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INTERNATIONAL

MAKING SENSE OF THE U.S. MID-TERM POLLS

The story so far:

The U.S. midterm elections held on November 8, which included contests for a wide range of positions in both houses of Congress and numerous state-level political offices, witnessed Democrats retaining control of the Senate and Republicans narrowly taking back the House of Representatives. This leaves the seat of the U.S. federal government more divided than it was before the election, requiring the White House of President Joe Biden to seek policy compromises with Republican Congressmen. Without such bipartisan bridge-building, it may be nearly impossible to get critical legislation passed and surmount the serious economic, public health and diplomatic challenges that the Biden administration faces. Failure by Democrats to reach across the aisle could jeopardise the prospects of the 46th president to leave behind a robust legacy on issues such as immigration, reproductive rights, and criminal justice reform.

Was there a 'red wave'?

Earlier this year, voter surveys hinted at the strong possibility of a "red wave" favouring Republicans in Congressional and state-level races, which would have potentially catapulted conservatives into power amidst deep disenchantment with the performance of Democrats in office, including the White House and Capitol Hill. After all, U.S. mid-term elections have traditionally served as a referendum on the sitting President, and Mr. Biden's job approval ratings have been one of the lowest on record at under 40%, according to recent polls. However, several developments appeared to militate against this early trend and no such wave occurred.

How much did the legacy of the Trump administration matter?

The bipartisan Congressional committee looking into the deadly January 6, 2021, attack by a mob on the Capitol buildings painted a disturbing picture of the role of former President Donald Trump and his allies in attempting to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election by instigating violence and fuelling the politics of hate. For example, the committee established from witness accounts and video evidence that Mr. Trump had stood back and refused to intervene, even as the rioting got out of control and far-right groups unleashed organised violence at the site of the Capitol, resulting in the deaths of several officials, property damage, and an unprecedented security threat to members of Congress in the building. The broader context of hate politics in the backdrop of this unsavoury episode was also highlighted during the committee's deliberations, especially the vicious election campaign of Mr. Trump and his acolytes. It comprised of denigrating minorities and women and included a targeted misinformation campaign against the election results claiming falsely that the election had been "stolen" through ballot voting, which was necessitated by the prevailing conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a good chance that the sheer polarising potential of this rhetoric played on the minds of some voters, especially independent and undecided voters, dampening enthusiasm for election-denier candidates. For example, in swing states, candidates who cast aspersions on the validity of the 2020 election lost resoundingly, with a few exceptions: in the 13 races in six battleground states where an election denier was on the ballot for governor, secretary of state or attorney general, 12 lost, according to election reports.

Did the 2022 abortion ruling affect voter preferences?



A second major political development that may have ended up favouring Democrats was the June decision by the U.S. Supreme Court to overrule women's constitutional right to abortion as enshrined in the ruling of the 1973 Roe vs Wade case. Republican triumphalism, which came on the back of Mr. Trump nominating three Supreme Court justices and tipping the balance of the apex body 6-3 towards conservatives, proved to be short-lived, as numerous states such as Kentucky pushed back against the abortion ban and liberal voters across the board were galvanised and mobilised in force earlier this month. In some recent surveys, including AP/VoteCast, 70% of respondents said the abortion ruling was "an important factor" in their voting decision, approximately 60% said they were "angry or dissatisfied" by it, and nearly 60% said they favoured a law "guaranteeing access to legal abortion nationwide."

What is the post-election scenario?

The Senate, which was poised on a 50-50 razor's edge seat distribution, tipped towards the Democrats. Key to that mid-term election outcome was the defeat in the Pennsylvania Senate race of the Trump-endorsed candidate Mehmet Oz to Democrat John Fetterman, giving Democrats 50 clear seats to Republicans' 49. One state, Georgia, will hold a runoff election on December 6 to decide the winner, and Vice-President Kamala Harris holds a tie-breaking vote, which puts Democrats in a slightly improved position for the 118th Congress that will kick off on January 3, 2023. The House of Representatives flipped from Democrat to Republican in the 2022 mid-term election. While Republicans have already crossed the majority mark of 218 in the 435-seat House, they nevertheless must reckon with the grim reality of having a narrow margin of victory, possibly close to the 221-212 margin that they had in 2001, including support from independents.

What will be the consequences of the new balance of power in Congress?

On the one hand, Democrats are no doubt breathing a sigh of relief over holding the Senate, for this implies that important aspects of policy including the nomination of judges to various courts can proceed unimpeded, sans Republican obstructionism in the Upper House. It may help them forget the bitter memory of the scenario under the Obama administration in 2016, when erstwhile Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell refused to conduct a vote on the White House's Supreme Court nominee, Merrick Garland. Their grip on the Senate also implies that Democrats can comfortably reject bills passed by the House and set their own agenda to counter the narrative of the House, which will doubtless have the Biden administration in its crosshairs.

The situation at the House will likely be the mirror image of this: Republicans will be free to launch probes into a wide range of policy issues, including the business dealings of Mr. Biden's son, Hunter; border policies with a view to stem the flow of undocumented workers and stopping immigrants from "stealing American jobs"; the recent FBI search of Mr. Trump's residence at Mar-a-Lago, Florida, for classified documents; and the bureaucratic decision-making behind COVID-related school closures and vaccine mandates.

ELECTION, REFERENDUM

The United Kingdom's Supreme Court ruling has extinguished, at least for the moment, the hopes of the Scottish National Party to conduct later next year a "consultative plebiscite" — a non-binding referendum on whether Scotland should be an independent nation. The highest court squashed two claims made by the Scottish government: first, that the consultative aspect of the referendum implied that it would have no constitutional consequences and fell entirely within the legal scope of devolved powers, and second, that it carried legitimacy under international law,



which permits democratic expressions of the right to national self-determination. The court argued that the devolved Parliament in Holyrood did not essentially have the power to authorise a second referendum on independence — the first being in 2014 — unless the Westminster Parliament agreed it could do so — which, unsurprisingly, in the climate of political uncertainty, it has not blessed. Further, the U.K. Supreme Court has posited, the SNP's draft bill for the referendum would likely have constitutional ramifications. Second, the court found that Scotland's position vis-à-vis the U.K. was not comparable to the scenario of a sub-national region occupied by a malign foreign power, subject to exploitative colonial control and refused the right to democratic representation of collective will. Given that this basic standard for making claims to independence under international law could not be met, in the eyes of the top court, it was not possible now for such deliberations to reach beyond the borders.

One thing is clear: SNP leader and First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, “is not an extremist”. While recognising that the Scottish government will have to abide by the court's ruling, she has however said that she wants the next U.K. general election to be a “de facto referendum” on independence, based on the plan for the SNP to make it a single-issue campaign, not dramatically different from the U.K.'s Conservative Party interpreting several elections as referendums on Brexit. There are two related issues with this framing. First, the political space for Scottish voters to express their preferences on issues other than whether Scotland ought to be independent would have disappeared, and that is not good for substantive democracy. Second, if the SNP is using the independence referendum issue to divert attention from its performance in government as an incumbent (administration of public services including the NHS and the regional economy), then that too does not help the cause of good governance in Scotland. Westminster would be wise to do more to win over Scottish hearts and minds, instead of relying on the harder route of judicial and political vetoes on referendums.

IRAN'S WOMEN ARE UNDETERRED AND FEARLESS. IN SHOWING SOLIDARITY, THE IRANIAN FOOTBALL TEAM MAKES ITS SILENCE COUNT

In a country where the woman's voice has systematically been subdued, and forced to submit to the diktats of regimes in power, the undeterred and fearless protests by Iranian women for basic rights and for civil and economic reforms are now being amplified by their countrymen, through words, companionship, and sometimes, with silence. At the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha, Qatar, on Monday, ahead of their opening match against England, the Iranian football team made their silence count. They stood quietly during the playing of the Iranian national anthem, in an apparent show of solidarity with the ongoing human-rights protests in Iran that began after the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini at the hands of the government's morality police in September, over an alleged breach of the Islamic republic's dress code for women. The escalating protests, one of the longest in over a decade in Iran, have been met with a brutal crackdown by the government that has resulted in the arrest, death and maiming of hundreds of civilians, especially the youth.

The courageous gesture of the Iranian national football team is being rightfully applauded. But the sporting arena has long been a stage for upholding demands for human rights, even if sponsorship clauses and potential sporting sanctions have made such shows of support isolated events. In 1966, at the height of the Vietnam War, boxing legend Muhammad Ali's refusal to be conscripted to the US Army as a conscientious objector had cost him his titles and licence to box in the US. Be it the Black Power Salute at the 1968 Summer Olympics by African-American athletes, gold medallist Tommie Smith and bronze medalist John Carlos, or Brazilian football legend Socrates



demanding democratic elections in his country, there are instances of sportsmen standing up for justice. In the last decade, social media has amplified such messages, turning what would otherwise be singular incidents into full-fledged global movements. This was evident with the Black Lives Matter movement that started with American football player Colin Kaepernick taking a knee to highlight police atrocities and racial injustice in the US. So powerful was the gesture that the International Olympic Committee allowed athletes to take a knee at last year's Olympics and even on Monday, England players took a knee before their World Cup match against Iran.

Brave as it was, it is important to recognise the gesture of the Iranian footballers as a supporting act to the fearless call of the women of their country for jin, jiyān, azādi (woman, life, freedom). The present movement is a culmination of years of rage and deprivation, of the infringement on women's independent thought and choice. Despite the heavy burden they bear, Iran's women have continued to find ways to rebel against the gender bigotry and the curtailment of human rights that begins but does not end with them, choosing to be survivors standing up to powerful men rather than giving in to archaic demands for conformity.

RIOTS AT CHINA'S IPHONE ASSEMBLY PLANT

The story so far:

Videos on Chinese social media on November 23 showed hundreds of workers protesting and clashing with police at the Foxconn factory in Zhengzhou, in central China's Henan province. The videos showed violent clashes between workers and thousands of hazmat-clad police deployed at the facility, where workers have been, for several weeks, protesting living conditions and delays in pay amid a COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdown. The continuing unrest at the plant has turned the spotlight on China's "zero-COVID" policy and the impact on both workers' conditions and global supply chains as the world's second-largest economy continues with stringent COVID-19 measures.

What led to the protests?

Zhengzhou, where Taiwanese electronics giant Foxconn established the world's largest iPhone assembly facility, has been dealing with a wave of COVID-19 cases since September. Reports in October said an outbreak at the Foxconn facility led to workers being locked down in dormitories for several weeks. Dramatic images in late-October showed some workers climbing the walls of the factories to escape the lockdown and walking back to their hometowns along highways, reminiscent of the migrant worker exodus seen during India's lockdown in March 2020.

With workers leaving, the local government has sought to hire hundreds of replacements, with reports in the Chinese media saying as many as one lakh new workers are being recruited to ensure Apple's supply chain remains undisrupted. The latest protests appear to have been carried out by some of the new recruits, who have, in videos, complained that they were denied the payments promised. Some have also complained of conditions in the factory and alleged they were not separated from COVID-19 positive cases.

How have the Chinese government, Foxconn and Apple responded?

The Chinese government has cracked down forcefully on the protesters, and videos on November 23 showed thousands of riot police, all clad in white hazmat suits, surrounding the facility and clashing with workers. Some clips showed the white-clad security personnel beating up and



kicking workers. Videos were being live streamed on Chinese social media websites by some of the protesters, before being taken down.

The response has been in keeping with the harsh enforcement of COVID-19 lockdowns across China. Just this week, there were also clashes between hazmat-clad police and people protesting lockdowns in southern Guangdong province, underlining growing public discontent at the continuing lockdowns as part of the “zero-COVID” policy three years into the pandemic.

Foxconn, in a statement, denied the workers’ claims, saying it had fulfilled contracts and that allegations of workers not being separated from COVID-19 cases were “untrue”. Apple said, in a statement, it had “Apple team members on the ground at our supplier Foxconn’s Zhengzhou facility” and was “reviewing the situation and working closely with Foxconn to ensure their employees’ concerns are addressed.” On November 23, reports said Foxconn would offer a payment for workers to leave, suggesting it wanted the recently arrived replacements, who have been involved in the protests, to leave the facility and to find new hires.

How will the protests impact Apple’s iPhone deliveries?

Since the COVID-19 outbreak in Zhengzhou, Apple has expressed concerns that its iPhone 14 shipments will be hit ahead of the key holiday season in the U.S., when orders are likely to surge. Foxconn’s Zhengzhou plant employed two lakh workers and was the biggest for Apple anywhere in the world.

Reuters had reported in October that Apple was already bracing for disruptions, even prior to the latest protests. With the departing new workers, the facility will likely take weeks to return to full capacity, although Foxconn said it was looking to offset disruptions by ramping up production in other facilities.

Foxconn produces around 70% of Apple’s iPhones. Reuters reported that while the Taiwanese firm is also looking to up production in India, it is still largely reliant on the Zhengzhou factory for assembly of most of its global output.

ON THE EDGE

The missile incident in Poland, in which two people were killed, should serve as a warning: the Ukraine conflict could potentially spill over into a wider war between nuclear-armed Russia and NATO. The Russian invasion of its neighbouring country and NATO’s decision to back Ukraine with military supplies have brought the two sides to an eyeball-to-eyeball situation, with only a spark needed for a conflagration. Immediately after the missile exploded inside Polish territory, which is a part of NATO, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy blamed Russia, calling it an attack on the West’s collective security and a significant escalation. Russia quickly distanced itself from the incident, but at least for a few hours, the world was on edge amid fears of this incident triggering an open war between Russia and NATO. But NATO leaders, including U.S. President Joe Biden, responded firmly and responsibly. Mr. Biden, who was in Bali to attend the G20 meeting, publicly refuted Mr. Zelenskyy’s claim, saying it was unlikely that the missile came from Russia, which Polish and NATO authorities confirmed later. What hit Poland was a Russian-made S300 defence missile, most likely fired by Ukraine against a Russian missile, they said. While their sober response avoided a showdown, the incident has highlighted the risks of this hair-trigger situation.

Mr. Zelenskyy’s comment was irresponsible. His anger towards Russia is justifiable given that his country is being bombarded on a daily basis, but as the President of Ukraine, what he says will



have consequences, and he should wait for the facts and respond cautiously when it comes to NATO-Russia tensions. Russia should understand that Ukraine is now a tinderbox. To overcome its battlefield failures, Russia is now deliberately targeting Ukrainian infrastructure with repeated missile attacks. A misfire could turn the nightmare into reality. All stakeholders, primarily Russia which started the war, have the responsibility to put in place the guardrails against escalation. They should turn the diffusion of the Polish crisis into an opportunity for open dialogue. As the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark A. Milley, pointed out, the conflict could enter a frozen stage during winter. Despite Ukraine's territorial gains, it is unlikely its forces will be able to expel Russians from all captured territories through force, he said, making his case for talks. Mr. Zelenskyy, reportedly under U.S. pressure, changed his earlier position that he would not hold talks with Mr. Putin. So, there is a small window for de-escalation. Russia must respond with concrete proposals and create conditions for a constructive dialogue.

WHY IS JAPAN INCREASING ITS DEFENCE BUDGET?

The story so far:

For decades, Japan has maintained a low profile on defence spending and remained dependent on its allies, mainly the U.S., for security guarantees. That has started changing with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) proposal of doubling the country's defence budget to 2% of the GDP in five years, in line with NATO members. If Japan, whose post-War, U.S.-drafted Pacifist Constitution, achieves more military capabilities, it could further alter the balance of power of East Asia.

What does Japan's Constitution say?

Article 9 of Japan's Constitution states that the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat and use of force as a means of settling international disputes. It also states that the country would never sustain land, sea and air forces with war potential. The Constitution was introduced when Japan was occupied by U.S. forces, but for decades, Japan's different political sections backed pacifism. Instead of a regular army, the country maintained Japan Self Defence Forces, with offensive weapons such as intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear arms strictly banned. But with China's rise in its neighbourhood, the nationalist sections within the ruling party, mainly under the leadership of the late former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, started pushing for more muscular, nationalist foreign and security policies.

In 2014, Japan's government reinterpreted Article 9 and gave more powers to the forces — they can now come to the defence of allies if they were attacked. The Diet, Japan's Parliament, later passed a series of legislation codifying the reinterpretation. Now, the LDP, under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, is pushing for increased spending on research and defence production.

What is the LDP's proposal?

For the fiscal year 2023, the government has already raised the defence budget to its highest level — six trillion yen (\$43 billion) or more than 1% of the world's third largest GDP. The LDP wants this to be doubled in five years as the geopolitical and regional risks the country is facing are rising. The Ministry of Defence is now planning to achieve "counter-attack capability". As part of the proposals, Japan will begin mass producing surface-to-ship missiles, a domestically-developed cruise missile with a range of over 1,000 km (which can hit both China and North Korea, even though it's not clear what Japanese law says about hitting targets inside another country) and high



speed glide missiles. Japan plans to deploy these weapons in 2026. The budget has allocated research and development funds for hypersonic guided missiles, which are five times faster than the speed of sound. Japan is also developing a new fighter jet — F-X. Mitsubishi Heavy Industries is designing the jet on which Japan has already spent more than 200 billion yen.

What triggered the change in policy?

The rapid rise of China and growing militarisation of North Korea were already strengthening the nationalist sections within Japan. Japan, which had occupied the whole of the Korean Peninsula and parts of China before the Second World War and had committed unspeakable crimes in its colonies, still has a testy relationship with China and the two Koreas. Recently, a missile North Korea launched flew over Japan and an ICBM fell near its territorial waters. In August, China carried out days-long live military drills around Taiwan, the self-ruled island internationally recognised as part of China that lies just 160 km west of Japan's southern islands. Besides China and North Korea, Russia's invasion of Ukraine also seems to have influenced Japan's thinking. Japan and Russia, which fought a disastrous war in 1904-05, have disputes over the ownership of the Kuril Islands that separate the Sea of Okhotsk from the Pacific Ocean. From Japan's point of view, western military guarantees to Ukraine did not stop Russia from invading its neighbouring country. The obvious question Japan's policymakers face is whether the security guarantees from the U.S. is enough to deter threats from a highly securitised neighbourhood where there are three nuclear powers—China, North Korea and Russia. This calculus seems to have quickened the push for remilitarism in Japan's security thinking. In the past, any bid to move away from pacifism would attract public criticism, but the changing regional situation is altering Japan's domestic political mood as well. A recent poll suggested that more than half of the Japanese public support raising the defence budget.

A DEEPER MESSAGE

At face value, the outcome of Nepal's general election was, expectedly, favourable to the ruling five-party alliance of the Nepali Congress, CPN (Maoist-Centre), CPN (Unified Socialist), Loktantrik Samajwadi Party, Nepal and Rastriya Janamorcha, which has won or established a lead in at least 87 of the 165 seats in the FPTP system and is tipped to win close to half of the 110 proportional representation seats. The coming together of the alliance is what helped it overcome the opposition coalition led by the K.P. Oli-helmed Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) — it won or leads in 49 seats in the FPTP system while the UML is leading as the single largest party in terms of PR votes. But the mandate shows that the long-standing mainstream parties now have challengers — the largely urban-based newcomer Rashtriya Swatantra Party has a lead in or won eight seats while emerging as the third largest party in vote terms and also get a sizeable number of PR seats in the House of Representatives. Led by a former television personality, Rabi Lamichhane, the RSP has vague ideological views but a clear position against federalism, seeking to dissolve the provincial assemblies that were set up under the federalist constitution. Its performance points to the inability of mainstream parties to ensure stability or effect policies to lift the living standards of Nepalis in a country that sees much youth out-migration.

The election results have also been a blow to the Maoists and the Madhesi parties, which played a crucial role in the federalisation of republican Nepal. Their legacy in constitution-building did not help them overcome the fact that voters were tired of their opportunist political stances. While there is no threat to republicanism or secularism in Nepal, a more comprehensive federal agenda will have to ensure that provinces are sufficiently empowered or else the enthusiasm for



federalism will wane further. The winning Nepali Congress will also have to look deeper into its electoral results which has been buoyed by the performance of its youth candidates. Led by veterans, the party must consider letting a younger leader (Gagan Thapa) take over. Unlike other south Asian democracies, Nepal's elections were marked by the absence, largely, of calls for voting on religious/sectarian basis, and delivered results true to the country's political diversity. Yet, a beleaguered Nepali citizenry that has waited for decades for democracy to unleash better developmental outcomes deserves change: it is now up to the parties to provide that.

