a group comprising Brazil, India, South Africa and China, large economies that are significantly dependent on coal, has for several years voiced common concerns and reiterated their right to use fossil fuels during their transition to clean energy.

Their statement expressed “grave concern” that developed countries were not showing leadership or responding with a matching effort.

“Unilateral measures and discriminatory practices, such as carbon border taxes, that could result in market distortion and aggravate the trust deficit amongst Parties [signatory countries to the United Nations climate agreements], must be avoided. BASIC countries call for a united solidarity response by developing countries to any unfair shifting of responsibilities from developed to developing countries,” the statement said.

It also said that developed countries had “backtracked on finance and mitigation commitments and pledges” and there was a “significant increase” in the consumption and production of fossil fuels in the past year by developed countries, their statement underlined, even as they continue to press developing countries to move away from the same resources. “Such double standards are incompatible with climate equity and justice.”

They said that adaptation was still not being accorded the balanced and substantive attention they deserved in the UN climate framework process, despite the opportunities and linkages with “loss and damage.”

The latter refers to a demand by developing countries to have an institutional system to finance countries that are affected by climate change for the environmental damage that has already occurred.

## ATOMIC ENERGY, HYDROGEN POWER INDIA'S NET ZERO PLAN

At the United Nations Conference of Parties (COP) in Sharm el-Sheikh, India on Monday announced its long-term strategy to transition to a “low emissions” pathway, which is premised on expanding its nuclear power capacity by at least threefold in the next decade, apart from becoming an international hub for producing green hydrogen and increasing the proportion of ethanol in petrol.

Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav said these steps were consonant with India’s “five-decade journey” to net zero, or being carbon neutral by 2070 — a commitment made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Glasgow, where the 26th COP was held last year.



While 195 member countries, signatories to the UN climate agreements, were obliged to submit the long-term document by 2022, only 57 — India is the latest addition — have done so. “The LT-LEDS (Long Term-Low Emission Development Strategy) has been prepared in the framework of India’s right to an equitable and fair share of the global carbon budget. We have ensured that the strategy emphasises energy security, energy access, and employment, while keeping focus on our vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat,” Mr. Yadav said. “The journey to net zero is a five-decade-long one and India’s vision is therefore evolutionary and flexible, accommodating new technological developments and developments in the global economy and international cooperation.”

India “aspires” to maximise the use of electric vehicles, with ethanol blending to reach 20% by 2025 (it is currently 10%) and a “strong shift” to public transport for passenger and freight traffic. India will also focus on improving energy efficiency by the Perform, Achieve and Trade (PAT) scheme, the National Hydrogen Mission, increasing electrification, enhancing material efficiency, and recycling and ways to reduce emissions.

India’s forest and tree cover is a net carbon sink absorbing 15% of carbon dioxide emissions in 2016, and the country is on track to fulfilling its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) commitment of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of additional carbon sequestration in forest and tree cover by 2030, the document notes.

The NDCs are voluntary commitments by countries to reduce emissions by a fixed number relative to a date in the past to achieve the long-term goal of climate agreements of preventing global temperature rising beyond 1.5 or 2 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. Thus, India’s most updated NDC commits to ensuring half its electricity is derived from non-fossil fuel sources by 2030, and reducing the emissions intensity by 45% below 2005 levels by 2030. The LT-LEDS are qualitative in nature and are a requirement emanating from the 2015 Paris Agreement whereby countries must explain how they will transition their economies beyond achieving near-term NDC targets, and work towards the larger climate objective of cutting emissions by 45% by 2030 and achieve net zero around 2050. This is what, scientists say, offers the best chance of keeping temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The document, however, also underlined that this transition entailed costs ranging in “trillion dollars” that the developed countries, responsible for the existing carbon accumulation, ought to be making good. “The transition to low carbon development pathway will entail several costs pertaining to the development of new technologies, new infrastructure, and other transaction costs. While several estimates exist, varying across studies, they all fall generally in the range of trillions of dollars by 2050. Provision of climate finance by developed countries will play a very significant role and needs to be considerably enhanced, in the form of grants and concessional loans, ensuring scale, scope and speed, predominantly from public sources, in accordance with the principles of the UNFCCC,” the document noted.

