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INTERNATIONAL

JOE BIDEN SIGNS GAY MARRIAGE LAW, CALLS IT 'A BLOW AGAINST HATE'

A celebratory crowd of thousands bundled up on a raw Tuesday afternoon to watch US President Joe Biden sign gay marriage legislation into law, a joyful ceremony that was tempered by the backdrop of an ongoing conservative backlash over gender issues.

"This law and the love it defends strike a blow against hate in all its forms," Biden said on the South Lawn of the White House. "And that's why this law matters to every single American."

Singers Sam Smith and Cyndi Lauper performed. Vice President Kamala Harris recalled officiating at a lesbian wedding in San Francisco.

And the White House played a recording of Biden's television interview from a decade ago, when he caused a political furore by unexpectedly disclosing his support for gay marriage. Biden was vice president at the time, and President Barack Obama had not yet endorsed the idea.

"I got in trouble," Biden joked of that moment. Three days later, Obama himself publicly endorsed gay marriage.

Despite Tuesday's excitement, there was concern about the nationwide proliferation of conservative policies on gender issues at the state level.

Biden criticised the "callous, cynical laws introduced in the states targeting transgender children, terrifying families and criminalising doctors who give children the care they need." "Racism, antisemitism, homophobia, transphobia, they're all connected," Biden said. "But the antidote to hate is love."

The new law is intended to safeguard gay marriages if the US Supreme Court ever reverses Obergefell v. Hodges, its 2015 decision legalizing same-sex unions nationwide. The new law also protects interracial marriages. In 1967, the Supreme Court in Loving v. Virginia struck down laws in 16 states barring interracial marriage.

The signing marks the culmination of a monthslong bipartisan effort sparked by the Supreme Court's decision in June to overturn Roe v. Wade, the 1973 ruling that made abortion available across the country.

In a concurring opinion in the case that overturned Roe, Justice Clarence Thomas suggested revisiting other decisions, including the legalisation of gay marriage, generating fear that more rights could be imperilled by the court's conservative majority. Thomas did not reference interracial marriage with the other cases he said should be reconsidered.

Lawmakers crafted a compromise that was intended to assuage conservative concerns about religious liberty, such as ensuring churches could still refuse to perform gay marriages.

In addition, states would not be required to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples if the court overturns its 2015 ruling. But they will be required to recognise marriages conducted elsewhere in the country.

A majority of Republicans in Congress still voted against the legislation. However, enough supported it to sidestep a filibuster in the Senate and ensure its passage.

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



Tuesday's ceremony marks another chapter in Biden's legacy on gay rights, which includes his surprise endorsement of marriage equality in 2012.

A Gallup poll showed only 27% of US adults supported same-sex unions in 1996, when President Bill Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act, which said the federal government would only recognize heterosexual marriages. Biden voted for the legislation.

By the time of Biden's 2012 interview, gay marriage remained controversial, but support had expanded to roughly half of US adults, according to Gallup. Earlier this year, 71% said same-sex unions should be recognised by law.

Biden has pushed to expand LGBT rights since taking office. He reversed President Donald Trump's efforts to strip transgender people of anti-discrimination protections. His administration includes the first openly gay Cabinet member, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, and the first transgender person to receive Senate confirmation, Assistant Secretary for Health Rachel Levine.

FRANCE TO MAKE CONDOMS FREE FOR ANYONE UNDER 25, SAYS MACRON

France will make condoms free in pharmacies for anyone up to age 25 in the new year, President Emmanuel Macron announced on Friday.

The move comes as the government says sexually transmitted diseases are on the rise among young people, and as this year's exceptional inflation is cutting especially deeply into the budgets of France's poorest.

Girls and women 25 and under already can get free birth control in France as part of government efforts to ensure that young people of all incomes can prevent unwanted pregnancy. Existing measures don't apply to men, however, or specifically address access for transgender or nonbinary people.

Macron had said Thursday that condoms would be free in pharmacies for anyone 18-25 starting January 1. But after a French TV presenter and others challenged him on social networks on Friday over why the condom measure did not include minors, the president agreed to expand the program. "Let's do it," Macron said in a selfie video that he shot from the sidelines of a summit in Spain. He later tweeted: "A lot of minors also have sex ... they need to protect themselves too."

Macron, who was France's youngest-ever president when he was first elected in 2017 at age 39, also promised stepped-up efforts to prevent and test for HIV and other sexually transmitted viruses.

France's state health care system covers some birth control costs but not all, and doctor appointments for low-income patients often require long waits. Abortions in France are available free for everyone. Several other European countries offer free or subsidised contraception.

IRAN PUBLICLY CARRIES OUT SECOND PROTEST EXECUTION

Iran on Monday executed a second man in connection with protests that have shaken the regime for almost three months, defying an international outcry over its use of capital punishment against those involved in the movement.



Majidreza Rahnavard, 23, had been sentenced to death by a court in the city of Mashhad for killing two members of the security forces with a knife, and wounding four other people, the judiciary's Mizan Online news agency reported.

It said he was hanged in public in the city, rather than inside prison.

Europe and the U.S. reacted with outrage after Iran on Thursday carried out the first execution linked to the protests. Mohsen Shekari, also 23, was hanged after his conviction for wounding a member of the security forces. Mizan published images of Rahnavard's execution, showing a man with his hands tied behind his back hanging from a rope attached to a crane. The execution took place before dawn and there was no sign of any significant number of people witnessing it. The director of Oslo-based group Iran Human Rights, Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam, said Rahnavard "was sentenced to death based on coerced confessions after a grossly unfair process and a show trial".

"The public execution of a young protester, 23 days after his arrest, is another serious crime committed by the Islamic Republic's leaders and a significant escalation of the level of violence against protesters," he said.

CYCLES OF CRISES

When Pedro Castillo was elected the President of Peru last year, he promised voters a new social contract. With four Presidents in the past five years, there were widespread corruption allegations and growing anger in the country against the ruling elites with unemployment and poverty rising. Mr. Castillo, a former schoolteacher lacking administrative experience, vowed to fix the chronic economic problems and fight corruption. But in less than two years, the socialist met with the same fate as his immediate predecessors — impeachment by Congress. Rather than his ouster — a President being impeached is not new in Peru — what shook the nation were the developments leading to his impeachment. Just after he took over, clashes erupted between him and Congress. He also faced allegations of corruption and running a criminal organisation that profited off government contracts. While he rejected these allegations, by saying old political elites wanted to take back power, his inability to mobilise public and institutional support only emboldened his rivals. Lawmakers tried to impeach him twice invoking a clause in the Constitution that allows the sacking of Presidents "for permanent moral incapacity", but failed to garner enough votes. The crisis came to a tipping point last month when Mr. Castillo threatened to dissolve Congress.

In 1992, President Alberto Fujimori (currently in jail), shut down Peru's Congress, suspended its Constitution and went on to rule as a dictator until 2000. Mr. Castillo announced the dissolution of Congress on December 7, a few hours ahead of a scheduled impeachment vote. He wanted to convene a new Congress and rewrite the Constitution. But unlike the Fujimori plan, Mr. Castillo's collapsed as the military, the police and even aides came out against him. Congress impeached him with 101 to six votes (with 10 abstentions), and Vice-President Dina Boluarte took charge as the new President. While Peruvians avoided a major constitutional crisis by defeating Mr. Castillo's power grab plan, the whole incident should serve as a reminder of the challenges the young democracy faces. Congressional powers could be critical in preventing the rise of another Fujimori, but the constant clashes between the executive and the legislature and the back-to-back impeachment of elected Presidents are not signs of a healthy democracy. In the current political climate and context, it is nearly impossible for any elected President or legislature to have a reform agenda without triggering power clashes. And without reforms, one of the most unequal societies in South America would only get trapped in cycles of economic and political crises.



WHAT WAS THE 1988 LOCKERBIE ATTACK THAT KILLED 270 PEOPLE, AND FOR WHICH A LIBYAN IS NOW IN US CUSTODY

Authorities in Scotland said Sunday (December 12) that a Libyan man named Abu Agela Mas'ud Kheir Al-Marimi, suspected of making the bomb that destroyed a passenger plane over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988 is in US custody. The majority of those killed in the explosion were Americans.

The Lockerbie bombing was the biggest terrorist attack to be carried out on UK soil. Scotland's Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service said in a statement: "Scottish prosecutors and police, working with the UK government and US colleagues, will continue to pursue this investigation, with the sole aim of bringing those who acted along with al-Megrahi to justice."

Here is what happened on the Pan Am flight 103 that was flying over Lockerbie on December 21, 1988, leaving 270 people dead.

How did the Lockerbie attack happen?

On the day, a bomb planted aboard Pam Am Flight 103 exploded less than half an hour after the jet departed London's Heathrow airport, bound for New York. The attack destroyed the jet, which was carrying citizens from 21 countries. Among the victims were 190 Americans.

Investigators soon tied the bombing to Libya, whose government had previously been involved in hostilities with the US and other Western governments. About two years before the attack, Libya was blamed for the bombing of a Berlin disco that killed three people.

Who was behind the attack?

In 1991, the US charged two Libyan intelligence officers with planting the bomb aboard the jet. But the country's leader, the late Col. Moammar Gadhafi, refused to turn them over. After long negotiations, Libya agreed in 1999 to surrender them for prosecution by a panel of Scottish judges sitting in the Netherlands.

One of the men, Abdel Baset Ali al-Megrahi, was convicted and given a life sentence. The other, Lamem Khalifa Fhimah, was found not guilty. Scottish officials released Al-Megrahi on humanitarian grounds in 2009 after he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He died in Libya in 2012.

Megrahi had immediately lodged an appeal, insisting he was innocent. According to The Guardian, five years after he lost that appeal, the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission (SCCRC) ruled in 2007 his conviction could be unsafe, returning it to court. In 2009, however, Megrahi was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and abandoned his case after winning compassionate early release. The families of those killed, meanwhile, brought suit against the Libyan government, demanding they be held accountable. In 2003, Libya agreed to a settlement, formally accepting responsibility for the bombing, renouncing terrorism and paying compensation to the families. The pursuit of others responsible for the bombing was largely stalled, until after Ghaddafi was ousted from power in 2011.

What is Masud accused of?

After Ghaddafi's fall, Masud, a longtime explosives expert for the country's intelligence service, was taken into custody by Libyan law enforcement. In 2017, US officials received a copy of an interview with Masud done by Libyan authorities soon after his arrest.



In that interview, US officials said, Masud admitted to building the bomb used in the Pan Am attack and working with the two men charged earlier to plant it on the plane. He said the operation had been ordered by Libyan intelligence and that Ghadafi had thanked him and others after the attack, according to an FBI affidavit. In late 2020, the US Justice Department announced charges against Masud.

With Masud in Libyan custody, though, his prosecution remained largely theoretical. US and Scottish officials pledged to work for his extradition so that he could be tried. It was not clear Sunday how Masud was taken into US custody. He would be the first to appear in an American courtroom for the prosecution of the attack.

DANGEROUS GAMBLE

Turkey's recent attacks on Syria's Kurdish towns and its threat of a ground invasion could destabilise the border region, which has yet to recover from the scars of a long civil war and the violence by the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group. The trigger was the November 13 blast in Istanbul that claimed six lives. Turkey has blamed the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Kurdish militant group operating in its southeastern parts, and the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian-Kurdish militia, for the blast (they have denied the allegations) and has carried out air strikes in Syria's Kurdish towns. Turkey has reportedly asked the YPG to withdraw from key towns on the border — Manbij, Tal Rifaat and Kobane — soon and has threatened to launch another cross-border incursion into Syria if the YPG failed to do so. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wants to create a buffer zone between the YPG-controlled towns in Syria and Turkey's own Kurdish territories, where the state has been fighting the PKK. Ankara sees the YPG as an ideological and organisational brother of the PKK, which it has designated, along with the U.S. and European countries, as a terrorist organisation.

Turkey has carried out several incursions in the past into Syria, gobbling up territories now manned by the Syrian National Army, a rebel umbrella group that is opposed to Damascus and backed by Ankara. But, Turkey had also come under pressure from the U.S., its NATO partner that backs a YPG-led militia group, and Russia, an ally of the Syrian regime, which placed constraints on its operations. However, Russia's Ukraine war seems to have altered the geopolitical reality in the region in Turkey's favour. A preoccupied Russia would not like to antagonise Turkey, which despite being a NATO member has not joined the U.S.-led sanctions, and the U.S. would want Ankara's support for the inclusion of Sweden and Finland into NATO. This opens space for Mr. Erdoğan to up the ante in Syria. But this could be a dangerous bet. The IS had captured most of these border towns in 2014-15. The YPG, with U.S. help, had fought hard against the IS to liberate the region. Now under attack, the YPG has already said it would end patrolling of many towns on the border. A Turkish incursion could trigger further chaos, which could help Islamist militants to regroup and push the Kurdish population, already victims of years of wars, into further misery. Instead of taking the military path, Mr. Erdoğan should hold talks with Russia and the U.S., which have better ties with the Syrian Kurds, to find a workable solution to stabilise the border.

BATTLE FOR A LOST REPUBLIC

For years, Afghanistan has been haunted by a single question: What if Ahmad Shah Massoud had not been killed when he was, just two months before the Taliban fell in 2001? Had Massoud not been killed in a suicide bombing by Al Qaeda terrorists pretending to be journalists, he could well



have been the guiding force of Afghanistan post-Taliban then, and perhaps the Taliban would not have been able to regroup, many say.

Today, it is Massoud's son, 33-year old Ahmad Massoud, who is making a bid to form the "Second Resistance" with the "National Resistance Force" he set up last year along with former Vice-President Amrullah Saleh to fight the Taliban that is once again in power in Kabul. Just a child when his father was killed, the young Massoud has grown up in relative comfort, mostly abroad, studying first in Iran and then in the U.K. As Afghanistan's traditional, political non-Taliban leaders scattered around the world begin to organise themselves, the young Massoud pitches to a younger, more urban demographic, who grew up during 20 non-Taliban years with green-shoots of economic progress and democracy, rather than the traditional Afghanistan of warlords and religious conservatism.

However, unlike his father, who received support from India, the U.K., France and other countries, Massoud Junior receives practically no international assistance today. In a conflict-weary world, there is little financial support for armed groups anywhere, and given the NATO and the U.S.'s recent, humiliating pull-out from Afghanistan, less appetite for a plan that involves any military support. As head of foreign relations at NRF, Ali Maisam Nazary is fighting the battle against apathy and indifference in a number of international capitals. In recent months, the NRF has been instrumental in bringing together various parts of the Afghan diaspora at conferences and gatherings in Turkey and Vienna.

"The perception that we are fighting a civil war is incorrect. NRF is continuing the Global War on Terror [that the international community gave up] — not just against the Taliban but 21 international terror groups in Afghanistan today," says Mr. Nazary, calling the NRF's fight one for "global and regional security", not just for "peace and justice" in Afghanistan.

"At present there is little hope for the NRF, because they lack support from outside and don't have power inside the country," says former diplomat B.R. Muthukumar, who as India's Ambassador to Tajikistan, had been responsible for channelling support to the Northern Alliance. "They are living on the legend of Ahmad Shah Massoud but they are not the Northern Alliance of Massoud Senior," he explains. Many experts also point to the presence of Pakistan, much stronger than last time on the ground in Afghanistan that will make it harder for anti-Taliban forces to prevail.

The NRF faces other unfavourable comparisons to the Northern Alliance, whose fighters had won the battle against a superpower, driving Soviet forces out of Afghanistan. The NRF is made up of those who are either too old to fight a well-equipped Taliban, or too young to have been trained in guerilla warfare, or to understand Afghan traditions fully. Afghanistan is a land made up of many minorities — 42% Pashtuns, 27% Tajiks, 10% Hazaras, 9% Uzbeks. In order to control the whole, the NRF, whose fighters are mostly of Tajik ethnicity, will need to reach out to more than its support base and convince the new generation of Afghans to join their cause.

The NRF also faces a stronger opponent. In 1996, only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE recognised the Taliban regime. While no country recognises the Taliban regime today, more than a dozen, including India, maintain diplomatic missions in Kabul, send officials to Kabul to hold talks with the Taliban's ministers, and treat them like a government for all practical purposes.

The NRF hopes to fight this Taliban through a vision of establishing a federal, "decentralised, democratic republic", in the hope that Afghans who had participated in elections since 2005 and had seen the inclusion of girls in school and women in the workforce, would not submit endlessly to the Taliban's depredations and authoritarian rule. "They may have geography and power today,



but we have legitimacy that comes from popular support,” he adds – an assertion that has yet to be proven and will be tested in the months to come.

THE POLITICS BEHIND BANGLADESH PROTESTS

A massive rally by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in Dhaka Saturday has signalled that the main opposition party has reorganised on the ground despite a severe government crackdown against it, channelling economic grievances and popular resentment against the perceived authoritarian style of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, a three-term incumbent.

Month of rallies

Thousands of people attended the Dhaka rally, the culmination of more than a month of such protests by the BNP across the country — in Rajshahi, Chittagong, Mymensingh, Khulna, Rangpur, Barisal, Faridpur, Sylhet and Comilla.

At every rally, including the one at Dhaka, two chairs on stage were kept empty – one for party leader and chairperson Khaleda Zia, who was jailed for seven years in 2017, was released in 2020 after her sentence was suspended on condition that she would not leave Dhaka, and has been unwell since last year; the other for acting chairperson Tarique Rehman, her son, who lives in London in self-exile after his life sentence in the 2004 Hasina assassination attempt case.

At the Dhaka rally, BNP set out a list of 10 demands, which include: to oversee next year’s national election, the formation of a neutral caretaker government, which was provided for in the Constitution in 1996 but was later abolished by the Sheikh Hasina government; the formation of a neutral Election Commission by the caretaker government for a level playing field for all parties; the abolition of EVMs; cancelling the convictions of all opposition and religious leaders; and withdrawal of “false cases” against opposition leaders.

All seven BNP parliamentarians have resigned, accusing the Awami League of “stealing” the 2018 election.

Government response

The month-long mobilisation has raised the political heat in Bangladesh ahead of the 2023 national elections. Neither the government nor the Awami League has responded officially to the demands. Awami League members have, however, questioned what the BNP was doing in Parliament for four years if they believed the election was rigged.

In the weeks leading up to the Dhaka rally, several BNP members were arrested from across the country. One person died in a clash with the police outside the party office.

A day before the rally, two top BNP leaders, party secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and a member of the standing committee, Mirza Abbas, were arrested. The police, however, granted permission for the rally .

The huge response to the BNP rally seems to have put the government on the political backfoot, at least for now.

BNP’s lost decade



Suffering from a leadership vacuum, and discredited nationally for being allied with the Jamaat-i-Islami, a party that collaborated with the Pakistan Army to try and scuttle the liberation of Bangladesh, the BNP has drifted through the last 15 years without winning an election.

Its dalliance with the JI and other Islamist parties had lost it the support of a large section of secular Bangladeshi voters. The party boycotted the 2014 election after several months of strikes and protests that paralysed the country on the same demand as now — a caretaker government to conduct the election. In 2012, both parties had opposed the proceedings of the war crimes tribunal for actions during the 1971 war of liberation.

The tribunal handed down death sentences to at least nine JI members and two of the BNP. Violent protests by the JI segued into the BNP's agitation, setting the stage for the boycott. Hasina won the election, in which the voter turnout was a dismal 39.6 per cent, as opposed to 87 per cent in the 2008 election.

Months before the 2018 election, the party's attempt to make a comeback received a huge setback with Khaleda Zia's conviction on charges of siphoning off crores of Bangladeshi taka that foreign donors had sent for an orphanage while she was PM. She is also convicted in several other corruption cases, all of which she has rejected as fabricated.

The BNP managed to secure only 13 per cent of the votes, winning seven seats, and was written off as a spent force even though there was widespread resentment against the Hasina government's "one party rule".

Bangladesh's economic downturn

However, the BNP senses new opportunity in the economic downturn in Bangladesh besides the widespread resentment against the Awami League accumulated over its 15 years in office. The government blames the pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine for the disruption of its economic success story.

In November, responding to an appeal from the Hasina government, the International Monetary Fund agreed to a \$ 4.5 bn bailout package.

However, critics of the government say that it is not just the war, but poor financial management, wastage of resources on mega infrastructure projects such as the Padma bridge, corruption, and flight of capital from the country that have led to Bangladesh joining the ranks of Sri Lanka and Pakistan and becoming the third country in the region that will be hand held by the IMF over the next few years.

In recent weeks, attention has focussed on the S Alam Group and its close relationship with the Hasina government. Founded by a relative of a former Awami league politician, S Alam Group is one of the biggest business houses of the country. According to the Daily Star, "its interests range from commodity trading to fishery, from construction materials to real estate, from textiles to media, from intercity buses to shipping, and from power and energy to banks and insurance". The group is reported to have taken massive loans from Islami Bank, Bangladesh's largest private sector bank, in which it has 26.7 per cent stakes through its companies. Hasina has ordered an inquiry into how the group managed to obtain such an "excessive" loan. It has been reported that the group has taken the money out of the country to invest in real estate abroad.

From being her strongest suit so far, Bangladesh's economy could turn into Hasina's Achilles' Heel, especially when the IMF conditions kick in and add to the greivances against the government.



India and Bangladesh

Delhi's proximity to the Hasina government is no secret. From India's point of view, she has stood steadfast against Islamist forces and Pakistan's alleged attempts at radicalisation in Bangladesh. She also acted swiftly on violence against minorities, putting aside her government's reservations about the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019.

By contrast, Khaleda Zia's prime ministership from 2001 to 2006 does not evoke pleasant memories in Delhi. But India's open support of the Awami League has made both Delhi and Hasina unpopular in Bangladesh. Her opponents see Delhi as backing a leader who has undemocratic tendencies, and her as cosying up to a 'Hindutva government' whose political language is seen as embedded with invectives against Bangladeshis.

Over the coming months, depending on how much momentum the opposition's pre-election moves gather, Delhi will need to reassess its positioning vis a vis the two main parties in Bangladesh.

BANGLADESH HAS REACHED OUT TO IMF FOR HELP: WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMY?

Last month, Bangladesh reached out to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) seeking help. According to an IMF press release, Bangladesh will receive economic assistance worth \$4.5 billion (around Rs 37,000 crore).

This is a significant reversal for an economy that overtook India's in terms of per capita income in 2020 on the back of robust economic growth for the better part of the last two decades, and especially since 2017.

What's wrong with Bangladesh's economy?

If one looks at the growth of Gross Domestic Product or GDP, Bangladesh continues to post very impressive numbers. For one, unlike many countries including India that saw their GDP contract in 2020 following the Covid-19 pandemic, the economy of Bangladesh actually grew during this period. Its GDP grew by 3.4% in 2020, by 6.9% in 2021, and it is expected to grow by 7.2% in 2022.

However, Bangladesh's problems lie elsewhere.

The IMF states that "Bangladesh's robust economic recovery from the pandemic has been interrupted by Russia's war in Ukraine, leading to a sharp widening of the current account deficit, rapid decline of foreign exchange reserves, rising inflation and slowing growth."

In other words, while it is true that Bangladesh has posted very impressive economic growth numbers, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has meant four things:

* Inflation spiked to uncomfortable levels as all kinds of commodities such as crude oil became costlier. The inflation rate in November was 8.85% as against 5.98% in November 2021. For the 12 months ending November, inflation grew at 7.48% — much higher than 5.48% in the 12 months ending November 2021.

* Bangladesh's current account balance has gone deep into a deficit — both in absolute terms as well as a percentage of the GDP. The current account balance looks at the gap between the money coming into a country on account of earnings via the export of goods and services and the money



going out of the country via the import of goods and services. Bangladesh has typically been hugely dependent on its export earnings, but as the western economies slow down and their consumers put off their demand for a later date, Bangladesh suffers.

* Bangladesh's currency, the Taka, weakened partly under the pressure of the surge in the US dollar and partly on account of the worsening current account deficit. A weaker Taka further aggravated the inflationary spiral because all imports become costlier still. In December 2021, it took 86 Taka to buy a US dollar. As of today, the exchange rate has worsened to 105 Taka — a loss of more than a fifth of the currency's value in less than a year.

* The weakness in the external front also resulted in Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserves getting depleted. Last December, the forex reserves were valued at \$46,154 million. As of now, they are just \$33,790 million — a fall of more than one-fourth of its total valuation.

How will IMF's monetary assistance help?

"Bangladesh's request is part of the authorities' measures to cushion its economy from the economic disruptions caused by the ongoing war in Ukraine and to manage macroeconomic risks posed by climate change," states the IMF.

But that is not the only goal.

"Even as Bangladesh tackles these immediate challenges, addressing long-standing structural issues remains critical, including threats to macroeconomic stability from climate change. To successfully graduate from Least Developed Country status and achieve middle-income status by 2031, it is important to build on past successes and address structural issues to accelerate growth, attract private investment, enhance productivity, and build climate resilience," states IMF.

Overall, the IMF's programme hopes to achieve the following goals:

- * Creating additional fiscal space through higher revenue mobilisation and rationalisation of expenditures. This will allow the government to increase growth-enhancing spending as well as mitigate the impact on the vulnerable through higher social spending and better-targeted social safety net programs.
- * Containing inflation with increased exchange rate flexibility so that the country can buffer external shocks better.
- * Strengthening the financial sector by enhancing governance and regulatory aspects.
- * Boosting growth potential by creating a conducive environment to expand trade and foreign direct investment among other things.
- * Strengthening institutions to create an enabling environment will help meet climate change objectives.

ANALYSING U.S.-CHINA BILATERAL TIES

U.S.-China relations have witnessed an unprecedented downturn in 2022. Nancy Pelosi's historic visit to Taiwan in August has deeply upset bilateral ties. The imposition of heavy restrictions on China's semiconductor industry by the U.S. in October has fanned the flames of rivalry further. Amid this escalation, the U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping had their first



in-person interaction on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Bali in November, signalling a probable relaxation of the growing tensions.