CHASING ELUSIVE PEACE

In the early days of the Donald Trump administration, as it became apparent that parts of the U.S. establishment had been engaging the Taliban for talks, various other stakeholders activated overt dialogue platforms to discuss the future of Afghanistan. It was against this backdrop that the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan was launched in 2017, consisting of representatives of Russia, Afghanistan, India, Iran, China and Pakistan. It was aimed at ensuring a political settlement, intra-Afghan dialogue and creation of a stable and inclusive government in Kabul after the U.S. withdrawal.

The fourth edition of the format was held in the Russian capital on November 16. The call for the dialogue was given by Zamir Nabiyevich Kabulov, Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation for Afghanistan. In an article published in Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Mr. Kabulov launched a scathing criticism of the American handling of the Afghan situation as the U.S. banks continue to hold around \$9 billion of the Afghan reserves. Setting the stage for another round of the Moscow Format Consultations, Mr. Kabulov said, "Together with our regional partners, we counter this line of the West with efforts to coordinate assistance to the political and socio-economic stabilisation of the situation in Afghanistan, based on the understanding that the true national reconciliation is achievable through the creation of an inclusive ethno-political state leadership."

Difficult situation

The job is not easy. The Moscow Format's members are trying to deal with a difficult situation in which they want the Taliban to crack down on extremist and terror outfits inside Afghanistan even though the Taliban have not received global recognition as the de facto ruler of Kabul.

The members of the grouping have varying degrees of concerns regarding the Taliban regime. None of the member countries, in sync with the rest of the global community, has recognised the predominantly Pashtun set-up that replaced the Government of President Ashraf Ghani on August 16, 2021. But almost all the states have engaged the Taliban in security related dialogue. That apart, Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan have maintained diplomatic presence in Kabul.

That apart, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Uzbek officials have interacted with the Taliban on several occasions ever since the seismic developments of August 2021. India too has sent a special group of officials to Kabul to run the basic functions of the Embassy in Kabul and has been sending large quantities of humanitarian assistance to the country. Prior to this, India had participated in the third round of Moscow Format talks that was held in October 2021 in which an Indian delegation interacted with the Taliban representatives in Moscow.

Both Iranian and Russian missions in Kabul came under repeated attacks recently. China, on the other side, has its own concerns, mainly related to the presence of Uighur militants belonging to

the ETIM or the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. The total number of the ETIM fighters are not fully known but it is estimated to have at least 1,000 armed rebels in its ranks who are mostly from the Xinjiang province of China. That apart, China is concerned about the safety of its workers who are stationed in Pakistan and are active in safeguarding the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. So all sides, including India, Russia, China and Central Asian republics want to see a stable solution to the Afghan crisis so that their interests would be protected.

In the fourth round of consultations, the participants called for an “inclusive government” and for “national reconciliation” but the Taliban did not promise that it will endorse the Moscow Format’s recommendations and merely recognised the “praiseworthy stance”. In a curious turn of phrase, the Taliban said it will not allow “any third country to place military facilities in Afghanistan” and hinted at a quid pro quo, saying countries should not “put their land and airspace at the disposal of other countries against Afghanistan.”



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NATION

U.S. REMARK COMPARING MODI TO SAUDI PM WAS UNNECESSARY, SAYS INDIA

Criticising the U.S. State Department's comparison of immunity given to Prime Minister Narendra Modi since 2014 to the legal immunity now given to Saudi Crown Prince and PM Mohammed bin Salman, the government on Thursday said the U.S. comments were not "relevant, necessary or contextual".

The External Affairs Ministry also took aim at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) for issuing a "Country Update" that accused the government of "engaging in or tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations".

'Crackdown on dissent'

The "Country Update" had referred to India's "crackdown on civil society and dissent", pointing to the imprisonment and harassment of "journalists, lawyers, rights activists, academics, political leaders, religious minorities, and others critical of its policies". It recommended that the U.S. State Department, which periodically releases a list of countries being watched for religious freedom issues, designate India as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC).

He said the government had not protested with the U.S. Embassy or government, as the USCIRF is a U.S. Congressional body, not a government one. Mr. Bagchi expressed surprise at a comment by U.S. State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel on November 18 on the U.S. visa ban. Mr. Patel had said, in response to a number of questions from the U.S. press corps over the Biden administration's decision to give Saudi Prince Mohammed immunity in the Jamal Khashoggi murder case, that the U.S. had given similar immunity to Mr. Modi and a number of other leaders like former Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, former Congolese President Laurent Kabila and former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

EVERY SUPREME COURT BENCH WILL TAKE UP 10 TRANSFER, 10 BAIL PLEAS DAILY: CJI

Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud Friday said every bench of the Supreme Court will take up 10 transfer petitions and 10 bail applications every day.

The CJI told lawyers during mentioning hours that a decision to this effect was taken at a full court meeting and that as a consequence, all transfer petitions pending before the Supreme Court will be decided before the winter recess starting December 17.

"I must tell all the members of the Bar that there are about 3,000 transfer petitions pending. After having a full-court meeting with all my colleagues, we have all agreed that every day, every bench will take up 10 transfer petitions. We have 13 benches going on right now with the present strength. So, we will be disposing of about 130 (matters a day), 650 per week. So, in the five weeks, which we have before closing for the winter vacation, all transfer petitions shall be over," he said.

CJI Chandrachud added that after the transfer petitions, all benches will take up 10 bail matters as they involve questions of personal liberty. "I have also directed that we will give priority to bail matters. So, 10 bail matters every day after transfer petitions because that is a matter of personal liberty. Ten transfer petitions because those are family matters, followed by 10 bail matters across all benches. Then we will start the regular work."



On November 15, the CJI had said that he was “keeping a close watch on the listing of cases” to ensure that all fresh matters were listed for hearing without undue delay.

He pointed out that he was “also keeping a close tab on how many matters are being verified by the Registry on the removal of defects”.

Speaking at a felicitation event organised by the Supreme Court Bar Association a day before that, the CJI had said that “listing (of cases) has been a real problem” in the Supreme Court and added that the court is trying to do away with the human interface with the help of technology.

Stating that significant efforts were made during former CJI U U Lalit’s tenure to address concerns about listing, he said the process should be institutionalised so that it continues uninterrupted.

THE SC RULING ON PENSIONS FOR WOMEN IAF OFFICERS

In an order on November 16, the Supreme Court asked the Indian Air Force (IAF) to consider the grant of pensionary benefits to 32 Short Service Commission (SSC) women officers, who fought for 12 long years to be reinstated and granted permanent commission. This is the latest in a series of legal judgements related to women officers in the armed forces, giving them equal opportunities along with their male counterparts.

What did the Court say?

A Bench comprising of the Chief Justice of India (CJI) D. Y. Chandrachud, Justice Hima Kohli and Justice J.B. Pardiwala said in their order that “These women SSC officers had the legitimate expectation of being granted an opportunity to claim permanent commission in terms of prevailing policy”. The Bench further remarked that, “we are of the view that these women SSC officers be considered for grant of pensionary benefits,” while exercising its extraordinary power under Article 142 of the Constitution for doing complete justice in any matter pending before it. The officers had joined the service between 1993-1998 and were granted extensions of six and four years successively before being released from service between 2006 to 2009.

“Reinstatement cannot be a viable option keeping in mind the requirement related to exigencies of serving the nation,” it noted. The cases of the appellants will be evaluated on the basis of the HR Policy of November, 2010, the court said while making it clear that the officers shall not be entitled to arrears of salary. The CJI also appreciated the IAF for taking a “fair approach”.

Does the Army also offer permanent commission?

The Navy and the IAF had opened up permanent commission to women much before the Army.

In a landmark judgment in the Babita Puniya case in February 2020, the Supreme Court directed that women officers in the Army be granted permanent commission (PC) as well as command postings in all services other than combat. Further, on March 25, 2021 the Supreme Court in Lt. Col. Nitisha vs. Union of India held that the Army’s selective evaluation process discriminated against and disproportionately affected women officers seeking permanent commission.

Giving an overview on women officers in the armed forces, in a written reply in the Rajya Sabha in response to a question from Member of Parliament Priyanka Chaturvedi in August, Minister of State Ajay Bhatt said that in the Army, women are commissioned in 10 arms and services as officers and that permanent commission had been granted. “Women serve as medical doctors and



dentists in the Indian armed forces. Only women serve as nurses in Military Nursing Service. Women are being inducted as jawans in Corps of Military Police since 2019,” the reply said.

In another reply to Parliament, the government informed that the National Defence Academy (NDA) has started inducting women cadets from the Autumn 2022 term, with 19 vacancies being allotted to women. The Navy has also opened 12 branches, cadres and specialisations for women officers. It has already announced that women would be inducted as Agniveers under the Agnipath scheme, with training set to commence shortly. On the IAF, the reply added that, “women serve in all arms and services as officers in the IAF akin to their male counterparts.” As per a written reply in Parliament in March, there are 1,640 women officers in the IAF excluding medical, dental and nursing officers. This number includes 15 fighter pilots, and 53 transport and helicopter pilots each. The fighter stream of IAF was opened for women in 2016.

LAWYERS’ PROTESTS UNITE CJI, RIJIJU ON SAVING SANCTITY OF COLLEGIUM RULINGS

Saturday saw Law Minister Kiren Rijiju, an ardent critic of the Collegium system, worry about the outcome if such protests “recur” against future Collegium decisions too.

Chief Justice of India (CJI) D.Y. Chandrachud spoke of the choice between taking “tough decisions” or making it easy for oneself by saying “I’ll have a nice time until the Constitution tells me to retire”.

Mr. Rijiju has cautioned lawyers against the risk of getting “too loud” on their demands. The Law Minister referred to “norms practised for a long time” and “well-established conventions”.

“I heard some lawyers want to meet the Chief Justice of India on some transfer issue... In isolation, it may be one of the issues... but if this becomes a recurring instance for every decision taken by the Collegium or which is supported by the government, then where will it lead to... then the whole dimension will change,” Mr. Rijiju said at a function to felicitate the Chief Justice.

Only a few days ago, the Law Minister was reported to have said at a media conclave that “when we have a system that is not transparent, it reflects the thoughts of the lawyers and judges”.

But, on Saturday, the Minister admitted that “maybe I failed to convey what should be conveyed”.

Mr. Rijiju’s statements about the transfers and the ensuing protests on Saturday came before even the Chandrachud Collegium had published its resolution on the proposed transfers on the Supreme Court website.

It is also not known whether the Chandrachud Collegium has forwarded the reported recommendations of the transfers to the Union government.

On Saturday, the CJI and the Law Minister neither confirmed nor denied the reported transfer recommendations.

In his turn, the CJI had focussed on the disruptive aspect of the lawyers’ protests.

“When lawyers strike, who suffers? Consumers of justice for whom we exist suffer... not judges, not the lawyers. Possibly, the lawyers because after a few days their fees start drying up”.



A FIRST LOOK AT THE NEW DATA PROTECTION BILL

The story so far:

The latest draft of the data protection law — the Digital Personal Data Protection Bill, 2022 (DPDP Bill, 2022) — has now been made open for public comments and the government is expected to introduce the Bill in Parliament in the budget session of 2023.

Is this the first draft?

This is the fourth iteration of a data protection law in India. The first draft of the law — the Personal Data Protection Bill, 2018, was proposed by the Justice Srikrishna Committee set up by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) with the mandate of setting out a data protection law for India. The government made revisions to this draft and introduced it as the Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019 (PDP Bill, 2019) in the Lok Sabha in 2019. On the same day, the Lok Sabha passed a motion to refer the PDP Bill, 2019 to a joint committee of both the Houses of Parliament. Due to delays caused by the pandemic, the Joint Committee on the PDP Bill, 2019 (JPC) submitted its report on the Bill after two years in December, 2021. The report was accompanied by a new draft bill, namely, the Data Protection Bill, 2021 that incorporated the recommendations of the JPC. However, in August 2022, citing the report of the JPC and the “extensive changes” that the JPC had made to the 2019 Bill, the government withdrew the PDP Bill.

Why have there been so many revisions and changes?

Constant interactions with digital devices have led to unprecedented amounts of personal data being generated round the clock by users (data principals). When coupled with the computational power available today with companies (data fiduciaries), this data can be processed in ways that increasingly impair the autonomy, self-determination, freedom of choice and privacy of the data principal.

The current legal framework for privacy enshrined in the Information Technology Rules, 2011 (IT Rules, 2011) is wholly inadequate to combat such harms to data principals, especially since the right to informational privacy has been upheld as a fundamental right by the Supreme Court (K.S. Puttaswamy vs Union of India [2017]). It is inadequate on four levels; first, the extant framework is premised on privacy being a statutory right rather than a fundamental right and does not apply to processing of personal data by the government; second, it has a limited understanding of the kinds of data to be protected; third, it places scant obligations on the data fiduciaries which, moreover, can be overridden by contract and fourth, there are only minimal consequences for the data fiduciaries for the breach of these obligations.

While the need to have an effective personal data protection regime is undisputed, India like other jurisdictions has struggled to come up with an optimum formulation for several reasons. First, while protecting the rights of the data principal, data protection laws need to ensure that the compliances for data fiduciaries are not so onerous as to make even legitimate processing impractical. Second, the challenge lies in finding an adequate balance between the right to privacy of data principals and reasonable exceptions, especially where government processing of personal data is concerned. Third, given the rate at which technology evolves, an optimum data protection law design needs to be future proof — it should not be unduly detailed and centred on providing solutions to contemporary concerns while ignoring problems that may emerge going forward.



Fourth, the law needs to be designed for a framework of rights and remedies that is readily exercisable by data principals given their unequal bargaining power with respect to data fiduciaries.

What is the scope of the present formulation of the Bill?

The DPDP Bill, 2022 applies to all processing of personal data that is carried out digitally. This would include both personal data collected online and personal data collected offline but is digitised for processing. In effect, by being completely inapplicable to data processed manually, this provides for a somewhat lower degree of protection as the earlier drafts only excluded data processed manually specifically by “small entities” and not generally.

Furthermore, as far as the territorial application of the law is concerned, the Bill covers processing of personal data which is collected by data fiduciaries within the territory of India and which is processed to offer goods and services within India. The current phrasing, inadvertently, seems to exclude data processing by Indian data fiduciaries that collect and process personal data outside India, of data principals who are not located in India. This would impact statutory protections available for clients of Indian start-ups operating overseas, thereby impacting their competitiveness. This position further seems to be emphasised with the DPDP Bill, 2022 exempting application of most of its protections to personal data processing of non-residents of India by data fiduciaries in India.

How well does the DPDP Bill, 2022 protect data principals?

The bulwark of most data protection legislations consists of allowing maximum control to the data principal over their personal data. This happens by mandating a comprehensive notice to the data principal on different aspects of data processing based on which the data principal can provide explicit consent to such processing. While limited circumstances for non-consent based processing of personal data exists, it still gives the data principal the right to access, correct, delete etc their data. Concomitantly, the data fiduciary is placed, inter alia, with the obligation of data minimisation, which is to collect only such personal data as is required to fulfil the purpose of processing (collection limitation); process it only for the purposes stated and no more (purpose limitation) and to retain it in its servers only for so long as is required to fulfil the stated purpose (storage limitation).

The current draft removes explicit reference to certain data protection principles such as collection limitation. This would allow a data fiduciary to collect any personal data consented to by the data principal. Making collection solely contingent on consent, ignores the fact that data principals often do not have the requisite know-how of what kind of personal data is relevant for a particular purpose. For example, a photo filter app may process data related to your location or information on your contacts even though it may not require such information to carry on its primary task of applying the filter. It also does away with the concept of “sensitive personal data”. Depending on the increased potential of harm that can result from unlawful processing of certain categories of personal data, most data protection legislations classify these categories as “sensitive personal data”. Illustratively, this includes biometric data, health data, genetic data etc. This personal data is afforded a higher degree of protection in terms of requiring explicit consent before processing and mandatory data protection impact assessments. By doing away with this distinction, the DPDP Bill, 2022 does away with these additional protections.

Additionally, the Bill also reduces the information that a data fiduciary is required to provide to the data principal. While the previous iterations required considerable information in terms of



the rights of the data principals, grievance redressal mechanism, retention period of information, source of information collected etc to be provided for the data principal, the current draft reduces the scope of this information to the personal data sought to be collected and the purpose of processing the data.

Moreover, the DPDP Bill, 2022 seems to suppose that a notice is only to be provided to take consent of the data principal. This is a limited understanding of the purpose of notice. A notice is also important for the data principal to exercise data protection rights such as the right to know what personal data is being processed by whom, whether that data needs correction or updation and also to request deletion of data that may not be relevant for the purpose of processing. These rights exist even in cases of non-consent based processing of data. As such, limiting notice to only consent based personal data processing would limit the scope for the exercise of these rights.

The DPDP Bill, 2022 also introduces the concept of “deemed consent”. In effect, it bundles purposes of processing which were either exempt from consent based processing or were considered “reasonable purposes” for which personal data processing could be undertaken under the ground of “deemed consent”. However, there exist some concerns around this due to the vaguely worded grounds for processing such as “public interest” and the removal of additional safeguards for protection of data principals’ interests.

An important addition to the right of data principals is that it recognises the right to post mortem privacy which was missing from the PDP Bill, 2019 but had been recommended by the JPC. The right to post mortem privacy would allow the data principal to nominate another individual in case of death or incapacity.

SC QUESTIONS ‘LIGHTNING SPEED’ OF EC APPOINTMENT

The Supreme Court, after inspecting official files on Thursday, said that the appointment of Arun Goel as Election Commissioner was done with “lightning speed”, the procedure taking less than 24 hours from start to finish on November 18.

A Constitution Bench, led by Justice K.M. Joseph, had asked Attorney-General R. Venkataramani on Wednesday to produce the files concerning Mr. Goel’s appointment after petitioners alleged that it was “hurriedly” done. In fact, the appointment was made the very next day after the court started examining the need to insulate the Election Commission from political influence by setting up a “neutral and independent mechanism” for appointment of Election Commissioners.

Advocate Prashant Bhushan, for a petitioner, said Mr. Goel was a secretary in the government on Friday. He took voluntary retirement that day and was appointed an Election Commissioner on Saturday and took charge on Monday.

“It was done with such haste... with a tearing urgency... You did not require time to contemplate?” Justice Joseph asked the government side.

Justice Ajay Rastogi, on the five-judge Bench, said the Election Commissioner’s post was vacant from May.

“The vacancy was there from May to November 18... Now, what prevailed on the government that everything needed to be done within the shortest possible time... This superfast mechanism... We know that where there is a will there is a way, but here the notification was brought out on the same day, the application was given the same day, it was accepted the same day and the



appointment was made the same day... The file has not travelled even 24 hours! Lightning speed... What kind of evaluation was there?" Justice Rastogi asked.

Mr. Venkataramani said he could show a whole number of appointments made after 2015, which had taken a maximum of two to three days. "Are we finding fault with quick appointments?" he asked.

Justice Aniruddha Bose pointed out that Mr. Goel had taken voluntary retirement and was appointed EC the very next day. "Does it happen like that?" he asked. Mr. Venkataramani replied that it could have been a "coincidence".

Justice Joseph said Mr. Goel's records show excellent academic credentials, but asked whether brilliance and competency was enough of a guard against docility. The Attorney General said 'docility' was subjective and depended on the lens through which the court wanted to view a person. "It is not that we find some docile person lurking there and decide to appoint him," he shot back.

Justice Joseph said Mr. Goel's name was picked from a panel of four names prepared by the Law Minister. The court questioned the process by which the Law Minister had zeroed in on these four names from the entire database of the Department of Personnel and Training.

Tenure of CEC, ECs

The court pointed out that the law required both the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and the two Election Commissioners (ECs) to have separate six-year tenures. The court said the government has reduced the scope of candidates to just bureaucrats and ensured that neither the CEC nor the ECs serve their full term. The government said ECs were "elevated" as CECs. "A CEC is a person to be appointed in his own right. You have made it into a promotion source. You are supposed to appoint a person directly as CEC. You have made ECs a feeder category. The founding fathers contemplated a CEC who will hold office for six years independently... not as a promotion," Justice Joseph addressed the government.