## WIDOW SPIDERS

When it comes to spider love, female widow spiders hold the key to attracting mates, potentially adjusting their web’s attractiveness to lure males, according to new research (Nature Communications Biology). A study led by Simon Fraser University’s Andreas Fischer reveals new details about how female false widow spiders (*Steatoda grossa*) communicate using pheromones — and suggests they can build more attractive webs — to lure mate-seeking males by adjusting the pH level of their pheromone-bearing silk, a release says.



Female false widow spiders disseminate pheromone from their webs to attract males and deposit contact pheromone components on their webs that induce courtship by the males once they arrive.

This study also identified the organ that produces these pheromone components — the posterior aggregate silk gland — as well as the chemical structure of the pheromone components involved in attraction and courtship.

## CAN DIABETES MEDICINES LEAD TO WEIGHT LOSS? CAN THEY BE GIVEN TO THE OBESE WHO ARE NON-DIABETIC?

With obesity not restricted to the rich from metro cities anymore, several classes of diabetes medicines that are known to drive weight loss – and remission in diabetics and pre-diabetics – have great potential, says diabetologist Dr Anoop Misra. The morbidly obese may choose to use these drugs before thinking of bariatric surgeries.

### Which diabetes medicines lead to weight loss and how?

There are two classes of diabetes medicines that help in moderate to substantial weight loss. The first is the SGLT-2 inhibitors, which we have been prescribing for diabetes for six to seven years now. They act by eliminating glucose in the urine and preventing its re-absorption in the kidneys. This loss of glucose effectively means a loss of calories as well. So, in addition to decreasing blood sugar levels, it also leads to weight loss. This class of drug, on an average, leads to a weight loss of about 2 to 4 kg in a year. This is not too high, but that is good enough for several patients.

When it comes to weight loss, the second class of drugs are GLP-1 receptor analogues that are mostly injectable. (The drug that Elon Musk said he uses to stay fit belongs to this category).

We have been using these injectables for diabetes management for ten years now. Over the years, there have been many such injectables available – first we had a twice-daily injection, then once daily injection, then we had once-a-week injection, and now we have oral form of these drugs. These are powerful drugs that can lead to a loss of 5 per cent to 10 per cent of body weight over six months to one year.

The newer versions of these drugs, which are currently not available in India, can make a person lose up to 15 per cent of their body weight. This is remarkable. There is a great potential of these drugs as far as obesity is concerned.

### Can these drugs be prescribed to obese persons who might not be diabetic?

As far as people who are only obese are concerned, right now the only approved drug in India is a very weak one called Orlistat. It's a very old drug that has been on the market for more than 20 years. This drug blocks the absorption of fat in the intestine. But, since it works on the intestine, it can also cause gastrointestinal symptoms such as diarrhoea. Besides, the weight loss is not much.

On the other hand, worldwide, injections of these GLP-1 receptor analogues at a high dose are available for weight loss in non-diabetics. Now, another drug of the same class is being approved on the fast track for the treatment of obesity.

For diabetics with obesity, there are SGLT-2 inhibitors – which are the frontline drugs for diabetes management – and injectable GLP-1 receptor analogues, along with the oral GLP-1 analogue, that is available by the name Rybelsus for the last couple of months.



Just to repeat, in India however, there is only one approved weight loss drug. However, if you are using the GLP-1 receptor analogues in the doses currently available in India, then the patient has to be explained that it is being used out of the label (a drug used for the treatment of a condition for which it is not approved).

**Does using diabetes medicines in non-diabetic obese persons lead to a drop in blood glucose levels?**

No. These drugs are, in fact, known to not cause hypoglycaemia. These drugs are used by us, infrequently, in those who have morbid obesity and don't want to go for bariatric surgery.