How did relations sour between U.S. and China?

The U.S. and China, ever since the establishment of diplomatic relations in the later part of the Cold War, have worked toward enmeshing their economic systems from the perspective of economic complementarity and strategic convergence. As a result, China rose to the status of the second largest economy and got itself ingrained into the global economy. This eventually translated into China's growing economic competence as well as its rising political ambition and might. China then started to systematically undermine U.S. global dominance through military and diplomatic means. This happened at a time when there was a growing perception of U.S. decline amidst the global financial crisis and its entrenchment in the "forever wars" of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Under Xi Jinping, China's assertiveness rose further, as its quest for primacy in the world stage became increasingly apparent. With Donald Trump's entry into the White House, the U.S. concerns about the threat from China reached critical levels. The Trump administration took progressively confrontational steps towards China, with growing bipartisan backing. The administration's imposition of tariffs on China's exports turned into a "trade war" which started to reverse the trajectory of U.S.-China relations. Though Mr. Biden succeeded Mr. Trump, the policy on China did not change significantly, as the momentum for "decoupling" bilateral relations did not just continue, but kept on gathering pace. China's crackdown in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, its "wolf warrior diplomacy" during the COVID-19 blame game, its evident support to Russia during the Ukraine crisis, and its escalating offensive posturing towards Taiwan, made it imperative for the U.S. to continue with a confrontational posture towards China.

The year 2022 witnessed the relations descend into an abysmal trajectory with the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi visiting Taiwan. The visit was extremely significant in light of sabotaging the U.S.'s stated commitment to the One China Policy as well as bolstering its commitment towards the defence of Taiwan. China expressed its exasperation through large scale military drills seemingly aimed at blockading Taiwan and signalling the U.S. of its intent to respond in kind. China has been going on an overdrive to gain technological dominance in the fourth Industrial Revolution over the U.S. In order to undercut China's growing technological prowess, the U.S. imposed a series of restrictions on China targeting its semiconductor chip industry. With tensions reaching a peak, the G-20 summit held at Bali provided an opportunity for the leaders of both the countries to hit the pause button on the deterioration of ties.

What was discussed between the two leaders on the G-20 sidelines?

Mr. Biden and Mr. Xi discussed outstanding matters related to U.S.-China relations for nearly three hours at Bali. There was no joint statement released after the meeting, although both sides provided their own perspectives on issues of mutual concern. Easing tensions and reopening channels of communication were agreed upon by both the leaders. The U.S. President expressed that both the countries should "manage the competition responsibly and maintain open lines of communication", and that the U.S. is not looking for conflict with China. However, he said that the U.S. "will continue to compete vigorously" with China. Mr. Biden proposed promoting U.S.-China cooperation on the issues of climate change, global macroeconomic stability, as well as global health and food security. He also underlined the human rights concerns surrounding China's activities in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong.



On the other hand, the Chinese President stated that the relationship should not be seen by the U.S. through the prism of “democracy versus authoritarianism”. Mr. Xi also re-emphasised Taiwan’s position as being at “the very core of China’s core interests” as well as the “the bedrock of the political foundation of China-U.S. relations”, which the U.S. needs to respect. Meanwhile, Mr. Biden reiterated that the U.S.’s commitment to the One China Policy had not changed, and that it will oppose “any unilateral changes to the status quo by either side”. This is despite Mr. Biden’s several previous statements which contradicted this stance. Mr. Xi also noted the “five noes” previously mentioned by Mr. Biden — not seek a new Cold War; not seek to change China’s system; not to revitalise its alliances against China; not to disturb the cross-Strait status quo; and not look for conflict with China. Mr. Xi stressed that both the countries needed to “explore the right way to get along”.

What does the future hold?

The recent meeting between the two heads of states certainly imply that there is a move toward bringing in more stability into bilateral relations. However, to what extent could this move be aimed at taking the relations to where it was before the trade war remains questionable. For one, China has not moved away from its path to attain its long term goal of centrality in the international system. In fact, Xi Jinping has at multiple times underlined China’s time bound aspiration to achieve such a goal through phased modernisation of the country. China’s more specific objectives like the reunification of Taiwan with the mainland has been underscored by Mr. Xi most recently in November during the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, where he consolidated his exceptional third leadership term. Further, it has to be noted here that the “new era” of Xi Jinping is marked by China’s efforts to project rather than conceal its capabilities.

On the other hand, the Biden administration has continued with intensifying the U.S.’s rivalry with China by expanding it beyond trade and into avenues like technology and political freedoms. It has also utilised multilateral approaches like strengthening the Quad in the Indo-Pacific, and the founding of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. However, the administration has coated these efforts with a veneer of moderation and accommodation to demonstrate some distinctiveness with the previous administration. For instance, the current U.S. administration’s China policy outlined in May by the Secretary of State Antony Blinken identified China as the “most serious long-term challenge” to the international order. Nevertheless, it presented a three-pillar approach towards China — “invest, align, compete”. This showcases the Biden administration’s intent to deal with the threat posed by China without sliding into an inadvertent conflict.

Thus, the long-term trajectories of both countries do not seem to be poised for a reset; rather, both seem to be buying time and reducing unnecessary risks while the strategic rivalry unfolds.

CHINA BIGGEST ROADBLOCK, TIME RUNNING OUT FOR SRI LANKA TO DELIVER ON IMF COMMITMENT

Sri Lanka, which qualified on September 1 for an IMF Extended Fund Facility of \$2.9 billion to tide over its worst ever economic crisis, had hoped to have in place financing assurances for debt sustainability from its creditors by this month, in order to access the bailout package. Getting such a commitment was a “prior action” that Sri Lanka had to take for the IMF board to sign off on the package.



With time running out in December as the Christmas shutdown in the US approaches, Sri Lanka's President Ranil Wickremesinghe has now said his government will work to have these commitments wrapped up by the 75th anniversary of the country's independence, which is on February 4.

Why no creditors' agreement yet

"Financing assurances to restore debt sustainability from Sri Lanka's official creditors and making a good faith effort to reach a collaborative agreement with private creditors are crucial before the IMF can provide financial support to Sri Lanka," the September 1 statement from the IMF had said.

What this means is that financing assurances have to be given by the bilateral creditors, resulting in "a sufficient level of comfort to the IMF that bilateral creditors will support Sri Lanka's efforts to restore public debt sustainability," the Sri Lankan government said, briefing its creditors on September 24.

Sri Lanka held a second meeting with bilateral donors on November 3, but there was not enough progress for the country to clinch an agreement and meet its December deadline.

While private creditors only have to be given an assurance of a "good faith effort", the debt restructuring commitment from bilateral or "official" donors was always going to be the difficult part.

China, Japan, and India are Sri Lanka's main bilateral creditors. Of the total bilateral debt, that is the amount owed to foreign governments, China's share is 52 per cent, Japan's share is 19.5 per cent and India's is 12 per cent, going by what the government has said in its briefing for bilateral creditors.

What China, and to a lesser extent India, do is important to how Sri Lanka's debt restructuring talks progress and get resolved. No bilateral creditor wants any other country or group to get preferential treatment — if there has to be a haircut, it must be evenly distributed among all creditors. For this reason, creditors prefer to negotiate with the debtor country from a common platform.

Creditors from the OECD group, which includes Japan and South Korea, work through a common platform called the Paris Group. For Sri Lanka's debt restructuring, the Paris Group wants China and India to come on board.

China is the main concern; it has the biggest share of Sri Lanka's bilateral debt. And its past record suggests that it prefers bilateral negotiations, with confidential terms. China has not said it will join the Paris Club negotiations with Sri Lanka.

India, which has said that any agreement must reflect "creditors equitability and transparency", has concerns about joining a common platform that does not have China: one is that it leaves China to enter into its own custom-made bilateral agreement; second, the Sri Lankan side has conveyed that this year's emergency assistance from India amounting to \$ 4 bn should be included in the restructuring, which is not how New Delhi sees it.

New Delhi is now engaged in separate bilateral talks with Colombo.

Earlier this month, Wickremesinghe said the talks with India had "succeeded". Officials were more tempered in their assessment, and said the two sides were making "good progress".



That leaves China, whose apparent reluctance to enter into debt restructuring talks with Sri Lanka even bilaterally gave rise to a rare public rebuke of Beijing.

In parliament, Shanakiyan Rasamanickam of the Tamil National Alliance accused China of trying to scuttle Sri Lanka's IMF deal, breaking an earlier political narrative that the Chinese leadership was preoccupied with the October Party Congress, and had insufficient time for the talks.

"If China is truly Sri Lanka's friend, ask the Chinese to help with the [debt] restructuring and the IMF programme," he said. He accused China of paying bribes to finance unproductive infrastructure projects, and said "this is China not being Sri Lanka's friend, that is China being Mahinda Rajapaksa's friend".

How much does Sri Lanka owe China?

Earlier, Sri Lanka's debt to China was calculated at 10 per cent of the total of the country's external debt, about the same as to Japan.

However, new research by the China-Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies shows it is as high at 20 per cent. For their paper published November 29, 'Evolution of Chinese Lending to Sri Lanka Since the mid-2000s: Separating Myth from Reality', Umesh Moramudali and Thilina Panduwawala show that Chinese loans were \$ 7.4 billion at the end of 2021. Almost all of this owed not to the Chinese government but to state-owned banks, China Exim Bank and China Development Bank (\$ 4.3 bn and \$ 3 bn respectively). And this constitutes 19.6 per cent of Sri Lanka's debt. The authors of the report said this debt was duly reported to the World Bank's International Debt Statistics department.

"China will have to play a major role in Sri Lanka's debt restructuring process, with US\$ 7.4 billion or 19.6 per cent of outstanding public debt owed to China at the end of 2021 (out of a total of US\$ 37.6 billion in total public external debt excluding central bank debt), and it will be the first time a major Asian Belt and Road Initiative borrower is going through the process. But given the severe balance of payments (BOP) and debt distress being experienced by most developing countries, this will definitely not be the last Chinese debt restructuring. China's approach to Sri Lanka's debt restructuring and the extent of debt relief offered will set a precedent for China's role and behavior in other countries as well," the authors note.

That Sri Lanka's debt restructuring could become a precedent for other failing borrowers from China may be one reason that Beijing is holding out. Delegations of the two banks have visited Colombo. So far it does not appear that government level talks have been held. And there is no indication yet from China that it is ready for bilateral restructuring talks or that it will join the proposed Paris Club committee.

What happens if Sri Lanka does not reach an agreement with creditors?

A stalemate over restructuring debt is not unknown. Zambia, also a heavy borrower from China, struggled with its debt restructuring for two years due to stalemated discussions with China. Last month, Zambia said that it was actively engaged with China for a breakthrough, but the matter has not yet reached resolution.

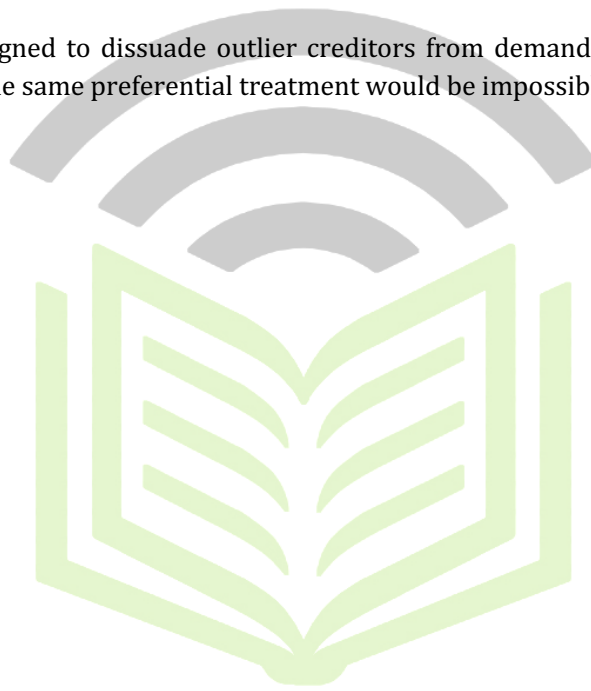
The Paris Club is believed to be ready with its creditors committee, but if Sri Lanka's stalemate with its biggest creditor continues, it could have a knock-on effect on other creditors.

At the moment, better management of the shortages have partially reduced people's day-to-day difficulties. The foreign exchange crisis has also partly eased due to strict import restrictions, combined with an increase in remittances plus the pick-up in tourist arrivals.

But this "low level equilibrium", as some are describing it, has come at the cost of the economy contracting by a projected 6 per cent this year, and perhaps by over 8 per cent next year. This impact on the real economy may in turn have social and political costs.

One way to cut through the impasse, according to experts, is for Sri Lanka to resort to a "most favoured creditors" clause, under which the sovereign debtor promises that if any bilateral creditor — say China in this case — manages to swing advantageous terms for itself, those same terms will be applicable to all other creditors in the first movers' group.

In effect, this is designed to dissuade outlier creditors from demanding preferential terms, as giving all creditors the same preferential treatment would be impossible.



DreamIAS



NATION

WARNING SIGN

Another attempted transgression by the Chinese military, this time in the Tawang sector in the eastern section of the India-China boundary, has served a reminder of the precarious state of affairs along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). A crisis which began in April 2020, with PLA transgressions in Ladakh, in the western sector of the boundary, has now appeared to have widened to Arunachal Pradesh. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said in Parliament that the Indian Army had forced the PLA to return to its posts. The Minister's comments, on December 13, came four days after the incident, details of which were first reported by The Hindu on December 12. An Army statement confirmed the clash. The Opposition, which has criticised the Narendra Modi government's continuing reticence on the China border issue, staged a walkout after being denied a discussion.

As troubles now flare in Arunachal, the situation in Ladakh still remains unresolved. India is yet to resume patrolling in any of the five disengagement areas where temporary buffer zones have been established, while the Chinese military remains on India's side of the LAC in two other friction points, in Depsang and Demchok. What is clear is that the Chinese military has decided, for reasons still unexplained, to unilaterally change how both sides manage what were previously mutually recognised disputed areas. Managing what has become a live border after three decades of relative peace, and crafting a modus vivendi with China in this new situation, has now emerged as a pressing challenge for New Delhi. This is both a military and a political challenge. Addressing it will require, as a first step, transparency, and taking the Opposition and public along on an issue far too important to be led by apparent considerations over optics. Those considerations also appear to be one factor behind the continuing freeze in high-level political contact with China, with Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping avoiding a formal meeting at two recent multilateral summits. That the leaders have not spoken for more than three years, barring an exchange of pleasantries at the G20 summit, is an untenable situation as risks continue to rise along the borders. A resumption of dialogue will, at the very least, allow India to convey its concerns at the highest level. The public also remains largely in the dark on the events that have transpired along the borders, as well as the developments that led to the loss of life of 20 Indian soldiers, in 2020. If the Government's apparent hope was to maintain a silence until the crisis resolves in due course, the latest clash has served a warning sign that it is nowhere near ending.

INDIA'S IMPORTS FROM CHINA ROSE SHARPLY POST GALWAN CLASH: WHAT TRADE DATA SHOW

Amid fresh demands for snapping of trade ties with China in the wake of the Tawang skirmish, official data show that India's imports from the neighbouring country spiked sharply post the 2020 Galwan clash, in which 20 Indian soldiers were killed.

Second-biggest trading partner

China is India's second biggest trading partner after the United States. In 2021-22, India-China bilateral trade stood at \$115.83 billion, which was 11.19 per cent of India's total merchandise trade of \$1,035 billion. The US was just a notch above, with 11.54 per cent (\$119.48 billion) share.



Till 20 years ago, China figured at the 10th position (2001-12) or lower (12th in 2000-01; 16th in 1999-00; 18th in 1998-99). However, from 2002-03, it started an upward march and became India's top trading partner in 2011-12. In the next year, the UAE dislodged it to the second place. However, China bounced back and again became India's top trading partner in 2013-14, and remained there till 2017-18. For the next two years (2018-19 and 2019-20), the US was at the top but in 2020-21, China again became India's number trading partner.

While China and the US have both been India's top trading partners in recent years, there is a big difference between the trade with the world's two largest economies. While with the US, India had a trade surplus of \$32.85 billion during 2021-22, with China, it had a trade deficit of \$73.31 billion, the highest for any country. In fact, India's trade deficit with China during 2021-2022 was double the previous year's level (\$44.02 billion) and it was an all-time high.

Apart from the US and China, the other eight countries and regions among India's top-10 trading partners during 2021-22 were UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia, South Korea, and Australia.

Sharp spike in trade deficit

India's trade deficit with China has increased from \$1 billion to \$73 billion in the past 21 years.

Data show that imports from China have skyrocketed since the beginning of this century—from \$2 billion in 2001-02 to \$94.57 billion in 2021-20. However, during this period, India's exports to China have increased at a snail's pace—from about \$1 billion to \$21 billion. Due to this surge in imports, India's trade deficit with China has increased from about \$1 billion in 2001-02 to \$73 billion.

It is expected to rise further this year. During the first seven months (April-October) of the current financial year (2022-23), India's trade deficit with China stood at \$51 billion, which was 39 per cent higher than the figure (\$37 billion) recorded in the corresponding period of the last fiscal. In fact, China alone accounted for over one-third of India's total trade deficit (\$191 billion) during 2021-22.

The rising gap between imports and exports from China is evident from the fact that two decades ago, India's imports accounted for about 60 per cent of the total bilateral trade between two countries, but now it is over 80 per cent.

Imports up significantly since Galwan clash

An analysis of the trade data shows that the recent spike in trade with China is due to an unprecedented surge in imports from the neighbouring country in recent years.

The monthly figure of imports from China, that hit a low of \$3.32 billion in June 2020 during the Covid lockdown, started rising soon after easing of restrictions and rose to \$5.58 billion in the following month (July 2020). Since then, it continued rising and scaled a new peak of \$10.24 billion in July this year.

The figure of average monthly imports from China has increased from \$5.43 billion in 2020-21 to \$7.88 billion in 2021-22. In the first seven months (April-October) of the financial year 2022-23, the figure reached \$8.61 billion. In the pre-Covid times, the average monthly import figure stood at \$5.43 billion during 2019-20. For the first time since June 2020, there has been a slight dip in



imports from China in October 2022, with the figure coming down to \$7.85 billion from \$8.69 billion a year ago.

What India buys from China

During 2021-22, 15.42 per cent (\$94.57 billion) of India's total imports (\$613.05 billion) came from China. The top commodities that India bought included: electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof; sound recorders and reproducers, television image and sound recorders and reproducers and parts; nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances and parts of thereof; organic chemicals; plastic and plastic articles; and fertilisers.

A look at the item-wise list of the imports shows that the most-valued Chinese item in the Indian import basket was the personal computer (laptop, palmtop etc), which accounted for \$5.34 billion in 2021-22. It was followed by 'monolithic integrated circuits-digital' (\$4 billion), lithium-ion (\$1.1 billion), solar cells (\$3 billion) and urea (\$1.4 billion).

As far as the US is concerned, India imported petroleum crude, coking coal, LNG, diamonds, almonds, turbo-jets, etc.

What China buys from India

In 2021-22, India's exports to China stood at \$21.25 billion, which was 5 per cent of India's total shipments (\$422 billion). Among the top commodities China bought from India included: Ores, slag and ash (\$2.5 billion); organic chemicals (\$2.38 billion), mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation, bituminous substances, mineral waxes (\$1.87 billion); iron and steel (\$1.4 billion); aluminum and articles of thereof (\$1.2 billion); and cotton (\$1.25 billion). Among single items, light Naphtha (\$1.37 billion) was India's most valued export item to China during 2021-22.

As far as the United States is concerned, diamonds, gold jewellery set with diamonds, vannamei shrimp, and turbo-jets were among the top items imported from India.

THE RACE OF TWO ASIAN GIANTS: THE STORY OF INDIA AND CHINA SO FAR

As tensions yet again rise on the India-China border, this article dated August 15, 2022 by Rana Mitter explains how the two neighbouring countries, for better or for worse, will shape Asia in the next decade.

Last month, a United Nations population survey estimated that a milestone may be passed in 2023. For the first time in over two millennia, China will not be the most populous society on earth. Instead India will have the largest population, and China will be second.

It's a rare example of a global ranking where India sits higher than China, and it's an ambivalent victory at best: a larger population does not have merit in itself, unless it is well-fed and endowed with economic prospects. China has other number 2 rankings which may raise its standing, such as the second largest economy in the world. It is not second to India but the U.S. This is a reminder of how far the two Asian giants have come since their moments of profound political change in the late 1940s: independence for India in 1947, and the victory of the Chinese Communist Party and establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. In global power terms, China now looms above India, but the fluidity of geopolitics in the 2020s may give India advantages in the world now being shaped.



Different directions

The world of the late 1940s was one where global order was just as much in turmoil as in the present day. India had become the first major British colony to gain freedom, and its new leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, saw the fate of India as important not only for his country's own people but also for the other, still-colonised peoples of Asia. Although the violence of Partition cast a bloody cloud across the landscape, the establishment of India as a multi-party electoral democracy with a free media was a foundation stone of the secular politics that Nehru embodied, and wanted an independent India to represent. China's fate at that time was also marked by violence, but it had a very different result. China had fought Japan from 1937 to 1945 during World War II, but was then plunged into a civil war between the ruling Nationalists of Chiang Kai-shek and the Communists under Mao Zedong. Mao's victory saw the establishment of the PRC, which leaned heavily on the Soviet Union for its economic model. China was kept out of the United Nations for another two decades, and did not open diplomatic relations with the U.S. for three. The years of Mao's rule saw immense domestic turmoil, with events such as the Great Leap Forward of 1958-62, an experiment in self-sufficient socialism that went horribly wrong and starved millions of farmers to death, as well as the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, in which China went to war with itself. Mao's China also, of course, went to war with India, in a border conflict in 1962 whose after-effects are still very evident today.

Common concerns

Yet, in the later years, the thawing of the Cold War saw both countries change path, and even share some common concerns. By the 1990s, India's highly protected economy was producing limited growth, and controversial reforms under figures including P.V. Narasimha Rao opened up the economy in various ways, creating a new class of millionaires as well as increasing inequality. In a sense, China had been there first, with the astonishing economic experiment begun in the 1970s with the blessing of Mao's ultimate successor, Deng Xiaoping. Instead of the command economy that Mao had favoured, China's senior leader allowed the development of a market economy. This did not follow the model pioneered by Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Bob Hawke, of removing the government as much as possible from the workings of the market. Instead, the Chinese private sector was given space to develop within a framework controlled by the party. But it worked astonishingly well. China became a manufacturing hub for the world, regularly posting 10% growth rates in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Today, China's per capita GDP rate is around \$9,000 a year, as opposed to around \$2,000 for India.

Today, geopolitical tensions mean that China and India mostly sit on opposite ends on major global questions. There are some areas of commonality, to be fair; both are nervous about climate change commitments that may hamper their growth, and both abstained at the United Nations this year rather than condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Lessons to be learned

Yet there are also elements behind their rise that mean that both sides can learn from each other. One of China's most powerful engines for growth has been its stress on education: 2.4% of GDP goes on research and development broadly defined, and in international university rankings, which mostly rate hard sciences, China has a group of institutions in the top tier, many more than India. Education is not evenly distributed, with urban centres obtaining much more of the pie than the children of the countryside. Yet, there is no doubt that China's stress on building human capital has had results.



However, China's current political system runs the risk of losing its gains as it become narrower and more authoritarian. In the last few years, technology entrepreneurs, academics and lawyers have all become victims of political crackdowns by the party, which is concerned about any voices that do not simply follow the line sent down by Beijing. However, societies that suppress questioning voices find, in time, that their capacity to innovate is damaged. India has long had a pluralist system with a variety of voices; the flexibility and capacity to change that such a system can provide should give both China and India pause for thought if neither wants to fall behind in the next stage of global development.

Challenges ahead

The 2020s will provide a set of challenges for both India and China. On the international stage, both countries need to think where they can find new friends. In the case of India, there are plenty of suitors, as the establishment of the Quad naval agreement with the U.S., Australia, and Japan suggests. Yet independent India has always been reluctant to become too entangled in disputes beyond its borders. The growing strength of China has become a source of alarm for India, but it is not yet obvious that New Delhi wants to accept the invitations of the U.S. to become a full-blown ally against Beijing, nor what New Delhi's reaction would be, say, to a Chinese attempt to take Taiwan in the near future. China is likewise wary of formal alliances, but that is in part because its potential partners are ambivalent ones. Russia and China declared a "friendship without limits" in February this year, but it seems unlikely that Russian President Vladimir Putin shared the full extent of his ambition to invade Ukraine with Chinese President Xi Jinping when he met him at the Winter Olympics.

There is little doubt that the actions of both China and India will shape Asia in the next decade. But it is likely that they will continue to do so in wary opposition to each other, and not as part of a wider Asian power bloc of the sort that Nehru might have imagined back in 1947, even if they continue to remain the first and second most populous societies on earth – in whichever order.

The 2020s will provide a set of challenges for both India and China. On the international stage, both countries need to think where they can find new friends.

INDIA CONDEMNS OIC SECRETARY GENERAL'S VISIT TO POK, HIS COMMENTS ON J&K

India Tuesday condemned the visit of the secretary general of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and his comments on Jammu and Kashmir, asserting that the grouping has no locus standi in the matters related to the region.

In a sharp reaction to OIC Secretary General Hissein Brahim Taha's trip to PoK, External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said, "Any attempt of interference and meddling in India's internal affairs by the OIC and its secretary general is completely unacceptable." He said the OIC has already lost its "credibility" by taking a "blatantly communal, partisan and factually incorrect approach" in various issues. Taha visited PoK during his three-day visit to Pakistan from December 10 to 12.