THE NEED TO HAVE FULL DISCLOSURE ON ELECTORAL BONDS AND POLITICAL FUNDING

According to an RTI reply, electoral bonds worth ₹10,246 crore have been sold by the State Bank of India (SBI) since the instrument was launched in March 2018. In this article dated June 16, 2021, Rakesh Reddy Dubbudu elaborates how electoral bonds have further obscured political party funding.

In 2014, the Delhi High Court held that both the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were guilty of illegally accepting donations from two companies registered in India but whose controlling shareholder was Vedanta, a foreign company. The court held that this was in contravention of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), 1976, as the donations accrued from "foreign sources" within the meaning of law.

Following this indictment, the two parties came together in the last memorable bipartisan move. In 2016 and 2018, the government amended the FCRA through the annual Finance Bills, to retrospectively legalise the violations. The amendments and subsequent changes brought in by the current government enabled new and regressive pathways that afford full anonymity to corporate and foreign political donors.



A new form of anonymity

While recently hearing a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) by the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR), the Supreme Court downplayed the concerns of the corrupting influence of anonymous corporate and foreign money. It offered us voters the suggestion of “match the following”.

Earlier, only profit-making domestic companies could contribute to political parties; now loss-making companies can too. Earlier, foreign companies or companies where the controlling stake was held by a foreign company couldn't contribute; now they can. India's political parties could theoretically be fully funded by a foreign company operating in India or by a foreign entity through a shell company.

In 2017, the then Finance Minister said anonymous cash donations to political parties would be reduced from ₹20,000 to ₹2,000 to ensure greater transparency in political funding. However, the concurrent introduction of electoral bonds brought a new form of anonymity to thousands of crores of donations. It drastically reduced public and legislative oversight. Only the ruling party via the State Bank of India (SBI) has a full account of all donations being made via electoral bonds, to itself and to Opposition parties. Parliament, the Election Commission and the Opposition parties do not have this information, nor do the public.

The ADR PIL challenges electoral bonds as unconstitutional. In March 2021, the Supreme Court refused to stay the sale of electoral bonds before the West Bengal elections. Instead, the judgment listed several documents which supposedly establish a paper trail on donations — “all that is required is a little more effort to cull out such information from both sides (purchaser of bond and political party) and do some ‘match the following’.”

This is impractical and plainly incorrect. The Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005 enables easier access to information held by public authorities. No ordinary person has the resources to navigate documents on obfuscating government websites or pore over income tax returns. The few civic and non-profit organisations that attempt to simplify information to enable accountability have been systematically delegitimised.

Suggesting a “match the following” is incorrect for three reasons. If we set aside individual donors and focus just on registered entities, we will find that the full scale of registered entities is unknown. Even if registered companies filed annual financial statements, many do not disclose political donations. Crucially, political parties do not need to disclose their electoral bond donors either.

According to back-of-the-envelope calculations, there are close to 25 lakh potential donors comprising just companies and firms. This includes about 12.6 lakh active private limited companies as of January 31, 2021. Unlike what is stated in the judgment, the annual reports of all these companies are not readily accessible on the website of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs. More than 12 lakh firms filed income tax returns for the assessment year 2018-19. Firms, unlike companies, have no regulatory mandate to submit their annual reports except for filing their annual tax returns, since their functioning is regulated by Acts other than the Companies Act of 2013.

Even if these documents are indeed filed and available in the public domain, they will not specify donations to parties. Conveniently, the Finance Bill of 2017 amended Section 182 of the Companies Act of 2013 to remove the requirement for declaring disaggregated donations to political parties. At best, company statements might have a total aggregate amount of all



donations, including philanthropic ones. If we are lucky, these might be sub-categorised as “political contributions through electoral bonds.” Nowhere are donations to specific political parties required to be mentioned.

Even if one combs through these documents to find an actual political donation, there is nothing to match it with. Political parties do not need to disclose their electoral bond donors. Strictly speaking, political parties are not even supposed to know their electoral bond donors. The only requirement is the annual audit reports with a total of all donations received via electoral bonds. These reports are submitted with great delays. For instance, the audit reports for 2019-20 of major national parties were made available on the Election Commission’s website only a few days ago. The BJP’s report is not yet available as the Election Commission extended the deadline for the submission of Annual Audit Reports for 2019-20 to June 30, 2021. Even if these reports are submitted on time, there is no way to match a donation of a company to that received by a political party as only aggregate amounts are available.

Hence, the “match the following” suggestion of the Supreme Court falls flat on its face. It is impossible for an average voter to pore over documents of lakhs of entities and track potential company and firm donors.

Further, recipient-wise information is unavailable. Unlike the tall claims of electoral bonds enabling transparency, it is only RTI applications with the SBI that offer a glimpse into the crores of money funding political parties, and therefore influencing public policies. If they chose to, the Supreme Court or the legislature could order full and real-time disclosure, to the actual benefit of transparency and accountability. Instead, meagre civil society resources are expended in filing PILs and RTI applications, at significant personal risk.

Winners and losers

In effect, electoral bonds give political power to companies, wealthy individual donors, and foreign entities, thus diluting the universal franchise of one voter-one vote. Every vote is not equally valuable if companies can influence policies through hidden donations.

The winner of this arrangement is the ruling party, whether at the Centre or in a State, and the loser is the average voter. Companies and political parties could exercise moral leadership and voluntarily disclose the identity of recipients and donors, as the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha recently did. Till then, voters are stuck with a ruling party with war chests of resources, being subject to relentless election campaigns, while donors surreptitiously and directly influence policy.

VOTERS’ DATA ‘THEFT’: BOMMAI ISSUES INSTRUCTIONS TO START PROBE SINCE 2013 WHEN CONG. WAS IN POWER

Launching a counter-attack on the Congress over the case of alleged theft of voters’ data by an NGO and deletion of names from the voters’ list, Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai on Sunday instructed the authorities to conduct an investigation into the issue from 2013 when the Congress was in power.

“Instructions have been given to hold the investigation from 2013 when Siddaramaiah was the Chief Minister as it will reveal all the directions that had been given to the agency by that government. A probe will bring out the truth,” he told reporters here. “People should know why the orders were issued to Chilume and the reasons behind it. Earlier, the government had planned



to probe only the current incident but it has now been decided to probe whatever happened since 2013.”

The Chief Minister pointed out that the incumbent government gave orders only to create awareness among the voters, and a condition was imposed that the agency must not have any association or links with any party. “However, Mr. Siddaramaiah had issued orders for the revision of electoral list which has to be done by the Election Commission. It is a grave crime that the work to be done by the Election Commission was given to a private agency. The Siddaramaiah government crossed all limits and misused the power by even authorising appointment of BLOs,” he alleged.

Stating that the allegations of Congress leaders were baseless, Mr. Bommai said that this incident would backfire on the Congress. “Addition and deletion of names in the electoral list is the job of the Election Commission, and allegations against the current government is politically motivated. The commission has used artificial intelligence for the removal of duplication of names in the list to remove fake voters. Because of this the Congress is creating a hue and cry,” he said.

ADIVASI AND VANVASI: WHY BJP USES THE LATTER TERM FOR TRIBES, AND THE ROW AROUND IT

Campaigning for the Gujarat Assembly elections, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi Monday questioned the term ‘Vanvasi’, used by the BJP and its ideologue RSS for the tribal community, contrasting it with ‘Adivasi’, which the Congress uses for them.

“The people of BJP don’t call you Adivasi. What do they call you? Vanvasi. They don’t tell you that you are the first owners of Hindustan. They tell you that you live in the jungles, meaning they don’t wish that you live in cities, that your children become engineers, doctors, fly planes, speak in English...,” Gandhi said at a rally in the tribal-dominated reserved constituency of Mahuva.

Adivasi or Vanvasi?

The Constitution of India uses the term Scheduled Tribes or “Anusuchit Janjati” to describe tribes. Many tribal people choose to refer to themselves as ‘Adivasi’, which means ‘first inhabitants’. It is used in public discourse, in documents, text books and in media.

‘Vanvasi’, which means forest dwellers, is a term used by the Sangh Parivar, which works extensively in tribal areas “to protect them from the clutches of Christian Missionaries”. With the marginalised tribal community traditionally treated as a unit outside the main caste structure, the term ‘Vanvasi’ was used to convey their distinct identity.

Alarmed by the changing culture of the tribal communities and their distancing from the Hindu religion, Ramakant Keshav Deshpande, in consultation with M S Golwalkar, the second Sarsanghchhalak, had set up the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (ABVKA) on December 26, 1952 in Jashpur, Chhattisgarh. Although the primary focus was on ‘Hinduisation’ of the tribals – which the Sangh said was necessary for national integration – and protecting their identity and culture, the Sangh’s activities among the community have always helped the BJP secure electoral gains.

“We call them Vanvasis. We do not call them Adivasis because Adivasi means original inhabitants or aboriginals, which implies all others are from outside. But the Sangh believes that we all are original inhabitants of this continent,” RSS leader Ram Madhav told The Indian Express.



Madhav said the Aryan invasion theory — that the Aryans were from somewhere in Central Asia and migrated to an already settled Indian subcontinent — had always been rejected by the RSS. “We are fine with the constitutional term Anusuchit Janajati, or Scheduled Tribes, for the tribals,” he added.

Harsh Chouhan, Chairman of National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, a Sangh leader who has worked among tribes for years, explained that the term Vanvasi was established in 1952.

“Those who lived in the forests were traditionally referred to as Vanvasis. Even in Ramayana, this reference is there, to identify communities living in the forests. Vanvasi conveys the right concept about the forest dwellers and is a term of pride,” Chouhan told The Indian Express. Chouhan said the term Adivasi or ‘aboriginals’ was more suited to the American context.

“The term ‘Adivasi’ was brought in by the British in the 1930s. There is no harm in using the word Adivasi. But in the context of India, it is wrong. In the US, the word aboriginals is used for the tribals to get their identity, because they were marginalised. But the word Vanvasi simple conveys that they are forest dwellers,” he explained.

About Rahul Gandhi’s claim that the term signified they should “live in the jungles”, Chouhan said, “If you are called Bharatvasi, it does not mean that you should live in India only. Its just a political narrative Gandhi is trying to pitch.” He said the concept that people living in forests cannot be cultured was “western”.

“It is a Western narrative that those who are living in jungles or forests cannot have culture. In India, it was never like that. We believe that our culture stems from forest dwellers. In earlier times, those who lived in villages were called ‘gramvasi’, those living in cities were ‘nagarvasi’, and those in forests were called ‘vanvasi’.”

Chouhan also argued that the Sangh had set up the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram to “protect and preserve the culture of the forest dwellers to make them contribute to the nation’s growth”, and not just to “stop the conversion process.”

Is the dispute new?

Many have pointed out that tribal communities don’t necessarily live in forests. During the constituent assembly debates, Jaipal Singh Munda, hockey player who later became the tribal representative in the Constituent Assembly, had insisted on using the word “Adibasi” and questioned why the word ‘tribals’ became “Banjati” when translated into Hindi.

“The word ‘Adibasi’ has not been used in any of the translations made by the several Committees. How is it? I ask you why, it has not been done. Why has the word ‘Adibasi’ not been used and the word ‘Banjati’ has been used? Most of the members of our tribes do not live in jungles.... I wish that you should issue instructions to your translation Committee that the translation of Scheduled tribes should be ‘Adibasi’. The word Adibasi has grace. I do not understand why this old abusive epithet of Banjati is being used, for till recently it meant an uncivilised barbarian,” he said.

Even in the RSS, there seems to be a section which considers the word “Vanvasi” obsolete. “In fact, many volunteers have stopped using the term Vanvasi and our ashrams are now known simply as Kalyan Ashrams. Mainly because our work also covers coastal tribes. Among the tribals, some do not want to be known as Vanvasi, claiming that the term sounds like “jungles”,” an RSS volunteer who works among the tribals in central India said. Madhav, however, said there is no review planned of the Vanvasi, but the RSS accepts the word Janajati as used in the Constitution.



MP LAW ON DECLARING INTENTION TO CONVERT ILLEGAL: WHAT THE HC SAID

In a decision that provided relief to interfaith couples seeking to marry, the Madhya Pradesh High Court on Thursday restrained the state government from prosecuting “adult citizens if they solemnise marriage on their own volition” and violate Section 10 of the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act (MPFRA), 2021. On Sunday, Advocate General Prashant Singh said the state would challenge the High Court’s order in the Supreme Court “shortly”.

Under what circumstances was the MP Freedom of Religion Act, 2021 enacted?

After Kamal Nath’s Congress government was toppled and the BJP’s Shivraj Singh Chouhan returned as Chief Minister in March 2020, the state government announced its intention to curb religious conversions carried out solely for the purpose of marriage. On December 28 that year, a special meeting of the state Cabinet cleared the Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantrata Adhiniyam, 2020, a proposed law to tighten restrictions on religious conversions.

The new law was intended to replace the existing Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantraya Adhiniyam, 1968. The 1968 law faced a challenge in the High Court, but it had been upheld by the Supreme Court in 1977.

An ordinance was promulgated on January 7, 2021, and, two months later on March 8 last year, the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 2021 was passed by voice vote amid slogans of Jai Shri Ram in the state Assembly. With the passage of the Act, Madhya Pradesh became the third BJP-ruled state after Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh to bring a law to punish religious conversions for marriage.

What are the main provisions of the MPFRA, 2021?

Section 5 of the MPFRA, 2021 prohibits unlawful conversion from one religion to another by use of misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, any other fraudulent means, allurement, or promise of marriage.

Violators face between one year and five years of imprisonment. If the person who is converted is a child, a woman, or a person belonging to a Scheduled Tribe or Scheduled Caste, the punishment varies from two years to 10 years, with a fine of 50,000. The punishment for mass conversions is five to 10 years in prison, with a penalty of Rs 1 lakh.

Cases under the Act are cognizable (which means an arrest can be made without a warrant) and non-bailable. Complaints can be registered by the victim, the victim’s parents or siblings, or anyone else including a guardian with permission from the local court. The complaint will be investigated by a police officer of the rank of sub-inspector and above.

For a religious conversion to be valid, the law requires a 60-day prior “declaration of the intention to convert” to the district magistrate by the individual as well as the priest carrying out the conversion. It is only after this, that a couple from different religions can be legally married. Failure to notify the state of the intent to convert will render the wedding null and void, and an individual can be prosecuted for fraudulent conversion on the promise of marriage. A priest who fails to notify the government can be punished with imprisonment from three to five years and a minimum fine of Rs 50,000.



How many cases have been registered under this law so far?

The purpose of the law was to prevent or discourage forcible or fraudulent religious conversions with the promise of marriage, something that Hindutva groups often refer to as “love jihad”. Home Minister Narottam Mishra had informed the state Assembly that between the time the ordinance came into effect and the passage of the Act on March 7, 2021, at least 16 cases had been registered for alleged violation of the provisions of the law. By the end of December 2021, 68 cases had been registered under the Act across the state.

An investigation published by The Indian Express in March 2021 showed that in at least 11 of the 21 cases registered (against 47 individuals) under the anti-conversion law until then, the women who registered the complaints knew the accused — they were friends, in a relationship, and in one case, married for over five years. In at least four cases, the couple had eloped and returned before the women involved approached the police. Three other cases were lodged after the intervention of Hindutva groups. The remaining six cases were filed against alleged Christian missionaries “trying to lure villagers” to convert.

What did the High Court say in its order on Thursday?

The order passed by Justices Sujoy Paul and Prakash Chandra Gupta of the Jabalpur Bench of the Madhya Pradesh High Court found Section 10 of the MPFRA prima facie unconstitutional. This section requires individuals who are intending to convert, and the priest who would carry out the conversion, to notify the district magistrate of their intention 60 days in advance.

The court said: “Section 10 makes it obligatory for a citizen desiring conversion to give a declaration in this regard to the District Magistrate which in our opinion ex facie, unconstitutional in the teeth of aforesaid judgments of this Court. Thus, till further orders, respondent shall not prosecute the adult citizens if they solemnize marriage on their own volition and shall not take coercive action for violation of Section 10 of Act of 21.”

In August 2021, a division Bench of the Gujarat High Court comprising then Chief Justice Vikram Nath and Justice Biren Vaishnav had stayed several provisions of The Gujarat Freedom of Religion (Amendment) Act, 2021, including those pertaining to prior permission from district magistrates, punishment for marriage by unlawful conversions, etc.

The Gujarat law, which amended an earlier 2003 law pertaining to punishment for forcible conversions, was notified on June 15 last year. The Gujarat HC Bench observed that certain sections of the law “interferes with the intricacies of marriage including the right to the choice of an individual, thereby infringing Article 21 of the Constitution of India”.

LAWS AND RULES

The Left Democratic Front government in Kerala is bringing a Bill to remove the Governor, Arif Mohammed Khan, as the Chancellor of State-run universities after repeated run-ins with him. On Monday, Mr. Khan, signalling his intent to stall any such legislation, asserted that the post of Chancellor was bestowed on the Governor by way of a ‘national consensus’, which State governments are powerless to challenge. It is likely that he would sit on the Bill, just as he has put aside the Kerala Lok Ayukta (Amendment) Act, 2022, and the University Laws (Amendment) Act, 2022. Mr. Khan chose to put on notice Vice-Chancellors (VC) of 11 of Kerala’s universities last month, shortly after the Supreme Court of India set aside the appointment of the VC to the A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Technological University on the grounds that it had flouted University Grants



Commission (UGC) Regulations that prescribed that the search committee, constituted in line with UGC Regulations, recommends a panel of at least three candidates to the Chancellor. Last week, the Kerala High Court pulled the plug on the appointment of the VC to the Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies, objecting to the composition of the search committee and its recommendation of a single name to the VC's post. The contention that it was an 'agricultural university' where UGC norms would not apply failed to find traction with the court. An appeal is in the apex court now.

These rulings point to the immediate need for Kerala to review the statutes governing individual universities in the State recognised under Section 12(B) of the UGC Act of 1956 and bring them in line with the UGC Regulations given that the Supreme Court has upheld their prevailing over the provisions of State University Acts. Legal questions on the preponderance of the UGC norms in the administration of specific universities such as an agricultural university are something for the courts to settle. But recriminations over these appointments have lowered the standards of public discourse. Read alongside his diatribes against an elected government and ad hominem attacks on its Chief Minister, Mr. Khan's intransigent use of his constitutional authority to gun for VCs smacks of political interests and does not pass the test of federal principles enshrined in the Constitution. If anything, the public row and the spate of litigation have marred the functioning of universities as evident from the administrative impasse at the A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Technological University, where the appointment of a temporary VC by the Governor has been challenged in court. Meanwhile, fresh graduates are worried about getting their degree certificates. At stake is the interest of students seeking higher education.

DISQUIET IN NORTHEAST

On November 22, five villagers from Meghalaya and an Assam forest guard were killed and two others were seriously injured in a firing incident along the boundary between the two States. The Assam government said the incident happened after its forest guards tried to intercept a truck smuggling illegal timber. When the truck was stopped, the forest personnel were gheraoed by unknown miscreants who resorted to violence, according to Assam, which maintains that the staff resorted to firing to save their lives. Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma said on Twitter that the Assam police and Assam forest guards entered Meghalaya and "resorted to unprovoked firing". Versions differ and both States have instituted separate inquiries, but the mistrust and underlying conflicts in the northeast that lead to such incidents are deeper. Assam and Meghalaya have a five-decade old boundary dispute. Meghalaya, carved out of Assam as an autonomous region in 1970, became a full-fledged State in 1972. In March, Assam and Meghalaya resolved the boundary dispute at six out of total 12 such locations along their 884.9 km boundary, and the next round of talks was to take place soon. Though the latest flare-up did not arise out of this dispute, it happened along a disputed border stretch.

Assam has boundary disputes at various points in time with the States carved out of it — Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram. Last year, the police forces of Assam and Mizoram clashed, killing five on the Assam side. Dozens of people have died in conflicts along State borders in the northeast over the years. Union Home Minister Amit Shah had asked Assam to take the lead in resolving the lingering disputes, which have their origins in the colonial cartography that overlooked the life patterns of local communities. Traditional hunting, grazing and farming grounds of communities got divided by modern administrative boundaries at many places. When new States were formed, such concerns acquired a more serious nature, and the Naga demand for a unified homeland that is now spread beyond the State of Nagaland is instructive. It is unfortunate



and tragic that States that are part of the Indian Union are involved in violent clashes with one another. The BJP is in government in much of the northeast and has the leverage to aim for a comprehensive resolution of all outstanding disputes in the region. Communities will have to be taken into confidence, and boundaries adjusted. In any case, these man-made lines should not be allowed to restrict the movement of people in pursuit of a livelihood.