**Importantly, since these medicines lead to weight-loss, can they result in remission of the disease?**

Of course, if they lose that much weight. There is a 60 to 70 per cent likelihood that the persons go into diabetes remission. This is the additional advantage of using these drugs in pre-diabetic and diabetic persons who are obese.

Now, can people go off these medications after remission? Usually, the patients and their doctors set a target weight. If they reach the target and their sugars are normal, they can go off the medicines. But, they need to have, say, a high degree of exercise and a good diet to prevent regaining weight. Weight regain is always a problem with whichever modality is used to lose weight, except bariatric surgery.

So, we wait and see what happens. If they are gaining weight at a slow pace then we would wait and watch, if they are gaining weight at a fast pace then we may have to restart the medicines.

Of course, some people stop because the injections are expensive – they cost about Rs 8,000 to 9,000 a month. Initially, they can cause nausea and vomiting for about four weeks. The alternative is, of course, bariatric surgery which may cost more initially but then there is less weight regain as compared to the medicines

**MAJOR ALZHEIMER'S DRUG CANDIDATE FAILS TEST: WHAT WAS THE ROCHE TRIAL**

Roche's Alzheimer's drug candidate could not be shown to slow dementia progression in two drug trials, the pharmaceutical company said in a statement on Monday.

**The study**

The statement said that the twin studies, known as Graduate 1 and 2, had not reached their main goal of showing that the drug gantenerumab could preserve abilities such as remembering, solving problems, orientation and personal care in patients suffering from early stages of Alzheimer's disease.

The Swiss drugmaker conducted two identically designed studies, each with about 1,000 participants, who were examined and queried by physicians over more than two years. Within each study, volunteers were randomly assigned to receive either the injectable antibody drug gantenerumab or a placebo.

The drug was associated with a relative reduction in clinical decline of 8 per cent in Graduate 1 and 6 per cent in Graduate 2 compared with the placebo, but those results were not statistically reliable, the company said in a statement.



Gantenerumab was designed to bind to aggregated forms of beta-amyloid and remove brain amyloid plaques, which are believed to play a crucial role in the slowly progressing dementia disease.

Roche released only the main outcome of the trials on Monday. It plans to present detailed data at the Clinical Trials on Alzheimer's Disease conference in San Francisco on November 30.

Rachelle Doody, Roche's head of neurodegeneration, said she was very disappointed, adding that trial measures of amyloid removal were also lower than hoped.

"We will be showing that there is a relationship between the lowering of amyloid and the clinical outcomes. It's just that when you don't get the amyloid lowering that you expected you won't get the clinical outcome that you expected," she told Reuters.

#### **Alzheimer's threat**

Most of the 55 million people suffering from dementia worldwide are likely to be affected by Alzheimer's disease, according to the World Health Organisation. In 2030, dementia is expected to affect 78 million.

Alzheimer's is difficult to diagnose, especially during its early stages.

### **CAN VACCINE DISTRIBUTION BE MADE FAIRER?**

#### **The story so far:**

The Global Dashboard for Vaccine Equity, a joint effort by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the University of Oxford with cooperation across the UN system, has put out recent data that justifies the vexatious core of the vaccine distribution programme: Only one in four people has been vaccinated with at least one dose in low and middle income countries as of November 9, 2022. In comparison, in high income countries, three in four people have got at least one dose of the vaccine.

#### **What is the Global Dashboard?**

The Global Dashboard for Vaccine Equity combines the latest data on the global roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines with the "most recent socio-economic information to illustrate why accelerating vaccine equity is not only critical to saving lives but also to driving a faster and fairer recovery from the pandemic with benefits for all."

#### **What is vaccine equity?**

Simply put, everyone in the world has the same access to vaccines. While the availability of drugs across the world continues to remain iniquitous, disadvantaging large swathes of people in low and middle income countries, it was hoped that the urgency of a pandemic might erase these differences, offering equal access to all. But that was not to be.