"We hope that he would refrain from becoming a partner in carrying out the nefarious agenda of Pakistan – promoting cross-border terrorism into India, especially in Jammu and Kashmir," he added.

A statement by the OIC, a grouping of Muslim-majority countries, said Taha briefed Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on his diplomatic efforts to resolve the Kashmir issue.



BILAWAL'S COMMENTS ON MODI 'UNCIVILISED': INDIA

India lashed out at Pakistan on Friday for what it termed an “uncivilised outburst” by Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, stating that cities across the world “bear the scars” of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism.

The comments are a continuation of a heated exchange that began at a United Nations Security Council briefing on counter-terrorism in New York on Thursday, where External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had described Pakistan as the “epicentre of terrorism”.

In his response, Mr. Bhutto Zardari had said, “Osama bin Laden is dead. But the butcher of Gujarat lives and he is the Prime Minister of India.”

“Pakistan Foreign Minister’s uncivilised outburst seems to be a result of Pakistan’s increasing inability to use terrorists and their proxies,” said Arindam Bagchi, official spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs. “We wish that Pakistan Foreign Minister would have listened more sincerely yesterday [Thursday] at the UN Security Council to the testimony of Ms. Anjali Kulthe, a Mumbai nurse who saved the lives of 20 pregnant women from the bullets of the Pakistani terrorist, Ajmal Kasab. Clearly, the Foreign Minister was more interested in whitewashing Pakistan’s role.”

Mr. Bagchi further said that the perpetrators of the 26/11 attacks, Hafiz Saeed, Masood Azhar and Sajjad Mir, as well as the mastermind of the 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts, Dawood Ibrahim, all remained free in Pakistan. “Cities like New York, Mumbai, Pulwama, Pathankot and London are among the many that bear the scars of Pakistan-sponsored and instigated terrorism. This violence has emanated from their Special Terrorist Zones and exported to all parts of the world. ‘Make in Pakistan’ terrorism has to stop,” said the spokesperson.

Responding to Mr. Bhutto Zardari’s attack on the Prime Minister, Mr. Bagchi said: “These comments are a new low, even for Pakistan. The Foreign Minister of Pakistan has obviously forgotten this day in 1971 [Liberation of Bangladesh on December 16], which was a direct result of the genocide unleashed by Pakistani rulers against ethnic Bengalis and Hindus.”

“Unfortunately, Pakistan does not seem to have changed much in the treatment of its minorities. It certainly lacks credentials to cast aspersions at India,” Mr. Bagchi said.

Mr. Bagchi’s comments were echoed by Minister of State for External Affairs Meenakshi Lekhi who pointed out that Pakistan’s record as a terror-sponsor had led to its inclusion in the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). “If a Foreign Minister of a country is making such a statement, it doesn’t hold him well. This is the country which was included in the grey list of FATF several times. The country he represents is incubating terrorism,” said Ms. Lekhi. Minister of Information and Broadcasting Anurag Thakur also condemned Mr. Bhutto Zardari’s comments.

THE ATTACK ON THE LAST BASTION — THE JUDICIARY

Recent comments by the Vice-President, Jagdeep Dhankar, and the Law Minister, Kiren Rijju, can be read as a concerted attack on the collegium system, the Supreme Court of India, and even the basic structure doctrine (conveniently forgetting that it is this doctrine that has kept the Indian Constitution intact). Clearly, the present government continues to try and undermine judicial independence, which it has been doing since it first came to power in 2014. As a long-standing critic of the collegium system, I might have joined a chorus that called out the problems with

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



judicial appointments. But this onslaught from the Government has been particularly disturbing and wholly unwarranted.

An 'elected autocracy'

The Supreme Court, conceived as the custodian of the Constitution and the final arbiter of the law, has had an inconsistent history. The ghosts of ADM Jabalpur continue to haunt to this day. While the government under Indira Gandhi intended to destroy the judiciary during the Emergency, the entire Court, barring Justice H.R. Khanna, was also complicit in the erosion of citizens' rights that took place then.

Over the decades, after much reflection and repair, from both within and outside the judiciary, those dark days have been seemingly left behind. But what worried us then has now re-emerged to torment us again.

The present move — of attempting to undermine and discredit the judiciary, as seen in the comments — is part of the larger mission to make the executive the most powerful entity. Today, executive accountability is a thing of memory, for no one raises any questions about its actions. Since 2014, the Government has undertaken a well-crafted, deliberate takedown of various institutions and mechanisms that could hold the executive accountable. Its efforts may not be as brazen as the Indira Gandhi-led government, but the same ends are being achieved: the state is rendered practically comatose, and the executive, most often, has the upper hand.

Parallels can be drawn with 'elected autocracies', where elected governments use the very institutions integral to democracy to kill democracy itself and destroy civil liberties. We have heard nothing of the Lokpal since. The National Human Rights Commission has been made dormant. Investigation agencies are misused at the slightest opportunity, with action against activists, journalists, students, political opponents, or anyone who protests against the government. The Election Commission of India appears to have been clearly compromised. The Information Commission is almost non-functional. The list is long and disturbing. Others who can hold the executive accountable — academia, the press, and civil society — have also been systematically emasculated. Universities are under attack. An unbiased mainstream fourth estate in India no longer exists, and the media operates mostly as a propaganda machine. Civil society, too, is being slowly but surely strangled.

And a resurgent judiciary

Since the Supreme Court's decision in 2015 on the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) Act, arguably, from the Court under the Chief Justices of India (CJI) Dipak Misra onwards, through the tenures of notably Justice Ranjan Gogoi and Justice S.A. Bobde, the judiciary has remained passive, even submissive, to the executive. Consequently, not even a whisper emerged against the collegium. However, with the last three CJIs, i.e., Justice N.V. Ramana, Justice U.U. Lalit, and Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, the Court is being more assertive and speaking in a non-aligned and confident voice. The executive seems to have recognised that the judiciary is the last bastion and final protector of civil liberties which it must overcome to claim its position as the most powerful entity in India.

History tells us that in the early years of modern India, decisions on judicial appointments were usually made on the advice of the CJI. Even if concurrence was not contemplated, for our founding fathers, an independent judiciary was non-negotiable. B.R. Ambedkar was unambiguous that appointments should have no political pressure and considerations, but that 'consultation with



persons who are well-qualified ... to give proper advice' would be appropriate. This was followed through the Nehru-era.

Both the Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi governments attempted to manipulate the process. The collegium was created as a historical response to contemporaneous challenges, and succeeded in preventing the executive from hijacking judicial appointments. However, I maintain that 'judges appointing judges' is never a good idea, and a formal, structured appointments commission, with rules and accountability mechanisms, is the ideal way forward.

The NJAC law could have fixed this problem but it had many flaws, structured to undermine judicial independence, including giving a veto to so-called 'eminent persons'. The Court could have read down these flaws and at least set up a body that could incrementally improve with every selection round. But the Government refused to accede to any change or modification in the law. Eventually, the Court was forced to strike down the law completely, leaving us, once again, with the collegium system.

Fixing the system of appointments

For better or for worse, the collegium system is currently the law of the land, which everyone, including the executive, must adhere to. Instead, we see a defiant government refusing to cooperate, let alone consult, with the Supreme Court. Names proposed by the collegium are left pending for years, only to be eventually returned unceremoniously. The Government would also do well to think about its own culpability in allowing the problem of pendency and vacancies to fester. Pendency is caused majorly by poor judicial infrastructure, including an abysmally low number of judges. Court funding is at the mercy of the government, which is either particularly frugal or deliberately parsimonious in the matter. Similarly, vacancies in the higher judiciary are directly due to the Government's frequent refusal to accept names of persons who are out of favour, or who have not toed the Government's line.

All this points to the same thing repeatedly, i.e., the appointments system must be fixed. Pending a clear, rule-based system, even the existing collegium system can be improved, e.g., through well-defined criteria for appointments, transparency and accountability in selection, better methods of assessing candidates for elevation, and improved ways of ensuring diversity and representation. CJI Chandrachud, with two years in office, has a wonderful opportunity to make these changes, even as, in the long term, we strive for a well-structured and balanced legislation on a judicial commission that brings in transparency without compromising judicial independence.

Until then, issues of pendency and infrastructure should be broached in appropriate forums, such as the Chief Justices Conference, or meetings between the Prime Minister and the CJI. Press interviews or parliamentary addresses are not fit stages for this, and only serve to incite acrimony and reinforce the view that the Government does not have a cooperative spirit.

We can rest assured that the leadership at the Supreme Court appears to be in good hands now and is resisting the pressure and attacks in a dignified and restrained way. If the Government continues to stonewall, perhaps the judiciary should find ways to persuade or even compel the Government to follow the law of the land. This is the best that the Supreme Court can do to protect democracy, and for the sake of Indian citizens.



COURT VACATIONS: WHAT ARE ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST JUDGES TAKING BREAKS?

Chief Justice of India (CJI) D Y Chandrachud said on Friday that the Supreme Court will not have a vacation bench when it breaks next week for its annual winter vacation. The announcement came the day after Union Law Minister Kiren Rijiju criticised the judiciary for taking long vacations even as pending cases rise to record levels every year.

What exactly did the Law Minister say?

Responding to questions relating to pendency, Rijiju said the issue cannot be resolved until a “new system” on the appointment of judges is evolved. He also said that “there is a feeling among people of India that the long vacation which the courts obtain is not very convenient for justice-seekers”, and that it is his “obligation and duty to convey the message or sense of this House to the judiciary”.

What are court vacations?

The Supreme Court has 193 working days a year for its judicial functioning, while the High Courts function for approximately 210 days, and trial courts for 245 days. High Courts have the power to structure their calendars according to the service rules.

The Supreme Court breaks for its annual summer vacation which is typically for seven weeks — it starts at the end of May, and the court reopens in July. The court takes a week-long break each for Dussehra and Diwali, and two weeks at the end of December.

What happens to important cases during court vacations?

Generally, a few judges are available for hearing urgent cases even when the court is in recess. The combination of two or three judges, called “vacation benches”, hear important cases that cannot wait. Cases such as bail, eviction, etc. often find precedence in listing before vacation benches.

It is not uncommon for courts to hear important cases during vacation. For example, in 2015, a five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court heard the challenge to the constitutional amendment setting up the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) during the summer vacation. In 2017, a Constitution Bench led by then CJI J S Khehar held a six-day hearing in the case challenging the practice of triple talaq during summer vacation.

Why are court vacations criticised?

The Law Minister’s critique of court vacations is not new. For one, like Rijiju said, extended frequent vacations is not good optics, especially in the light of mounting pendency of cases and the snail’s pace of judicial proceedings. For an ordinary litigant, the vacation means further unavoidable delays in listing cases.

The colonial origins of the practice is not lost on the critics. The summer break perhaps began because European judges of the Federal Court of India found Indian summers too hot — and took the winter break for Christmas.

In 2000, the Justice Malimath Committee, set up to recommend reforms in the criminal justice system, suggested that the period of vacation should be reduced by 21 days, keeping in mind the long pendency of cases. It suggested that the Supreme Court work for 206 days, and High Courts for 231 days every year.



In its 230th report, the Law Commission of India headed by Justice A R Lakshmanan in 2009 called for reform in this system. “Considering the staggering arrears, vacations in the higher judiciary must be curtailed by at least 10 to 15 days and the court working hours should be extended by at least half an hour,” the report said.

In 2014, when the Supreme Court notified its new Rules, it said that the period of summer vacation shall not exceed seven weeks from the earlier 10-week period.

In the past, Chief Justices of India have tried to reform vacation cycles in view of the criticism.

In 2014, when the pendency of cases hit the 2 crore mark, then CJI R M Lodha had suggested keeping the Supreme Court, High Courts, and trial courts open round the year. CJI Lodha suggested that schedules of individual judges should be sought at the beginning of the year, and the calendar should be planned accordingly. With Justice Lodha’s tenure lasting just five months, that proposal did not see the light of the day.

Former CJI T S Thakur also suggested holding court during vacations if parties and lawyers mutually agreed. That proposal too, did not take effect.

What are the arguments in favour of court vacations?

Within the legal fraternity, the long breaks are strongly defended. Lawyers have often argued that in a profession that demands intellectual rigour and long working hours — both from lawyers and judges — vacations are much needed for rejuvenation.

Judges typically work for over 10 hours on a daily basis. Apart from the day’s work in court from 10.30 am to 4 pm, they also spend a few hours preparing for the next day. A frequently-made argument is that judges utilise the vacation to write judgments.

Another argument is that judges do not take leave of absence like other working professionals when the court is in session. In 2015, even after the Supreme Court heard a midnight plea against the execution of Yakub Memon, Justices Dipak Misra and Prafulla Pant returned to work the next morning. Family tragedies, health are rare exceptions, but judges rarely take the day off for social engagements.

Legal experts also point out that cutting down on court vacations will not see a dramatic decrease in pendency of cases, at least in the Supreme Court.

Data show that the Supreme Court roughly disposes of the same number of cases as are instituted before it in a calendar year. The issue of pendency relates largely to legacy cases that need to be tackled systemically. The argument that cutting the vacation period would be a solution to pendency is not backed by data, and takes away from real issues that contribute to the pendency problem.

What is the practice in other countries?

The Indian Supreme Court has the highest caseload among the apex courts around the world and also works the most. In terms of the number of judgments delivered too, with 34 judges, the Indian Supreme Court leads the way.

In 2021, 29,739 cases were instituted before the Supreme Court, and 24,586 cases were disposed of by the court in the same year.



This year, between January 1 and December 16, the Supreme Court has delivered 1,255 judgments. This is apart from the usual workload of daily orders and hearings in cases where judgments are yet to be delivered.

By contrast, the US Supreme Court hears approximately 100-150 cases a year, and sits for oral arguments for five days a month. From October through December, arguments are heard during the first two weeks of each month and from January through April, arguments are heard in the last two weeks of each month.

In the UK, High Courts and Courts of Appeals sit for 185-190 days in a year. The Supreme Court sits in four sessions throughout the year, spanning roughly 250 days.

SC JUDGE RECUSES HERSELF FROM HEARING BILKIS BANO'S PETITION

Supreme Court judge, Justice Bela M. Trivedi, on Tuesday recused herself from hearing a writ petition filed by Bilkis Bano against a Gujarat Government decision to prematurely release 11 men sentenced to life imprisonment for gang-raping her and murdering her family members during the 2002 riots.

Justice Ajay Rastogi, who led the Bench, said the writ petition would be returned to the Chief Justice of India to be listed before another Bench of the top court.

Justice Trivedi hails from Gujarat. She started her judicial career in the district judiciary in 1995, and worked in different posts, including as Registrar-Vigilance in the High Court, Law Secretary in the Gujarat Government, Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) court judge, Special Judge etc. She was elevated as a Gujarat High Court judge in February 2011.

A review petition of Ms. Bano was also listed on Tuesday for a decision via circulation by a Bench led by Justice Ajay Rastogi.

'Violation of rights'

Ms. Bano has sought a review of a Supreme Court judgment of May 2022 that paved the way for the Gujarat government to release the 11 convicts.

In her writ petition, Ms. Bano, through advocate Shobha Gupta, has argued that the early release of the convicts amounted to a violation of her fundamental right to life. She has said the remission policy of the State of Maharashtra, where the trial happened, and not Gujarat, would have governed the case.

Others like Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) leader Subhashini Ali and Trinamool Congress leader Mahua Moitra have also challenged the early release of the convicts.

The court had then given the petitioners time to respond to a Gujarat government affidavit on the matter.

The affidavit by the State of Gujarat had revealed that while the Superintendent of Police, CBI, Special Crime Branch, Mumbai and the Special Judge (CBI) of Greater Bombay opposed the premature release, all the authorities in Gujarat and the Home Ministry recommended their release.



PUBLIC SERVANTS CAN BE FOUND GUILTY OF GRAFT ON CIRCUMSTANTIAL PROOF: SC

A Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court on Thursday held that the demand and acceptance of bribe or illegal gratification by a public servant can be inferred by a court on circumstantial proof in the absence of direct evidence.

The Bench, led by Justice S. Abdul Nazeer, said the “stink of corruption” has a “pervasive impact” on the efficient administration and governance of the country. Corrupt officials have a demoralising effect on honest public servants. Corruption by public servants has become a “gigantic problem”. Large-scale corruption retards nation-building activities and everyone has to suffer on that count, the court observed.

The court, quoting from its preceding judgments on the Prevention of Corruption (PC) Act, said it is a “sad but a bitter reality that corruption is corroding, like cancerous lymph nodes, the vital veins of the body politics, social fabric of efficiency in the public service and demoralising the honest officers”.

The Bench was answering a reference on the question whether public servants could be convicted for corruption under Section 7 (public servant taking gratification other than legal remuneration in respect of an official act) and 13 (1)(d)(i) and (ii) (criminal misconduct by a public servant) in the absence of direct oral or documentary evidence due to unavailability of the complainant owing to his death or for any other reasons.

“In the absence of the evidence of the complainant (through direct, primary, oral, documentary evidence), it is permissible to draw a deduction of culpability or guilt of a public servant under Sections 7, 13 (1)(d)(i) and (ii) read with 13(2) based on other evidence used by the prosecution,” Justice Nagarathna observed.

The prosecution can prove its case of corruption with the help of any other witness, oral or documentary evidence or circumstantial evidence in cases in which the complainants have turned hostile. The trial would not abate or result in an acquittal.

Justice Nagarathna said if a bribe-giver offers to pay illegal gratification without there being any demand from the public servant and the latter simply accepts the offer and receives the payment, it would be a case of “acceptance” under Section 7 of the PC Act.

On the other hand, if the accused public servant makes a demand for a bribe and accepts the payment, it would be a case of “obtainment” and an offence under 13 (1)(d)(i) and (ii) of the PC Act.

But both the offer by the bribe-giver and the demand and acceptance of the illegal gratification have to be effectively proved by the prosecution as a fact.

“In other words, mere acceptance and receipt of the illegal gratification without anything more would not make it an offence under Section 7 and 13 (1)(d)(i) and (ii) of the Act,” the court said.

Justice Nagarathna interpreted that a court of law could use its discretion to make a “presumption of fact” of the offer made and bribe demanded or accepted by an accused official based on the material on record.



WHY PARLIAMENT MUST REEXAMINE POCSO

Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud on Saturday made an important call for legislative reform to address the gap in law that often leads to criminalisation of adolescent relationships. Speaking at the National Annual Stakeholders Consultation on Child Protection, the CJI expressed a “growing concern” underlined by several high courts. A stringent legislation, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act criminalises all sexual activity for minors, that is, those under the age of 18 years. Cases involving consensual sexual activity of teenagers often end up facing the full force of law. “In my time as a judge, I have observed that this category of cases poses difficult questions for judges across the spectrum,” the CJI said, urging that the issue must be considered by the legislature in light of reliable research by experts in adolescent healthcare. With 253 million adolescents in the country and a social culture that stigmatises independent decisions when it comes to choosing a partner, the CJI’s call for reform is significant and welcome.

The National Family Health Survey-5, 2019-21 (NFHS-5) shows 39 per cent of women had their first sexual intercourse before the age of 18 years. The POCSO Act, introduced in 2012 increased the age of consent from 16 to 18 years. The Indian Penal Code and other laws were subsequently modified to ensure cohesion with POCSO. Since the law leaves little room for discretion by trial courts, parties are often forced to approach the high courts for leniency. Invoking the “Romeo-Juliet exception,” many high courts cautiously acquit the accused in cases involving consensual sexual activity between minors aged between 16-18 years. But not all judges use the discretion similarly. In a 2021 decision, the Madras High Court cautioned that “it does not help matters to avoid acknowledging that the society is changing and influencing people’s identity and cognition, constantly.” A study by Enfold Proactive Health Trust, reported in this newspaper shows that 1 in four cases under the POCSO Act involve admission of romantic relationships.

Even when POCSO was enacted, policy makers were alive to this incongruity. A draft Bill specified that statutory rape would be triggered for minors between 16-18 years only in circumstances such as use of force. This was, however, dropped when the Bill was tabled in Parliament. There are valid concerns that adding a defence of consensual sexual activity could lead to putting the complainant’s conduct on trial or encourage parties to enter into a “compromise”. This is where stakeholder consultation and careful drafting to ensure the spirit of the law is upheld is important. Parliament must take notice and reexamine the law.

WHAT ARE THE EXISTING LAWS ON RELIGIOUS CONVERSIONS?

In post-independent India, Odisha became the first State to enact a law restricting religious conversions, which later became a model framework for other States. Odisha’s 1967 Act provides that no person shall directly or indirectly convert any person from one religious faith to another by force, inducement or any fraudulent means. Later, Madhya Pradesh brought in the Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantraya Adhinyam (1968). This Act added a provision distinct from the Odisha law, requiring whoever converted any person, to intimate the District Magistrate that such a conversion had taken place. Failure to do so would attract punishment and fines. Subsequent Acts in other States over the past two decades see identical provisions.

These laws also provide for greater punishment for forceful conversion of persons from Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribe communities, minors and women. A recent paper in the Economic and Political Weekly highlighted how administrations often said that such provisions were in the best interest of these groups, painting them as “naive” and prone to be misled.



More than ten Indian States have passed laws prohibiting certain means of religious conversions — Arunachal Pradesh (1978), Gujarat (2003), Chhattisgarh (2000 and 2006), Rajasthan (2006 and 2008), Himachal Pradesh (2006 and 2019), and Tamil Nadu (a law was enacted in 2002, but repealed in 2004), Jharkhand (2017), Uttarakhand (2018), Uttar Pradesh (2021), and Haryana (2022). The Karnataka Assembly also passed an anti-conversion Bill amid stiff opposition. Since 2017, multiple BJP-ruled States enacted or revised their anti-conversion laws, restricting religious conversions on the additional ground of marriage, supposedly to curb what has been described as “love jihad”. For instance, the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, 2021, says that a marriage would be declared “null and void” if the conversion is solely for that purpose, and those wishing to change their religion after marriage need to apply to the District Magistrate. Madhya Pradesh also passed a new law in 2021— the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act (MPFRA), which the State’s Home Minister Narottam Mishra described as having the strictest provisions compared to other laws. While other States prescribe that an individual must inform a District Magistrate 30 days prior to an intended conversion, the MPFRA increases this to 60 days, and makes it mandatory for both the individual and the priest facilitating the conversion.

Have these laws been challenged?

The Himachal Pradesh High Court in 2012 struck down certain provisions of the State’s 2006 law restricting conversions, holding them “unconstitutional”. The Court said that the individual converting their faith also enjoyed their right to privacy and the provision to give a month’s prior notice to the District Magistrate violated this right. In 2021, the Gujarat High Court stayed some provisions of the Gujarat Freedom Of Religion Act, 2003, which the State amended in 2021 to add the grounds of marriage to prohibit conversions. This year, the Madhya Pradesh High Court also held certain provisions of the MPFRA unconstitutional. In November last year, the Allahabad High Court allowed several interfaith couples to register their marriages despite not having sought the DM’s approval.

QUESTIONING THE BASIS OF CLERICAL SHARIAH

Last month, Afghanistan’s self-styled supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada decreed that cases in which shariah conditions of hudud (crimes against God) and qisas (justified retaliation) were fulfilled, judges must implement “Islamic” punishments because “this is the ruling of shariah, and my command, which is obligatory.” Within days of this arrogant pronouncement, 11 men and three women were publicly flogged by the Taliban for committing “moral crimes” such as theft and adultery.

The Taliban are not alone in interpreting Islam in such a narrow way. In July, Sudan sentenced a woman to death by stoning for adultery. Indonesia recently passed a law that makes sex outside marriage punishable by a year in jail on complaints by a spouse, parents or children.

The fact is, most Muslim countries treat the Quran and books of hadith as nothing more than congeries of fossilised codes to be imposed in the name of shariah. The distortion of these texts, and especially the concept of hudud, has been so gross that the law that prevails in Muslim societies has not just maligned Islam but enslaved Muslims to the diktats of religious absolutism.

Misrepresenting Hudud

For centuries Muslim jurists have defined hudud as prosecutable offences against Allah such as adultery, fornication, theft, unproved allegations of unchastity, apostasy, and even blasphemy. But



these acts have not been called hudud crimes in the Quran. The Quranic hududullah are the inviolable “limits of Allah” mentioned in the context of the rules of Ramzan fasting (2:187), inheritance rights (4:11-14), and the rights of divorced women (2:229-230, 58:2-4, and 65:1). They have no connection with the post-Prophetic definition of hudud laws formalised by the authoritarian alliance between successive Muslim Caliphates and their clergy which even introduced, in the name of Prophetic practice (sunnah), extra-Quranic punishments for some of these offences. For instance, a distinction between fornication and adultery was created to over criminalise the former with 100 life-threatening lashes and the latter with death by stoning, a punishment not mentioned in the Quran.

The Quranic sin of zina (consensual sex outside marriage) is, in reality, independent of the marital status of the parties. And the punishment of 100 lashes in public for it hinges entirely on the impossible condition that the act must have been physically seen by at least four persons (24:2). Failure to support an accusation of zina with four eyewitnesses invites a penalty of 80 lashes (24:4). This unattainable prerequisite indicates that the Quranic pronouncements on zina are more in the nature of highlighting its immorality than giving anyone the right to police the private lives of citizens.

The Prophet was reluctant to punish even those who voluntarily admitted to committing “moral crimes”. A hadith in Bukhari states that when a penitent beseeched the Prophet to punish him for a moral crime, the Prophet told him that considering the congregational prayer he had just offered, “Allah has forgiven your legally punishable sin”. Another hadith in Tirmizi quotes the Prophet as asking Muslims to avert legal punishments as much as possible because it is better to err in pardoning than in punishing.