WITH MEGA EVENT IN DELHI, ASSAM GOVT PUSHES FOR NATIONAL RECOGNITION TO 17TH CENTURY GENERAL

With an exhibition, two panel discussions and addresses by union cabinet ministers, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Assam government is culminating its valourisation of 17th century Ahom general Lachit Barphukan through his 400th birth anniversary celebrations this year in Delhi.

Three days of these celebrations were kicked off in the national capital Wednesday with Union Minister of Finance Nirmala Sitharaman inaugurating an exhibition on Barphukan and the Ahom Dynasty with artefacts from late medieval Assam in Vigyan Bhawan.

Lachit Barphukan is best known for leading the Ahom troops which fought and defeated advancing Mughal troops at the Battle of Saraighat on the outskirts of Guwahati in 1671. Through these high-profile celebrations of his 400th birth anniversary, the Assam government is pushing for his national recognition as a hero along the lines of Shivaji, and as an important foil to the Mughals. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma made this clear in his address at the celebrations' inaugural session Wednesday.

"India was not just about the Mughals. It was about so many other kings who ruled the country with affection. But Indian history has ignored our heroes. Indian history has ignored Lachit Barphukan, the Indian history has ignored the glorious Ahom dynasty. I hope and believe that this campaign of the government of Assam and the people will put the dynasty into its proper perspective. Indian history will recognise the glorious contribution of various kings and that India had a better general and better kings than Aurangzeb," he said.

"Lachit's victory at the Saraighat helped to preserve the Ahom kingdom's independence and protected the culture and civilisation of Assam. He was a military genius and a fearless leader... The Mughals planned to invade Assam and Southeast Asia through the Brahmaputra valley and spread Islam throughout the region. But Lachit Barphukan created history by foiling their imperialist policy at Saraighat," he added.

The Assam government has been having a week-long celebration since November 18, which included the release of a theme song by renowned singer Zubeen Garg. On Wednesday, Sarma announced that a book and a documentary on Barphukan have been prepared and the government is working on memorial projects including a building in Barphukan's honour at the National Police Academy in Hyderabad.

"I would strongly urge the government of Assam to make sure this display is taken to the different parts of the country, to different universities where young Indians assemble for them to know what remarkable contributions Assam and its people have made for the motherland. And that is what is going to motivate, inspire and encourage young Indians to know more about India. In 70 years, we have not had a fair share of history for those who deserve to be mentioned, top of the agenda, top of the books, top of the indexes, and top of the chapters about the contribution,



remarkable intelligence and strategic experiences these people had,” said Sitharaman. Union Home Minister Amit Shah will attend the celebrations on Thursday and Prime Minister Modi will attend on Friday.

‘AN ATTEMPT TO PROTECT OFFICERS’: JHARKHAND GOVERNOR RETURNS EXCISE AMENDMENT BILL

Stating that the amendments made in the Jharkhand Excise (Amendment) Bill-2022 “is seen as to be an attempt to protect officers of any criminal or unconstitutional activities”, Governor Ramesh Bais returned the Bill, asking for reconsideration. After the excise Bill was passed by the Jharkhand Assembly, the government had sent it to the Governor for assent in August.

After three months of deliberations, the Governor sent the Bill back on Tuesday (November 22), directing the government to go through the provisions in different states and take the views of the revenue council on the same. File notings point out that liquor is sold in the state through shops run by agencies selected by the Jharkhand State Beverage Corporation Limited. It is these agencies whose accountability has been fixed in case of any wrongdoing or any illegal acts, but the officials of the Corporation or the Excise Department have been left out of it, the notings said.

“With the amendments in the new Bill, only those local workers who operate the shops will be held responsible. However, the entire accountability lies with these agencies and it is important that the Corporation should also monitor the activities... This arrangement is seen as an attempt to protect criminal or unconstitutional activities of officials of the corporation and the agencies,” the Governor said, as per the file notings.

The amended Bill had also painted a picture of increased revenue, which, the Governor think, was not the case. “After the implementation of excise policy, the department had promised that it would increase the revenue, but in contrast it is being seen that in the first six months the revenue is dropping. Since there is no direct accountability of the officers and the employees of the Corporation and the Department, there will be less monitoring and the illegal acts will be encouraged. It is possible that revenue may fall too,” the Governor said.

The tug of war in Jharkhand

The excise Bill rebound from the Raj Bhavan happens amid the ongoing tussle between Governor Ramesh Bais and CM Hemant Soren over threat of the latter’s disqualification as an MLA on the basis of the purported EC advisory to Bais on August 25 in an alleged office-of-profit case. However, the Governor hasn’t made the advisory public even as there were repeated demands from Soren to clear the air. Before this, Bais had returned three Bills since assuming the office in July last year.

The Governor also added that the amended Bill has provision that persons found in possession of 20 litres of alcohol can be let go on a personal bond as decided by the officer. “From this provision, a meaning arises: any person can have a stock of 20 litres of liquor, which does not seem proper,” Bais said.

Since assuming office in July last year, Jharkhand Governor Ramesh Bais has returned three Bills prior to this one. In fact, the Jharkhand Finance (Amendment Bill)-2021 was returned twice citing defects. The other two Bills are Mob Violence and Mob Lynching Bill-2021, and Pandit Raghunath Murmu Tribal University Bill-2021. Out of the three Bills returned, only the Tribal University Bill was finally cleared by the Governor.



SIGNS OF TROUBLE

The blast in Mangaluru in Karnataka on November 19 is a troubling sign of the radicalisation among a section of Muslims. Mohammed Shariq, who was allegedly carrying the improvised explosive device (IED) in a pressure cooker in an autorickshaw, may be linked to the Islamic State, at least ideologically, according to investigators. The police have searched at least seven places in Karnataka and are investigating his possible links with Jameesha Mubin who was killed in a blast in his own car in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu on October 23. Shariq had travelled to several places in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, and according to the police, experimented with a bomb in Shivamogga district on September 21. His two accomplices were caught but he managed to evade the police and resurfaced in Mysuru where he continued to build an explosive device. The police believe that the accused — he suffered severe burn injuries in the blast — will survive and reveal more information. The accused was in touch with multiple handlers who may have been involved in the Coimbatore blast too. Investigators had recovered 75 kg of explosives from the house of Mubin. The real extent of the capacity, the intent and the connections of these two incidents remain a matter of investigation, but what is known so far itself is enough cause for worry.

Coastal Karnataka, where Mangaluru falls, has been in the grip of competitive communalism, where Hindu and Muslim outfits have upped the ante in recent years. The Centre has noted a countrywide decline in terrorism incidents in recent years, particularly of 'jihadi terrorism', a category that was introduced in the report of the National Crime Records Bureau, in 2017. Government data say terror incidents have been contained in Jammu and Kashmir, the North East and Left Wing Extremism (LWE)-affected States. In fact, there have been no incidents of terrorism in any part of the country outside of these conflict zones for several years now. Vigilance and the efficiency of investigative agencies can prevent terrorist incidents, but maintaining peace and social harmony is a larger political challenge. The operational links between the blasts in Coimbatore and Mangaluru are being probed, but regardless of the findings on that count, they are certainly linked to the extent that both point to the underlying security challenges before the country. Political rhetoric over the Coimbatore and Mangaluru blasts does more harm than good, but the fact is that India, now under a Hindu majoritarian government, has an Islamist challenge.

JAMA MASJID REVOKES ORDER RESTRICTING WOMEN'S ENTRY

The Jama Masjid administration on Thursday withdrew an order restricting the entry of unaccompanied women into the mosque after a backlash against the move prompted Delhi Lieutenant-Governor V.K. Saxena to intervene in the matter.

Raj Niwas sources said Mr. Saxena had requested Syed Ahmed Bukhari, the Shahi Imam of the mosque, to rescind the order.

'Preserving sanctity'

Mr. Bukhari told The Hindu that the masjid administration had put up notices outside the entry gates stating that "women who aren't accompanied by their family members or are alone are not allowed inside the mosque".

He said the move was implemented to preserve the sanctity of the mosque and aimed at preventing "improper activities".



The masjid administration also clarified that there was no restriction on the entry of women who come along with their family members to offer prayers at the mosque.

“The masjid administration does not want to prevent anyone from worshipping,” Mr. Bukhari said.

THROUGH MOUNTAINS AND UNDER A LAKE, MUMBAI TO PUNE VIA ASIA’S WIDEST ROAD TUNNELS

On a weekday afternoon, men in hard hats and fluorescent reflective jackets worked to plaster the walls of the giant cavern, guided by their headlights and the string of lights on the roof. At the far end, their supervisors carried out a review of the unfinished stretch.

This is Tunnel 2 of Rs 6,600-crore ‘missing link project’ of the Mumbai-Pune Expressway, the second and the longer of two sets of twin tunnels, which, at 24 metres each, are set to be Asia’s widest.

If all goes to plan, by January 2024, the drive from Mumbai to Pune will pass through this 13.3-km-long ‘missing link’ – an engineering marvel that’s expected to decongest the six-lane Mumbai-Pune Expressway.

Currently, those traveling between the two cities take either the six-lane, 94-km-long Mumbai-Pune Expressway or the old Mumbai-Pune Highway (or National Highway No-4), a four-lane, 111-km road stretching from Shil Phata to Dehu Road. But somewhere near the Khalapur toll plaza, the traffic on both the expressways merge, leading to a bottleneck until Khandala Exit as the traffic of 10 lanes converge on six lanes of the expressway. Besides, this stretch passes through ghats and is prone to landslides during the monsoons, leading to further congestion.

Over 30 cross passages, at a distance of every 300 metres, have been featured in the twin tunnels to help people move from one tunnel to the other in case of emergencies. The tunnels are also equipped with fire-fighting systems such as sprinklers, smoke-detection alarms and quick response vehicles, among others.

AVIATION MINISTRY NOTIFIES DRAFT AIRCRAFT SECURITY RULES, 2022

The Civil Aviation Ministry has notified the draft Aircraft Security Rules, 2022, which enable the aviation security regulator, Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS), to impose penalties up to ₹1 crore on airports and airlines for violation of security measures.

Once the draft Rules are finalised, the BCAS can impose a fine of ₹50 lakh to ₹1 crore on airports and airlines if they fail to prepare and implement a security programme, or if they commence operations without seeking a security clearance. Large airports can also face a penalty of ₹1 crore if they fail to plan the design and layout of the airport in accordance with the National Civil Aviation Security Programme. Individuals will also face penalties ranging from ₹1 lakh to ₹25 lakh depending on the nature of the offence.

According to the proposed rules, the BCAS will also be able to suspend or cancel an entity’s airport security clearance and security programme.

The amendment in Parliament was required after the United Nation’s aviation watchdog, International Civil Aviation Organisation, raised questions about the three regulators functioning without statutory powers.



The Ministry has invited stakeholder comments for a period of 30 days. The draft rules were notified on November 10.

STRATEGY TO SAVE

The best first step towards addressing a malaise is to recognise that it exists. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare's recently published National Suicide Prevention Strategy fits right there. It has been a long time coming, but the Strategy, finally in the public realm, calls attention to the massive burden of suicides in the country, and initiates steps to achieve a reduction in suicide mortality by 10% by 2030. At the same time, it has measured the paces forward with a time-bound action plan that takes into account the grim realities of a varying ground situation in India. The problem is indeed dire, and without targeted intervention programmes, and stigma reduction strategies, a public health crisis of gargantuan proportions is imminent. Globally, suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds and also the second leading cause of death for females aged 15-19 years, as per WHO estimates. In India, more than one lakh lives are lost every year to suicide. In the past three years, the suicide rate has increased from 10.2 to 11.3 per 1,00,000 population. As per National Crime Records Bureau statistics, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Karnataka have the highest percentage share of suicides (2018-2020), ranging between 8% to 11%. The most common reasons include family problems and illnesses, while other causes include marital conflicts, love affairs, bankruptcy, substance abuse and dependence. Further, in approximately 10% of cases, the cause for suicide remains unknown. Importantly, the document notes that contrary to belief, the majority of suicides are preventable.

The Strategy is etched with evidence-based practices to reduce the number of suicides, inspired by WHO's strategy for the South East Asian region, and strings together multiple sectoral collaborations to provide a cohesive strategy and achieve the intended reduction in the number of suicides. In addition to committing to establishing effective surveillance mechanisms within the next three years, and psychiatric outpatient departments in all districts over five years, the Strategy also intends to write in mental health in the curriculum in educational institutions within the next eight years. Addressing issues relevant to India, including access to pesticides, and alcoholism, has set the Strategy on the path towards achievement of the goals. It is, however, incumbent on the Government to stay the course until the targets are achieved. Of course, in a federal country, any success is possible only if States are enthusiastic participants in the roll out.

COMING, A TOUGH LAW TO PREVENT CRUELTY TO ANIMALS. WHY IS IT NEEDED?

The Centre has proposed to overhaul The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, introducing 61 amendments in the law, which includes three years' imprisonment for committing "gruesome cruelty" including "bestiality" with animals.

A draft Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Amendment) Bill, 2022, prepared by the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry, and Dairying, has been opened for public comments until December 7. Once the draft is final, the Bill could be brought either in the Winter Session or the Budget Session of Parliament.

What are the main changes proposed in the law?

Essentially, the law is proposed to be made tighter, with more stringent punishments. Several offences have been made cognizable, which means offenders can be arrested without an arrest



warrant. The draft Bill has proposed to include “Bestiality” as a crime under the new category of “Gruesome cruelty.”

The proposed subsection describes “gruesome cruelty” as any act involving animals which leads to “extreme pain and suffering” and is “likely to leave the animal in life-long disability”. It includes “mutilation or killing of animal by the use of strychnine injection in the heart or any other cruel manner that is known to cause permanent physical damage to the animal or render animal useless or cause any injury which is likely to cause death including bestiality...”.

The draft proposes fines from Rs 50,000 to Rs 75,000 “or the cost of the animal...whichever is more or with the imprisonment of one year which may extend up to three years or with both” for the offence of gruesome cruelty. For killing an animal, the draft Bill proposes a maximum punishment of five years in jail.

What is the argument for strengthening the law?

In September, a doctor in Rajasthan’s Jodhpur allegedly tied a dog to his car and dragged it across the city. The dog had a fractured leg and suffered bruises. An offence such as this — fairly common in India — would currently attract charges under Section 428 (mischief by killing or maiming animal) IPC and Section 11 (treating animals cruelly) of The PCA Act, 1960.

First-time offenders under the PCA Act are punished with a fine of Rs 10-50. If it is found that this is not the offender’s first such crime in the past three years, the maximum punishment would be a fine between Rs 25 and Rs 100, a jail term of three months, or both.

In short, the penalty is ridiculously light in the law as it exists now, and is incapable of acting as any deterrent for potential offenders.

Who has called for amendments and on what grounds?

Along with animal welfare organisations, several political leaders have in the past called for the law to be amended.

In 2014, the Supreme Court, in ‘Animal Welfare Board of India vs A Nagaraja & Others’, had said that “Parliament is expected to make proper amendment of the PCA Act to provide an effective deterrent” and that “for violation of Section 11, adequate penalties and punishments should be imposed”.

In 2020, a group of MPs cutting across party lines wrote to then Animal Husbandry Minister Giriraj Singh, urging that the punishment in the 1960 Act be increased.

And what has the government said on this subject?

In April 2021, the Centre had proposed changes where the penalty can go up to “Rs 75,000 per animal or three times the cost of the animal as determined by the jurisdictional veterinarian, whichever is more, and imprisonment of three years which may extend to five years or both.”

In October 2021, the government said it would bring in a Bill to amend the PCA Act. Union Minister for Animal Husbandry Parshottam Rupala told PTI, “We are ready with the draft amendment Bill. We are in the process of getting the Cabinet approval.”

The government has finally moved in this direction.



Apart from increasing penalties, what else is proposed?

The draft bill proposes the insertion of a new section providing five freedoms to animals.

“It shall be the duty of every person having charge of an animal to ensure that the animal in his care or under his charge has freedom from:

- * Thirst, hunger and malnutrition;
- * Discomfort due to environment;
- * Pain, injury and diseases;
- * Fear and distress, and the
- * Freedom to express normal behaviour for the species

The proposed law also says that “in case of a community animal, the local government such as municipality or panchayats shall be responsible for taking care of the community animals in a manner developed by the State Government or by the Board”.

The draft defines “community animal” as “any animal born in a community for which no ownership has been claimed by any individual or an organization, excluding wild animals as defined under the wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (53 of 1972).”

How frequent are acts of atrocities against animals?

While acts of everyday stoning or beating animals are widespread and commonplace, sometimes the offence takes on grotesque and perverse forms.

* In April this year, four people were arrested for carrying out unnatural sexual acts on a monitor lizard in Maharashtra.

* In July 2021, the Kerala High Court took suo motu cognizance after a dog was beaten to death by three people in Adimalathura beach in Thiruvananthapuram

* In 2020, the death of a pregnant elephant that bit an explosives-filled fruit had provoked nationwide outrage.

* In February that same year, three men were arrested in Ludhiana for allegedly beating a stray dog with iron rods, throwing it from a rooftop and then dragging it on the road tied to an auto-rickshaw.

Are there any concerns around tightening the law?

While comments have been invited to the draft Bill, some experts have in the past pointed out that simply increasing the quantum of punishment may not be enough to stop cruelty against animals, and some already marginalised communities like ‘madaris’ (who perform with animals) and ‘saperas’ (snake charmers) may be disproportionately affected.

Others have argued that focusing on the individual act of ‘cruelty’, such as farmers putting up electric fences around their fields, is an incomplete approach, and steps are needed to mitigate the larger issues of vanishing animal habitats and climate change exacerbating man-animal conflict.



SOON, GOOGLE 3 MILLION TECHNICAL TERMS IN MOTHER TONGUE

Technical terms from disciplines such as linguistics, public policy, finance, agriculture and engineering will also be available on the website shabd.education.gov.nic and will be launched as an app, too. The domain for the website has been registered and is expected to become operational before the start of the next academic session.

The National Education Policy (NEP) advocates teaching in the mother tongue and local languages as far as possible. The NEP says that the promotion of Indian languages will be integrated into school and higher education at every level. In order to help students learn these languages, the availability of quality learning materials in the form of workbooks, textbooks, videos, plays and novels is required. Moreover, the languages should have consistent updates of their vocabulary in the dictionary, so that students have access to the latest topics and issues.

The project is an initiative of the Commission for Scientific and Technical Terminology (CSTT) under the Ministry of Education.

“As of now, we are working on 22 official languages, but the ambit will be widened to include other Indian languages as well,” Professor Giri Nath Jha, Chairperson, CSTT, said.

Explaining that the digitisation mandate was vast as it included technical terms in the sciences, finance, medicine, linguistics and so on in Hindi and all modern Indian languages, Professor Jha said the website would provide a standardised vocabulary for reference which can be easily accessed on the internet. “The aim is to create an official vocabulary in Indian languages that can be accessible to all through a simple Google search,” he said.

Different committees are working simultaneously on the project and approximately three million translated technical words will be available on the website.

Subject-based committees are focused on finding the words for their areas of expertise while language committees are collating the “standard versions”. The words are being taken from dictionaries, glossaries and reference materials published by the CSTT over the years. The commission is being aided by the National Translation Mission of the Education Ministry’s Department of Higher Education.

CSTT, which was set up in 1961, publishes a large number of textbooks and monographs, apart from its quarterly journals, the Vigyan Garima Sindhu and Gyan Garima Sindhu. It undertakes the publication of administrative and departmental glossaries that are used by government departments, institutions, and research laboratories, autonomous organisations and public sector undertakings, besides organising workshops to popularise standard technical terminology in Hindi and other Indian languages.

MAPMYINDIA SEEKS LEVEL PLAYING FIELD WITH GOOGLE

Domestic device manufacturers and app makers may have got relief from the Competition Commission (CCI) against Google’s monopolistic practices in the Android space, but homegrown MapMyIndia, which works on geospatial data, continues to seek a level playing field with the US tech giant on the usage of satellite imagery.

Indian government’s regulations put a limit on domestic companies working with geospatial data with regard to satellite imagery, but as Google is a US company, it is free from such restrictions.