A Lancet article, indicated how, early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine production was insufficient to meet global demand. "Many wealthy countries turned inwards, procuring vaccine doses through exclusive bilateral deals for their domestic populations (vaccine nationalism), and manufacturing countries, such as India, imposed temporary export bans. These events catalysed the global vaccine inequity that is still evident today," the article, by Victor. J. Dzau, argued.



Another Lancet article in February this year by Simar Singh Bajaj et al, pointed at the fact that “widening gaps in global vaccine equity have led to a two-track pandemic with booster COVID-19 vaccinations proliferating in high-income countries (HICs) and first doses not yet reaching all populations in low-income countries (LICs).” WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus using the strongest of terms for this divide, called it: ‘Vaccine Apartheid’.

The Dashboard also points out another key factor: While vaccination programmes will increase healthcare costs across all countries, it is especially the case in low-income countries as they would need to increase their health expenditure by a staggering 30-60% to reach 70% of their population under the current pricing. High-income countries are expected to increase theirs by only 0.8% to achieve the same vaccination rate in one year.

#### **Were efforts taken to reduce vaccine inequity?**

It was reported that during the height of the pandemic, efforts were initiated to waive the intellectual property protection for the COVID-19 range of therapeutics and vaccines, in order to ensure that affordability alone doesn’t determine availability. A waiver in the TRIPS agreement was proposed as a radical way to overcome the anticipated shortfalls. However, that did not come through.

What did come through was The COVID-19 Vaccine Delivery Partnership (COVAX), a collective international effort with ‘One Country Team’, ‘One Plan’, and ‘One Budget’ which was launched by WHO, UNICEF, and Gavi and the World Bank, to intensify country readiness and delivery support. It aimed at accelerating COVID-19 vaccination coverage in 34 low coverage countries, along with their governments. While COVAX has helped many countries access vaccines, since its launch in January 2022, low income countries (LICs) particularly continue to have difficulties in achieving a step change in vaccination rates, the WHO records.

Further, unless it can support LICs beyond the 20% vaccination rate, the financial burden of vaccinating an additional 50% of the population will fall on most vulnerable countries. Given that substantial parts of the world are still reeling from lockdown-induced economic crises, such nations might find it a Herculean task to do so, even if not impossible.

#### **What lies ahead?**

Going by WHO’s dictum that no one is safe until everyone is safe, it is imperative that adequate quantities of COVID-19 vaccine are available to countries across the world, particularly at a time when the risk of new variants causing further waves of infections is still alive.

### **PERSONALISED CELL ‘EDITING’ USED TO TREAT CANCER PATIENTS: STUDY**

Scientists have, for the first time, used the CRISPR (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats) technology to insert genes that allow immune cells to attack cancer cells, potentially leaving normal cells unharmed and increasing the effectiveness of immunotherapy.

The CRISPR gene editing technique has been previously used in humans to remove specific genes to allow the immune system to be more activated against cancer.

The research, published in the journal Nature, used CRISPR to not only take out specific genes, but also to insert new ones in immune cells efficiently redirecting them to recognise mutations in the patient’s own cancer cells.





When infused back to patients, these CRISPR-engineered immune cells preferentially traffic to the cancer and become the most represented immune cells there, the researchers said.

### Cell therapy

The human immune system has specific receptors on immune cells that can specifically recognise cancer cells and differentiate them from normal cells.

These are different for every patient, so finding an efficient way to isolate cancer cells and insert them back into immune cells to generate a personalised cell therapy to treat cancer is key to making the approach feasible on a large scale.

The researchers found an efficient way to isolate these immune receptors from the patient's own blood.

After isolation, the immune receptors are used to redirect immune cells to recognise cancer using the CRISPR gene editing.