The Prophet’s understanding of lashing (jaldah) too was a far cry from the murderous flogging legalised by some Muslim states. According to hadiths in Bukhari and Bulugh al-Maram, the “whip” during the Prophet’s time was twisted cloth or two palm leaf stalks. In other words, the Prophet did not see jaldah as a punitive device to inflict corporal pain. His reluctance to use even flimsy whips underlines his attitude towards the negative impacts of retributivism. It also proves that he practised the doctrines of lenity and constitutional avoidance long before these became axioms of modern law.

Nonetheless, the Quranic idea of lashing as a deterrent to prevent sexual immorality should not be judged on the basis of modern legal theories because it would amount to decontextualising it from 7th century norms. What needs to be appreciated is how the Prophet practised it.

If non-Muslims are not conscious of this fact, it is because Muslim jurists over the centuries have, using questionable hadiths, undermined the Prophet’s compassionate exposition of the Quran. For instance, a hadith in Muslim narrates that a person, Ma’iz ibn Malik al-Aslami, confessed to his sin of adultery on three consecutive days but was turned away by the Prophet. When he came back on the fourth day, the Prophet had him stoned to death. The same hadith narrates how a pregnant adulteress was repeatedly sent back by the Prophet and stoned to death after the child was born and fully weaned. The basis of these unbelievable hadiths is another unbelievable hadith in Muslim in which the Prophet is alleged to have ruled that the punishment for fornication is 100 lashes and a year in exile, while adulterers are to be first flogged 100 times and then stoned to death.

What Muslim theologians don’t seem to comprehend is that the Prophet could never have gone against the book he was ordered to recite and explicate (3:164). When some of his detractors



asked him to tamper with the Quran, he said, "It is not for me to change it of my own accord. I only follow what is revealed to me"(10:15).

Yet some hadiths would have us falsely believe that the Prophet went beyond the Quran and even introduced punishments not mentioned in it. If Islam is to be rescued from such malignant distortions, the Muslim laity must start challenging the clergy's right to deduce law from hadiths that violate the Quran.

STATES CAN ENACT LAWS ON UNIFORM CIVIL CODE, LAW MINISTER TELLS RAJYA SABHA

The Minister made these remarks in a written reply to a question posed by Communist Party of India (Marxist) member John Brittas, asking whether the Centre was aware of the States formulating their own laws with respect to the uniform civil code.

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Rijiju, "Article 44 of the Constitution provides that the State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India."

Mr. Rijiju added, "Personal laws such as intestacy and succession, wills, joint family and partition, marriage and divorce, relate to Entry 5 of List-III-Concurrent List of the Seventh Schedule to the Constitution, and hence, the States are also empowered to legislate upon them."

The Law Minister's comments assume significance given the backdrop of several Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled States announcing their intention to implement the UCC.

Taking the lead

While Uttarakhand was the first to set up a panel to explore the possibility of a common civil code, the Gujarat government also announced its intention of doing so just ahead of its Assembly election.

The party had made the implementation of the UCC a part of its Himachal Pradesh manifesto as well, although it lost the Assembly election. Earlier this month, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan said a committee would be constituted to implement the UCC.

On December 9, BJP MP Kirodi Lal Meena moved a Private Member's Bill on the UCC amid strong Opposition protests. The Bill was eventually introduced, with 63 members voting in favour of the motion while 23 members opposed it. Defending Mr. Meena, Leader of the Rajya Sabha Piyush Goyal had said, "It is the legitimate right of a member to raise an issue which is under the directive principles of the Constitution. Let this subject be debated."

HOW J&K'S PROPOSED FAMILY ID WILL WORK, AND WHY IT IS BEING CRITICISED

Jammu and Kashmir Lt Governor Manoj Sinha's announcement that the government has decided to introduce a family pehchan patra (identity card) for residents of the Union Territory has been criticised by the mainstream opposition parties in Kashmir, with the PDP describing it as a surveillance tool to keep a watch on Kashmiris.

What is the proposed family pehchan patra for J&K residents?

It will be an identity card with a unique eight-digit alphanumeric number to identify each family and its members through the head of the family. The card will contain details of all members of the family, including their names, ages, qualifications, employment status, etc.



The card will be linked with the Aadhaar and bank account number of the head of the family. It will be a single identifier for every family and individual in the UT that will instantly confirm their eligibility for government welfare schemes and facilitate direct transfer of benefits to their bank accounts with minimum human interference, officials said.

What is the purpose of introducing the family identity card?

According to government officials, the primary objective is to create an authentic, verified, and reliable database of families in J&K to ensure speedy and transparent doorstep delivery of welfare schemes to eligible beneficiaries.

The database will help to identify and weed out duplicate ration cards and Aadhaar, and will help the government identify families that may have a number of educated youth, but without jobs. While Aadhaar contains information about an individual, the family ID card will collate information about families to help in the delivery of welfare schemes, officials said.

Since the database will have information on births, deaths, and marriages that will be continuously and automatically updated, it will help the government plan policy based on authentic, updated population data, officials said.

Because updations such as the removal of a woman's name from the family of her parents and addition in the family of her husband will be carried out automatically, people will no longer have to visit local officials for such purposes.

Will it be compulsory to have a family ID card?

The government has said that the database will be created only with the consent of the family.

But the families that do not consent to having the card will likely face practical difficulties because benefits such as subsidised rations through the targeted public distribution system under the National Food Security Act, free medical treatment, old age/ widow pensions, help to victims of militancy, family pensions in case of death of sole earning member of a family, scholarships, etc. will be linked with the family ID card.

Why are political parties objecting to the card?

Barring the BJP, all mainstream political parties in J&K have opposed the proposed family pehchan patra. PDP president Mehbooba Mufti posted on Twitter that the "unique family ID" was "emblematic of the widening trust deficit esp[ecially] post 2019 [when the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir lost its special status and was bifurcated into two UTs]. Kashmiris are viewed with deep suspicion & this is another surveillance tactic to tighten the iron grip on their lives". The National Conference spokesperson said the proposed unique IDs were a waste of time and resources, and were not needed. The government should instead focus more on effective deliverance of existing schemes, the party said.

Are residents of J&K being uniquely targeted by the card?

Several other states have proposed or created similar databases. Haryana was the first state to introduce the concept of the family pehchan patra, and Punjab introduced it last year for direct transfer of benefits to families who are eligible for various social service schemes of the government. Last month, the Uttar Pradesh government decided to launch a UP Parivar Kalyan Card for similar purposes.



Rajasthan's Congress government has introduced something called a "Jan Aadhaar" which "aims to be the single identifier of a family and also an individual", and "the sole vehicle on which delivery of all kinds of cash as well non-cash benefits and services are riding and reaching to the door-step of the residents". According to the Rajasthan Jan Aadhaar Authority, 1.94 crore families with 7.55 crore individuals are enrolled under the Jan Aadhaar Yojana.

SUVS BOUGHT WITH NIRBHAYA FUND DIVERTED TO PROVIDE Y-PLUS SECURITY TO SHINDE LEGISLATORS

Several vehicles procured by the Mumbai Police under the Nirbhaya fund, meant to be used for fighting crimes against women, are instead being used as escort vehicles for MPs and MLAs of the ruling Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena faction since July this year.

In June this year, the Mumbai Police purchased 220 Boloros, 35 Ertigas, 313 Pulsar bikes and 200 Activas at the cost of over Rs 30 crore under the Nirbhaya fund — a corpus set by the Centre in 2013 for state governments to implement schemes for the safety of women. By July, the vehicles had been distributed to police stations.

WEIGHING IN ON THE EFFICACY OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN GOVERNMENT

According to government data presented in the Lok Sabha on December 9, women representation in Parliament and most States legislatures is below 15% with 19 Assemblies having less than 10% women lawmakers. In this article dated September 24, 2020, Bhaskar Dutta explains why we need increased female representation in policy making.

What do Germany, Taiwan and New Zealand have in common? These are all countries that have women heading their governments. And although they are located in three different continents, the three countries seem to have managed the pandemic much better than their neighbours. Much along the same lines, a detailed recent study by researchers in the United States reports that States which have female governors had fewer COVID-19 related deaths, perhaps partly because female governors acted more decisively by issuing earlier stay-at-home orders. The authors of the study conclude that women leaders are more effective than their male counterparts in times of crises. There will be several critics who will question the reliability of this conclusion by pointing out deficiencies in the data — admittedly somewhat limited — or the econometric rigour of the analysis. Many will also point out that it is dangerous to make sweeping generalisations based on one study. The point about the danger of making sweeping generalisations is valid. Of course, studies such as these do not establish the superiority of all female leaders over their male counterparts. All female leaders are not necessarily efficient, and there are many men who have proved to be most effective and charismatic leaders. The important takeaway from the recent experience and such studies is the necessity of getting rid of inherent biases and perceptions about female effectiveness in leadership roles.

India's gram panchayats

Importantly, female leaders also bring something quite different to the table. In particular, they perform significantly better than men in implementing policies that promote the interests of women. This was demonstrated in another study conducted by Nobel Laureate Esther Duflo and co-author Raghavendra Chattopadhyay, who used the system of mandated reservations of pradhans in gram panchayats to test the effectiveness of female leadership. Their study was made possible by the 1993 amendment of the Indian Constitution, which mandated that all States had



to reserve one-third of all positions of pradhan for women. Since villages chosen for the mandated reservations were randomly selected, subsequent differences in investment decisions made by gram panchayats could be attributed to the differences in gender of the pradhans.

Chattopadhyay and Duflo concluded that pradhans invested more in rural infrastructure that served better the needs of their own gender. For instance, women pradhans were more likely to invest in providing easy access to drinking water since the collection of drinking water is primarily, if not solely, the responsibility of women.

In addition to the instrumental importance of promoting more space for women in public policy, this is also an important goal from the perspective of gender equality. The right to vote is arguably the most important dimension of participation in public life. There are others. What proportion of women stand for election to the various State and central legislatures? How many are elected? Perhaps more important, how many women occupy important positions in the executive branch of government?

About suffrage

Independent India can rightly be proud of its achievement in so far as women's suffrage is concerned. Women were allowed to vote from 1950 onwards and so could participate on an equal footing with men from the first general election of 1951-52. This is in striking contrast to the experience in the so-called "mature democracies" of western Europe and the United States. In the U.S., it took several decades of struggle before women were allowed to vote in 1920. Most countries in Europe also achieved universal suffrage during the inter-war period. Since most able-bodied men went away to the battlefields during the First World War, increasing numbers of women had the opportunity to show that they were adequate substitutes in activities that were earlier the sole preserve of men. This, it is suggested, mitigated the anti-female bias and earned women the right to vote in European countries.

We have had and have charismatic female leaders like Indira Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Mayawati, Sushma Swaraj and Mamata Banerjee among several others. Interestingly, a glaring example of gender stereotyping was the labelling of Indira Gandhi as the "only man in the cabinet". Apart from these stalwarts, the overall figures are depressing.

The female representation in the current National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government at the Centre is probably not very far from the typical gender composition in Indian central and State governments. Female members make up only about 10% of the total ministerial strength. The underrepresentation of female Ministers in India is also reflected in the fact that Ms. Banerjee is currently the only female Chief Minister.

The underrepresentation of women in Indian legislatures is even more striking. For instance, the 2019 election sent the largest number of women to the Lok Sabha. Despite this, women constitute just over 14% of the total strength of the Lok Sabha. This gives us the dismal rank of 143 out of 192 countries for which data are reported by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Tiny Rwanda comes out on top with a staggering 60% of seats in its lower house occupied by women.

The women's Bill languishes

Since women running for elections face numerous challenges, it is essential to create a level-playing field through appropriate legal measures. The establishment of quotas for women is an obvious answer. I have mentioned earlier that mandated reservation for women in gram



panchayats was established in all major States since the mid-1990s. Attempts have also been made to extend quotas for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies through a Women's Reservation Bill. Unfortunately, the fate of this Bill represents a blot on the functioning of the Indian Parliament. The Bill was first presented to the Lok Sabha by the H.D. Deve Gowda government in 1996.

Male members from several parties opposed the Bill on various pretexts. Subsequently, both the NDA and United Progressive Alliance governments have reintroduced the Bill in successive Parliaments, but without any success. Although the Rajya Sabha did pass the bill in 2010, the Lok Sabha and the State legislatures are yet to give their approval — despite the 24 years that have passed since it was first presented in the Lok Sabha.

Steps to reducing prejudice

Of course, there is a simple fix to the problem. The major party constituents of the NDA and UPA alliances can sidestep the logjam in Parliament by reserving say a third of party nominations for women. This will surely result in increasing numbers of women in legislatures and subsequently in cabinets. The importance of this cannot be overestimated. There is substantial evidence showing that increased female representation in policy making goes a long way in improving perceptions about female effectiveness in leadership roles. This decreases the bias among voters against women candidates, and results in a subsequent increase in the percentage of female politicians contesting and winning elections. So, such quotas have both a short-term and long-term impact.

Indeed, voter perceptions about the efficacy of female leadership may change so drastically in the long run that quotas may no longer be necessary!

BILL SEEKS EC ROLE IN PARTIES' INTERNAL POLLING

Congress MP Manish Tewari has introduced a private member's Bill in Lok Sabha seeking the Election Commission (EC) to be made responsible for regulating and monitoring the internal operations of political parties in the country. Calling the internal functioning of most political parties "opaque and ossified", the Bill seeks to provide the EC with the necessary wherewithal to regulate the internal functioning of all political parties registered with it and to withdraw their recognition as national or State parties if they fail to comply with the directions of the Commission.

The Bill, named 'Constitution (Amendment) Act, 2022', also seeks to insulate the appointment process of Election Commissioners and mandates that they should not be eligible for post-retirement jobs. The proposed legislation seeks insertion of a new Article, 328 (A), to empower the EC to regulate, monitor and supervise the elections in registered political parties in accordance with their respective constitutions until a model internal code is prescribed by the EC. "It shall be incumbent upon all registered political parties to incorporate the model election code into their respective constitutions after its formulation by the Election Commission," the Bill says.

It seeks appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and Commissioners to be appointed by a panel of the Prime Minister, Home Minister, Leader of the Opposition or floor leaders in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, Chief Justice of India and two senior-most judges of the SC.



WHAT ARE KERALA'S UNIVERSITY LAWS (AMENDMENT) BILLS?

The story so far:

The Kerala government has passed the two University Laws (amendment) Bills in the State Assembly to amend laws relating to the governance of State universities and to remove Governor Arif Mohammed Khan as the Chancellor of said universities.

What do the Bills say?

The proposed legislations will amend the statutes of 14 universities established by legislative Acts in Kerala and remove the Governor as the Chancellor. The Bills will give the government power to appoint eminent academicians as Chancellors of various universities, thus ending the Governor's watchdog role in university administration. The Bills also provide provisions to limit the term of the appointed chancellor to five years.

How did the Bill come into being?

Mr. Khan and the State Government have been at loggerheads for months now. It reached a simmering point when the Governor accused Kannur University VC Prof. Gopinath Raveendran of plotting to endanger his life at the 2019 Indian History Congress. This took a turn for the worse when the Governor denied assent to the controversial Lok Ayukta (Amendment) Bill and University Laws (Amendment) Bill passed earlier by the State Assembly. The fallout from this stand-off between the Governor and the Government led to Mr. Khan claiming that he has the power to dismiss Ministers who criticise him. Mr. Khan went to the extent of suggesting that the Chief Minister should take action against Finance Minister K.N. Balagopal as he had "ceased to enjoy my [Governor's] pleasure." The worsening relationship between the State and Mr. Khan reached a tipping point with the Supreme Court order invalidating the Kerala Technological University VC's appointment. Following this judgment, the Governor demanded the resignations of 11 other VCs claiming that they were appointed through the same procedure that was invalidated by the top court.

Why is the State government amending University laws?

The Minister for Law, P. Rajeev, while tabling the Bills, pointed out that the UGC guidelines, which earlier used to be considered mandatory for Central universities and "partially mandatory and partially directive" for State universities, had been made legally binding for all universities by way of recent rulings by the Supreme Court. "Worryingly, such precedence pointed towards a scenario in which the legislative powers of the Assembly on all subjects on the Concurrent List (of the Constitution) could be undermined through a subordinate legislation or an executive order issued by the Centre," he said. Moreover, the State government has claimed the recommendation of the Punchhi Commission on Centre-State Relations to refrain from "burdening the Governor with positions and powers which are not envisaged by the Constitution and which may lead the office to controversies or public criticism" as the rationale behind the Bills.

What are arguments against the Bill?

As described above, the Bills would give the State Government more leeway in appointing its own nominees as VCs of State Universities. This would mean a transfer of power over university administration from the Governor and the UGC to the State Government. While both the ruling front and the Opposition seem united in stripping away the Governor's Chancellorship, the



Opposition fears that the State Government would try to turn State universities into its fiefdom, leading to the erosion of the autonomy universities enjoy.

ON AMENDING THE COOPERATIVE SOCIETIES ACT

The Bill to amend the Multi-State Cooperative Societies (MSCS) Act, 2002, was introduced in the Lok Sabha on December 7. Opposition parliamentarians alleged that the Bill's provisions encroached upon the rights of State governments, demanding that it be referred to a Standing Committee.

What are multi-State cooperatives?

According to the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), cooperatives are people-centred enterprises jointly owned and democratically controlled by and for their members to realise common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations. Multi-State cooperatives are societies that have operations in more than one State — for instance, a farmer-producers organisation which procures grains from farmers from multiple States. The board of directors are from all the States these collectives operate in and control all the finances and administration. There are close to 1,500 MSCSs registered in India with the highest number being in Maharashtra.

What are the issues with the cooperative sector?

The independent and autonomous character of cooperative societies was to be crucial in their functioning. However, H.S. Shylendra, professor at the Institute of Rural Management, Anand (IRMA) points out in a 2021 paper that the inclusion of cooperatives in the planning process as development instruments made the sector an avenue for dispensing patronage to the supporters of ruling political parties. Moreover, the policy of State governments to contribute to the share capital of the cooperatives enabled governments, “in the name of public interest” to directly intervene in the working of cooperatives which are legally autonomous. Notably, the potency of cooperatives as an apparatus of political control can be seen in States such as Maharashtra, Kerala, Gujarat, parts of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. Besides, MSCSs were formed to ease the operation of collectives throughout the country. On the contrary, IRMA researcher Indranil De points out that in spite of their potential, MSCSs are facing issues regarding trust, which is the very basis of cooperation. This has brought MSCSs under multiple controls from the Centre. Monitoring is one of the important institutional functions in a collective organisation but if monitored from much above, it takes a top-down approach as opposed to a grassroots one. In 1991, the Choudhary Brahm Perkash Committee of the planning commission made far-reaching recommendations to reorganise multi-State cooperatives but researchers point out how the Act has not been modified as per the report.

What does the Bill seek to change?

To plug the “loopholes” in the MSCS Act, the Centre introduced a Bill seeking to amend the 2002 law for more “transparency” and “ease of doing business”. The amendments have been introduced to improve governance, reform the electoral process, strengthen monitoring mechanisms and enhance transparency and accountability. The Bill also seeks to improve the composition of the board and ensure financial discipline, besides enabling the raising of funds in multi-State cooperative societies.

The Bill provides for the creation of a central Co-operative Election Authority to supervise the electoral functions of the MSCSs. The Authority will have a chairperson, vice-chairperson, and up



to three members appointed by the Centre. Objecting these amendments, Congress MP Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury said in Parliament that the Bill may lead to “the concentration of power of the Centre”, which could impact the “autonomy” of MSCSs and create potential for “misuse”. Notably, the constitutional domain of States in regulating cooperative societies was upheld by the Supreme Court last year when it struck down a part of the 97th Constitution Amendment.

It also envisages the creation of a Co-operative Rehabilitation, Reconstruction and Development Fund for the revival of sick multi-State co-operatives societies. This fund shall be financed by existing profitable multi-State co-operative societies which will have to deposit either ₹1 crore or 1% of the net profit into the Fund. Congress MP Manish Tewari pointed out that this would put an additional burden on MSCSs.

In order to make the governance of multi-State cooperative societies more democratic, the Bill has provisions for appointing a Cooperative Information Officer and a Cooperative Ombudsman. To promote equity and facilitate inclusiveness, provisions relating to the representation of women and Scheduled Caste/Tribe members on the boards of multi-State cooperative societies have also been included.

OVER 20 KILLED IN BIHAR: WHY CAN HOOCH BE SO DEADLY?

Over 30 people have died in a hooch tragedy in the Saran district of Bihar, where alcohol is prohibited. The incident has created a political furor, with Chief Minister Nitish Kumar drawing charges of insensitivity over his reaction to the tragedy. In a statement, Nitish said, “If someone consumes alcohol, they will die.

A day later, Nitish said, “No compensation will be given to people who died after drinking...We have been appealing — if you drink, you will die... those who talk in favour of drinking will not bring any good to you...”

However, what killed people in Saran was spurious liquor, qualitatively different from the standard alcoholic products sold in the market. A look at what hooch is, how it is prepared, and why it can be very deadly.

Bihar hooch tragedy: What is hooch?

Hooch is a commonly used term for poor quality alcohol, derived from Hoochinoo, a native Alaskan tribe that was known to produce very strong liquor. Unlike branded liquor which is produced in factories with sophisticated equipment and rigorous quality control, hooch is made in more crude settings without any quality checks.

All that matters is to produce alcohol that will intoxicate, and hooch surely does that. The only problem is that if prepared incorrectly, it can kill.

Importantly, it is near impossible to tell whether hooch is safe to consume before actual consumption.

The science of creating alcohol

Alcohol is produced using two basic processes: fermentation and distillation. When heated, yeast reacts with sugar (from grain, fruits, sugarcane, etc.) to ferment and produce a mixture containing alcohol. However, as this process continues and the alcohol levels rise (with more of the sugar getting converted to alcohol), the conditions become toxic for the yeast itself, eventually ending



the process of fermentation. Thus, to make anything stronger than beer or wine (above 14-18% ABV or alcohol by volume), distillation is key.

Distillation is the process of physically separating the alcohol from the rest of the mixture using evaporation and condensation. Since different parts of the mixture have different boiling points, theoretically, if one heats the mixture up to a correct temperature, it will be possible to separate only the alcohol from the water and other remnants. This will be far more potent than any fermented beverage. All spirits (such as whiskey, vodka, gin, etc) are made using this technique.

How is hooch produced? Hooch-makers also use this principle. First, they heat water, locally available yeast, and sugar or fruit (often fruit waste) to produce a fermented mixture in a large pot. Once sufficient fermentation has occurred, they distill this fermented mixture to produce concentrated alcohol using a rudimentary setup. Often, this setup includes a big vat where the fermented mixture is boiled, a pipe that captures and carries the alcoholic fumes, and another pot wrapped in a wet cloth (to make it cooler), where concentrated alcohol condenses.

Distillation can be done repeatedly in order to increase the alcohol content of the final product.

An inbuilt risk with crude production method There is an inherent risk associated with the crude methods of production that hooch-makers employ.

The fermented mixture which is to be distilled contains more than just consumable alcohol (ethanol). It also contains methanol, a different form of alcohol which is highly toxic for human beings. Methanol is generally used for industrial purposes. While non-distilled alcoholic beverages like wine contain relatively harmless trace amounts of methanol, during the distillation, both ethanol and methanol are concentrated. Thus, if done wrong, the end product can have a high concentration of methanol instead of ethanol and thus be poisonous.

Methanol has a boiling point of 64.7 °C whereas ethanol has a boiling point of 78.37 °C. This means that during distillation, when the mixture reaches 64.7 °C, the pot collecting concentrated alcohol begins to fill up with a highly toxic chemical. This must be discarded for the end product to be safe. Further, it is crucial to maintain a temperature of above 78.37 °C but below 100°C (the boiling point of water) to obtain safe-to-consume yet potent liquor. Commercial distillers have sophisticated equipment and multiple checks to maintain the accuracy of the process.

However, hooch-makers have no temperature control. This basically means that the process of distillation lacks the accuracy that is crucial to make it safe and effective.

Adulteration and its risk

Often, various adulterants are added to increase the potency of the liquor. Given the issues with conducting distillation without proper equipment, frequently, the end product may be safe but at the same time watered down (basically, when the mixture is overboiled). To compensate for this, adulterants are added. Some of the known ones include organic waste, battery acid, and industry grade methanol, all of which which are highly toxic.

Adding the wrong kinds of adulterants in the wrong quantities increases the risks associated with hooch. First, it can make hooch far more intoxicating, producing effects such as blackouts, memory loss, and high drunkenness even on consumption of low quantities of liquor. Second, in extreme cases, when adulterants like methanol are present in high concentrations, the liquor is unfit to consume and can be deadly.



The effects of spurious liquor on your body and its treatment

Methanol or methyl alcohol can cause impaired vision, high toxicity and metabolic acidosis, a condition in which the body produces excessive acid that cannot be flushed out by kidneys.

The treatment for this is to intravenously administer Fomepizole and ethanol. However, fomepizole can be expensive and unavailable in many parts of India. In such cases, doctors administer a mixture of ethanol and water (1:1 ratio). Ethanol inhibits methanol's conversion into toxins and helps in flushing it out of the body either naturally or through dialysis.

KOTA'S STUDENT SUICIDES: A MISMATCH BETWEEN RISING ASPIRATIONS, SHRINKING OPPORTUNITIES

There is a sobering familiarity to the news of the suicide of three students, in separate incidents, in Kota, Rajasthan. It is possible to imagine Ankush Anand, 16, Ujjwal Kumar, 18, and Pranav Verma, 17, arriving in the coaching institute hub, nursing dreams of a shining academic career. It is possible, too, to imagine the stress to which they finally succumbed. In the coaching centres of Kota, the 14-hour days, with tests even on Sundays, relentless pressure to ace a tough curriculum, shame and guilt of experiencing the very human need for a break, fierce competition, and the fear of failure — not to mention the loneliness of being far away from home — have taken a toll on many young lives over the years.