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



“Private companies in India using satellite imagery for either consumer or enterprise use cases cannot put out imagery finer than one-metre resolution. However, Google Maps does not comply with this directive and offers even finer and crisper resolution on their maps to consumers, making this regulation a grey area. This way Google is able to offer fine imagery on its apps, which we are not able to do, and this is definitely not a level playing field,” Rohan Verma, CEO and executive director, MapMyIndia, said.

RANSOMWARE ATTACK CRIPPLES AIIMS SERVICES

The National Informatics Centre (NIC) at AIIMS Delhi on Wednesday said that a ransomware attack affected the hospital server due to which day to day activities including OPD registrations and blood sample reports remained halted at the premier institute.

Doctors and patients complained of the facility being down post which it was found that there was a ransomware attack.

“Today the server for National Informatics Centre’s Hospital being used at AIIMS, New Delhi was down due to which outpatient and inpatient digital hospital services including, smart lab, billing, report generation, appointment system etc, have been affected. All these services are running on manual mode currently,” said a statement issued by the institute.

The National Informatics Centre (NIC) team informed that the attack has been reported and will be investigated by appropriate law enforcement authorities.

“Measures are being taken to restore the digital services and support is being sought from Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) and National Informatics Centre (NIC). AIIMS and NIC will take due precaution to prevent future such attacks,” the statement added.

WHY INDIA’S PUSH FOR MILLETS IS YET TO GAIN WIDESPREAD TRACTION

At a pre-launch celebration of the International Year of Millets 2023 organised by the Ministries of Agriculture and External Affairs on Thursday, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar named “Covid, conflict, and climate” as the world’s main food security challenges, and placed the cultivation and popularisation of millets in the context of the wider imperative of “de-risking the global economy”.

The event was attended by about a hundred foreign diplomats based in New Delhi.

Millets, the crop

The word millets is used to describe small-grained cereals like sorghum (jowar), pearl millet (bajra), foxtail millet (kangni/ Italian millet), little millet (kutki), kodo millet, finger millet (ragi/ mandua), proso millet (cheena/ common millet), barnyard millet (sawa/ sanwa/ jhangora), and brown top millet (korale).

Millets were among the first crops to be domesticated. There is evidence for consumption of millets by the Indus valley people (3,000 BC), and several varieties that are now grown around the world were first cultivated in India. West Africa, China, and Japan are home to indigenous varieties of the crop.



Millets are now grown in more than 130 countries, and are the traditional food for more than half a billion people in Asia and Africa. They require much less water than rice and wheat, and are mainly grown in rainfed areas.

Globally, sorghum (jowar) is the biggest millet crop. The major producers of jowar are the United States, China, Australia, India, Argentina, Nigeria, and Sudan. Bajra is another major millet crop; India and some African countries are major producers.

In India, millets are mainly a kharif crop. During 2018-19, three millet crops — bajra (3.67%), jowar (2.13%), and ragi (0.48%) — accounted for about 7 per cent of the gross cropped area in the country, Agriculture Ministry data show.

'High nutritive value'

Millets are considered to be “powerhouses of nutrition”. On April 10, 2018, the Agriculture Ministry declared millets as “Nutri Cereals”. Jowar, bajra, ragi/ mandua, the minor millets — kangani/ kakun, cheena, kodo, sawa/ sanwa/ jhangora, and kutki — and the two pseudo millets, buckwheat (kuttu) and amaranth (chaulai), which have “high nutritive value” are now regarded as “Nutri Cereals” for the purposes of production, consumption, and trade.

The Story of Millets published by the Karnataka State Department of Agriculture in association with ICAR-Indian Institute of Millets Research, Hyderabad, says, “Millets contain 7-12% protein, 2-5% fat, 65-75% carbohydrates and 15-20% dietary fibre... Small millets are more nutritious compared to fine cereals. They contain higher protein, fat and fibre content.”

Year of Millets

On March 3, 2021, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution to declare 2023 as the International Year of Millets. The proposal was moved by India, and was supported by 72 countries. Several events and activities, including conferences and field activities, and the issuing of stamps and coins, are expected as part of the celebrations aimed at spreading awareness about millets, inspiring stakeholders to improve production and quality, and attracting investments.

Millets under PDS

Under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, eligible households are entitled to get rice, wheat, and coarse grain at Rs 3, Rs 2, and Re 1 per kg respectively. While the Act does not mention millets, coarse grains are included in the definition of “foodgrains” under Section 2(5) of the NFSA.

However, the quantity of coarse grains procured for the Central Pool and distributed under the NFSA has been negligible. The latest data on stocks with the Food Corporation of India (FCI) show only 2.64 lakh metric tonnes (LMT) of coarse grain was available in the Central Pool on November 1, 2022. In comparison, the stocks of rice, wheat, and unmilled paddy were 265.97 LMT, 210.46 LMT, and 263.70 LMT respectively.

The push to distribute coarse grains under the PDS has not gained momentum. The Centre has accepted the recommendation of a committee set up by it, that millets be included in the PDS in order to improve nutritional support. On Thursday, Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar said “the time has come for the Public Distribution System to shift the focus of distribution programs from basic calories to provide a more diverse food basket that includes millets to improve the nutritional status of pre-school children and women of reproductive age”.



The government has set a target to procure 13.72 LMT coarse grains during the Kharif Marketing Season (KMS) 2022-23, more than double the 6.30 LMT procured during KMS 2021-22. The target includes 4.12 LMT of bajra, of which 0.95 LMT had been procured until November 21.

MSP for millets

The government declares a Minimum Support Price (MSP) for jowar, bajra, and ragi only. For KMS 2022-23, the MSP for jowar hybrid was declared at Rs 2,970 per quintal, and that for jowar maldandi at Rs 2,990 per quintal. The MSP for bajra and ragi were Rs 2,350 per quintal and Rs 3,578 per quintal respectively.

Main millets states

Jowar is mainly grown in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, and Madhya Pradesh. In 2020-21, the area under jowar stood at 4.24 million hectares, while production was 4.78 million tonnes. Maharashtra accounted for the largest area (1.94 mn ha) and production (1.76 million tonnes) of jowar during 2020-21.

Bajra is mainly grown in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka. Of the total 7.75 mn ha under bajra in 2020-21, the highest (4.32 mn ha) was in Rajasthan. The state also produced the most bajra in the country (4.53 million tonnes of the total 10.86 million tonnes) in 2020-21.

Consumption patterns

In the latest available NSSO household consumption expenditure survey (which is more than a decade old), less than 10 per cent of rural and urban households reported consumption of millets.

In rural areas, of the 11.231 kg of cereals consumed by a person in a month in 2011-12, 6.125 kg was rice, and 4.439 kg was wheat. Very little millets were consumed: 201 grams jowar, 246 g bajra, 75 g ragi, and 4 g of small millets. More than 95% of rural households reported consumption of rice and more than 59% wheat; only 8.5%, 6.6%, and 5.3% reported consumption of jowar, bajra, and ragi respectively.

In urban areas, monthly per capita consumption of cereals (9.322 kg) was lower than in rural areas. The monthly per capita consumption of jowar, bajra, ragi, and small millets were recorded at just 139 g, 91 g, 60 g, and 1 g.

The consumption of millets was reported mainly from Gujarat (jowar and bajra), Karnataka (jowar and ragi), Maharashtra (jowar and bajra), Rajasthan (bajra), and Uttarakhand (ragi).

Political significance

Millet is grown mainly in low-income and developing countries in Asia and Africa, and are part of the food basket of about 60 crore people across the globe. By proposing the resolution to celebrate 2023 as the International Year of Millets, India pitched itself as a leader of this group. This is similar to the Indian initiative on the 121-nation International Solar Alliance.

At home, millet growing states like Karnataka and Rajasthan will witness state Assembly elections next year. Activities around the celebrations can potentially be leveraged by the government to reach out to farming communities.



DEVELOPMENT OF GREAT NICOBAR: STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE AND ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS

The volcano on the Barren Island of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands is being closely watched to check for signs of an eruption which could lead to a tsunami or a monstrous undersea landslide akin to what had happened in Indonesia in 2018. Last month, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change gave environmental clearance for the ambitious Rs 72,000 crore development project on the strategically important Great Nicobar Island. The project is to be implemented in three phases over the next 30 years.

The proposal

A “greenfield city” has been proposed, including an International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT), a greenfield international airport, a power plant, and a township for the personnel who will implement the project. “The proposed port will allow Great Nicobar to participate in the regional and global maritime economy by becoming a major player in cargo transshipment,” the Niti Aayog has said in a report.

The port will be controlled by the Indian Navy, while the airport will have dual military-civilian functions and will cater to tourism as well. Roads, public transport, water supply and waste management facilities, and several hotels have been planned to cater to tourists.

A total 166.1 sq km along the southeastern and southern coasts of the island have been identified for project along a coastal strip of width between 2 km and 4 km. Some 130 sq km of forests have been sanctioned for diversion, and 9.64 lakh trees are likely to be felled.

Great Nicobar, Great Nicobar development project, Andaman and Nicobar islands, Great Nicobar project, Indian Express Great Nicobar is India’s southernmost point. Development activities are proposed to commence in the current financial year, and the port is expected to be commissioned by 2027–28. More than 1 lakh new direct jobs and 1.5 lakh indirect jobs are likely to be created on the island over the period of development.

The Island

Great Nicobar, the southernmost of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, has an area of 910 sq km. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are a cluster of about 836 islands in the eastern Bay of Bengal, the two groups of which are separated by the 150-km wide Ten Degree Channel. The Andaman Islands lie to the north of the channel, and the Nicobar Islands to the south.

Indira Point on the southern tip of Great Nicobar Island is India’s southernmost point, less than 150 km from the northernmost island of the Indonesian archipelago. Great Nicobar is home to two national parks, a biosphere reserve, and the Shompen and Nicobarese tribal peoples, along with ex-servicemen from Punjab, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh who were settled on the island in the 1970s.

The Shompen are hunter-gatherers who depend on forest and marine resources for sustenance. The Nicobarese, who lived along the west coast of the island were mostly relocated after the 2004 tsunami. An estimated 237 Shompen and 1,094 Nicobarese individuals now live in a 751 sq km tribal reserve, some 84 sq km of which is proposed to be denotified. The approximately 8,000 settlers who live on the island are engaged in agriculture, horticulture, and fishing.



The Great Nicobar Island has tropical wet evergreen forests, mountain ranges reaching almost 650 m above sea level, and coastal plains. Fourteen species of mammals, 71 species of birds, 26 species of reptiles, 10 species of amphibians, and 113 species of fish are found on the island, some of which are endangered. The leatherback sea turtle is the island's flagship species.

The purpose

The island has a lot of tourism potential, but the government's greater goal is to leverage the locational advantage of the island for economic and strategic reasons.

Great Nicobar is equidistant from Colombo to the southwest and Port Klang and Singapore to the southeast, and positioned close to the East-West international shipping corridor, through which a very large part of the world's shipping trade passes. The proposed ICTT can potentially become a hub for cargo ships travelling on this route.

The proposal to develop Great Nicobar was first floated in the 1970s, and its importance for national security and consolidation of the Indian Ocean Region has been repeatedly underlined. Increasing Chinese assertion in the Bay of Bengal and the Indo-Pacific has added great urgency to this imperative in recent years.

The concerns

The proposed massive infrastructure development in an ecologically important and fragile region, including the felling of almost a million trees, has alarmed many environmentalists. The loss of tree cover will not only affect the flora and fauna on the island, it will also lead to increased runoff and sediment deposits in the ocean, impacting the coral reefs in the area, they have cautioned.

Coral reefs, already under threat from warming oceans, are of enormous ecological importance. Environmentalists have also flagged the loss of mangroves on the island as a result of the development project. India has successfully translocated a coral reef from the Gulf of Mannar to the Gulf of Kutch earlier. The Zoological Survey of India is currently in the process of assessing how much of the reef will have to be relocated for the project. The government has said that a conservation plan for the leatherback turtle is also being put in place.

According to the government, expediting the project is of paramount national security and strategic importance. Officials said that after the grant of stage I clearance on October 27, all aspects will be carefully weighed before final approval is granted.

The project site is outside the eco-sensitive zones of Campbell Bay and Galathea National Park. The Centre has said that the development area is only a small percentage of the area of the island and its forest cover, and that 15 per cent of the development area itself will be green cover and open spaces.

INCOIS KEEPS WATCH ON BARREN ISLAND VOLCANO

The monitoring is being carried out by the Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS), which houses the Indian Tsunami Early Warning Centre (ITEWC) here.

Volcano emitting smoke

"The volcano about 140 km northeast of Port Blair has been emitting smoke and is not capable of causing major destruction. Even if it does, there could be a localised tsunami but we are working



on keeping a watch. We already have seven tide gauges in the Indian Ocean and there is a plan to put a seismic sensor and another tide gauge to catch any movement generated underwater,” informed senior scientist B. Ajay Kumar, in an exclusive interaction.

Recent tsunamis, including one in Tonga this year, have brought to the fore the challenge of tsunamis triggered by non-earthquake sources such as submarine landslides and volcanic eruptions which can wash away the regions near the source within a few minutes. This lack of awareness and preparedness by local communities and officials leading to slow responsiveness, needs to be addressed, said the scientist.

Scientists have calculated that it would take a magnitude of more than 6.5 on the Richter scale for a ‘tsunamigenic’ earthquake occurring in the Indian Ocean to hit the Indian coast, with travel time being 20 to 30 minutes to reach the A&N islands and two or three hours to hit the mainland. On India’s west coast, off the Arabian Sea, it could emerge from the Makran region and take two or three hours to reach the Gujarat coast. Tsunamis can travel from 800 kmph in the deep ocean and about 30 kmph near the shore, with wave heights ranging from less than a metre to nine metres when they reach the shoreline, said Mr. Ajay Kumar.

Though the devastating tsunami of December 2004 has faded away from public memory, ITEWC continues its round-the-clock vigil for unusual happenings on the sea to give advance warnings to 25 countries apart from India. Whenever an earthquake of more than 6.5 on the Richter scale occurs within the Indian Ocean (or above 8 on the Richter scale in other regions), timely and accurate tsunami bulletins are generated.

“We can estimate the expected wave heights and issue four threat levels corresponding to different public responses and mapped to NDMA (National Disaster Management Authority) guidelines about potential tsunamis, with confirmation and likely extent of inundation,” explained the scientist.

THE GEOHERITAGE VALUE OF RAM SETU

On November 10, the Supreme Court gave the Centre four weeks’ time to file a response clarifying its stand on a plea by former Rajya Sabha MP Subramanian Swamy seeking national heritage status for the ‘Ram Setu’.

While the story of the controversial Sethusamudram Ship Channel Project (SSCP) can be traced back to the British, who proposed creating a channel to link the Palk Strait with the Gulf of Mannar, it was only in 2005 that the project was inaugurated. Separating the shallow sea consisting of the Gulf of Mannar in the south and Palk Bay in the north is a somewhat linear coral ridge called Adam’s Bridge or Ram Setu. This runs between Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu and Thalaimannar in Sri Lanka. The SSCP, if completed, is expected to considerably reduce the navigation time between the east and west coasts of India.

Concerns about the project

Though the CSIR-National Environmental Engineering Research Institute ruled out any serious environmental risk and certified the feasibility of the project, concerns have been raised on the stability of the proposed channel and its environmental impact. Computer models suggest that the central, eastern and north-eastern parts of the Palk Bay may be impacted by waves of higher energy. This means that these areas also receive more sediment, rendering them more turbid. The



models also indicate that waves enter the Bay from its north and south, corresponding to how the channel is aligned.

The area is also vulnerable to cyclonic storms. A cyclone in 1964 was so powerful that it wiped out the town of Dhanushkodi. Such storms can cause the local sedimentary dynamics to go haywire. Finding safe places for dumping dredged material without harming terrestrial or marine ecosystems is therefore a big challenge. Emissions from ships traversing the narrow channel will pollute the air and water. And if a rogue ship carrying oil or coal is grounded or strays from its course within the canal, it could cause an ecological disaster. While environmental groups have been protesting against the project for the huge environmental cost it would entail, religious groups have been opposing it as they believe that the structure, which is mentioned in the Ramayana, is of religious significance.

In 2003, space-based investigations, using satellite remote sensing imagery, by researchers at the Space Applications Centre in Ahmedabad concluded that Ram Setu is not man-made, "but comprises 103 small patch reefs lying in a linear pattern with reef crest, sand cays and intermittent deep channels". Cays, also known as keys, refer to low-elevation islands situated on surfaces made of coral reef. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Ram Setu is a linear ridge made of coral reefs and forms a shallow part of the ocean that is being constantly impacted by sedimentation processes. Like the Great Barrier Reef, the Ram Setu is also a continuous stretch of limestone shoals that runs from Pamban Island near Rameswaram to the Mannar Island on the northern coast of Sri Lanka.

During a global glaciation period that began around 2.6 million years ago and ended 11,700 years ago, the Indian coast, including parts of the Sethusamudram, may have been raised above water. The post-glaciation period witnessed a steady rise in sea levels around the world. The coral polyps could once again have grown higher on the newly submerged platforms. And in time, the platforms may have been used by migrants to cross oceans. The Ramayana refers to a putative land bridge in this region; believers hold it as the structure that Lord Rama and his army built to reach Lanka. This ridge may have been used in the distant past as a migratory route.

Need for protection

The coral reef platforms between Thoothukudi and Rameswaram in the Gulf of Mannar were notified as a marine biosphere reserve in 1989. More than 36,000 species of flora and fauna reportedly live there, flanked by mangroves and sandy shores which are considered conducive for turtles to nest. This is also a breeding ground for fish, lobsters, shrimps and crabs. Of the 600 recorded varieties of fish in the region, 70 are said to be commercially important. This area is already threatened by discharge from thermal plants, brine run-off from salt pans, and illegal mining of corals. The SSCP, if it becomes a reality, will be the final blow to this sensitive environment and to the livelihoods of the people there.

While considering this issue from a believer's point of view, it is also important to consider this feature from a 'geoheritage' perspective. The geoheritage paradigm is used in nature conservation to preserve the natural diversity of significant geological features. It accepts the fact that geodiversity, consisting of varied landforms and features representative of dynamical natural processes, is under threat from human activities and needs protection. The natural heritage of a country includes its geological heritage. The value of abiotic factors like geology, soils and landforms is also recognised for their roles in supporting habitats for biodiversity. India's 'tryst with destiny' does not begin at Harappa or the Vedic Period; it goes back billions of years when



the Indian tectonic plate moved thousands of kilometres from the south of the equator to its present location. The Ram Setu carries the unique geological imprints of an eventful past. Therefore, it needs to be preserved not just as a national heritage monument, but also as a geoheritage structure as defined from a scientific perspective.

ANDAMAN SEEKS GI TAG FOR NICOBARI HODI

The Geographical Indications Registry at Guindy, Chennai, has received an application from the Tribal Development Council, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, seeking the Geographical Indication (GI) tag for the Nicobari hodi boat. This is the first application from the Union Territory seeking a tag for one its products.

The hodi is the Nicobari tribe's traditional craft. It is an outrigger canoe, very commonly operated in the Nicobar group of islands. The technical skills for building a hodi are based on indigenous knowledge inherited by the Nicobarese from their forefathers. The hodi is built using either locally available trees or from nearby islands, and its design varies slightly from island to island.

The GI tag application states: "The master carpenter journeys to the islands where the search is to be made for the tree to make Hodi craft. Once the choice is made, the terms and conditions under which the owner will allow the tree to be felled have to be determined. The trunk selected has to be free of branches along the required length, while it has to be sufficiently wide in girth to provide for the desired width. A 60 to 80 year old tree with a straight trunk or one having a slight incline to one side is preferred."

Considerations to be taken into account including the length of the finished canoe, which has to be 12 times that of its width while the length of the undressed tree trunk has to be 15 times this width. Padma Shri Awardee and GI expert, Rajani Kant, who facilitated the application, said, "Hodis are used for transporting people and goods from one island to another, [for] sending coconuts, [for] fishing and racing purposes."

The tuhet, a group of families under a headman, consider the hodi an asset. Hodi races are held between islands and villages.