"This is a leap forward in developing a personalised treatment for cancer, where the isolation of immune receptors that specifically recognise mutations in the patient's own cancer are used to treat the cancer," said Antoni Ribas from the University of California, U.S., and a corresponding author of the research paper.

"The generation of a personalised cell treatment for cancer would not have been feasible without the newly developed ability to use the CRISPR technique to replace the immune receptors in clinical-grade cell preparations in a single step," he added.

The researchers report treating as many as 16 patients with a variety of solid cancers including colon, breast and lung cancers.

## PERMACRISIS: WHAT IT MEANS AND WHY IT'S WORD OF THE YEAR FOR 2022

The Collins Dictionary's word of the year for 2022 is "permacrisis". As accolades go, the managing director of Collins Learning, Alex Beecroft, has said that this one "sums up quite succinctly how truly awful 2022 has been for so many people".

The word, most widely understood as a portmanteau of "permanent" and "crisis", has been in use for a little longer. In April 2021, policy analysts in Europe saw it as defining the era in which we live. Some in Britain inevitably ascribe the genesis of that era to Brexit. Others point to the pandemic.

For others still, it was Russia's invasion of Ukraine that made the word indispensable. As the writer, David Shariatmadari has put it: "Permacrisis" is a term that perfectly embodies the dizzying sense of lurching from one unprecedented event to another, as we wonder bleakly what new horrors might be around the corner." This represents a shift from the way the notion of crisis has been defined until now. However, digging into the philosophical roots of the word reveals that a crisis is not necessarily awful, but may, in the long term, prove a necessary and beneficial corrective.



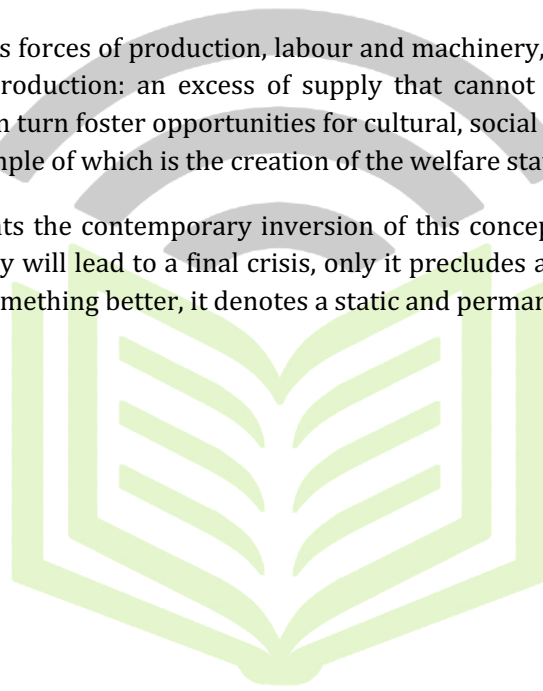
### **Crisis as necessary to progress**

Philosophers have long defined a crisis as a situation that forces an individual or group to a moment of thoughtful critique – to a point where a new path is mapped out in relation to some issue of pressing concern. This definition stems from the ancient Greek term κρίσις or krisis, which describes a medical or political moment of opportunity that bifurcates into life or death, victory or defeat.

However, as philosopher of history Reinhart Koselleck has shown, in modern philosophy, that ancient Greek notion of crisis undergoes a semantic shift. Its meaning changes radically, to refer to a contradiction between opposing forces that accelerates the transition of past into future. This can be seen in Karl Marx's description of capitalism as a crisis-ridden economic system.

In struggling to tame its forces of production, labour and machinery, Marx contends, this system causes crises of overproduction: an excess of supply that cannot be met with an equivalent demand. These crises in turn foster opportunities for cultural, social and political innovation, the best 20th-century example of which is the creation of the welfare state.

“Permacrisis” represents the contemporary inversion of this conception. It is similar to Marx's idea that human history will lead to a final crisis, only it precludes any idea of further progress. Instead of leading to something better, it denotes a static and permanently difficult situation.



# DreamIAS