But this is a larger problem that goes beyond Kota and the pressure cooker atmosphere created in coaching centres. The combination of a large population of young people with rising aspirations and an economy with shrinking opportunities has created a public health crisis that requires urgent attention. The National Crime Records Bureau's Accidental Deaths and Suicide in India report 2021, released in August this year, shows that the number of students' deaths by suicide rose by 4.5 per cent in 2021, with Maharashtra bearing the highest toll with 1,834 deaths, followed by Madhya Pradesh with 1,308, and Tamil Nadu with 1,246. According to the report, student suicides have been rising steadily for the last five years.

Various solutions have been proposed — some bordering on the ludicrous, like the Indian Institute of Science's reported move last year to replace ceiling fans in hostel rooms with those that are wall-mounted. Others have addressed only part of the problem, like the guidelines issued by the Board of Intermediate Education in Andhra Pradesh in 2017 to ease the pressure on students, including yoga and physical exercise classes and maintaining a healthy student-teacher ratio. It is painfully evident that the failure to address the larger issue of a punishing education system that is simply not designed to support young minds or prepare them for today's economic realities continues. The vision contained in the New Education Policy 2020, offering greater academic flexibility to reduce the pressure on students, will take time to be fully realised. The need of the hour is to learn from past failures to address the growing crisis and take urgent steps that involve all stakeholders — students, parents, teachers, institutes and policy makers.

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL YET TO SHAKE OFF PANDEMIC BLUES BUT STUDENTS GO ABROAD IN RECORD NUMBERS

Even as international travel, whether for employment or tourism or business, is yet to fully bounce back from its pandemic-induced trough, the first 11 months of 2022 have witnessed a record number of Indian students go abroad on student visas.



According to the statistics placed before Parliament by the Bureau of Immigration (BoI), as many as 6,48,678 students have gone abroad on student visas up to November 30, 2022, an all-time high compared with the student movement figures in the past five years.

The data compiled by the BoI, which collects the data on Indians going abroad based either on their verbal disclosure or the type of visa of the destination country produced by them at the time of immigration clearance, shows that international travel by Indians, including for business, employment, residence re-entry, visiting, and tourism purposes, has not fully recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

Only travel on student visas and people travelling on visiting visas have reached either the pre-pandemic level or surpassed the pre-COVID-19 figures.

A record number of Indians had gone abroad in 2019, with over 2.52 crore Indians visiting various countries for different purposes, including 89.5 lakh Indians travelling for residence or re-entry purposes, 63.80 lakh on tourist visas, and 42.11 lakh on visiting visas. In 2022 (up to November 30), 1.83 crore Indians went abroad.

The data also reveals that international travel to traditional destinations for jobs in West Asia, such as the UAE, which accounts for the highest number of Indians abroad, is yet to reach the pre-pandemic levels.

However, the number of Indians going to countries like Canada and the U.K. — favoured destinations for students — surpassed the pre-pandemic figures. If 6.17 lakh Indians went to Canada in 2019, the number has reached 6.60 lakh in the first 11 months of 2022. Similarly, 7.54 lakh Indians are heading for the U.K. till November 30, 2022, compared with 7.45 lakh in 2019.

Speaking to The Hindu, S. Irudaya Rajan, chairman, International Institute of Migration and Development, Kerala, said it's true that the student migration from India to foreign countries has now reached a fever pitch, post-COVID-19.

THE CHAOS AT IGI TERMINAL 3: THE URGENT NEED TO EXPAND INFRASTRUCTURE

Over the past few days, reports have described chaotic scenes at Indira Gandhi International Airport's Terminal 3 in Delhi. The long lines at the airport entry points, immigration, check-in and security counters have caused considerable delays for passengers, leading some to even miss their flights. Similar stories of chaos at other airports across the country have been doing the rounds. In fact, in recent days, major airports in the world have witnessed traffic congestion. Part of the surge in travellers can be traced to the post-pandemic easing of travel restrictions — air traffic has grown to levels higher than in the pre-Covid era. It is also true that travelling tends to increase during the holiday season. But, at the same time, it is unfortunate that the surge in travellers has come up against an inadequate ramp-up of the corresponding infrastructure facilities. For a country that aspires to be the third largest economy in the world by the end of the decade, the scenes at its international airport are a let-down.

The IGI airport ranks as one of the busiest in the world with a capacity to handle around 70 million passengers every year. In October this year, it was the 10th busiest airport with respect to seat capacity and frequency of domestic and international flights. However, if demand for air travel has surpassed its current handling capacity, then it is only appropriate that both airlines and airport operators expand the facilities — for instance, by increasing the number of counters, personnel and gates — and analyse the choke points to plan measures to ease congestion. A

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



careful assessment must also be made of the manpower requirements at the security and immigration counters considering the surge in international travellers. Though it is likely that once the airport in Noida is operational, the congestion at Delhi airport will be eased, expansion of infrastructure at IGI, whether it involves enlarging existing terminals or building new ones, must be urgently accelerated.

The civil aviation ministry has responded to the public outcry over the disorder at Delhi airport by issuing guidelines to ease the congestion. These include reducing the number of flights during peak hours, directing airport authorities to set up and ensure real-time monitoring of crowds, among others. The measures announced, while helpful, are unlikely to greatly ease the congestion immediately. As the economy grows in size, and income levels rise, the surge in demand for air travel needs to be anticipated, and appropriate action plans drawn up to enhance the system-wide capacity.

HOW THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT HAS RESPONDED TO THE 'TWITTER FILES'

The fresh revelations made in a follow-up to the 'Twitter Files', that detailed how the platform curtailed the reach of some accounts, have been described as "disturbing" by the Indian government, with Minister of State for Electronics and IT Rajeve Chandrasekhar calling the incident a "vindication of a very widely held view that all was not right" at Twitter.

He said the recently released amendments to the Information Technology (IT) Rules are "meant to deal with the possibility of this happening", and that the government would consider tweaking the rules further if social media platforms "distort conversation on the Internet, which will not be tolerated going forward".

Twitter Files 2.0

"Twitter Files 2.0" came on the back of revelations released earlier this week on conservative podcaster Matt Taibbi's substack, which was heralded by Twitter's new owner Elon Musk as the "Twitter Files".

The "Twitter Files" thread alleged that in 2020, during Joe Biden's presidential campaign, Twitter actively censored a potentially damaging story about US President Joe Biden's son Hunter, and his alleged dubious business dealings in Ukraine.

Twitter Files 2.0, which was published by former establishment journalist Bari Weiss, claimed the platform's employees, prior to the sale of the company to Elon Musk, had comprehensive control over the visibility of users or posts, which they use to disproportionately target conservative or right-wing voices. This control is exercised through what employees call "Visibility Filtering" (VF).

VF includes blocking searches about a particular user/post, limiting the scope of a tweet's discoverability, and blocking certain users from trending or appearing in hashtag searches, among other methods.

Backlash in India

Chandrasekhar said the revelations around visibility filtering were "disturbing". "The fact that a few people were distorting the conversations happening on the platform and weaponising misinformation is unacceptable," he said.



India was right in pre-empting these issues and framing the amended IT Rules which were notified a few weeks ago, Chandrasekhar said. Under the amended rules, the government will appoint a grievance appellate committee that would have powers to oversee and overturn content moderation decisions taken by social media platforms. He said the formation of such committees will be fast-tracked in the light of the revelations.

Twitter Files have shown that “it is very obvious that safe harbours for Internet Intermediaries must be conditional on them following a set of rules as India has done,” Chandrasekhar said. Safe harbour essentially offers legal immunity to social media firms from user-generated content on their platforms.

A CHANNEL ACQUIRED AND DILEMMAS FOR THE STAKEHOLDER

Of the over 400 news channels in India the one I most regularly watch is NDTV, or New Delhi Television. Though I am often critical of its content and, occasionally, of its anchoring I am, nonetheless, an admirer of both. So the likelihood that, fairly shortly, Gautam Adani will become NDTV's majority stakeholder — with the power to significantly change the channel — is a matter of concern. Does this herald the end of NDTV as we have known it?

The FT interview

In an interview to the Financial Times in November, Mr. Adani has spoken about his future plans. As far as I know, it is the only time he has done so. He sees the NDTV acquisition as a “responsibility”, not a business opportunity. Prima facie that sounds reassuring.

But the rest of the interview offers good reasons for raising some questions. They arise out of Mr. Adani's concept of media independence. “Independence means if government has done something wrong, you say it's wrong.” No one could quarrel with that. However, he adds: “But at the same time, you should have courage when the government is doing the right thing every day. You have to say that.” Which government does the right thing every day? I know of none. And why do you need courage to acknowledge it? The word suggests the wider constituency of journalism is pressuring you to be only adversarial. It is not.

Journalists need to be objective. They need to evaluate each story in terms of its merit, not take sides or even be neutral. Praising a government is actually easy. They like it. Criticising it is more difficult. This is where courage comes in. I am not sure if Mr. Adani's concept of media independence embraces this.

However, he does have big plans for NDTV. He wants to give it “a global footprint” adding, “India does not have one single [outlet] to compare to [the] Financial Times or Al Jazeera.” This suggests two things: Mr. Adani plans to put a lot of money into NDTV and, presumably, he will protect its credibility because otherwise it cannot aspire to the status of the Financial Times and Al Jazeera.

The dilemmas to sort out

The problem is this laudable ambition clashes with his concept of media independence and, perhaps, places him squarely within a terrible dilemma. Or maybe two.

If NDTV were to praise the Government everyday it could be viewed as a propaganda organ of the Government. That would ensure it never rises to the level of the Financial Times and Al Jazeera. What Mr. Adani has possibly not grasped is that it is objectivity and the courage to be critical that



has made the Financial Times a great paper. That is also true of Al Jazeera though, sadly, not when it covers its own government in Qatar. The other dilemma is, arguably, more likely to present itself sooner. Mr. Adani has the money to make NDTV global. He can put it on satellites that reach every corner of the globe. But if its credibility has been undermined, will anyone want to watch it? Perhaps a section of non-resident Indians, still aching for the land they have left and not fully at home where they are, but not many else.

The essence of the channel in question

There is one other concern which Mr. Adani has not addressed but is, in fact, critical to any success he has in mind for his new channel. NDTV has a distinct character, a loyal audience, and a high reputation. After spending hundreds of crores to buy it — and perhaps thousands of crores to take it global — does it make sense for Mr. Adani to make changes that could damage and undermine its reputation? He, therefore, needs to retain its best anchors and correspondents. Without them, NDTV is just hardware. But will they stay if he tampers with their objectivity and curbs their freedom of speech?

Perhaps this might temper his thinking. New journalists, to replace those who leave, will not be hard to recruit. But good journalists are more difficult to find. And they, probably, already have secure, well-paid jobs. Would they sacrifice them for a venture into the unknown?

INDIA TEST FIRES AGNI-V, BALLISTIC MISSILE WITH A RANGE OF OVER 5,000 KM

INDIA on Thursday carried out a successful night time flight test of the long-range surface-to-surface Nuclear Capable Ballistic missile, Agni-5 amidst increased tension with China following the recent clashes along the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh.

The Strategic Forces Command (SFC) which operates the Agni-5, carried out the successful test of the missile from APJ Abdul Kalam Island off the coast of Odisha. The nuclear capable missile which uses a three-stage solid fuelled engine, has been developed by the Defence Research and Development organisation (DRDO). SFC is a key tri-services formation that manages and administers all the strategic assets and falls under purview of the Nuclear Command Authority of India.

Defence Ministry sources said that the test was carried out primarily to validate various new technologies onboard the missile which can strike targets at ranges of around 5,000 to 5,500 kilometers with a very high degree of accuracy. Like all other tests, the flight performance of the missile was tracked and monitored by radars, range stations and tracking systems all through the mission including by the assets deployed in the sea. The last test conducted in October 2021 was also conducted at night.

The name Agni originates from Sanskrit word for fire and is taken in the context of Agni being one five primary elements or Panch Mahabhutas. Others being Prithvi (Earth), Aapa (Water), Wayu (Air), Akash (Space). Of these names, Prithvi and Akash have been given to missiles developed by the DRDO.

Agni-5 has been successfully tested multiple times since 2012. At the time of the last test in October 2021, the Ministry of Defence in its statement had highlighted the posture of 'credible minimum deterrence' and 'No First Use' which are pivotal points of India's nuclear doctrine, first published in 2003.



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

The development of Agni missiles started in early 1980 under Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme spearheaded by Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, the central figure in India's missile and space programmes, who also served as the 11th President of India.

Medium to Intercontinental versions of Agni missiles systems 1 to 5 have varying ranges, starting from 700 kilometers from Agni-1 to 5000 kilometers and above for Agni-5. In June last year, the DRDO had successfully tested the new generation nuclear capable ballistic missile Agni P, which is an advanced variant of Agni class of missiles. Agni P is a canisterised missile with range capability between 1,000 and 2,000 kilometers.

While the DRDO has not officially declared, Agni-6 is also said to be under development with much longer range starting 8000 kilometers and has Multi Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle carrying capabilities.

FOCUS ON COMMERCIAL USE OF NAVIC, ISRO'S FUTURE SATELLITES TO GET ADDITIONAL FREQUENCY

With an aim to promote the civilian use of NAVigation with the Indian Constellation (NavIC), the regional navigation satellite system developed by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), the space agency is introducing the L1 frequency in all its future satellites. "The next satellites, starting from NVS-01 onwards, will have an L1 band for civilian navigational use," said Union Minister of State for the Department of Space Jitendra Singh in a written reply in Parliament on Wednesday.

The L1 frequency, one of the most commonly used frequencies in the Global Positioning System (GPS), will increase the use of the regional navigation system in wearable devices and personal trackers that use low-power, single-frequency chips. At present, the satellites operate on two frequencies — L5 and S bands.

The NVS-01 satellite, according to previous annual reports of the Department of Space, is set to replace one of ISRO's seven navigational satellites currently in space. Two of these satellites — IRNSS-1B and IRNSS-1C — will complete their 10-year mission life in 2024.

The NavIC-enabled chipsets first made their way to cell phones in 2019 even though the first three satellites of the constellation were launched in 2013 and 2014. Experts say only three satellites are needed to make a navigational constellation partially operational; however, before 2017, the space agency did not take interest in developing the user segment.

In fact, a 2018 report by the Comptroller and Auditor General notes that even though ISRO received a go ahead for Rs 200 crore funding from the Cabinet to develop the user receivers in 2006, work on it only started in March 2017, by when all three atomic clocks aboard the first satellite — IRNSS-1A (Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System) — had failed and two other satellites had lost two to three years of their mission life.



Navigating the market

The seven satellites in the NavIC constellation so far use two frequencies for providing positioning data — L5 and S band. The new satellites NVS-01 onwards, meant to replace these satellites, will also have L1 frequency that can be used by devices that run on low power, single-frequency chips such as smart watches and security systems.

“Other than the issues with atomic clocks onboard the satellites, there was not much interest in the space agency for developing the user segment. There was a discord. What this meant was that there were satellites sending signals but no user chipsets to receive the data. A couple of years ago, the commercial use of NavIC did start but years of mission life of these satellites was wasted,” said Ajey Lele, senior fellow at Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

“The usage of NavIC system has increased in India. NavIC finds utilisation in national projects like public vehicle safety, power grid synchronisation, real-time train information system and fishermen safety. Other upcoming initiatives (such as) common alert protocol-based emergency warning, time dissemination, geodetic network and unmanned aerial vehicles are in the process of adopting NavIC system,” the minister said in his reply in Parliament.

Other than that, many mobile phones available in the country already use chipsets capable of receiving NavIC signals. The minister in his reply said the “performance of NavIC system is on par with the other positioning systems”.

In fact, with a fully operational constellation and ground stations outside of India — ISRO plans to set up ground stations in Japan and France to better triangulate the entire area under NavIC coverage – the system is likely to become more accurate than GPS. The satellites placed directly over India also ensure better availability of signals in varied geographical regions compared to GPS, which India receives at an angle making it difficult to access in dense forests or valleys.

ARUNACHAL YIELDS A POTENTIALLY NEW SONGBIRD

Six birdwatchers trekked to a peak in Arunachal Pradesh’s Changlang district in search of the rare and elusive grey-bellied wren babbler. They recorded a potentially new species of songbird they named after the Lisu, the local community.

The team comprising Praveen J. from Kerala, Subramanian Sankar from Tamil Nadu, Dipu Karuthedathu and Hemraj Duraiswami, and their local guides Yolisa Yobin and Rahul Baruah, had explored the Mugafi peak in Changlang district in March. Their findings were published by Indian BIRDS, a peer-reviewed journal of South Asian ornithology.

The grey-bellied wren babbler is mostly found in Myanmar with some birds occurring in adjoining China and Thailand. There has been only one previous report of this bird from India when two specimens were collected from Mugafi close to the Myanmar border in 1988.

One of these specimens is kept at the Smithsonian Museum in the United States.

Mugafi is 40 km from Vijaynagar, the remotest circle headquarters in Arunachal Pradesh. A 157 km road from nearest town Miao, much of it through the Namdapha Tiger Reserve, is yet to be completed.

“All the birds we found had a sweet song similar to that of the Naga wren babbler and quite unlike the trilling song of the grey-bellied wren babbler,” Mr. Praveen said.

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



The team managed to take some photos and videos of the bird and recorded its songs over their two-day trek almost marred by incessant rainfall.

They came back and analysed the skins of other wren babblers in many museums, including one at as well as photographs from other sites. They tried to match their sounds with the existing recordings of the grey-bellied wren babbler.

“As the name indicates, the belly of grey-bellied wren babbler is grey. But all the photos we got showed birds with a whitish belly. The single Smithsonian specimen from these mountains also had a whitish belly,” Mr. Karuthedathu said.

When all the information was put together, the birdwatchers realised they have probably documented a new bird for science — at least a new subspecies, but more likely a new species.

The plumage in conjunction with the songs do not match with any known species, they found.

Establishing and naming a species or subspecies scientifically requires genetic material from these birds to be compared against other wren babbler species. But the team named the bird Lisu wren babbler.

WHY WE NEED TO LISTEN TO SHAH RUKH KHAN

Insights, when they are repeated for long enough, become cliches and lose their power to provide perspective. But context and creativity can rescue them. So, when Shah Rukh Khan spoke about social media being driven by a “narrowness of view” on December 15 at the Kolkata International Film Festival (KIFF) he was, in a sense, merely rephrasing a theme social scientists have long studied. But in the current moment, his words have a larger resonance — both for the film industry of which he is a champion and society at large.

In the days before his comments at KIFF, there were calls for Khan’s upcoming film *Pathaan* to be boycotted. The stated reasons for taking offence seem terribly contrived — from objections to the orange colour of actor Deepika Padukone’s clothing to “hurt sentiments” of the majority. More striking was the predictability of this controversy. Padukone has been painted as a “supporter” of the “tukde tukde gang” ever since she showed up at JNU in 2020 to extend solidarity to agitating students amid protests against the CAA-NRC. In a polarised climate that is increasingly infecting the worlds of art and cinema too, Khan has also been a regular target of vicious trolling.

Khan is right when he says that “negativity increases social media consumption, and thereby increases its commercial value as well. Such pursuits enclose the collective narrative, making it divisive and destructive”. Divisiveness is indeed rewarded on the internet. But, unlike so many of his colleagues, Khan is not despondent nor does he give in to cliché or abdicate responsibility. “Cinema has an even more important role to play now...Cinema exposes the vulnerability of human nature”, says Khan. If only the trolls and those certain of the righteousness of their prejudice could hear him.

DELHI’S FIRST TRANSGENDER COUNCILLOR DREAMS BIG

About 23 years ago, Bobi started dancing and singing on the streets of Sultanpuri in northwest Delhi with a group of transgender people at weddings for money.



Fast forward to December 7, Ms. Bobi, 38, took out a rally on the same streets, standing on a jeep with garlands around her neck and dozens of supporters raising slogans for her. For, she just won the election on Aam Aadmi Party ticket to become the first transgender councillor in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. "Hindu, Muslim, and everyone should live peacefully. Now problems (between them) are increasing," she says.

"I want to work for the rights of my kinnar community and I also want to build an old-age home for them. But first, I will work on cleaning my area, fixing sewers, and parks."

While the journey so far, from the time she was asked to leave her house at the age of 14, has been difficult enough, winning a place in the capital's civic body has not made it all that easier, she says. "During the election campaign, some people said that 'she is a kinnar, hijra, chakka' and even after winning the election, some people said that 'arey, hijra ko jita diya' (You have elected a eunuch)," Ms. Bobi, who identifies herself as a social worker, said at her house in Sultanpuri.

Ms. Bobi ventured into social work at the age of 24, when she joined an NGO. When the AAP was born, she joined the party as well. While most of the people The Hindu met in her area attributed her success to the popularity of party chief Arvind Kejriwal, some say her service as a social worker had something to do with it too.

Ms. Bobi has faced such discrimination and more from a very young age. Born in a poor Scheduled Caste (SC) family in Delhi, Ms. Bobi lost her father when she was around 12 years of age. Her mother had to take up menial jobs to raise her and her younger brother. Soon after, she found herself confronting the reality of her identity.

"When I was about 14, I started asking myself, 'What am I?' Since many students and people around me called me kinnar, hijra etc., I used to get sad. What could I do," she recounts, adding that she eventually dropped out of school. Her family asked her to leave the house so that she would not "spoil" her brother's life.

Luckily for Ms. Bobi, it was then that her 'Guruji' Babita, a fellow transwoman and mentor, found her. "She took me and gave me the love of a mother and father," Ms. Bobi says.

It has been five years since Ms. Bobi stopped dancing on the streets. Now, she is a guru herself with around 20 chelas in her care. The election victory has given her yet another identity. How this will change people's perception of her is yet to be seen.

CERVICAL CANCER VACCINE TO BE ROLLED OUT NEXT YEAR FOR GIRLS AGED 9-14 YRS

WITH THE cheaper, indigenously developed HPV (human papillomavirus) vaccine to prevent cervical cancer scheduled to become available by April-May next year, a nationwide immunisation drive for girls in the age group of 9-14 years is likely to begin by mid-2023.

Disclosing this, Dr N K Arora, chairperson of the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (NTAGI), told The Indian Express: "There is political commitment at the highest level."

The quadrivalent vaccine called Cervavac, developed by the Serum Institute of India (SII), offers protection against four strains of HPV — 16, 18, 6, and 11. SII CEO Adar Poonawalla had said earlier that the vaccine is likely to be priced at Rs 200-400 per dose. The vaccines available in the market currently are priced at Rs 2,500-3,300 per dose.



“The Sikkim government purchased vaccines from GAVI in 2016 and rolled out a programme, vaccinating nearly 97% of all girls between the ages of 9 and 14 years in campaign mode. They now provide it as part of routine immunisation and the coverage is about 88-90%,” said Dr Arora.

Learning from Sikkim’s experience, girls in the 9-14 years age group will first have to be vaccinated against HPV in campaign mode, followed by the inclusion of the vaccine as part of routine immunisation for nine-year-olds, he said.

While the Delhi government had also rolled out an HPV immunisation programme around the same time, it wasn’t as successful as the vaccines were available at only one of the state government run hospitals.

“When we talk of the target population of the vaccine, they are all children of school-going age, and that is where it has to be introduced. When we go to a single-age cohort, it can be given in primary school, where the enrolment is a high 90%. But we have to look beyond that too, we have to reach the girl children who are not in schools as well,” said Dr Arora.

Citing lessons learnt from the Covid-19 vaccination drive, he said a system similar to CoWIN may be used. “A communication strategy is needed before any such rollout happens. The acceptance of Covid-19 vaccine also did not happen by default. There was pushback during the initial two to three months, but we saw the hesitation go down with effective communication,” he said.

In addition to carrying out an immunisation drive, Dr Arora emphasised the need to carry out screening for women above the age of 30 years. “If women over the age of 30 years go for cervical disease checkup every three to five years, any cancer can be quickly detected. In fact, if detected at an early stage, cervical cancer can even be treated at the PHC level — the morbidity and expensive treatment happens because there is delay in detection. If cancer is suspected, doctors can do an immediate point-of-care DNA test, and cauterise the cancerous tissue,” he said.

SII had received approval from the country’s apex drug regulator in July this year, after presenting data of its immunogenicity trial conducted across 13 centres where the response of the vaccine was compared to Merck’s Gardasil quadrivalent vaccine.

More than 6,00,000 new cases of cervical cancer and more than 3,40,000 deaths from the disease were reported around the world in 2020, according to an observational study published in The Lancet Global Health journal. India reported 1,23,907 new cases of cervical cancer and 77,348 deaths, according to the study. Though the incidence of cervical cancer has decreased in many parts of the world —notably in Latin America, Asia, Western Europe, and North America — over the past three decades, the burden remains high in many low- and middle-income countries.

The study used the International Agency for Research on Cancer’s (IARC) Global Cancer Observatory (GLOBOCAN) 2020 database to estimate the burden of cervical cancer incidence and mortality rates in 185 countries. In 2020, overall incidence was 13 per 1,00,000 women; mortality was 7 per 1,00,000 women. As many as 172 out of the 185 countries saw more than the 4 cases per 1,00,000 women per year threshold for elimination set by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The development of effective vaccination against the human papilloma virus (HPV), which causes cervical cancer, and screening programmes have made cervical cancer a largely preventable disease. In 2020, the WHO announced a target to accelerate the elimination of the disease as a public health problem, aiming to reduce incidence to less than 4 cases per 1,00,000 women per



year in every country by 2030. This study tracks the progress on cervical cancer rates and identifies the countries and regions where scaling up efforts are required to reach WHO targets.

Case rates for cervical cancer ranged from two cases in Iraq to 84 in Eswatini per 1,00,000 women per year, while mortality rates ranged from one death in Switzerland to 56 deaths in Eswatini per 1,00,000 women per year.