TABBASSUM: A PIONEERING CHAT SHOW HOST

In a recent interview with Twinkle Khanna, filmmaker Karan Johar revealed that he wanted to "become Tabassum" when he grew up. His revelation that the late chat show host, who died this week at 78, was the inspiration for his show Koffee with Karan, is not surprising. To Indians of a certain vintage, the line of descent from Tabassum's popular Doordarshan chat show, Phool Khile Hain Gulshan Gulshan, to Johar's show couldn't be clearer. At a time when mystique was an essential part of the celebrity toolkit, Tabassum nudged her famous guests to let their guard down. Others, like Johar or Simi Garewal, have only followed the path she laid down.

It helped that Tabassum — born Kiranbala — was a Bollywood insider almost from the start. She began acting before she turned three, debuting in the 1947 film Nargis as Baby Tabassum. She took on more mature roles as she grew up, but her biggest success came as an interviewer, where she used her considerable charm to coax revelations out of her celebrity interviewees. With a flower tucked in her hair and her sari drawn over both shoulders, she soon came to be as recognisable a figure as some of the stars on her show.

**BUSINESS & ECONOMICS****OPENING STANCE**

In what would be India's first major free trade deal with a developed economy in over a decade, the first phase of a pact sealed with Australia in April this year is likely to be operationalised soon, paving easier market access for Indian services and goods. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's administration that assumed office a little over a month after his predecessor and now Leader of Opposition Scott Morrison signed the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) with India, has steered its ratification through Parliament. So, the India-Australia partnership enjoys wide, bipartisan support in Canberra — that Australia has been particularly upset with what it called the 'weaponisation of trade' by China, has surely helped galvanise sentiment about India being a more trustworthy partner. While the two countries are already part of recently formed global cliques such as the four-nation Quad, the trilateral Supply Chain Resilience Initiative and the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF), the bilateral trade deal is a strong positive signal about India's credentials to a world shuffling its feet away from dodgy supply chains towards a 'China plus one' strategy. Trading partners, some of whom are negotiating similar deals with India, will also be watching the contours of the next phase of talks between the two countries to firm up a more comprehensive treaty.

India expects bilateral trade to rise to about \$50 billion from the current level of \$31 billion in five years, with Indian exports driving half this surge, creating a million new jobs in labour-intensive sectors. Zero duty benefits on 98.3% of Australian tariff lines, from the day the agreement comes into force, will be extended to all Indian products within five years. Australia, in turn, will get zero duty benefits for 90% of its exports (in value terms) to India. With raw materials such as coal, metals and wool dominating its shipments, that means cheaper inputs for Indian firms. Annual visa quotas for Indian chefs and yoga trainers, and a post-study work visa regime for Indian students will bolster ties, as would the approval of a double taxation avoidance agreement by Australia, which is expected to save millions of dollars a year for Indian IT firms. As India pushes to close trade deals with the U.K., the EU and Canada, the wine import clauses with Australia that envisage an industry-level partnership, could also serve as a template for other spirits. It is critical to remember that trade deals open new doors, but do not automatically mean higher exports or better trade balances, as India's past pacts with ASEAN and Japan have shown. There is no shortcut or alternative to fixing India's overall global competitiveness.

67% DROP IN PM-KISAN PAYOUT IN 3 YEARS'

The number of farmers who received the 11th instalment of funds from the Prime Minister's Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) has fallen by 67%, according to the Agriculture Ministry's response to a Right to Information query from activist Kanhaiya Kumar.

PM-KISAN is a flagship Central scheme launched in 2019 to pay eligible farmer families ₹6,000 a year in three instalments of ₹2,000 each.

The Agriculture Ministry's instalment-wise payment success report showed that only 3.87 crore farmers received the 11th instalment of ₹2,000 in their accounts in May-June 2022. This is a sharp drop from the 11.84 crore farmers who received the first instalment back in February 2019, just before the Lok Sabha election.



The 12th instalment was disbursed on October 17 this year.

Year-by-year drop

From 11.84 crore farmers in the first instalment, the falling trend started from the sixth instalment which was received by 9.87 crore farmers. The seventh, eighth, ninth and 10th instalments were received by 9.30 crore, 8.59 crore, 7.66 crore and 6.34 crore people, respectively.

The Ministry did not respond to The Hindu's queries on why the number of beneficiaries has declined so sharply.

The data revealed that in Andhra Pradesh, the number of beneficiaries came down from 55.68 lakh to 28.2 lakh. In Bihar, the number reached seven lakh from 83 lakh, while in Chhattisgarh, just two lakh farmers received the 11th instalment, instead of 37 lakh people who got the amount in the first instalment.

In poll-bound Gujarat, 63.13 lakh farmers got the amount in 2019, but in 2022, only 28.41 lakh farmers benefited from the scheme.

Similarly in Haryana, 19.73 lakh farmers received the first instalment, but only 11.59 lakh farmers got the 11th instalment. In Maharashtra, the number came down from 1.09 crore in 2019 to 37.51 lakh in 2022.

In Madhya Pradesh, while 88.63 lakh farmers received the aid in 2019, only 12,053 received the amount in 2022. In Meghalaya, 627 farmers got it in 2022 against 1.95 lakh farmers in 2019. In Punjab, too, the number decreased to 11.31 lakh from 23.34 lakh.

In Uttar Pradesh, 2.6 crore farmers availed the aid in 2019, and it decreased by half to 1.26 crore in 2022. In West Bengal, according to the data, 45.63 lakh farmers received the amount in 2019 and no farmers got the money since the sixth instalment. The State government had raised this matter with Union Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar.

In Assam, the number of people who received the payment came down from 28.79 lakh to 2.54 lakh. In Chandigarh, just three people got the amount in May-June 2022. In Delhi, the number came down to 2,065 from 16,513.

In Himachal Pradesh too, the number came down by half from 9.86 lakh to 5.43 lakh. In Jammu and Kashmir, the beneficiaries who received the payment was 5.61 lakh from 12.07 lakh in 2019. In Jharkhand 4.17 lakh farmers got the money in May-June while in 2019, 27.07 lakh people had received the amount. In BJP-ruled Karnataka, the number came down from 55.61 lakh to 2.58 lakh. In Kerala, 24.23 lakh beneficiaries received the payment in 2022 against 36.99 lakh in 2019.

Similarly in Odisha, 7.05 lakh farmers got the payment in 2022, while in 2019, the number was 39.2 lakh. In Tamil Nadu, 23.04 farmers received the money in 2022 and 46.8 lakh got the amount in 2019. In Telangana, 24.32 lakh people received the payment in 2022; the first instalment was received by 39.1 lakh farmers. In Tripura too, the number has come down by half.

A wind-up coming?

All India Kisan Sabha president Ashok Dhawale termed the data "very shocking".

"Two-thirds of the farmers have not received the payment according to this data in 2022. There is no logical reason for such a decrease in the number of beneficiaries. It shows that the Centre is



trying to slowly wind up this scheme. This scheme is not at all a substitute for the legally guaranteed MSP. This scheme was another jumla to skirt the real issues the farmers are facing,” Dr. Dhawale said.

‘No fraud beneficiaries’

The Ministry said no money was transferred to any fraud beneficiary under the PM-KISAN scheme, adding that the benefits had been transferred directly into bank accounts only after the receipt of 100% error-free data of farmers from States, which is validated through Aadhaar or the Public Financial Management System (PFMS) database.

The government had earlier said that so far, eligible farmer families had received benefit of more than ₹2 lakh crore under the scheme through 11 instalments.

“Of this, ₹1.6 lakh crore has been transferred during the COVID-19 pandemic period. With the 12th instalment to be released by the Prime Minister on October 17, the total amount transferred to the beneficiaries so far is expected to cross well over ₹2.16 lakh crore,” a recent press release said.

STATES ASK CENTRE TO REIN IN RELIANCE ON SURCHARGES, CESS WHILE RAISING REVENUE

They also sought greater fiscal support to help revive the economy and reiterated demands for extending the Goods and Services Tax (GST) compensation period.

These issues about the federal fiscal framework were flagged, along with States’ local project wish-lists, at a consultation meeting for the Union Budget of 2023-24, steered by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman here and attended by Chief Ministers, Deputy CMs as well as Finance Ministers of States.

Tamil Nadu Finance Minister Palanivel Thiagarajan noted that the share of cesses and surcharges had grown from 10.4% of gross tax revenue in 2011-12 to 26.7% in 2021-22. “This has deprived the States of their legitimate share of revenue collected by the Union Government. I exhort the Union Government to merge the cesses and surcharges into the basic rates of tax so that the States receive their legitimate share in devolution,” he submitted.

His plea was echoed by other States, including Kerala’s Finance Minister K.N. Balagopal, who told The Hindu that this was a question of federalism.

“The Centre has been increasing surcharges and cesses despite the Constitution setting conditions for its imposition. We have been raising this in various forums. But in this meeting, I was happy to note that several BJP-ruled States, including Assam, supported this argument,” he said.

Hours after the meeting, where States like Tamil Nadu also raised concerns about pending dues from the five-year GST compensation window for States that expired on June 30 this year, the Finance Ministry said it had released ₹17,000 crore to States on Thursday towards the “balance GST compensation for the period April to June, 2022”. “With this release, Centre has released, in advance, the entire amount of cess estimated to be collected this year till March-end available for payment of compensation to States. This decision was taken to assist the States in managing their resources and ensuring that their programmes especially the expenditure on capital is carried out successfully during the financial year,” the Ministry said. On the parley with States, the Ministry said that most participants thanked the Union Finance Minister for financially supporting their



States and Union Territories by enhancing borrowing limits, providing two advanced devolution instalments and through special assistance for capital expenditure.

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel asked the Centre to resolve the issue of refunds of the corpus given to the National Pension Scheme, as the State has restored the old pension scheme. He said that ₹17,240 crore deposited with the National Securities Depository Limited till March 2022 should be returned so that it can be put in the General Provident Fund of the employees.

Mr. Balagopal, who also asked for the GST revenue share of States to be raised to 60% from the present 50%, said that States are going through severe financial problems, particularly after the GST rollout. "Now, if the revenues shared with States decrease (due to cesses), it would further harm our developmental and welfare activities," he emphasised.

Video conference

The Goods and Services Tax Council, which last met in June and was expected to meet again this August in Madurai, will now be convened on December 17 over a video-conference.

GST ON ONLINE GAMING, CASINOS, RACING: ISSUES IN THE DEBATE

The ministerial panel formed for casinos, race courses and online gaming under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime is likely to reiterate its earlier stance of a uniform 28 per cent tax rate for the three categories, irrespective of whether it is a game of skill or chance.

The final call about the valuation mechanism, however, will be taken by the GST Council as the GoM members have differed on whether it should be levied on the platform fee or the entire amount paid by the participants.

The panel, which met on Tuesday (November 22), is likely to fall back on the initial report presented before the GST Council in June. This would imply a hike in tax rates for online gaming, as online gaming platforms currently pay 18 per cent GST on platform fee alone, and not on the full value including prize money.

The online gaming industry grew exponentially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Online gaming currently contributes more than Rs 2,200 crore of GST, as per a recent study by EY and Assocham. As per a KPMG report, the online gaming sector would grow to Rs 29,000 crore by 2024-25 from Rs 13,600 crore in 2020-21.

GOVT. FORMS PANEL TO LOOK INTO MGNREGA'S EFFICACY

The Central government has constituted a committee to review the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme, especially to assess the programme's efficacy as a poverty alleviation tool.

The committee, headed by former Rural Development secretary Amarjeet Sinha, had its first meeting on Monday, and has been given three months to submit its suggestions.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was passed in 2005, and the scheme guarantees 100 days of unskilled work per year for every rural household that wants it. Currently, 15.51 crore active workers are enrolled in the scheme.



The Sinha committee has now been tasked to study the various factors behind demand for MGNREGA work, expenditure trends and inter-State variations, and the composition of work. It will suggest what changes in focus and governance structures are required to make MGNREGA more effective.

“MGNREGA was launched as a poverty alleviation instrument for the rural region, providing them with a safety net in the form of guaranteed work and wages. It was felt that States like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar where there is higher level of poverty, haven’t been able to utilise the scheme optimally,” a senior official aware of the developments said.

In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had termed MGNREGA a “living monument of Congress government’s failure”. In a speech in Parliament, he had said: “After so many years in power, all you were able to deliver is for a poor man to dig ditches a few days a month.” The scheme has also been criticised by economists like Jagdish Bhagwati and Arvind Panagariya as an “inefficient instrument of shifting income to the poor”.

The present committee will also look at the argument that the cost of providing work has also shot up since the scheme first started.

The committee has to review the reasons and recommend ways to bring in a greater focus on poorer areas. “An open-ended scheme such as this will always show sharp contrasts. Bihar, for example, despite its levels of poverty, does not generate enough work to make a concrete difference, and on the other end of spectrum we have Kerala, which is economically better but has been utilising it for asset creation. While Bihar needs MGNREGA more, we cannot deny Kerala the money because of the current structure of the programme,” one of the committee members said.

Asset creation

MGNREGA critics also slam the scheme for the lack of tangible asset creation. The committee will study if the composition of work taken up presently under the scheme should be changed. It will review whether it should focus more on community-based assets or individual works.

With four months more to go for the financial year to end, ₹59,420 crore has already been spent out of the ₹73,000 crore sanctioned for the scheme. The Rural Development Ministry has recently asked for an additional sum of ₹25,000 crore from the Finance Ministry for the anticipated expenditure before the financial year ends.

Regardless of all the criticism, MGNREGA acted as a crucial safety net during the COVID pandemic. In the financial year 2020-21, the number of person days of work provided under the scheme rose drastically to 389 crore, in comparison to the previous year’s figure of 265 crore. In 2021-22 too, the demand for MGNREGA work stood high, and 363 crore person days of work were generated. As per the current statistics, 196 crore person days of work have already been generated this year.

C RANGARAJAN EXPLAINS WHY IT IS ESSENTIAL TO CONTAIN DOMESTIC INFLATION

C Rangarajan weighs in on the factors that are driving the depreciation of the rupee, and why it is essential to contain domestic inflation to stop the slide.

Why is the rupee falling against the dollar?

First of all, we need to understand how the value of the rupee is determined. Several decades ago, there was a theory called the purchasing power parity theory, which explained how the value of



any currency is determined. The idea was that the external value of a currency is determined by its internal value — meaning that the rate differential between one currency and another depends upon the difference in the inflation in the two countries. That was a time when the balance of payments of a country was dominated by what we call the current account — that is, the export and import of goods and services.

But over time, this has changed. An important element now is the capital account in the balance of payments — which means the inflow and outflow of funds. The value of a currency can be strong despite the fact that it has a high current account deficit because there is enough capital flowing from outside into the country. Therefore, the supply of foreign currency increases not because of [trade] but because of the decision to invest or because of the decision to keep deposits in our country.

In some sense what has happened in the Indian situation — and this is true of many other countries as well — is that the main reason for the rupee depreciating in its value, let's say against the dollar, is because the funds inflow into our country started diminishing. That is because the Fed, with a view to control inflation in the United States, really raised the rate of interest.

Therefore, investors find the United States is [more] attractive, because of the higher rate of interest. Instead of sending funds outside, they are keeping the funds inside and sometimes, as it has happened in the present case, they withdrew the funds from India and put them in the United States.

Therefore, the reason why there is a sudden decline in the value of the rupee is because of the capital account, because of the outflow of funds and the lack of funds coming from outside.

There are various forms through which funds flow, but generally speaking, when the investment becomes more attractive domestically, foreign countries do not send funds into other countries, and this is precisely what has happened, because the fluctuation in the value of the rupee was quite sudden.

Is a stronger currency necessarily bad?

In a sense, an undervalued currency is better because it is more attractive for exports. But at the same time, we have to understand that this (depreciation against the dollar) cannot go on; this cannot be a continuous process. Please remember, immediately after the IMF was formed, the dollar was equal to 4.75 rupees and today we are talking in terms of 80 rupees to the dollar or a little more.

So, I would say that at a particular point in time, the devaluation or the depreciation in the value of the domestic currency may be advantageous because we have a tough balance of payments situation and we need to export more and reduce the current account deficit.

But this cannot go on continuously...because ultimately what we are essentially saying is that for getting \$1 the amount of the resources that you need in India is becoming higher and higher. Therefore, the steady deterioration in the value of the rupee is not something that one would advocate.

And this is where the whole purchasing power parity comes [into the picture]. So long as inflation in our country is higher than the inflation in other countries, the value of the rupee will (continue to) depreciate.



What can be done to stabilise the rupee's exchange rate?

I have always taken the position that we must reduce our inflation rate.

For example, the US talks of 2% as the appropriate inflation, whereas, we talk of 4% as the appropriate inflation, even though our actual inflation may be higher, but at least the goal is 4%. If you have this (setting), then every year the value of the rupee will have to depreciate.

The point is that the current situation has been aggravated because of the capital flows. But over a period of time, we really need to see that our inflation — while it may not necessarily be equal to their inflation — (is) at least close to it and the margin is not that high.

A conflict of that kind does not actually exist.

I will say that even in India inflation is at a higher level. We had set 6% as the upper limit in the inflation targeting scheme, but the inflation rate has been above 6% for almost nine months.

Therefore, we too need to control inflation. In some senses, raising the rate of interest is serving two purposes: it moderates inflation and at the same time, it does have an effect in terms of the value of the rupee as well.

Therefore, I don't see that (conflict) at the moment, but the question that will arise: to what extent (should the RBI raise the interest rates)?

I do not think that India can say that we will not raise the rate of interest. I think that is ruled out in my opinion... (Because) I think we really have a problem, we also have a high inflation, (and) we need to bring it down.

IN LAST 5 YEARS, RS 10 LAKH CRORE IN WRITE-OFFS HELP BANKS HALVE NPAS

AFTER WRITING off a huge amount of loans worth over Rs 10 lakh crore in the last five years, banks have been able to recover only 13 per cent of it so far.

The mega write-off exercise has enabled banks to reduce their non-performing assets (NPAs), or defaulted loans, by Rs 10,09,510 crore (\$123.86 billion) in the last five years, according to data furnished by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in its reply to the Right to Information (RTI) request filed by The Indian Express.

Aided by this huge write-off, which would have been enough to wipe out 61 per cent of India's estimated gross fiscal deficit of Rs 16.61 lakh crore for 2022-23, the banking sector reported a decline in gross NPAs to Rs 7,29,388 crore, or 5.9 per cent of the total advances, as of March 2022. Gross NPAs were 11.2 per cent in 2017-18.

Significantly, banks were able to recover only Rs 1,32,036 crore from the written off loans in the last five years, according to the RTI reply.

Once a loan is written off by a bank, it goes out from the asset book of the bank. The bank writes off a loan after the borrower has defaulted on the loan repayment and there is a very low chance of recovery. The lender then moves the defaulted loan, or NPA, out of the assets side and reports the amount as loss.



“After write-off, banks are supposed to continue their efforts to recover the loan using various options. They have to make provisioning also. The tax liability will also come down as the written off amount is reduced from the profit,” said Sanjay Agarwal, banking analyst with Care Ratings.

A loan becomes an NPA when the principal or interest payment remains overdue for 90 days.

The reduction in NPAs due to write-offs was Rs 13,22,309 crore in the last ten years, the RBI said. “Data is as reported by the banks,” the RBI said in its RTI reply.

The total defaulted loans (including write-offs but excluding loans recovered from write-offs in five years) amount to Rs 16.06 lakh crore, according to back of the envelope calculation. Including write-offs, the total NPA ratio would have become 13.10 per cent of advances as against 5.9 per cent reported by the banks.

Not surprisingly, according to the RBI, public sector banks reported the lion’s share of write-offs at Rs 734,738 crore accounting for nearly 73 per cent of the exercise.

When asked about the RBI guidance on write-offs, the RBI replied, “It may be noted that in a deregulated credit environment, banks have been advised to take credit related decisions including waiving off bad loans as per their commercial assessment of the viability of the loans in terms of their board approved policies subject to prudential norms issued by the RBI.”

However, the RBI did not provide the names of top loan write-offs. “Information on borrower-wise loan write-off is not collected by us and hence, not available with us,” the RBI replied.

While many big and small defaulted loans were written off by banks over the years, the identity of these borrowers was never revealed by banks. Among individual banks, reduction in NPAs due to write-offs in the case of State Bank of India was Rs 2,04,486 crore in the last five years, Punjab National Bank Rs 67,214 crore and Bank of Baroda Rs 66,711 crore. Among private banks, ICICI Bank’s reduction in NPAs due to write-offs was Rs 50,514 crore.

The writing off NPAs is a regular exercise carried by banks to clean up the balance sheet. “A substantial portion of this write-off is, however, technical in nature. It is primarily intended at cleansing the balance sheet and achieving taxation efficiency. In “Technically Written Off” accounts, loans are written off from the books at the Head Office, without foregoing the right to recovery. Further, write-offs are generally carried out against accumulated provisions made for such loans. Once recovered, the provisions made for those loans flow back into the profit and loss account of banks,” the RBI had earlier said in an explanatory note.

RBI’S CONCERNS ON SLOW DEPOSIT GROWTH

Global headwinds at present are emanating from three sources; Russian actions in Ukraine impacting energy supplies and prices (especially in Europe), economic slowdown in China because of frequent lockdowns due to its zero-COVID policy, and the increased cost-of-living because of resulting inflationary pressures.

Thus, monetary policies across the globe, especially of advanced economies, are being tightened, spurring concerns about financial stability risk in emerging and developing economies. The ‘drag’ occurs in two broad ways. Firstly, lower external demand drives down export demand obligating economic growth to be solely driven by domestic demand which might not be sufficiently strong. Second, higher global inflation and interest rates impact the flow of capital into the economy,



putting downward pressure on domestic currency and in certain circumstances, higher imported inflation. To this effect, the regulator had stated in its November bulletin, “The (domestic) macroeconomic outlook can be best characterised as resilient but sensitive to formidable global headwinds.”

What about deposit growth vis-a-vis credit growth?

Important to note, banks’ credit-disbursing bandwidth is determined by its in-house reserves. More importantly, demand for credit increases with greater economic activity. As per the RBI bulletin, aggregate demand domestically bears an “uneven profile” at present. Urban demand appears robust and rural demand which was muted has also started acquiring some strength recently. Commercial bank credit growth too has been surging, led by services, personal loans, agriculture and industry, in that order. This reflects the growing preference for bank credit for meeting working capital requirements.

How are we placed with respect to deposits and credit growth?

As per the RBI’s latest weekly data for scheduled commercial banks, aggregate deposits have grown 8.2% in comparison to 11.4% on a year-over-year basis whereas credit off-take has jumped 17% in comparison to a 7.1% increase on a YoY basis.

Senior Director and Deputy Chief Ratings Officer at CRISIL Ratings, Krishnan Sitaraman observed that it is not that deposit growth has fallen materially, but that credit growth has risen in the last few quarters. During the pandemic, owing to lower economic activity credit growth was on a lower trajectory. Now with economic activity returning to normalcy, the credit growth has picked up — especially in the previous three quarters.

Analysts have also pointed to deposit rates not going up as another reason for slower deposit growth. While banks passed on higher rates through loan portfolios, most of which were at floating rates, the approach was much measured with respect to deposit rates. Though this helped banks’ net interest margins, it did not bolster their bandwidth to disburse further credit.

What about banks’ asset quality?

RBI’s November bulletin informed that gross non-performing assets (GNPAs) have consistently declined, with net NPAs sliding down to 1% of total assets. Liquidity cover is robust and profitability is shored up. However, market participants have raised concerns with respect to corporates in light of the macroeconomic situation.

“We can expect asset quality to improve on the corporate loan book. The reason is the de-leveraging that has happened in corporate India over the years wherein most corporates have been able to cut down on their debt level and improve their credit profiles,” Mr. Sitaraman states.

Corporate NPAs are expected to come down in the current and upcoming fiscals due to the setting up of the National Asset Reconstruction Company Ltd which is expected to take over some of the legacy corporate loan NPAs which are still with banks.

WHY THE BUSINESS OF BANKING IS A RISKY VENTURE

Maturity transformation refers to a role played by banks in which they use short-term funds to finance long-term projects. For example, banks could use deposits that can be withdrawn by their customers at any point in time to give out loans that are repayable over many years by borrowers.



Depositors generally like to have ready access to the deposits that they entrust with a bank. Borrowers, however, prefer to take out loans with tenures that are ideally as long as the tenure of the projects in which they invest the borrowed money. Banks try to act as intermediaries trying to bring together depositors with short time horizons and borrowers with long time horizons.

The right balance

In order to manage the mismatch between the maturity profile of their assets and that of their liabilities, banks repeatedly roll over their deposits. They do this by paying current short-term depositors who demand their money back with fresh money that they receive from new short-term depositors. This makes the business of banking a risky venture as banks need to correctly forecast when their liabilities (customer deposits) and assets (loans) will mature, and how to manage any mismatch in these maturities. If a bank's depositors demand their money sooner than the bank's borrowers can repay their loans, this can lead to trouble as the bank will be unable to make good on its promise to return money to its depositors on demand. The bank may even be forced into a fire sale of its assets in order to immediately pay back depositors, which in turn could cause the bank to go insolvent. Banks may try to extend the maturity of their liabilities by rolling them over with fresh deposits. They may also use instruments such as bonds, fixed deposits, etc., which have a defined maturity date in contrast to current deposits that can be withdrawn at any time. Some economists believe that banking is inherently unstable due to the mismatch in the maturity of assets and liabilities of banks. Hence, they believe that banks need help from the government in the form of bailouts whenever they get into trouble. Other economists, however, believe that banks need to adjust their loan-making practices in such a way that it is consistent with the maturity profile of their deposit base. Some particularly note that it should be illegal for banks to promise their short-term depositors that they can withdraw their money whenever they want since banks loan these to borrowers. Instead, they argue that short-term funds should be treated as safe-keeping deposits and banks should be barred from using these funds to give out loans.

SEBI BRINGS MUTUAL FUND MANAGERS, DIRECTORS UNDER INSIDER TRADING RULES

With several cases of insider trading in mutual funds coming to light recently, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has finally brought fund managers, directors of fund houses, trustees and other connected entities under the ambit of insider trading rules.

Listing detailed guidelines in the gazette, the regulator said connected entities will include board of directors and key management personnel of sponsor of the mutual fund, directors or employees of registrar and share transfer agents and custodians or valuation agencies of the mutual fund who have access or are reasonably expected to have access to unpublished price sensitive information relating to a mutual fund scheme or its units in the course of business operations.

The Sebi board had earlier cleared the proposal. Fund managers of some fund houses had indulged in front running, making a huge money in the manipulation. Front-running, which is illegal in India, involves purchasing a stock based on advance exclusive information regarding an expected large transaction that will affect its price. Sebi has categorised front-running as a form of market manipulation and insider trading, and penalised several fund houses and fund managers in the past over this activity.



WHY SCRAPPING AIR SUVIDHA WILL PROVIDE RELIEF TO PASSENGERS TRAVELLING TO INDIA

Starting Tuesday (November 22), passengers travelling to India no longer need to fill forms and upload negative RT-PCR tests on the government's Air Suvidha portal. The doing away of this pre-embarkation requirement is likely to come as a relief for international fliers. It is in sync with the times, as Covid-19 has entered an endemic stage mainly on the back of vaccination coverage.

What was the Air Suvidha requirement?

The Air Suvidha portal was launched in August 2020 through which international passengers had to mandatorily submit details of their journey and Covid vaccination or testing status. The pre-arrival self-registration portal also enabled authorities to ascertain whether a person was arriving from a high-risk region.

Late last year, as the Omicron variant of Covid-19 spread, the Union Health Ministry mandated submitting details on the portal, including passengers' 14 day travel history and negative RT-PCR test reports to map if the traveller was arriving from an 'at-risk' country.

What was the criticism against Air Suvidha?

There was no pushback when Covid infections were rising, international passenger numbers were low, and there was a risk of India importing a new variant of the virus from abroad.

However, when the number of international passengers started to increase after India lifted its two-year ban on regular international flights on March 27, 2022, the travel requirement was seen as an impediment by many. A part of the reason was that the system was not able to cope with the increased number of international passengers after regular international flights were restored.

Travellers complained of not being able to upload Covid negative certificates, and that it took hours for passengers to get an Air Suvidha acknowledgment certificate, which was mandated for travel. Systems were updated but that was not enough to ease the pain of fliers.

When did India start the process to abolish Air Suvidha?

A plea was made around the time regular international flights started in March and was pursued seriously only around June. There was a divide within the government too over the issue of its abolition. While the Aviation and Tourism ministries were of the view that the requirement should be abolished, the Health ministry was reluctant and favoured its continuation since there was a risk of India importing new variants.

Requests by the Tourism and Aviation ministries were not accepted in June, but the ministries were assured that a review would be done around August to abolish the Air Suvidha requirement.

So has India removed all Covid restrictions for fliers?

The abolition of Air Suvidha is the last Covid restriction to go.

Last week, the government removed the mandatory requirement of wearing face masks on board aircraft. India's Covid-era restrictions included limiting the number of domestic flights, ban on regular international flights, fare restrictions, no meal service on board, etc. The path towards



bringing normalcy in the aviation sector took flight primarily after Jyotiraditya Scindia took charge as Aviation minister in July 2021.

CENTRE SCRAPS EXPORT TAX ON IRON ORE, STEEL

India scrapped export taxes on low-grade iron ore and on some intermediate steel products beginning Saturday, after months of complaints from miners and steel makers about loss of foreign sales opportunities.

A notification, issued late on Friday, reverses the imposition in May of a 50% tax on exports of iron-ore lumps and fines with less than 58% iron content.

The government also reversed a May increase in export tax on iron ore concentrates other than roasted iron pyrites. That tax returns to 30% from 50%.

The additional tax imposed in May was intended to boost domestic supply of iron ore, a raw ingredient for making steel, and thereby hold down inflation. India exported less than half as much steel in the seven months to October as it did a year earlier, according to government data seen by Reuters.

Major steel makers have urged the government to unwind the additional export taxation, saying it added to their problem of weakening global demand.

Despite the latest tax reductions, a top miners' organisation remained doubtful about the prospect of exports reviving.

The "Chinese market is not very buoyant now. Let us see how much we are able to export," R.K. Sharma, secretary-general of the Federation of Indian Mineral Industries, told Reuters. "Once you disturb the trade, to recover is very difficult."

Earlier this month, Mr. Sharma said India's iron ore exports had dropped to "nearly zero" in October due to the higher export taxes and was further expected to languish due to lower demand from China's weak economy.

Indian producers of low-grade ore depend largely on foreign markets, because most major domestic steel producers use high-grade iron ore.

On Friday, the government also removed a 15% export tax on some intermediate steel products, such as bars and rods, that it had also imposed in May.

Last week, JSW Steel Ltd., the country's largest steelmaker by capacity, told Reuters it expected its exports in the financial year to March 2023 to fall to their lowest level in more than five years because of reduced global demand and the added duty.

'Boost sentiment'

Joint managing director Seshagiri Rao M.V.S said on Saturday removal of the extra levies would boost sentiment in the industry.

"We welcome the government's decision to roll back the export duty on steel products and iron ore," said Tata Steel MD T.V. Narendran.



“India, being richly endowed with iron ore, has a great opportunity to make steel in India, for India, and for the world,” he added.

IF DEAL GOES THROUGH, BISLERI TO BE ‘BEAUTIFUL FIT’ FOR TATA: EXPERTS

Bisleri International chairman Ramesh Chauhan is negotiating with a few companies, including Tata Consumer Products (TCPL), for selling the company that he had bought from an Italian firm, Felice Bisleri, for Rs 4 lakh in 1969. While Chauhan is not divulging the deal value or the buyer as yet (he termed “incorrect” reports that the Tatas have clinched the deal already), the buzz is getting stronger that the discussions between the two have reached the final stages.

In a communique to the stock exchanges on Thursday, TCPL said “it evaluates various strategic opportunities for growth and expansion of the business of the company, on an ongoing basis...The management remains in discussions with various parties, including Bisleri”.

While Chauhan and TCPL are being guarded in their response, brand experts and analysts say Bisleri will be a “beautiful fit” for TCPL. “While Himalayan mineral water is bringing in the value, Bisleri will bring in the volume for TCPL,” one of them said. Besides, Bisleri is an iconic brand, which is synonymous with the category and one that commands a lot of trust. “The whole beverage segment can see a lot of innovation and, backed by the Bisleri distribution, is certainly a plus for the business,” analysts said.

According to analysts with Nomura, if the deal goes through, assuming purchase of Chauhan’s entire stake, Bisleri could contribute 12-14 per cent to Tata Consumer’s FY23 sales and profits owing to margins of the two companies being similar. Akshay D’Souza, chief of growth and insight at Bizom, agrees. “... Tatas have also been generally associated with a lot of brand credibility. Therefore, Bisleri fits well into their structure,” he said.

WHY AIRTEL’S TARIFF HIKE IS SIGNIFICANT, AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE SECTOR

As it looks to increase revenue collected from users, Bharti Airtel has hiked its entry-level tariff in two circles — Haryana and Odisha — by as much as 57 per cent. The telco’s move could prompt other operators, especially cash-strapped Vodafone Idea, to undertake similar tariff hikes.

In the Haryana and Odisha circles, Airtel has decided to scrap its cheapest Rs 99 plan that, along with talk time, offered users 200 MB of 2G mobile data for 28 days. With the plan’s withdrawal, the cheapest plan in these circles now starts from Rs 155 and offers unlimited voice calling, 1 GB of mobile data and 300 SMSes for 24 days.

Why is Airtel’s move significant?

A senior executive at the company said that Airtel decided to raise prices first in these circles to see how users, and more importantly its competitors, react. “If we see the other players also undertake hikes, that would be great for the industry overall. If the others also increase their prices in these circles, then we can think of hiking plan prices across the country,” an executive said. Haryana and Odisha circles together contributed 4.4 per cent of Airtel’s Adjusted Gross Revenues (AGR) in the first quarter of FY2023.

Bharti Airtel has, for a long time, suggested that the average revenue per user (ARPU) of the industry needs to be around Rs 200 per month in the short term and eventually rise to Rs 300 for the industry’s sustainability. During the July-September quarter, Airtel’s ARPU had seen a jump of



3.8 per cent quarter-on-quarter to Rs 190, which is higher than Jio's Rs 177.2 and Vodafone Idea's Rs 131.

While Vodafone India has a similar Rs 99 plan for its subscribers, Reliance Jio's comparable 28-day plan has unlimited voice calls for Rs91.

Industry experts believe that Airtel's move will come as a shot in the arm of Vodafone Idea (Vi), which currently has the lowest ARPU among the three telcos. "Tariffs in the industry are still the lowest in the world. If there is a move by any operator to increase the base rate, then the others — Jio and Vi — may follow through with a similar tariff hike in the next few weeks or months," said Prashant Singhal, EY Global TMT Emerging Markets Leader.

The three telcos had last undertaken a tariff hike of around 25 per cent in November 2021. Since then, they have spent top dollars in the 5G spectrum auction earlier this year, where they collectively bought spectrum worth Rs 1.49 lakh crore. In a research note, ICICI Securities said that if the competition follows, it will result in faster deleveraging of balance sheets and boost the generation of free cash flow, both being critical to telcos as they are currently spending significantly to roll out 5G networks.

How could Airtel's move impact the company?

Aside from allowing other telcos to hike tariffs, Airtel's hike is not expected to affect its 4G users since the plan scrapped by the telco only offered 2G internet speeds. "By limiting the effective tariff hike only to 2G customers, Airtel has ensured its peers cannot take advantage of the situation to poach its 4G customers," ICICI Securities said. Citigroup said that if Bharti Airtel is successful in implementing this change across all its circles, its mobile revenues could rise around 2.5-3%.

WHAT DOES THE LATEST FTX FALLOUT MEAN FOR THE CRYPTO INDUSTRY?

The story so far:

On November 11, FTX filed for bankruptcy protection. One of the world's biggest crypto exchanges collapsed after reports emerged about the platform's CEO Sam Bankman-Fried using customer deposits to trade on behalf of FTX's sister firm Alameda Research. The bushy-haired co-founder of both the exchange and the trading unit apologised and resigned after a potential takeover deal by rival exchange Binance failed to materialise. The 30-year-old billionaire's crypto empire collapse is so significant that it dragged Bitcoin's price to a two-year low. Once the darling of the crypto industry with a valuation of \$32 billion, FTX is now accused of financial fraud and misuse of customer funds. Mr. Bankman-Fried admitted he was ignorant of his platform's true liquidity and leverage levels when customers requested for "roughly" \$5 billion in withdrawals in one day.

What is the genesis of FTX?

Mr. Bankman-Fried was a former quants trader at the global trading firm Jane Street. By the end of 2017, when Bitcoin's price breached \$1,000 after years of fluctuation, he moved to Hong Kong to set up investment fund Alameda Research to trade in crypto tokens and derivatives. The skyrocketing rise of the de facto crypto benchmark asset set off a new bull run for cryptocurrency. But the digital coins were not traded at the same price on different exchanges. Mr. Bankman-Fried saw an arbitrage opportunity in this inherent volatility in the crypto ecosystem and two years later, in April 2019, when Bitcoin once again lost its sheen, Mr. Bankman-Fried launched FTX as a platform where traders could buy and sell crypto assets and derivatives.



LIFE & SCIENCE

INCREMENTAL WIN

The two-week long climate conference in Egypt has drawn to a close with a symbolic victory in the form of a fund that will compensate some of the countries bearing the brunt of climate change-linked natural disasters. However, progress on action to keep temperatures from rising beyond 1.5°C of pre-industrial levels was limited. The 27th edition of the United Nations Conference of the Parties was projected to be an 'implementation' COP that would have decisively resolved questions on how developed countries, responsible for the bulk of historical emissions, would make good on an old promise to provide developing countries \$100 billion annually by 2020. And whether the world would commit to end all categories of fossil fuel, and not just coal. Despite hours of negotiations, these deadlocks remain. COP-27 will certainly be remembered as the COP of Loss and Damages (L&D). A nearly three-decade old movement, first initiated by the island nation of Vanuatu and the Alliance of Small Island States, has come to partial fruition. There will now be a dedicated fund to compensate the most vulnerable developing countries that are already bearing the brunt of climate change-linked natural disasters. L&D refers to impacts of climate change that cannot be avoided either by mitigation (cutting greenhouse gas emissions) or adaptation (modifying practices to buffer against climate change impacts). They also include not only economic damage to property but also loss of livelihoods, and the destruction of biodiversity and sites that have cultural importance. This broadens the scope for affected nations to claim compensation.

The text approved at Sharm el-Sheikh only commits to a fund being created and leaves discussions for how it is to be set up and, most importantly, who will pay how much to it, for future COP negotiations. While there have been nominal commitments by Scotland and Wallonia (Belgium) to donate to such a fund, the estimated L&D is already over \$500 billion. During negotiations this year, the European Union pressed hard for China, the Arab states and "large, developing countries" — and this could include India — to contribute on the grounds that they were large emitters. This already opens up fresh occasion for acrimony in future COPs and given that barely a third of committed climate finance has made its way to developing countries, the L&D fund too might take years before it can meaningfully operate. While the gain is incremental, countries ought not to lose momentum and must work harder to ensure that COPs remain credible catalysts and are not occasions for pyrrhic victories.

WHAT IS INDIA'S FUTURE STRATEGY ON EMISSIONS?

The story so far:

The Climate Change Conference (COP-27) at Sharm el-Sheikh was to end on Friday but the deadline was extended to the weekend because there were divisions among member countries on the final text of the agreement. While India unveiled its much-awaited Long-Term Low Emission Development Strategy during COP-27, several outstanding issues remain.

What has India committed on carbon neutrality?

The Paris Agreement of 2015 required countries to submit a plan demonstrating how they would switch their economies from being reliant on fossil fuel to clean energy sources. This was to include measures to be taken to keep temperatures from rising beyond 2°C, and preferably keep



it at 1.5°C by the end of the century and becoming carbon neutral or achieving net zero. India has committed to being net zero by 2070. The deadline to make a commitment was 2020 but the pandemic meant deadlines were extended. India is now in a group of about 60 countries — the Paris Agreement has over 190 signatories — to have submitted a strategy document to the UN.

What are the elements of India's low emissions strategy?

The 100-page document that lays out India's strategy underlines the use of nuclear power and hydrogen as critical to transition India into a carbon-neutral economy.