An analysis of data from 1988 to 2017 show a clear socioeconomic gradient in incidence and mortality, with higher rates observed in countries with lower socioeconomic development.

The study found major declines in cases in Latin American countries including Brazil, Colombia, and Costa Rica; Asian nations like India, Thailand, and South Korea; and Poland, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic in Eastern Europe.

However, there were increases in cases over the past decade in Latvia, Lithuania, and Bulgaria, in parts of East Africa, as well as in The Netherlands and Italy. Reasons for the recent increases might include increased prevalence of HPV among the younger generations of women and lack of effective screening programmes, according to the study report.

Countries with the largest average declines in incidence rates per year include Brazil (8%), Slovenia (7%), Kuwait (7%), and Chile (6%). The highest increases in rates were seen in Latvia (4%), Japan (3%), Ireland (3%), Sweden (3%), Norway (2%), Northern Ireland (2%), Estonia (2%), and China (2%).

The estimates in the report are based on the best available cancer data in each country, even though the authors caution that these may be incomplete or inaccurate. For instance, cases may appear low in countries where there are no effective screening programmes, or where limited local population-based cancer registry data are available.

JAPANESE MANUFACTURER FILES TRADEMARK CASE ON 'AJINOMOTO': HOW DID THE SEASONING BECOME POPULAR?

The Delhi High Court recently halted the release of a film titled 'Ajinomoto', after a Japan-based seasoning manufacturer claimed infringement of its 113-year-old registered trademark 'AJI-NOMOTO', which is primarily used for its product, monosodium glutamate.

Makers of the seasoning also claimed using the word to imply a negative characteristic, as suggested by the filmmakers, "is bound to severely prejudice" against the product.

The origins of MSG

In 1908, Kikunae Ikeda, a chemistry professor at Tokyo's Imperial University, reached out to a pharmaceutical firm in the city, Suzuki Pharmaceutical, for help in commercialising a food additive that he had been researching. Ikeda had been inquiring about the reason for the distinctive flavour of kelp, an algae.

The story goes that while savouring a bowl of boiled tofu in a broth made from kelp, he became convinced that there was another basic taste, very different from sweet, salty, sour, and bitter. He called it umami, playing on the Japanese word for delicious. Ikeda's studies led him to glutamate, one of the most common amino acids in foods – and in the human body. With a dash of sodium, it became monosodium glutamate (MSG). A tasting confirmed the compound's culinary promise.



In less than a year, the patent office gave its approval to Ajinomoto – a seasoning made by breaking down wheat with hydrochloric acid. The name, literally “quintessence of flavour” was chosen by Saburosukey Suzuki, the then-head of Suzuki Pharma.

But the production process would corrode the vessels. Moreover, all of Suzuki’s marketing couldn’t cloud the fact that Ajinomoto was expensive. According to the company’s own admission, a cup of soba noodles and broth at the time sold for 3 sen. Sen is a hundredth of a yen, the Japanese currency, and a 14-gram Ajinomoto bottle sold for 50 sen). It was not cheap. Finding very little success amongst restaurants, the company began targeting homemakers. But Japanese women, who would regard frugality as a necessary virtue, would find it difficult to regard Ajinomoto as necessary for their kitchens.

Doubts over safety

But in the late 1960s, especially in the US, the consumer trust in food products with chemicals broke down in parts of the West, fuelled in large measure by food safety and environmental movements. At times they, coalesced – inadvertently – with some of the racist inclinations of the time in the US: Symptoms such as numbness and a fast heartbeat often came to be referred to as the “Chinese restaurant syndrome”. In the ’70s, Ajinomoto sales fell for the first time in 40 years. But this was also the time that MSG was finding new shores – India, for instance.

It has continued to have its detractors, even as food safety agencies, such as the US FDA, have pronounced MSG safe. The doubters persist even when revisionist culinary studies have revealed that a lot of the bad press Ajinomoto got was because poorly-designed “food safety studies” used five to 30 times the normal amount. As a chemist and the writer of the vastly popular food science work, Masala Labs, Krish Ashok, notes MSG occurs naturally in foods we eat, including tomatoes.

WAYANAD RICE FESTIVAL PROMOTES CLIMATE-RESILIENT CROPS

On December 12, Thanal gave the public an opportunity to experience their initiative by launching Ikki Jathre, or the Festival of Rice in tribal parlance. Throngs of farmers, researchers, environmentalists and students have been arriving at Panavally to take part in the festival, which concludes on Sunday.

The initiative aims to sensitise people to the significance of conserving traditional crops that have the ability to withstand harsh climatic conditions. Thanal has been organising annual “rice field weeks” since 2012.

The festival also sets the stage for knowledge sharing and co-creation of knowledge between tribal farmers and experts. “We launched the Rice Diversity Block (RDB) at Panavally under the Save Our Rice campaign in 2009, with a collection of 30 varieties of rice,” Thanal director S. Usha told The Hindu. It has now expanded to 300 varieties.

“Many farmers had stopped cultivating traditional rice seeds after hybrid rice varieties became popular, under the misconception that the former has low productivity. But this is not true. The Thondy variety, a traditional and popular rice among the people in Wayanad a few decades ago, could compete with any hybrid rice in terms of productivity,” she said. Moreover, the input cost of traditional rice cultivation is very low owing to its inherent resistance to pests and diseases. Also, its nutritional value is high, though studies are yet to be conducted.



Though many traditional rice varieties, especially black rice varieties, are already rich in minerals like zinc, iron and other nutrients, the government is now trying to supply fortified rice by artificially adding minerals and nutrients to hybrid rice varieties.

TIHAR HAAT, RUN BY JAIL INMATES, RARING TO GO ONLINE

The move is aimed at expanding the footprint of TJ, the brand name of Tihar Haat products, while also providing employment to more jail inmates, say officers. Nearly 1,000-1,250 inmates are employed in the factories in the prison.

Director-General (Prisons) Sanjay Baniwal told The Hindu that the 16 jails in Tihar have 34 working units, which train and employ inmates. These units are involved in various categories of products, such as handloom, baked goods, carpentry, jute bags, herbal colour, spices, blanket, stitching, candle making, undergarments, etc.

Mr. Beniwal explained that the Haat's products, which were earlier limited to baked goods and food items, have now diversified to include rugs, cotton shirts, coats, woven sweaters and clothes among others. "We're reinventing ourselves to suit the modern market."

He added that the inmates are efficient at creating good quality products to use both commercially, such as file covers, and personally, like bedsheets and hygiene items. "We are now planning to approach online retailers to scale up our business," Mr. Beniwal said.

He also said that the teams supervising production at the Haat are working to ensure that even after scaling up their business, the products don't feel mass-manufactured. What works for them, Mr. Baniwal added, is that Tihar Haat customers have an emotional bond with the store.

"Many of our buyers understand that by purchasing TJ products, they are supporting people who are searching for a better life... We are trying to break stereotypes through this initiative."

SALAAM AARATI' SOON TO BE RENAMED AS 'AARATI NAMASKARA' IN KARNATAKA

The Karnataka government will soon issue a circular renaming the 'Salaam Aarati' ritual followed in some temples in Karnataka as 'Aarati Namaskara', Shashikala Jolle, Minister for Hindu Religious Institutions and Charitable Endowments, has said.

It is believed that the ritual was named by the 18th century Mysore king Tipu Sultan during his visits to those temples.

The decision comes after Hindutva outfits urged the State government to abolish the rituals "performed in the name of Tipu Sultan" at some temples. The decision was taken after a meeting of the Karnataka Dharmika Parishat, and a separate circular would be issued by the government soon, said the Minister.

"The official circular will be issued to all temples following this ritual to continue with it, but rename 'Salaam Aarati' as 'Aarati Namaskara'," Ms. Jolle told The Hindu.

Kashekodi Suryanarayana Bhat, member of the parishat, said such rituals were performed in well-known temples, including Kukke Sri Subrahmanya Temple, Sri Mahalingeshwara Temple at Puttur and Mookambika Temple at Kollur and a few others during evenings.



Earlier the Vishwa Hindu Parishad had urged the Kollur temple authorities to go for “course correction” and call the ritual “pradosha pooje.”

However, the temple’s Executive Officer had said nowhere was the evening ‘aarati’ named “Salaam Aarati” in the temple’s records.

Historian Talakadu Chikkarange Gowda said the ritual was instituted to mark Tipu Sultan’s visit to these temples.

“These are markers of syncretic culture of the State. The local narratives often use these as metaphors for the greatness of the temple, that even those from other religions revered them. For a ruler like Tipu Sultan, these were instrumental in demonstrating how he treated other religions also with respect in his territory. These rituals at temples often changed with new rulers, while some remained. Now the question arises as to who will decide if the name is to be changed. Does Dharmika Parishat have the right to do so?” the historian asked.

BADRI COW BREED OF UTTARAKHAND TO GET A GENETIC BOOST

To increase the productivity of its indigenous Badri cow, which grazes on herbs that grow in the Himalayas, Uttarakhand is now planning for its genetic enhancement.

At the recent chintan shivir (brainstorming session) that Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami had with senior officials of the State, the Animal Husbandry Department proposed to use sex-sorted semen technology to improve the stock of the petite Badri cattle. Officials proposed to opt for the embryo transfer method to produce more cattle of a high genetic stock.

Apart from Badri ghee, which costs ₹3,000 to ₹5,000 a kg, the State is looking at the marketing potential of gaumutra ark (distilled cow urine), cow dung, and Panchgavya (five products of the cow: curd, ghee, dung and urine).

Talking about the plan, B.V.R.C. Purushottam, Secretary, Animal Husbandry, told The Hindu that the Badri cow, the first registered cattle breed of Uttarakhand, had been certified by the National Bureau of Animal Genetic Resources.

New technologies

“The issue with this variety of cattle is that its milk production capacity is quite less as it gives one to three litres of milk a day. To make the farmers of Uttarakhand breed Badri and not to shift to high milk-producing alternative breeds such as Jersey, we have decided to opt for multiple ovulation embryo transfer (MOET), a conventional embryo flush, which is the most common procedure used in advanced cattle breeding,” Mr. Purushottam said.

At present, Uttarakhand has nearly seven lakh Badri cattle, among which 4.79 lakh are cows.

The Badri breed derived its name from the holy shrine of Char Dham at Badrinath. Possessing a balanced gait for the hills, the cattle breed is small in size with long legs and varied body colours — black, brown, red, white or grey. This breed is comparatively more resistant to diseases, mostly due to its eating habits.

Grazes on herbs



Officials say what makes the Badri cow stand out is the Himalayan environment, as she eats herbs and does not ingest polythene and other harmful things, and is far from toxic pollution.

FIVE AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS OF KERALA GET GI TAG, TAKING THE TOTAL COUNT TO 17

Attappady Attukombu Avara (beans), Attappady Thuvara (red gram), Onattukara Ellu (sesame), Kanthalloor-Vattavada Veluthulli (garlic), and Kodungalloor Pottuvellari (snap melon) are the latest Geographical Indications that have been registered.

The unique features of the products, imparted by the agro-climatic conditions of the geographical area of their production, are the basis for getting Geographical Indication tag.

Attappady Attukombu Avara, cultivated in the Attappady region of Palakkad, is curved like a goat's horn as its name indicates. Its higher anthocyanin content, compared to other dolichos beans, imparts violet colour in the stem and fruits.

Attappady Thuvara has seeds with white coat. These are bigger and have higher seed weight than the regular variety.

Compared to the garlic produced in other areas, the garlic from the Kanthalloor-Vattavada area of Devikulam block panchayat in Idukki contains higher amount of sulphides, flavonoids, and proteins. Onattukara Ellu and its oil are famous for its unique health benefits. Relatively higher antioxidant content in Onattukara Ellu helps in fighting the free radicals which destroy the body cells. Kodungalloor Pottuvellari cultivated in Kodungalloor and parts of Ernakulam is consumed as juice and in other forms. This snap melon, which is harvested in summer, is excellent for quenching thirst.

With the latest five GIs, 17 agricultural products of Kerala facilitated by Kerala Agricultural University have received the GI status.

READY FOR THE WORST

That Cyclone Mandous, which had its landfall near Mamallapuram, near Chennai, in the early hours of Saturday, did not cause much damage has come as a huge relief to the people of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. At one stage, it was expected to develop into a "severe cyclonic storm", but did not gain much strength. Called a "textbook cyclone", the storm, as predicted by the India Meteorological Department, crossed the coast with all the attendant features, to the satisfaction of professional meteorologists. Though Cyclone Mandous was similar to Cyclone Vardah which made landfall in Chennai in mid-December 2016, this event dumped heavy rainfall that was far more than what occurred under Vardah. This time, not only parts of north Tamil Nadu but also areas in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh experienced heavy rainfall. For instance, Vembakkam in Tiruvannamalai district of Tamil Nadu and Srikalahasti in Tirupati district of Andhra Pradesh bore the brunt, recording rainfall of 25 cm and 23 cm, respectively, during the 24-hour-period that ended at 8.30 a.m. on Saturday. But more noteworthy was the way the official machinery in Tamil Nadu steered the disaster management system. Despite the cyclone crossing the coast at almost midnight and causing a number of trees and structures to fall, the response of the administration was swift and the common man's life hardly disrupted. Five lives were lost, a count much lower than during disasters of a similar magnitude.



After drawing flak in November 2021, and, subsequently, when Chennai and its vicinity experienced inundation following spells of heavy rain, the Tamil Nadu government has been paying greater attention this time to improving the storm-water drain network and such other works. Though one of the reasons cited for many areas being spared of flooding was that the core parts of the city did not receive as much rain as the interior parts of north Tamil Nadu, the State government's coordination with the Meteorological Department and its preparedness in tackling the post-landfall situation made a difference to the situation this time. Otherwise, as in the past, citizens would have suffered even in light rain. Technology too, both in terms of forecast and information dissemination, has been playing a key role. The authorities, i.e., the State government and the Meteorological department, should continuously work to improve their ways of functioning, making use of technology, and helping people to be ready to face a natural disaster of this nature or even of greater strength. Ideally, the official machinery should set a goal of ensuring no loss to life. Such a task would not be impossible, given the availability of resources, both hardware and software, and empirical data on cyclones and severe cyclones crossing the coast of Tamil Nadu.

BACK ON TRACK

Decades ago, when P.T. Usha travelled by the Madras-Mangalore Mail, her employers, the Railways, permitted an unscheduled stop at her hometown Payyoli in North Kerala. Such was the respect she garnered for her medal-winning exploits at the Asian level while the collective heart-break she bequeathed in narrowly missing a bronze in the 400m hurdles at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics is remembered even today. After she retired from track-and-field, she evolved as a coach, groomed fresh talent and kept an eye on the grassroots. Her latest appointment as president of the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) comes with a surfeit of goodwill. Additionally, it busts the patriarchy inherent in many sports hierarchies across India. She becomes the first woman president of the IOA, a post she was elected to unopposed. In a sense the IOA's hand was forced as factionalism drew censure from the International Olympic Committee and there were whispers of a ban. A change of guard from the earlier well-entrenched lobby with political links was inevitable and Usha was seen as the ideal candidate. Already a nominated Rajya Sabha member, Usha's latest sporting elevation was seen as an organic progress. Having handled many batons while running her famous relays, Usha will find the latest one perhaps the toughest to manoeuvre.

As the umbrella organisation for sports bodies in India, the IOA has to deal with sister associations lost in dissidence. Stadiums become white elephants, leased out for housing loan expos or music concerts. Age-fudging and doping are grim realities as young athletes, seeking jobs, chase medals at the zonal, age-group and national levels. Medals often secure a career opening in public sector units, banks and a few corporates and Usha is aware of this. She and her team of administrators that includes sportspersons and other officials, need to crack the whip. For all the political jostling that happens during the elections, men and women representing opposite ideologies shake hands and become entrenched in sports administration, seeking brownie points and fame. The Government's leaning on the soft power of sports, the Sports Authority of India's initiatives and corporate-backed academies have changed the landscape. India is beginning to aspire for golds beyond the Asian realm and Neeraj Chopra and Abhinav Bindra's exploits in the Olympics are a pointer that the skill-sets are there and if support is provided, medals with better lustre can be secured. With India hoping to bid for the Olympics in the 2030s, Usha and her team are expected to create a road map for that too. The Payyoli Express has a tough challenge ahead.



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

US DUTY ON STEEL, ALUMINIUM INCONSISTENT WITH GLOBAL TRADE NORMS: WTO

A dispute panel of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has ruled that the US decision to impose customs duties on certain steel and aluminium products is inconsistent with the global trade norms.

This ruling was given in the cases brought by China, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey against these duties.

The WTO report assumes significance for India also, as the country in 2018 too had approached the Geneva-based WTO against the US move to impose these duties.

According to sources here, this ruling will help strengthen the Indian case too.

However, the sources said that India is inclined to resolve the dispute with the US amicably and on mutually agreed terms.

India had earlier stated that the imposition of high import duties by the US has impacted exports of these products by Indian businesses.

India too has alleged that the US move is also not in compliance with global trade norms.

In 2018, the US imposed 25 per cent and 10 per cent import duties on certain steel and aluminium products, respectively, on the grounds of national security.

In retaliation to the imposition of duties by the US, India had increased customs duty on a number of American products such as almonds, walnut, iron and steel items.

"The Panel recommends that the United States bring its WTO-inconsistent measures into conformity with its obligations under the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) 1994," according to the WTO ruling.

The panel said that it does not find evidence that the measures "were taken in time of war or other emergency in international relations".

Assistant United States Trade Representative Adam Hodge has rejected the ruling.

"These WTO panel reports only reinforce the need to fundamentally reform the WTO dispute settlement system. The United States will not cede decision-making over its essential security to WTO panels," Hodge has said in a notification.

According to WTO rules, a member country or countries can file a case in the Geneva-based multilateral body if they feel that a particular measure is against the norms of the WTO.

Bilateral consultation is the first step to resolve a dispute.

If both sides are not able to resolve the matter through consultation, either can approach the establishment of a dispute settlement panel.



The Geneva-based 164-member WTO is a multilateral body which formulates rules for global exports and imports and adjudicates disputes between two or more than two countries on trade-related issues.

US FED HIKES RATES: WHY INDIA MUST BE MINDFUL

On Wednesday, in its last meeting of the calendar year, the US Federal Reserve raised interest rates by 50 basis points. The federal funds rate now stands at 4.25 to 4.5 per cent. The projections accompanying the policy statement point towards a strong possibility of another 75 basis points of interest rate hikes over the course of the next year as the central bank continues its fight against inflation. This would take the federal funds rate to 5.1 per cent, up from the earlier expectations of 4.6 per cent. While the quantum of the rate hike in the December meeting was lower — the previous four consecutive rate hikes were of 75 basis points — the tone of the policy remained hawkish as the central bank sought to dismiss any doubt over the trajectory of monetary policy. “The historical record cautions strongly against prematurely loosening policy. We will stay the course, until the job is done,” noted Fed chairman Jerome Powell.

Data released a day prior shows that inflation has in fact moderated, though it continues to remain well above the central bank’s target of 2 per cent. In November, consumer prices rose at the slowest pace in the last 12 months. Core CPI, which excludes the volatile food and fuel components, rose 6 per cent in November, easing from 6.3 per cent in October. The sequential month-on-month momentum also suggests a softening of price pressures in the economy. As per the projections accompanying the policy statement, inflation (as measured by the price index for personal consumption expenditures) is expected to fall from 5.6 per cent in 2022 to 3.1 per cent in 2023. However, the projections on economic growth and unemployment underline the pain that the economy is likely to go through during this period. The economy is now expected to grow only at 0.5 per cent next year, down from the earlier assessment of 1.2 per cent, while the unemployment rate has now been pegged higher at 4.6 per cent in 2023 and is likely to remain around that level for some time. In his statement, Powell acknowledged the pain, noting that “reducing inflation is likely to require a sustained period of below-trend growth and some softening of labour market conditions.”

The revised projections also suggest that the central bank is, as of now, unlikely to cut interest rates any time soon. Rates are only expected to start falling in 2024. In fact, in his comments after the statement, Powell is reported to have said that it is too soon to talk about cutting rates. India will not be unaffected by tighter global financial conditions and slower growth in advanced economies such as the US. In fact, recent data indicates that the sharp slowdown in the advanced economies is already beginning to impact India’s export and industrial performance. Policymakers in India must thus be mindful of the risks to growth and macroeconomic stability as they attempt to steer the economy through this uncertain period.

INTERIM RELIEF

After a seemingly interminable 10-month streak of Indian consumers facing runaway price rise of over 6%, retail inflation appeared to have relented a bit in November to 5.88%. This may only be slightly below the 6% upper tolerance threshold for the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), but constitutes some relief. Since April 2022, when retail prices surged at a near-eight year high rate of 7.8%, five of the first eight months of 2022-23 year registered 7%-plus inflation. Sequentially, November’s 0.9 percentage point drop from October’s 6.77% mark is the sharpest moderation in



this period, with a similar correction in rural inflation's trajectory though it remains high at 6.1%. The Finance Ministry termed this a 'drastic decline' mainly attributable to a sharp decrease in food price inflation brought about by government measures. Consumer food price inflation cooled to an 11-month low of 4.67% in November from over 7% in October. Vegetable prices accounted for most of the decline in food inflation — moving from 7.8% inflation in October to deflation of 8.1% last month, and plummeting 8.3% month-on-month.

Vegetable prices may remain benign for a bit, but are volatile by nature — excluding them, retail inflation would have accelerated to 7% in November, some reckon. There has been little respite on other household budget items, including essential kitchen supplies such as cereals, milk and spices, whose inflation rates accelerated to 13%, 8.2% and 19.5%, respectively. The Government expects steps to check cereals and pulses prices to be 'felt more significantly' in coming months. Fuel inflation rebounded to 10.6%, with kerosene and coal costs rising month-on-month. Core inflation, which excludes food and energy prices and whose 'stickiness' RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das warned of in the latest monetary policy review, inched up too. Price rise in transport and communication, health, and household goods and services accelerated. About 56% of items in the Consumer Price Index basket clocked over 6% inflation in November, a higher proportion than September and October. While asserting the worst is behind us, the RBI estimates inflation to average 6.6% in this quarter, so December could yet see a bounce back beyond 7%. Inflation has to be sustainably reined in below 6% and shepherded to the preferred 4% target, but with industrial output tripping as well, the central bank may have limited room for aggressive rate hikes, and fiscal policy may have to do the heavy lifting now. That petrol pump prices remain frozen in India means no gains will accrue to consumers from the dip in global crude oil prices, unless the daily price reset regime for petroleum products is allowed to function again. The Government could fix that for starters.

NOV WPI INFLATION HITS 21-MONTH LOW

Wholesale price inflation hit a 21-month low of 5.85% in November, aided by a favourable base and a sharp drop in food inflation, further bolstering the notion that the price pressure in the economy has peaked.

The moderation in inflation — retail inflation already hit an 11-month low of 5.88% in November — amid easing global commodity prices has created some much-needed policy space for the government to push growth as it prepares the Budget for FY24.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), however, will closely track the magnitude of inflation, especially core retail inflation, in December and the Budget announcements before deciding whether to hold on to the rates in its February review, analysts said. Some say it will likely announce a small hike of 25 basis points in the repo rate in February to 6.5% before taking a pause.

Interestingly, inflation based on the wholesale price index (WPI) dropped below, albeit marginally, retail inflation in November for the first time since February 2021. It suggests the pass-through of elevated input costs to finished product prices is either over or nearing completion. Importantly, lower WPI inflation will augur well for corporate earnings and operating margins, as the rise in input prices would remain subdued.

Even a month-on-month seasonally-adjusted basis, WPI inflation recorded a decline of 0.15%, suggesting easing supply-side pressures, according to India Ratings' principal economist Sunil Kumar Sinha.



Headline WPI inflation has dropped sharply and steadily since hitting an over 30-year peak of 16.63% in May. Inflation based on the consumer price index (CPI) dropped below the 6%, the upper limit of the central bank's medium-term target, for the first time in November, after a gap of 10 months.

Icra chief economist Aditi Nayar expected WPI inflation to drop further in December on easing commodity prices.

In WPI, primary food inflation crashed to just 1.07% in November from 8.33% in the previous month, thanks mainly to a drop in prices of vegetable (20.08%), onion (19.19%) and fruit (1.07%) during the winter season. Primary article inflation hit a 21-month low of 5.52%.

Manufactured product inflation, which has a 64.2% weight in WPI, hit a 24-month low of 3.59%, broadly mirroring the easing of global prices of commodities like basic metals, mineral products, rubber, chemicals and pharmaceutical products. Fuel & light inflation eased to a 20-month low of 17.35% in November.

The broad-based decline in WPI inflation across food, fuel and manufactured goods segments in November came on the back of easing global commodity prices amid slowing demand due to a tightening of interest rates by key central banks.

Of course, at the retail level, core inflation still remained elevated at about 6% in November and the latest easing was driven mainly by slower price pressure in food. However, core WPI inflation eased to 3.4% in November from 4.7% in the previous month and 6.8% in September.

Meanwhile, trade sources said the western price cap of \$60 per barrel of Russian oil will give large buyers like China and India certain leverage to bargain hard with even other producers for reasonable energy rates. Any drop in oil prices will also weigh on fertiliser rates and help a net commodity importer like India.

For its part, the RBI has hiked the repo rate by 225 basis points since May to 6.25% to tame inflation. Last week, RBI governor Shaktikanta Das said the central bank would keep "Arjun's eye" on the evolving inflation dynamics and that war on price pressure would continue.

Although food inflation has substantially moderated, inflation in items like cereals, milk and products and crude petroleum and natural gas firmed up in November. While cereals inflation firmed up to a 112-month high of 12.9%, milk and products inflation edged up to a five-month of 6%. Even prices of crude petroleum and natural gas rose by a steep 48.2%, reversing the deceleration trend observed since May, India Ratings' Sinha pointed out.

Nevertheless, Sinha expected headline WPI inflation to drop below 5% in December, given the favourable base and softening of global commodity prices. FE

CONSUMERS WORRIED ABOUT INCOME, BUT LESS SO ABOUT ECONOMY

The share of urban consumers who were pessimistic about the Indian economy continued to decline in November 2022 as COVID-19 cases continued to decrease. The pace of decline in pessimistic levels also sharply improved. For instance, between January and May this year, the share of respondents pessimistic about the general economic situation declined from 66% to 63% — a 3%-point decrease. But between July and November, the share decreased from 63% to 55% — an 8%-point decrease. But over half the respondents (55%) continued to be pessimistic about



the general economic situation. In the last three years (since November 2019), the share of pessimistic respondents has remained higher than 50%. The observations are based on the Reserve Bank of India's consumer confidence survey conducted across 19 major cities. The latest round of the survey was conducted between November 2 and 11, 2022, covering 6,089 responses.

The share of respondents who were pessimistic about the employment scenario also declined and for the first time in the last three years, dropped below the 50% mark in November 2022.

This meant that those who were worried about their income levels also declined in November, though the degree of decline has been sluggish compared to previous editions of the survey. For instance, between January and May, this year, the share of those who said their income levels decreased declined from 49% to 36% — a 13%-point decrease. But between July and November this year the share decreased from 36% to 33% — a 3%-point decrease.

Put together, given the sharp decline in pessimism about income levels between January and May this year, confidence about the economy improved sharply between July and November. But with the decline in pessimism about income levels becoming sluggish between July and November, the confidence in the economy may also take a hit in the coming months or may not improve at a quicker pace as before.

The share of respondents who said that price levels increased also reached a peak (95%) in November 2022.

The share of respondents who said their non-essential spending decreased continued to decline with 44% saying so in November 2022. The share of those who said essential spending decreased also continued to decline to 4%. Non-essential spending includes expenses on consumer durables, motor vehicles, gold and jewellery, expenses on hotels and restaurants. Essential spending includes expenses on food, housing, fuel and electricity, essential clothing, education, medical amenities, transportation.

So, consumers are spending more freely despite saying that the price levels have gone up, probably as their incomes improved this year. However, if the decline in pessimism about income levels continues to be sluggish, their spending behaviour may change sharply going forward.

BANK DEPOSITS WILL EARN MORE INTEREST: WHY IS COMPETITION FOR RETAIL MONEY INTENSIFYING?

Savers, pensioners and depositors have a reason to smile. In a flurry of announcements, banks have started hiking retail deposit rates by up to 65 basis points, following the Reserve Bank of India's move to increase the repo rate by 35 basis points last week. Real interest rates – rates adjusted for inflation – have turned positive for many deposit tenors after nearly three years.

Who has increased deposit rates and by how much?

Several banks have made similar announcements, with a minimum increase of 50 bps, or half a percentage point.

Why have the banks taken these steps?

With credit offtake rising by 17.2 per cent, banks are in an intense race to mobilise deposits to support credit growth. "Deposit rate war is clearly brewing up... we have been telling this time and again that the gap between deposit growth and loan growth is very high and it's just a matter

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



of time before deposit rates start inching up rapidly,” Macquarie Research said in a recent report. “We believe, with deposit growth running well below loan growth and deposit rates inching up rapidly, margins will peak out by Q3 FY23 and will start heading down in Q4 FY23,” it said.

Does this mean that rates will go up further?

Deposits rates are expected to go up even further due to rising policy rates, intense competition between banks for sourcing deposits, elevated credit offtake, widening credit deposit gap, lower liquidity in the market and inflation, according to Care Ratings.

In the last seven months, the Reserve Bank has hiked the repo rate by a cumulative 225 basis points to tame retail inflation, raising the cost of funds for banks. With retail inflation declining to 5.88 per cent in November, the RBI is likely to reduce the quantum of Repo rate hike to 25 bps or even pause at the current level of 6.25 per cent in the next policy review. “We expect the RBI to tighten monetary policy further if inflation stays elevated,” Crisil said.

What is the size of the deposits market?

Deposits stood at Rs 172.9 lakh crore for the fortnight that ended November 18, 2022, registering a growth of 9.6% year-on-year. Meanwhile, in absolute terms, bank deposits have increased by Rs 15.2 lakh crore over the last twelve months.

The time deposits (fixed deposits) grew by 9.2% y-o-y, while demand deposits (savings bank deposit) rose by 12.7% in the reporting fortnight at 8.5% and 20.5% y-o-y, respectively, reported in the fortnight ended November 19, 2021.

BANKS JACK UP MCLR AFTER RBI RAISES REPO

Competition is hotting-up in the banking sector to attract deposits with banks hiking retail deposit rates by up to 65 basis points following the Reserve Bank’s move to increase the repo rate last week. Several banks, including HDFC Bank, Bank of Baroda and Union Bank of India have raised their marginal cost of funds-based lending rate (MCLR), leading to a higher equated monthly instalment (EMI) for borrowers.

SBI has revised its MCLR by 25 bps across various tenors, effective December 15. MCLR for one-month and three-month loans have been revised to 8 per cent as against 7.75 per cent. The bank raised six-month and one-year MCLR to 8.30 per cent.

Last month, RBI deputy governor Michael Patra, in a speech, had said though the share of fresh loans linked to MCLR has been declining. Nearly half of outstanding bank credit is still priced off the MCLR, delaying transmission via annual resets only, and with widely varying spreads.

WHY ARE INDIA’S SLOWING EXPORTS A CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

The story so far:

India’s exports declined about 16.7% in October compared with the year-earlier period. This is the first slide reported for any month since February 2021. October imports rose at a much milder pace than earlier, most likely because of softening commodity prices worldwide, and trade deficit widened by as much as 50%.



How is the export sector faring?

Engineering goods, which have lent a strong shoulder to India's goods exports in recent years, slid 21%. The Engineering Export Promotion Council of India Chairman Arun Garodia attributed the slowdown to high inflation in developed regions, falling demand in China, slowdown in the EU and the U.S. and the Russia-Ukraine war. The Commerce Ministry pointed out that for October, a decline of \$2 billion worth of exports was seen in steel and allied products, highlighting the fact that the government had levied an export duty on these products to help increase local availability and hence temper local prices. The government has since removed this duty. The Ministry also highlighted that in the month of Diwali every year, workers tend to take leave, thus impacting output. Therefore, one should wait and see whether export decline was only a blip or whether it was a trend that would stay.

What about other exporting nations?

Vietnam, an export-dominated country, recorded a 4.5% growth in exports from a year earlier to \$29.18 billion amid 'sustained foreign demand', according to tradingeconomics.com. Similarly, exports by the Philippines grew 20% in October. The government there had said that exports rose for the first time in three months in September amid what it calls 'signs of reviving foreign demand'. China is an outlier this year because of stringent lockdowns that are impacting manufacturing output, though lockdowns are being eased currently following protests against restrictions.

Is domestic demand enough?

The monthly Finance Ministry review for October acknowledges a slowing export scenario but emphasises that domestic demand will carry through. The report states that the global slowdown is driven by a 'confluence of stubbornly high inflation, rising borrowing costs and geopolitical tensions', but cites local demand as being 'resilient'. It also expects a 're-invigorated' investment cycle which will spur growth and job creation in the coming days.

Interestingly, the Ministry says that recently, inflation has been driven up more by local factors, including higher food prices, than imported reasons and that those pressures are set to dampen thanks to easing international commodity prices and the arrival of Kharif crop. (Retail inflation has been consistently above 7% these past few months, but stood at 6.8% in October). Sure enough, consumer inflation eased to 5.88% for November. In the monthly report, the Ministry also pinned hope on the fact that the last month saw the lowest sign-ons this year for the employment guarantee scheme MGNREGS. It is hoping that a spike in tractor sales in September and October reflects improved sentiment.

One seemingly positive signal for the economy is the private sector capital expenditure which Chief Economic Adviser V. Anantha Nageswaran says is on track to touch six lakh crore this fiscal which would make it the highest of the past six years. Private capex typically depends on credit, or loans, from the banking system. And that has seen a healthy growth in the recent past touching a high of 18% last month. There have been reports of banks scrambling to gather deposits, with videos of managers and their teams walking the streets announcing deposit rates to help mobilise funds for credit growth. Whether this credit growth is due to inflation and low base effect from last year, remains to be seen over the coming months.



What about our foreign reserves?

For the week ended December 2, foreign exchange reserves stood at about \$561 billion. If we take October imports at \$56.7 billion (an eight-month low) as a benchmark, then we have roughly about 9-10 months' worth of import cover which isn't as healthy as the 14-to-15-month cover that we had seen during the pandemic. However, economists feel this isn't as bad as 2013 when foreign investors began pulling out of India's financial markets. At that time, we had less than seven months' worth of import cover. And if anything, forex reserves have been rising in recent weeks signalling hope for the future.

OCTOBER IIP LOWEST IN MORE THAN A YEAR: WHY HAS INDUSTRIAL OUTPUT DECLINED?

The slowdown in exports and weak consumption demand led to a sharp decline in industrial output for October, bucking the general annual trend in the festival month. Factory output as measured by the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) slumped to a 26-month low of (-) 4 per cent in October on the back of a contraction in manufacturing and consumer goods, data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) on Monday (December 12) showed.

By how much — and where — has industrial output declined?

Manufacturing output, which accounts for 77.6 per cent of the weight of the IIP, contracted 5.6 per cent in October as against 3.3 per cent growth in the previous year.

A contraction was recorded for capital goods output — a proxy for investment sentiment — after a gap of nine months at (-) 2.3 per cent, indicating weak investment. Consumer durables and consumer non-durables output — an indicator of fast-moving consumer goods — also continued to be in negative territory at (-) 15.3 per cent and (-) 13.4 per cent respectively, reflecting weak consumption demand, especially in rural areas.

But why has manufacturing contracted?

Weaker global demand is reflecting on India's merchandise exports, which is in turn showing up as a decline in manufacturing output. The trend is in line with a 4.3 per cent contraction registered in manufacturing output seen in the overall GDP data for July-September quarter.

The maximum decline in industrial output for October was seen for clothing, electrical equipment, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and leather and related products, with most of these sectors having a large export share and production concentrated in the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) segment.

Merchandise exports contracted by 12.1 per cent in October after expanding during the previous 19 months. Merchandise imports rose by 10 per cent in October.

Much of the performance of the manufacturing sector is predicated on the interplay between the organised corporate sector and unorganised SME (small and medium enterprises) segments, with a faltering export performance and continuing struggle of SMEs acting as headwinds.

On the other hand, manufacturing activity, as measured by the S&P Global India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) has recorded expansion for 17 straight months, rising to 55.7 in November from 55.3 in October, which is being seen more as an indicator of better performance by large manufacturing firms.



PRICE DISTORTIONS IN FERTILISERS WILL NOT HELP FARMING IN THE LONG RUN. GOVT CAN OFFER ACREAGE-BASED CASH TRANSFERS

Two ambitious schemes of the Narendra Modi government — Soil Health Card and mandatory neem-coating of urea — were supposed to promote balanced use of fertilisers. However, far from weaning farmers from urea, annual consumption of this nitrogenous fertiliser has only risen from 30 to 35 million tonnes (mt) in the last five years. This year, not only have urea sales gone up by 3.7 per cent during April-October over the same period of 2021, it has grown even more, at 16.9 per cent, for di-ammonium phosphate (DAP). This has come even as sales of all other fertilisers — including complexes containing nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), K (potash) and sulphur (S) in different proportions — have fallen. In other words, instead of balanced use of plant nutrients based on soil testing and specific crop requirement, Indian farmers are effectively applying just urea and DAP — both high-analysis fertilisers containing 46 per cent N and P respectively.

They have reason to do so: The government has fixed the maximum retail price (MRP) of urea at Rs 5,628 per tonne. The MRPs of other fertilisers are technically decontrolled, but companies have been “told” not to charge more than Rs 27,000/tonne for DAP. The informally-fixed MRPs are higher at Rs 29,000-31,000 and Rs 34,000 per tonne for NPKS complexes and muriate of potash (MOP) respectively, but farmers have little incentive to buy at these prices. Why should they apply complexes such as 10:26:26:0, 12:32:16:0 and 20:20:0:13 when DAP is cheaper and has 46 per cent P as well as 18 per cent N? The fact that DAP does not contain K, S or other macro and micro nutrients wouldn't matter to a majority of farmers. For them, choice of fertilisers is primarily a function of prices. Under-pricing of urea (a historical phenomenon) and DAP (recent) is a product of subsidy-induced market distortions, for which the blame lies squarely with the Modi government. The compulsions of electoral politics have clearly trumped concerns over soil nutrient imbalances.

The effects of these — the current NPK ratio is about 13:5:1, as against the ideal 4:2:1 — would ultimately show up in crop yields. Plants, like humans, will respond poorly to fertilisers if only one or two nutrients are given in excess. The Modi government should replace subsidies on individual fertiliser products with a flat per-hectare cash transfer, maybe twice a year. Every farmer can have an e-wallet account into which this money can be credited before the kharif and rabi planting seasons. The e-wallet may be used only for the purchase of fertilisers. The government can maintain a stock of basic fertilisers, including urea and DAP, to ensure no untoward price rise even in a decontrol scenario.

THE COST OF INDIA'S SUBSIDY SPIKE

The Narendra Modi government received the Lok Sabha's nod on Wednesday to spend an additional Rs 2,14,580.88 crore towards subsidies on the 3Fs — food, fertiliser and fuel — in the current fiscal. Assuming no further batches of supplementary demands for grants, it will take the total expenditure in 2022-23 to Rs 5,32,446.79 crore: Food (Rs 2,87,179.34 crore), fertiliser (Rs 2,14,511.27 crore) and petroleum (Rs 30,756.18 crore). That would be the second highest outgo on major subsidies after the Rs 7,06,006.53 crore in 2020-21. The latter bill, however, largely comprised arrears, with the Modi government making a one-time provision to clear all subsidy dues to the Food Corporation of India and fertiliser companies. This time's overshooting is entirely on account of current obligations, linked to the government's decision to cushion consumers and farmers from the ravages of Covid-19 and the Russia-Ukraine war.



The last three years have, no doubt, been extraordinary in terms of external shocks —the pandemic (2020-21 and 2021-22), weather (2021-22) and war (2022-23) — with each seamlessly transitioning to the other. One can, to that extent, defend the spike in subsidy spending as response to crises that come only once in a decade or more. The government can, indeed, take credit for ensuring that the poor and vulnerable got access to free/near-free grain through the pandemic — not a small thing for a country that saw millions die during the 1943 Bengal Famine or the great drought of 1899-1900. There was also no significant shortage of urea and di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) for Indian farmers, despite the disruptions to the global fertiliser trade following the war. Even on petrol and diesel, the Modi government softened the blow by not allowing retail prices to go up since early-April this year.

All this, of course, entails costs. The Rs 5,32,446.79 crore subsidy bill on the 3Fs will consume nearly a quarter of the Centre's budgeted revenue receipts for this fiscal. Amounts apart, the problem lies in the market distortions created and incurred excessively even in normal years. The Modi government has addressed this substantially in fossil fuels, which are today, rightly, net taxed than subsidised. But this does not apply to fertiliser and food. Since November 2012, the retail price of urea has been raised just once — from Rs 5,360 to Rs 5,628 per tonne — only to cover the cost of neem-coating. The same goes for DAP, with fertiliser companies being forced to heavily under-price it as well. The issue prices of wheat and rice through the regular public distribution system, too, are frozen at Rs 2-3/kg since July 2013. Biting the bullet on food and fertiliser subsidy, by replacing them with targeted direct benefit transfers, would be too much to expect in a year of many elections.

OLD IS NOT GOLD

With the freshly minted Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh, Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu, reiterating that the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) will be restored by the newly elected Congress-led government, the State would now become the fourth to do so. It is no surprise that the promise of the return of OPS — it guarantees pension at 50% of the last drawn basic pay — boosted the beleaguered party as government employees and retirees form a significant portion of the hilly State's electorate. A Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey supported the fact that awareness (74% of those surveyed) and support for the Congress's promise was high (70%), possibly playing a role in the party pipping the BJP to pole position — there was a single percentage point difference between them. Government staff seem to prefer the scheme as it allows them to avert their contribution of 10% of their basic pay and dearness allowance towards the employee pension funds, as envisaged in the National Pension Scheme (NPS) since inception in 2004. But, concomitantly, reverting to OPS will tax the State's exchequer. Data show that pension payments form nearly 25.6% of States' own tax revenue — 80% for Himachal — but fall to close to a still substantial 12% of the total revenue receipts of States. Along with wages and salaries of government staff, the burden is set to be quite high.

States reverting to OPS can achieve some short-term gains as they need not put up the matching contribution of 10% towards employee pension funds. But with a greying population, the burden of payments will fall on future generations. An argument can be made for enhancing State revenues by further taxation to fund the scheme. The NPS, that has been in place and which allows employees to contribute to their pension corpus from their salaries with matching contribution from the government, is more robust as this corpus is invested through Pension Fund Managers and eases the State's burden. The NPS has built a substantial corpus and subscriber base over time. The Congress-led UPA government had indeed taken forward the pension reforms by the



previous NDA regime and this is how the NPS has become relevant over the years. Breaking a consensus on pension reforms and reverting to OPS amounts to an imprudent option as it will only benefit organised government sector employees, increase the fiscal burden of carrying these payments and take up a significant portion of the State's budget, thereby curtailing its outlays on general welfare as a whole. This holds good even if it allows for short-term electoral dividends and caters to those who form the backbone of the government machinery.

'INDIA MAY BE FIRST TO HOLD SATELLITE SPECTRUM AUCTION'

India will be the first country to auction spectrum for satellite communication (SatCom), and it should be designed to attract investments in the sector, telecom regulator TRAI chairman P.D. Vaghela said on Tuesday.

Speaking at a Broadband India Forum summit on SatCom, Mr. Vaghela said the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) would soon make recommendations to make permissions required for satellite communication from various Ministries — Information and Broadcasting, Space and Telecom — seamless to enhance ease of doing business in the sector. He also said TRAI had received a reference from the Department of Telecommunication for the spectrum required to be put to auction and associated aspects of satellite-based communication. "I think India will be the first to handle the issue of auctioning the space base spectrum. We are working on it."

TRAI is yet to come up with a consultation paper on the spectrum auction as per the standard process meant for satellite communication.

When asked about the status of the paper, Mr. Vaghela said that TRAI was in discussion with experts and regulators worldwide for a suitable model and the consultation paper would be floated after those discussions are over.



DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

NASA TO CONDUCT FIRST GLOBAL WATER SURVEY FROM SPACE

A NASA-led international satellite mission was set for blastoff from Southern California early on Thursday on a major Earth science project to conduct a comprehensive survey of the world's oceans, lakes and rivers for the first time.

Dubbed SWOT, short for Surface Water and Ocean Topography, the advanced radar satellite is designed to give scientists an unprecedented view of the life-giving fluid covering 70% of the planet, shedding new light on the mechanics and consequences of climate change.

A Falcon 9 rocket, owned and operated by billionaire Elon Musk's commercial launch company SpaceX, was set to lift-off before dawn on Thursday from the Vandenberg U.S. Space Force Base, about 170 miles (275 km) northwest of Los Angeles, to carry SWOT into orbit.

If all goes as planned, the SUV-sized satellite will produce research data within several months.

Nearly 20 years in development, SWOT incorporates advanced microwave radar technology that scientists say will collect height-surface measurements of oceans, lakes, reservoirs and rivers in high-definition detail over 90% of the globe.

The data, compiled from radar sweeps of the planet at least twice every 21 days, will enhance ocean-circulation models, bolster weather and climate forecasts and aid in managing scarce freshwater supplies in drought-stricken regions, according to researchers.

The satellite was designed and built at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) near Los Angeles. Developed by the U.S. space agency in collaboration with its counterparts in France and Canada, SWOT was one of 15 missions listed by the National Research Council as projects NASA should undertake in the coming decade.

"It's really the first mission to observe nearly all water on the planet's surface," said JPL scientist Ben Hamlington, who also leads NASA's sea-level change team.

One major thrust of the mission is to explore how oceans absorb atmospheric heat and carbon dioxide in a natural process that moderates global temperatures and climate change.

Scanning the seas from orbit, SWOT is designed to precisely measure fine differences in surface elevations around smaller currents and eddies, where much the oceans' drawdown of heat and carbon is believed to occur. And SWOT can do so with 10 times greater resolution than existing technologies, according to JPL.

Looking for ocean's tipping point

Oceans are estimated to have absorbed more than 90% of the excess heat trapped in Earth's atmosphere by human-caused greenhouse gas emissions.

Studying the mechanism by which that happens will help climate scientists answer a key question: "What is the turning point at which oceans start releasing, rather than absorbing, huge amounts of heat back into the atmosphere and accelerate global warming, rather than limiting it," said Nadya Vinogradova Shiffer, SWOT's program scientist at NASA in Washington.



SWOT's ability to discern smaller surface features also be used to study the impact of rising ocean levels on coastlines.

More precise data along tidal zones would help predict how far storm-surge flooding may penetrate inland, as well as the extent of saltwater intrusion into estuaries, wetlands and underground aquifers.

Freshwater bodies are another key focus SWOT, equipped to observe the entire length of nearly all rivers wider than 330 feet (100 meters), as well as more than 1 million lakes and reservoirs larger than 15 acres (62,500 square meters).

Taking inventory of Earth's water resources repeatedly over SWOT's three-year mission will enable researchers to better trace fluctuations in the planet's rivers and lakes during seasonal changes and major weather events.

NASA's SWOT freshwater science lead, Tamlin Pavelsky, said collecting such data was akin to "taking the pulse of the world's water system, so we'll be able to see when it's racing and we'll be able to see when it's slow."

SWOT's radar instrument operates at the so-called Ka-band frequency of the microwave spectrum, allowing scans to penetrate cloud cover and darkness over wide swaths of the Earth. This enables scientists to accurately map their observations in two dimensions regardless of weather or time of day and to cover large geographic areas far more quickly than before.

By comparison, previous studies of water bodies relied on data taken at specific points, such as river or ocean gauges, or from satellites that can only track measurements along a one-dimensional line, requiring scientists to fill in data gaps through extrapolation.

"Rather than giving us a line of elevations, it's giving us a map of elevations, and that's just a total game changer," Pavelsky said.

A BREAKTHROUGH IN US LABORATORY OFFERS NEW PROMISE FOR CLEAN ENERGY

For more than nine decades scientists have tried to replicate the process that produces energy for the sun and the stars — fusion. On Tuesday, researchers at the National Ignition Facility (NIF) in California, USA, announced a milestone in this endeavour. They merged two nuclei to produce a heavier nucleus. Their reactor produced about 1.5 times more energy than what was used in the process. In all the earlier attempts to harness the power of fusion, the reactors used up more energy than what was produced. But scientists say that it will be at least two decades before the process pioneered in the California laboratory can be scaled up. Moreover, the NIF's primary mandate is defence related, making the immediate prospects of clean energy from its reactors remote. Even then, in a world desperately searching for technologies that can power the developmental needs of nations without adding to the GHG load, the breakthrough at NIF has generated excitement.

Several countries are shifting to renewable energies to meet their international climate-related commitments. Yet, power generation currently is responsible for 25-30 per cent of global GHG emissions. The inherently unstable nature of renewables means that countries find it very difficult to jettison fossil-fuel energy sources. Conventionally-produced nuclear energy — that uses fission technology — is relatively cleaner. But accidents at Chernobyl in 1986 and Fukushima in 2011 have raised serious questions over the safety of fission-powered plants. According to the IEA's



best-case scenario, the world's nuclear energy generation capacity is likely to double by 2050 compared to 2020. The global body has repeatedly flagged concerns about the efficacy of the nuclear reactors — by and large in the US and Europe — given that about two-thirds of them have been in operation for more than 30 years. It has also maintained that the realisation of the best-case scenario would require significant investments in innovative nuclear technologies.

The UK-based JET laboratory has increased its net output in the past 25 years. Last year, researchers reported that they had created “a mini star and held it together for five seconds”. At an international collaborative project in France, of which India is also a part, researchers are using magnetic fields to create fusion. Japanese, Chinese and South Korean scientists are also working on this technology. Their efforts will be keenly watched.

WILL NEW ALZHEIMER'S DRUG WORK?

In late November, news of the success of a drug to reduce cognitive decline in patients with Alzheimer's disease burst on the horizon with all the promise of being a silver bullet. The drug, lecanemab, jointly developed by pharma companies Biogen and Eisai, was tested on patients with early Alzheimer's. Results of the study published in the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) showed modest effects in arresting decline of cognitive and functional aspects in patients with early disease. This has sparked hope in a world where an estimated 55 million people live with the debilitating effects of Alzheimer's disease.

What is lecanemab?

Lecanemab belongs to a class of drugs called monoclonal antibodies. These antibody-mediated drugs target beta amyloid, the protein deposition that is seen in patients with Alzheimer's disease, and disrupts cells function. Neuropsychiatrist Ennapadam. S. Krishnamoorthy, founder, Buddhi Clinic, Chennai, says: “For years amyloid plaques have thought to be an important target for treatment in Alzheimer's. This class of drugs does precisely that.”

As per the NEJM paper, the clinical phase-3 trial involved persons 50 to 90 years of age with early Alzheimer's disease (mild cognitive impairment or mild dementia due to Alzheimer's disease) with evidence of amyloid deposition. Participants were randomly assigned intravenous lecanemab or placebo. It was observed that lecanemab “robustly removed the amyloid plaques.” This was the primary end point of the trial, which showed a change in the score recorded at baseline when the trial began on the Clinical Dementia Rating–Sum of Boxes (CDR-SB). Key secondary end points included a change in amyloid burden on PET (positron-emission topography). There were changes both in the lecanemab group versus the placebo group, the researchers concluded.

LENDING A HELPING HAND TO ELIMINATE TB AS NI-KSHAY MITRA

Public health experience has shown that undernutrition and TB form a vicious cycle. Poor nutritional status predisposes an individual to get infected by the disease, or have a dormant disease manifest clinically. TB leads to depletion of nutrient reserves and aggravation of undernutrition.

Optimum nutritional support to TB patients improves weight gain, adherence to therapy, muscle strength, quality of life, robust recovery and reduced mortality. Good nutrition also prevents relapse of the disease.



Direct cash benefits

With a sharper focus on the nutritional improvement among TB patients, the Union Health Ministry launched the Ni-kshay Poshan Yojana in 2018 as part of National TB Elimination Programme (NTEP) which provides direct cash benefit transfer of ₹500 per month to TB patients on treatment.

Large-scale country-wide health programmes such as smallpox and polio eradication became a success only through Jan bhagidari (people's participation). Community participation plays a key role in mass awareness, behaviour change, demand creation, clearing myths and convincing the reluctant to embrace services. The success of these health programmes reinforced our belief that a further augmentation of multi-sectoral approach involving community and institutional-stakeholder support in TB elimination is required. This can play a pivotal role in addressing the social and nutritional determinants, thereby contributing toward the attainment of national goal.

Jan bhagidari forms the core principle of the recently launched Pradhan Mantri TB Mukh Bharat Abhiyaan to provide additional support to TB patients.

The Ni-kshay mitras

Under this, Ni-kshay Mitras can adopt and care for TB patients. Ni-kshay Mitras are volunteers who could be individuals, NGOs, co-operative societies, corporates, and even political parties.

They commit to help the TB patients through nutritional support, nutritional supplements, additional investigations and vocational support.

This public health initiative has already shown good uptake. Within three months of its launch, more than 52,000 Ni-kshay Mitras have registered.

Helping a TB patient could avert ruinous downside of a family due to wage loss. Humanitarian support from people could save the life of a TB patient.

THOSE FASCINATING HORNBILLS

The logo for India's upcoming G20 presidency was officially unveiled recently at the Hornbill festival in Nagaland. This popular festival showcases the art, culture and cuisine of Nagaland. It also brings attention to a family of some of the largest, most magnificent birds in our country.

The Great Hornbill is found in the Himalayan foothills, the Northeast and the Western Ghats. It is the state bird of Arunachal Pradesh and Kerala. With a wingspan of five feet, it presents an awesome (and noisy) spectacle while landing on a perch. The wreathed hornbill, the brown hornbill and the rufous-necked hornbill are slightly smaller, and only found in Northeast India. A great place to spot the oriental pied hornbill is the Rajaji National Park, Uttarakhand. The Malabar grey hornbill's loud 'laugh' echoes in the Western Ghats. The smallest of the group, the Indian grey hornbill is found all over (except the Thar Desert), and is often spotted in urban settings such as Theosophical Society gardens in Chennai.

Their large, heavy beaks pose some limitations—for balance, the first two vertebrae are fused. Hornbills can move their heads as in 'yes', but have difficulty in saying 'no'. Large beaks are also seen in toucans from Central and South America — an example of convergent evolution — as both birds have the same feeding ecology.



Tall trees preferred

Hornbills prefer tall trees for their nests (breast height being 1.5 metres or more). There is a mutualism between these birds and the trees where they nest. As large fruit-eating birds, hornbills play a vital role in dispersing the seeds of about 80 rainforest trees. Some trees, such as the cup-calyx white cedar suffer a 90% decline in seed dispersal beyond the parent tree when hornbill populations decline, negatively impacting the biodiversity of forests.

The towering Tualang tree of Southeast Asia is so entwined in folklore that it is considered a taboo to fell this tree. It is the preferred habitat of the helmeted hornbill. The fruiting season coincides with the birds' reproductive cycle. Traditional ecological knowledge stresses the value of hornbills in dispersing the seeds, which are expectorated from the throats of the birds. "When the seeds sprout, the hornbills hatch", a saying goes.

Prone to hunting

Unfortunately, tall trees are the first targets of illegal logging, and so there has been a slow decline in hornbill numbers, as reflected in bird counts. Slow, because these birds are long lived (up to 40 years). Their large size makes them prone to being hunted. The helmeted hornbill of Sumatra and Borneo is critically endangered because its helmet-like casque (a horny outgrowth over the skull), called red ivory, is highly prized. Luckily, the casque of the Great Hornbill is not suitable for carving.

Hornbill populations appear to be faring better in South India, The Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysuru, has collected data to show that forest plantations are not as suited for hornbill populations as natural-growth rainforest, although nests are sometimes built in non-native silver oaks.

The adaptable nature of hornbills is also seen in their feeding on the fruits of the African Umbrella tree, which has been introduced as a shade tree in our coffee plantations.

TOUGHEST MATERIAL

Scientists have measured the highest toughness ever recorded of any material while investigating a metallic alloy made of chromium, cobalt, and nickel. Not only is the metal exceptionally strong and ductile — which, in materials science, means highly malleable and impressively strong — its strength and ductility improves as it gets colder.

This runs counter to most other materials in existence.

CrCoNi is a subset of a class of metals called high entropy alloys (HEAs). All the alloys in use today contain a high proportion of one element with lower amounts of additional elements added, but HEAs are made of an equal mix of each constituent element. These balanced atomic recipes bestow some of these materials with an extraordinarily high combination of strength and ductility when stressed, which together make up what is termed "toughness".

The toughness of this material near liquid helium temperatures (20 kelvin, -424 Fahrenheit) is as high as 500 megapascals square root metres.



THE ARCTIC IS BECOMING WETTER AND STORMIER, SCIENTISTS WARN

As humans warm the planet, the once reliably frigid and frozen Arctic is becoming wetter and stormier, with shifts in its climate and seasons that are forcing local communities, wildlife and ecosystems to adapt, scientists said Tuesday in an annual assessment of the region.

Even though 2022 was only the Arctic's sixth warmest year on record, researchers saw plenty of new signs this year of how the region is changing.

A September heat wave in Greenland, for instance, caused the most severe melting of the island's ice sheet for that time of the year in over four decades of continuous satellite monitoring. In 2021, an August heat wave had caused it to rain at the ice sheet's summit for the first time. "Insights about the circumpolar region are relevant to the conversation about our warming planet now more than ever," said Richard Spinrad, administrator of the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "We're seeing the impacts of climate change happen first in polar regions."

Temperatures in the Arctic Circle have been rising much more quickly than those in the rest of the planet, transforming the region's climate into one defined less by sea ice, snow and permafrost and more by open water, rain and green landscapes.

Over the past four decades, the region has warmed at four times the global average rate, not two or three times as had often been reported, scientists in Finland said this year. Some parts of the Arctic are warming at up to seven times the global rate, they said.

Between October 2021 and September, air temperatures above Arctic lands were the sixth warmest since 1900, the report card said, noting that the seven warmest years have been the last seven. Rising temperatures have helped plants, shrubs and grasses grow in parts of the Arctic tundra, and 2022 saw levels of green vegetation that were the fourth highest since 2000, particularly in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, northern Quebec and central Siberia.

THORACIC AORTIC ANEURYSM: CONDITION THAT KILLED FOOTBALL WRITER GRANT WAHL DURING QATAR WORLD CUP

The American football writer Grant Wahl died last week after a catastrophic tear in a major blood vessel leading out of his heart, his family has said. Wahl's sudden and completely unexpected death in Qatar last week shocked everyone who knew him and his journalism and triggered speculation about the reason, which included dark suggestions about retaliation by the Qatari government for a critical report that he had filed and possible links to Covid-19 vaccines. Wahl was 49 years old and healthy at the time of his death.

The autopsy found that Wahl had an "ascending thoracic aortic aneurysm", a weakening of the blood vessel that often goes undetected, The New York Times reported. As the aneurysm grows, it may produce a cough, shortness of breath or chest pain, the report said — some of which Wahl experienced while in Qatar.

The condition

An aneurysm is a localised weakening of the wall of a blood vessel, which causes the vessel to bulge in that area — as a result of which the vessel may widen to more than 50 per cent of its usual diameter. Aneurysms are more commonly seen in arteries than in veins.



The aorta is the main artery that carries oxygenated blood from the heart to the rest of the body; it is also the body's largest blood vessel. An aortic aneurysm is a weakening and bulging in a portion of the aorta; "thoracic" refers to that section of the blood vessel that passes through the chest. According to a note by Johns Hopkins Medicine, aneurysms occur more often in the portion of the aorta that runs through the abdomen rather than the chest (causing what is called "abdominal aortic aneurysm").

An aneurysm increases in size over time, and the wall of the blood vessel gets progressively weaker in that area. The vessel may ultimately burst or separate, triggering a bleeding rush that can be life-threatening, and potentially lethal.

Causes and symptoms

Among the possible causes of thoracic aortic aneurysm, the Johns Hopkins note lists (i) degenerative disease that causes breakdown of the aortic wall tissue; (ii) genetic disorders; (iii) family history; (iv) vasculitis, or inflammation of the arteries; and (v) atherosclerosis, or the build-up of plaque on the walls of the artery. In rare cases, an infection can also trigger an aneurysm.

The NYT report said doctors are exploring whether Wahl had Marfan syndrome, a genetic disorder that increases the risk of this type of aneurysm. He was tall and thin and had long arms, all of which can be signs of the syndrome, the report said.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) page on Marfan syndrome describes it as a genetic condition that affects connective tissue and can damage the blood vessels and cause aneurysms of the aorta. The syndrome presents in around 1 in 5,000 individuals and is caused by a mutation in the FBN1 gene that limits the body's ability to make the proteins needed to build connective tissue, according to the CDC.

The Johns Hopkins information sheet says symptoms of thoracic aortic aneurysms may depend on the location, size and speed of growth of the bulging; often, there are no symptoms at all.

Symptoms, if they appear, may include (i) pain in the jaw, neck, chest, or upper back; (ii) wheezing, coughing, or shortness of breath (due to pressure on the trachea); (iii) hoarseness (due to pressure on the vocal cords); and (iv) trouble swallowing due to pressure on the oesophagus. These symptoms are not unique to thoracic aortic aneurysms, which may delay focussed medical attention.

Wahl had complained of a cold in the days before he passed away. He collapsed in the press box during the Argentina-Netherlands quarterfinal match, and could not be revived.

Diagnosis and treatment

According to the Johns Hopkins note, a doctor may look at the patient's medical history and carry out a detailed physical examination, including a computed tomography (CT) scan, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), an echocardiogram (Echo), a transoesophageal echocardiogram (TEE), a chest X-ray, and an arteriogram (angiogram).

Treatment may include monitoring the size and rate of growth of the bulge through an MRI or CT, and managing risk factors such as quitting smoking, controlling blood sugar (for diabetics), losing weight (if overweight), and eating healthy. Medicines may be prescribed for high cholesterol or high blood pressure.



Surgical intervention may be needed if the aneurysm is large or is causing symptoms, and may include thoracic aortic aneurysm open repair (making a large incision) or endovascular aneurysm repair (EVAR), which requires small incisions in the groin. The surgery could remove the aneurysm, or insert a stent to support the blood vessel against possible rupture.

WHAT IS 'STIFF-PERSON SYNDROME', THE RARE NEUROLOGICAL DISORDER CELINE DION SUFFERS FROM?

French-Canadian singer Celine Dion has opened up about being diagnosed with Stiff-Person Syndrome (SPS), a rare neurological condition that makes the muscles spasm uncontrollably. The disorder has left her with difficulties in walking and singing due to which she will be unable to take part in planned shows in the UK and Europe next year.

Sharing that this condition affects “something like one in a million people”, Dion added, “While we’re still learning about this rare condition, we now know that this is what has been causing all of the spasms that I’ve been having.”

What is Stiff-Person Syndrome?

It is a syndrome of fluctuating but progressive muscle stiffness and spasm that preferentially affects axial (back and abdominal) muscles, neurological experts noted. “It is a central nervous system disorder, meaning encephalomyelopathy, in which myelopathic features predominate in most patients. It frequently affects women with a median onset of 35 to 40 years of age,” Dr Mohan Krishna J, Consultant Neurologist, Yashoda Hospitals, Hyderabad said.

What are its causes?

Dr Vipul Gupta, Chief, Neurointerventional Surgery and Co-Chief, Stroke Unit, Artemis Hospital, Gurugram said that while the cause behind SPS is not fully understood yet, “there have been reports that spasms occur at any random time and can be triggered by loud noises, touch, and emotional distress.”

Explaining further, Dr Mohan said that this autoimmune disease is caused by antibodies to proteins, resulting in impaired GABAergic (Gamma amino butyric acid) inhibition of the motor nerves in the brain and spinal cord. “It is associated with GAD65 (Glutamic acid decarboxylase) and amphiphysin antibodies. 70 per cent of patients with GAD antibodies have diabetes mellitus as a comorbidity. It is associated with other autoimmune diseases like cerebellitis, myasthenia gravis, hypo/hyperthyroidism, rheumatoid arthritis, systemic lupus erythematosus,” he said.

He added that people with amphiphysin antibodies can have SPS as a paraneoplastic (a symptom of underlying malignancy) manifestation with predominant upper limbs or cranial nerve involvement. “The malignancies associated with stiff-person syndrome are breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and small cell carcinoma of the lung,” the expert said.

Common Symptoms

According to experts, this syndrome can manifest itself in many ways. “SPS is known to affect the body posture of a person due to severe pain and stiffness in muscles in the trunk (torso), arms and legs. But symptoms can also include a person having greater sensitivity to noise, touch, and emotional distress,” Dr Gupta said.



Treatment

Dr Mohan said that since it is a rare disease with heterogenous clinical manifestations, the diagnosis may be delayed by an average of six years following symptom onset.

“Treatment involves the use of both symptomatic agents to enhance GABAergic influences and Immuno modulating treatment aimed at the autoimmune basis of the disease. In patients with paraneoplastic Stiff Person Syndrome, identification and eradication of the underlying malignancy can alleviate symptoms. Corticosteroids are rarely used as Immuno modulating agents in Stiff Person Syndrome because of a high incidence of concurrent diabetes mellitus, he said, emphasising the need for awareness “in the community and among medical professionals” for “early diagnosis and good treatment outcomes”.

HOW GENE THERAPY COULD CURE CANCER

The story so far:

Scientists in the United Kingdom testing a new form of cancer therapy, reported success in a teenaged girl, Alyssia, with a form of cancer called T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukaemia.

What happens in this form of cancer?

In this form of blood cancer, the T-cells, which are a class of white blood cells, equipped to hunt and neutralise threats to the body, turn against the body and end up destroying healthy cells that normally help with immunity. The disease is rapid and progressive and is usually treated by chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

What marked Alyssia’s treatment?

The BBC reported that Alyssia, 13, tried several of the standard treatments including chemotherapy and radiation but with limited success. Just when it seemed there was no hope, she was enrolled in the trial testing of an experimental medicine. This trial was led by doctors and scientists at the University College, London and Great Ormond Street hospital. Alyssia was the first to receive experimental gene therapy that relied on a new technique called ‘base editing.’

What is ‘base editing?’

A person’s genetic code is several permutations of four bases: Adenine (A), Guanin (G), cytosine (C) and thymine (T). Sequences of these bases, akin to letters in the alphabet, spell out genes that are instructions to produce the wide array of proteins necessary for the body’s functions. In Alyssia’s case, her T-cells — perhaps because of a mis-arrangement in the sequence of bases — had become cancerous. A way to correct this mis-arrangement could mean a healthier immune system. In the last two decades, the world of biomedical engineering has been enthused by a technique that allow genes to be altered and errors ‘fixed.’ The most popular among these approaches has been the CRISPR-cas9 system.

Inspired by how certain bacteria defend themselves against viruses, by snipping out and storing pieces of their genes, the CRISPR-cas 9 system, consists of an enzyme that acts like molecular scissors. It can be made to cut a piece of DNA at a precise location and a guide RNA can be used to insert a changed genetic code at the sites of incision. While there are a few ways to effect such changes, the CRISPR-cas9 system is believed to be the fast, most versatile system to effect such gene editing. David Liu, of the Broad Institute, Massachusetts has improvised on the CRISPR-cas9



system to be able to directly change certain bases: thus, a C can be changed into a G and T into an A.

While still a nascent technology, base editing is reportedly more effective at treating blood disorders which are caused by so-called single point mutations, or when a change in a single base pair can cause terminal disease.

How did base-editing work for Alyssia's therapy?

The objective of the gene therapy in the case of T-cell leukemia was to fix her immune system in a way that it stops making cancerous T-cells. First, healthy T-cells were extracted from a donor and put through a series of edits. The first base edit blocked the T-cells targeting mechanism so it would cease attacking Alyssia's body, the second removed a chemical marking, called CD7, which is on all T-cells and the third prevented the cells being killed by a chemotherapy drug. Finally, the T-cells were programmed to destroy all cells — cancerous or protective — with CD7 marked on it. After spending a month in remission, she was given a second donor transplant to regrow her immune system that would contain healthy T-cells.

How effective was the treatment?

Three months after the treatment, her cancer seemed to resurface but the most recent investigations suggest no signs of it, according to the BBC. Alyssia was one of 10 people enrolled in the trial to receive the treatment.

It has been 1.5 years since she was first diagnosed with the disease and whether the treatment has reliably and entirely fixed her immune system, remains to be established.

WHAT IS END-TO-END ENCRYPTION AND WHY ARE TECH COMPANIES FOCUSING ON IT?

Apple, on Wednesday, announced it will be increasing the number of data points protected by end-to-end encryption on iCloud from 14 to 23 categories. The company claimed that with end-to-end encryption, user data will be protected even in case data is breached in the cloud. Similarly, Elon Musk, in November, said that he wanted Twitter DMs to be encrypted. He also shared that he is in contact with Moxie Marlinspike, creator of Signal who was willing to help out with encrypting Twitter DMs. However, government agencies are not happy with the development. The FBI in a statement to AP said that while it remains a strong advocate of encryption, it is deeply concerned with the threat that end-to-end encryption and user-only access pose. The agency insisted they hinder its ability to protect Americans from cyber-attacks, violence against children, and terrorism.

What is end-to-end encryption?

End-to-end encryption is a communication process that encrypts data being shared between two devices. It prevents third parties like cloud service providers, internet service providers (ISPs) and cybercriminals from accessing data while it is being transferred. The process of end-to-end encryption uses an algorithm that transforms standard text into an unreadable format. This format can only be unscrambled and read by those with the decryption keys, which are only stored on endpoints and not with any third parties including companies providing the service. End-to-end encryption has long been used when transferring business documents, financial details, legal proceedings, and personal conversations. It can also be used to control users' authorisation when accessing stored data, which seems to be what Apple intends to do.



Where is it used?

End-to-end encryption is used to secure communications. Some of the popular instant-messaging apps that use it are Signal, WhatsApp, iMessage, and Google messages. However, instant messaging is not the only place where user data is protected using end-to-end encryption. It is also used to secure passwords, protect stored data and safeguard data on cloud storage.

Why are tech companies using it?

Apple, on its blog, cited data breach research, “The Rising Threat to Consumer Data in the Cloud”, stating that the total number of data breaches more than tripled between 2013 and 2021. The company shared that data of 1.1 billion personal records were exposed in 2021 alone and that it is trying to address this rising threat by implementing end-to-end encryption. Apple also said that it believes the extra layer of protection would be valuable to targets of hacking attacks launched by well-funded groups. Mr. Musk has also publicly talked about his desire to improve Twitter’s direct messages. Mr. Musk told employees that the company would encrypt DMs and work to add encrypted video and voice calling between users, according to a report from The Verge.

The focus on end-to-end encryption seems to stem from the company’s desire to position itself as a provider of secure data storage and transfer services. End-to-end encryption is also seen as a technology that secures users’ data from snooping by government agencies, making it a sought-after feature by activists, journalists, and political opponents.

What does it mean for users?

End-to-end encryption ensures that user data is protected from unwarranted parties including service providers, cloud storage providers, and companies that handle encrypted data.

Apple on its support page shared that end-to-end encrypted data can only be decrypted by trusted devices where users are signed with their Apple ID. No one else can access this data and it remains secure even in the case of a data breach in the cloud storage.

The data can only be accessed with access to the device passcode, password, recovery contact, or recovery key. The technology also makes it harder for service providers to share user information from their services with authorities.

However, end-to-end encryption does not protect metadata, which includes information like when a file was created, the date when a message is sent and the endpoints between which data was shared.

Why are government agencies unhappy with it?

The FBI in a statement expressed displeasure at the idea of increasing use of end-to-end encryption by technology companies. It said that while it remains a strong advocate of encryption schemes that give “lawful access by design”, that would enable tech companies “served with a legal order” to decrypt data, it “continues to be deeply concerned with the threat end-to-end and user-only-access encryption pose”, it said in a statement to the Associated Press.

Attempts by government agencies across the globe, in the past, to access encrypted data hosted and stored by tech companies have met with strong resistance.



In 2019, the U. S., the U. K., and Australia planned to pressure Facebook to create a backdoor into its encrypted messaging apps. The aim was to allow governments to access the contents of private communications according to a report by The Guardian.

Australia, in 2018, passed laws that would force tech companies and service providers to build capabilities allowing law enforcement secret access to messages on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook.

The legislation, according to government agencies was necessary to prevent “terrorists” and other serious criminals from hiding from the law, according to a report by Al Jazeera.

While cryptographers and cybersecurity experts argue that attempts by law enforcement to weaken encryption with backdoors are ill-advised and could compromise the reliability of the internet, the move by tech companies to use end-to-end encryption to secure more user data seems to be getting stronger.

THE NARRATIVE OF A POST-TRUTH WORLD

Ever since “post-truth” was perceived to be a narrative of the contemporary world — it was also declared as Oxford Dictionary’s “Word of the Year” in 2016 — the term has remained shadowy and possibly a bit incomplete. Now, “gaslighting” has not only supplemented “post-truth” but also explained the modus operandi for igniting the modern collective post-truth rhetoric.

Political context as catalyst

It was destined to, though. Despite its origins in the 1930s, the term only became a cultural touchstone in the 2010s, particularly in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. It depicted a range of deceptive behaviours by politicians (Donald Trump), who frequently asserted that the media were spreading “fake news”, as well as the U.K. government’s handling of various issues regarding Brexit. The term first entered psychological literature in 1969. It made its way from the psychotherapist’s notebook to the wider public domain by 2018.

In 2018, the term was named a “buzzword” by The Guardian and shortlisted for the “word of the year” by Oxford Dictionary. And, finally, it became Merriam-Webster dictionary’s word of the year in 2022, after online searches spiked by 1,740%. As Merriam-Webster puts it, “In this age of misinformation — of ‘fake news,’ conspiracy theories, Twitter trolls, and deepfakes — gaslighting has emerged as a word for our time.”

As per Psychology Today, gaslighting is “a form of manipulation where targets are urged to doubt their memories, beliefs, feelings, or sanity”.

It is a process

The origin of the term can be traced to the 1938 play, ‘Gas Light’ by British playwright Patrick Hamilton (a dark tale of a marriage based on deceit and trickery, and with two film adaptations in the 1940s). In George Cukor’s Oscar-winning 1944 adaptation (starring Ingrid Bergman), a Victorian husband manipulates his wife into believing that she is going insane so that he can obtain her fortune. When she complains about the constant dimming of their London townhouse’s gaslights, he convinces her she has been hallucinating. It wasn’t, certainly.

Thus, gaslighting is not an incident but a process, with confusion, lying, deception, isolation, denial, accusation, and manipulation all parts of the process. A 2022 paper in Popular



Communication postulated: “As well as describing abuse in romantic relationships, the term has provided a lens for popular understanding of ‘post-truth’ politics.” Clearly, there is a significant overlap between gaslighting and post-truth political categories.

Also, in her 2021 paper titled “Post-truth politics and collective gaslighting” (Episteme), Natascha Rietdijk wrote that post-truth politics can “fundamentally undermine epistemic autonomy (trusting what one knows), in a way that is similar to the manipulative technique known as gaslighting.” Using examples from contemporary politics, she identified three categories of post-truth rhetorics — the introduction of counter-narratives, the discrediting of critics, and the denial of more or less plain facts — that tend to isolate people, leaving them disoriented and unable to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources.

In context

Knowing the dynamics of gaslighting thus enables us to envisage post-truth in a new light. In the movie, *Gaslight* (1944), Gregory deliberately tries to make his wife Paula lose her mind using manipulation. This, undoubtedly, is gaslighting at the individual level. In contrast, in collective gaslighting, a whole group of people is victimised, but the process would look very much like this.

In the Orwellian, post-truth world, words like “election”, “dissent”, and even “rights” are contested and derided. Political gaslighters may wish to push through a policy. Simple examples include “stolen elections” to save face after losing one or “fake news” to clamp down on free speech. Jair Bolsonaro’s denial of the systematic destruction of the Amazon rainforest or Donald Trump’s denial of the 2020 U.S. presidential election outcome are popular examples of collective gaslighting.

“Gaslighting,” is not simply lying. It is more sinister. Kate Abramson’s 2014 paper “Turning Up The Lights On Gaslighting” (Philosophical Perspectives) argues that the gaslighters’ characteristic desire is “to destroy even the possibility of disagreement”.

The 2022 paper, however, argued how a well-designed and well-intentioned “good echo chamber” might constitute a technique of resistance to online disinformation. But would that be effective to counter the collective gaslighting of the modern world? It is not quite clear, though. What is clear is that, in this post-truth world, collective “gaslighting” might go on shaping society’s outlook and direction in the near future, in various ways and directions.

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