Environment minister Bhupender Yadav said the Long-Term Low-Carbon Development Strategy, as India refers to it, underlines India's right to an equitable and fair share of the global carbon budget. The remaining budget for a 50% likelihood to limit global warming to 1.5°C, 1.7°C and 2°C is 380 GtCO₂ (nine years at 2022 emissions levels), 730 GtCO₂ (18 years) and 1,230 GtCO₂ (30 years), according to an analysis by the Global Carbon Project. One gigatonne (Gt) CO₂ is a billion tonnes of carbon dioxide. "The journey to net zero is a five decade long one and India's vision is therefore evolutionary and flexible, accommodating new technological developments and developments in the global economy and international cooperation."

India's plan is to maximise the use of electric vehicles; ensure that by 2025 the percentage of ethanol blended with petrol increases to 20% from the existing 10% and making a 'strong shift' of passenger and freight vehicles to public transport. India will also focus on improving energy efficiency by the Perform, Achieve and Trade (PAT) scheme, expand the National Hydrogen Mission, increase electrification, and enhance material efficiency and recycling. The PAT scheme refers to an emissions trading scheme where industries such as aluminium, fertilizer, iron and steel, that are extremely carbon intensive, have to reduce their emissions by a fixed amount or buy energy saving certificates from firms that have exceeded reduction targets. This scheme has been on since 2012 and, according to the Ministry of Power, has so far prevented 60 million tonnes of CO₂ from being emitted.

Is the strategy different from Nationally Determined Contributions?

The NDCs, which India must periodically update, are voluntary commitments by countries to reduce emissions by a fixed number relative to a date in the past to achieve the long-term goal of climate agreements of preventing global temperature rising beyond 1.5°C or 2°C by the end of the century. Thus, India's most updated NDC commits to ensuring that half its electricity is derived from non-fossil fuel sources by 2030 and reducing the emissions intensity by 45% below 2005 levels by 2030. They are concrete targets unlike the low-carbon strategy which is qualitative and describes a pathway.

What are the sticking points?

During COP-26 in Glasgow last year, India and several other countries announced a net zero timeline. COP-27 was labelled as an "implementation" conference, in the sense that countries were determined to solve outstanding questions on climate finance. This refers to money that developed countries had committed to developing countries to help them turn their economies away from fossil fuels, build infrastructure resilient to climate shocks and access technologies to enable widespread use of renewable energy. Of nearly \$100 billion annually committed in 2009, which was to have been arranged for by 2020, less than a third has come in. Much of this, and this has been pointed out by several countries including India, is in the form of loans or come with conditions that increase the economic burden on developing countries. Now there is a demand



that developed countries must come up with a new target, described in negotiations as a New Collective Quantified Goal, with a clear path of delivery and a higher amount, to the tune of “trillions of dollars” to account for increased costs of energy transition. Another major issue is on the question of Loss and Damage (L&D). This is a proposal to compensate the most vulnerable countries and developing countries who are facing the brunt of climate change for the damage that has already incurred. Again a topic that has been discussed for years, this year triggered hope that a dedicated fund for L&D would come into being. The European Union was resistant to announcing a fund this year, on the grounds that it would take years to materialise and there were other options to get money flowing where it was most needed. However, there were indications that they were amenable provided that contributors to the fund include large developing economies which are significant emitters — a pointer to China.

FLOODS IN PAKISTAN, HURRICANE IN US, NEARLY DAILY EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS IN INDIA: THE SEVERE CLIMATE DISASTERS OF 2022

Representatives from nations around the world are heading towards the concluding phase of the ongoing United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 27) in Sharm el-Shaikh, Egypt.

The conference has witnessed nations participating in discussions that emphasize climate finance, including adaptation and mitigation finance, by bringing the concept of ‘loss and damage’ into the forefront. The world’s biggest emitters – China, the United States, the European Union and India – account for more than half of historical emissions of greenhouse gases.

As developing and vulnerable nations like India continue to demand compensation from developed nations for climate-induced damages, we look back at global catastrophes which severely impacted life on Earth during the year.

Pakistan floods: The worst in the country’s recent history

The World Meteorological Department cited a research analysis conducted as part of the World Weather Attribution group and said, “Human-caused climate change likely increased the intense rainfall that flooded large parts of Pakistan.”

Pakistan recorded 62 per cent less than normal rainfall in the month of March, and the warmest April preceding the monsoon season. Glaciers melted as a result of these heat waves, which led rivers to swell. Access to basic necessities became difficult for 33 million people of Pakistan’s 220 million population.

Extreme rainfall further triggered the most devastating floods from June to September. Over 1,500 people were killed, with millions being displaced and developing serious health issues such as skin infections, malaria and diarrhoea. A national emergency was declared on August 26, 2022. According to a Reuters report, the overall damages in the nation were estimated at about \$30 billion. At COP27, the country’s Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif sought debt relief and compensation as a part of “loss and damage” funds for disaster-hit nations.

Hurricane Ian in the US: Costliest climate-induced disaster of the year

NASA data revealed that warm ocean waters in the Gulf of Mexico powered Hurricane Ian in the US towards the end of September, making it one of the strongest hurricanes to hit the country in recent memory. About 101 lives were lost, and monetary losses worth more than \$100 billion, were suffered, according to Reuters.



The escalation brought severe floods, relentless rains and strong winds to southwestern Florida. According to a New York Times report, “La Niña”, a climate phenomenon, fueled “favorable conditions for hurricanes in the North Atlantic over the past three years.” Warmer ocean waters strengthen and sustain such storms, it added.

European droughts: Likely to have been the ‘worst in 500 years’

Europe was struck by two extreme heat waves in June and July. As per a quarterly disaster report published by insurance agency Aon in October, heat waves claimed approximately 16,000 lives.

Following the deadly summer heat, many regions of Europe witnessed severe droughts since the beginning of this year, which worsened in the month of August. Water levels in Europe’s biggest rivers – Rhine, Po, Loire, and Danube – shrunk, and dry conditions continue to prevail in different parts of the continent.

The Global Drought Observatory (GDO) report by the European Commission’s research wing, declared 47% of the continent in “warning” conditions, while another 17% remained on alert. In an interview with the BBC, research commissioner Mariya Gabriel said that the heatwave and water shortages have “created an unprecedented stress on water levels in the entire EU.”

According to a report by World Weather Attribution, “human-induced climate change – especially high temperatures – increased the likelihood of observed soil moisture drought events.” But even in the UK, heatwaves and drought pushed trees into their “survival modes,” which made them turn into an autumnal shade in August.

North America, mainland China and other parts of the Northern Hemisphere also saw extreme heat conditions during the summer of 2022.

Spain and Portugal: Driest climate in 1200 years

An atmospheric high-pressure system, which causes dry air to descend over subtropical regions in the Northern Hemisphere during winter and spring seasons, called Azores high, has the ability to block wet weather outlets. This caused dry conditions in Iberian peninsula in southwestern Europe, and the Mediterranean region. Spain and Portugal hence faced the driest weather in 1,200 years, along with wildfires.

As The Guardian reported, scientists claim that the “most frequent Azores highs could only have been caused by the climate crisis, caused by humanity’s carbon emissions.” Rainfall in the region is likely to drop by 10-20% by 2100, severely impacting food production.

India recorded natural disasters almost every day in 2022

According to a report by Centre for Science and Environment and Down To Earth magazine, India recorded “extreme weather events on 241 of 273 days” in the first nine months of the year. Thunderstorms, persistent rains, cyclones, droughts, heat waves, lightning, floods and landslides occurred all throughout these months. Himachal Pradesh recorded the highest number of deaths (359), followed by Assam and Madhya Pradesh.

Overall, these disasters claimed about “2,755 lives, affected 1.8 million hectares (ha) of crop area, destroyed over 416,667 houses and killed close to 70,000 livestock.” The CSE report describes these disasters as “the watermark of climate change.”



Besides these climate events, on the whole, increasing surface temperatures and global warming continue affecting our planet. According to a study by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), this year, the “June-August global land and ocean surface temperature were 1.6°F above the 20th-century average of 60.1°F.” Further, August was the sixth-warmest, and October the fourth-warmest, in NOAA’s 143-year record.

RUSSIA’S NUCLEAR ICEBREAKERS AND MILITARISATION OF THE ARCTIC

The story so far:

On November 22, Russian President Vladimir Putin virtually presided over the launch and flag raising ceremony of two nuclear-powered icebreakers at St. Petersburg and said such icebreakers were of “strategic importance”. As climate change opens up the Arctic giving access to new routes and resources, there is a race by adjoining countries to build up their militaries and Russia has a clear lead over them.

Why are the Russian icebreakers significant?

Speaking at the launch ceremony, Mr. Putin said both icebreakers were laid down as part of their large-scale, systematic work to re-equip and replenish the domestic icebreaker fleet, to strengthen Russia’s status as a “great Arctic power.” The 173.3-metre-long ‘Yakutia’, with a displacement of up to 33,540 tonnes, was launched into water and can break through three metres of ice. The flag was raised on another vessel Ural, which is expected to become operational in December, while the Yakutia will join service by end-2024, Mr. Putin said.

There are two already similar vessels in service, Arktika and Sibir. Mr. Putin said that a much more powerful 209-metre-long nuclear icebreaker “Rossiya,” displacing up to 71,380 tonnes, would be completed by 2027.

In the last two decades, Russia has reactivated several Soviet era Arctic military bases and upgraded its capabilities.

Mr. Putin talked of the importance of the Northern Sea Route, which cuts down time to reach Asia by up to two weeks compared to the current route via the Suez canal. In line with this, the updated Russian naval doctrine, unveiled in July, envisages “diversifying and stepping up naval activities on the Spitsbergen, Franz Josef Land and Novaya Zemlya archipelagos and Wrangel Island.”

In the backdrop of the war on Ukraine, on March 3, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the U.S. announced that they would “temporarily pause participation in all meetings of the [Arctic] Council and its subsidiary bodies...”.

Why are countries racing towards the Arctic?

There has been a race among Arctic states and near-Arctic states to augment their capabilities in a bid to be ready to capitalise on the melting Arctic. Russian military modernisation in the Arctic has prompted other Arctic states to join the bandwagon. Unlike Antarctica, the Arctic is not a global common accentuating the problem.

For instance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has been conducting regular exercises in the region while partner countries are investing in upgrading military capabilities. At the same time, China, which calls itself to be a near-Arctic state, has also announced ambitious plans for a ‘polar silk route’ to connect to Europe as well building massive icebreakers.



Where does India stand with respect to the Arctic?

Since 2007, India has an Arctic research programme with as many as 13 expedition sunder taken till date. In March 2022, India unveiled its first Arctic policy titled: 'India and the Arctic: building a partnership for sustainable development'. India is also one of the 13 Observers in the Arctic Council, the leading intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation in the Arctic.

As the earth further heats up, which is more profound at the poles, the race for the Arctic is set to accelerate which makes the Arctic the next geopolitical hotspot with all interests converging on it – environmental, economic, political and military.

IF DONALD TRUMP DOESN'T WANT THE PUBLICITY OF YOUR PLATFORM — LIKE ELON MUSK'S TWITTER — IT'S DEFINITELY IN TROUBLE

If a publicity-loving narcissist doesn't want to be on your social media platform, it's in big trouble. One of the latest headlines from the seemingly never-ending hijinks at Twitter since Elon Musk took over has been the lifting of the suspension on Donald Trump's account on Sunday. Trump's account was suspended nearly two years ago, after the Capitol riots in January 2021. Musk, long before he decided to become the self-appointed one-man arbiter of free speech by buying a company, had been incensed by Trump's "permanent suspension". After a poll on his platform on whether the former US president's account should be re-instated, @realdonaldtrump is back in action. Unfortunately, the corporeal Donald Trump isn't interested in Twitter anymore.

Trump does not see "any reason" to return to Twitter. Perhaps he is right. The role his late-night tweets played during his presidency — injecting a ranting, polarising chaos into the public conversation and media cycle — is now fulfilled by the likes of Ye (formerly Kanye West) and Musk himself. Perhaps he doesn't want to compete for attention on a platform that's already overcrowded with mega-rich megalomaniacs. Or maybe he believes that since his posts on Truth Social — the platform Trump founded — are amplified by mainstream media and their screenshots are shared on other social media, another account is redundant.

Whatever Trump's intention, the fact is that he has transcended the need for Musk's generosity. Trolling, once a niche activity carried out on the margins, grew exponentially, and in the former US president, found a platonic ideal type. He made the casual misogyny, prejudice and name-calling reserved for private conversations and outliers of the cyber world into a successful political campaign. And by breaking the conventions of civility, he challenged the boundaries of free speech in a democracy. Trump doesn't need to go back to Twitter, perhaps, because he already broke it. Only Musk doesn't seem to realise that.

INDIA'S UNUSUAL ABSTENTION IN CITES VOTE ON REOPENING IVORY TRADE

Although increasingly squeezed for space and support in a crowded land, the elephant remains one of India's most powerful cultural and religious symbols. A pioneer in banning even the domestic trade in ivory in 1986, India has always been at the forefront of global elephant conservation initiatives.

That is why India's decision not to vote against a proposal to re-open the international trade in ivory at the ongoing conference of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) surprised many.



That proposal, to allow a regular form of controlled trade in ivory from Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, was defeated 83-15 in Panama City on Friday.

CITES agreement

CITES is an international agreement between governments — 184 at present — to ensure that international trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten the survival of the species. The convention entered into force in 1975 and India became the 25th party — a state that voluntarily agrees to be bound by the Convention — in 1976.

All import, export and re-export of species covered under CITES must be authorised through a permit system. CITES Appendix I lists species threatened with extinction — import or export permits for these are issued rarely and only if the purpose is not primarily commercial. CITES Appendix II includes species not necessarily threatened with extinction but in which trade must be strictly regulated.

Every two years, the Conference of the Parties (CoP), the supreme decision-making body of CITES, applies a set of biological and trade criteria to evaluate proposals from parties to decide if a species should be in Appendix I or II.

Tussle over ivory

The international ivory trade was globally banned in 1989 when all African elephant populations were put in CITES Appendix I. However, the populations of Namibia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe were transferred to Appendix II in 1997, and South Africa's in 2000 to allow two "one-off sales" in 1999 and 2008 of ivory stockpiled from natural elephant deaths and seizures from poachers.

Subsequently, Namibia's proposal for allowing a regular form of controlled trade in ivory by delisting the elephant populations of the four countries from Appendix II was rejected at CoP17 (2016) and CoP18 (2019). At the ongoing CoP19, the proposal was moved by Zimbabwe but met the same fate. The four southern African countries argue that their elephant populations have bounced back and that their stockpiled ivory, if sold internationally, can generate much-needed revenue for elephant conservation and incentivising communities.

Opponents of the ivory trade counter that any form of supply stokes demand and that sharp spikes in elephant poaching were recorded across the globe after the one-off sales allowed by the CITES in 1999 and 2008.

India and ivory trade

The endangered Asian elephant was included in CITES Appendix I in 1975, which banned the export of ivory from the Asian range countries. In 1986, India amended The Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 to ban even domestic sales of ivory. After the ivory trade was globally banned, India again amended the law to ban the import of African ivory in 1991.

In 1981 when New Delhi hosted CoP3, India designed the iconic CITES logo in the form of an elephant. Over the years, India's stand has been unequivocal on the ivory issue.

What has changed

After protracted negotiation, India signed an agreement in July with Namibia to fly in cheetahs. Last month, The Indian Express reported that India has agreed to promote "sustainable utilisation



and management of biodiversity” by supporting advances in this area of bilateral cooperation “at international forums including meetings of” CITES.

While the word “ivory” was not mentioned, Namibia sought India’s support under this agreement for the longstanding proposal to re-open the ivory trade at CITES. A Namibian government spokesperson confirmed the same to The Indian Express.

Reacting to the report, the Environment Ministry said that the “Government of India has not received any written communication from the Republic of Namibia regarding lifting of ban on ivory trade”.

“Though the agreement signed between the Government of the Republic of Namibia and Government of the Republic of India includes ‘wildlife conservation and sustainable biodiversity utilization’ as one of the areas of cooperation, this cannot be construed as support for lifting the ban on trade in endangered species,” the Ministry said on October 13.

However, on November 19, when the proposal on the ivory trade was put to vote at CoP19, India chose to abstain and not vote against it.

U.S. SCIENTISTS FIND NEW ORAL DRUG FOR LOWERING CHOLESTEROL

The research, published in the journal Cell Reports, represents a previously unrecognised strategy for managing cholesterol and may also impact cancer treatments.

After statins, the next leading class of medications for managing cholesterol are PCSK9 inhibitors, the researchers said.

These highly effective agents help the body pull excess cholesterol from the blood, but unlike statins, which are available as oral agents, PCSK9 inhibitors can only be administered as shots, creating barriers to their use, they said.

In the latest study, researchers at the University Hospitals (UH) and Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, U.S., developed an orally administered small-molecule drug that reduces PCSK9 levels.

Prolonging life

“Cholesterol lowering is one of the most important therapies we have to prolong life and protect people from heart disease, which is still the number one cause of morbidity and mortality in the Western world,” said senior author Jonathan S. Stamler, Professor at UH and Case Western Reserve School of Medicine.

“Statins only lower cholesterol so far. This is a drug class that we think would represent a new way to lower cholesterol, a new way to hit PCSK9,” he said.

The researchers noted that central to cholesterol regulation are LDL receptors, which sit at the surface of liver cells and remove cholesterol from the blood, thereby lowering serum levels.

LDL receptors

PCSK9 in the bloodstream controls the number of LDL receptors by marking them for degradation. Therefore, agents that inhibit PCSK9 increase the number of LDL receptors that remove cholesterol. Nitric oxide can prevent heart attacks by dilating blood vessels, the researchers said.

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



In the new study, researchers show that nitric oxide can also target and inhibit PCSK9, thus lowering cholesterol. They identified a small molecule drug that functions to increase nitric oxide inactivation of PCSK9.

“PCSK9 not only targets LDL receptors for degradation, it mediates the degradation of MHC 1 on lymphocytes, which is used for recognition of cancer cells,” Prof. Stamler said.

HYPERTENSION: A TICKING TIME BOMB IN INDIAN ADOLESCENTS

High blood pressure is already a problem of great magnitude in India. The Indian National Health Portal reports that 30% of adult Indians have elevated blood pressure — a little higher in urban (34%) compared with rural (28%) areas. High blood pressure is relatively silent, with grave consequences, as it is a major cause of cardiovascular diseases, including stroke. The best way forward is prevention, especially starting in childhood.

Our paper (with Anil Vasudevan as the first author) published recently in JAMA Network Open reports that Indian adolescents aged between 10-12 years have hypertension prevalence of 35%, while in those above 13 years, the prevalence is 25%. This is roughly the same in urban and rural areas; for younger children, the prevalence is even higher than in adults.

More prevalent

Effectively, high blood pressure is occurring in one in three or four children, and this is much higher than earlier estimates of about 7%. Even factoring for the somewhat higher estimates derived from a single survey, there is enough signal that hypertension in adolescents is much more widely prevalent than previously thought and bodes ill for the next generation of adults.

The figures are robust and believable, coming as they do from a national survey called the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS), which used a statistically appropriate method to sample adolescents without illnesses, aged 10-19 years, across all States and Union Territories.

Blood pressure was measured rigorously, and high blood pressure was defined based on the mean of second and third readings as per the 2017 American Academy of Paediatrics cut-offs, as height-adjusted blood pressure above the 95th percentile below 13 years and greater than 130/80 mm Hg in older adolescents.

Hypertension is often clustered with other cardio-metabolic risk factors including overweight and obesity. Adolescents with high fasting blood glucose, haemoglobin A1c, serum triglyceride and LDL cholesterol levels also have a greater risk of high blood pressure.

But there is also a deeply unsettling and counter-intuitive pattern of the occurrence of hypertension in Indian children. The notion that this is associated with affluence, which will not occur in undernourished children stands firmly dispelled. In fact, elevated blood pressure is more prevalent in poorer than the richest category and occurs with similar frequency in rural and urban areas. Its prevalence in younger stunted adolescents is as high as 40% compared with 34% in those not stunted.

The prevalence in thin/underweight adolescents is also high (32% in younger and 22% in older adolescents). We now need to come to terms with the combined presence of diseases of overnutrition in undernourished adolescents, or the intra-individual of double burden of malnutrition.



Rapid urbanisation

So, why is this happening in Indian children, and why is this happening across the board, even in undernourished adolescents, in rural areas, and among the poor? Higher prevalence of high blood pressure in rural areas may be attributable to rapid urbanisation, resulting in altered dietary habits, more screen time and a lower level of habitual physical activity. One causative factor that is relevant in India today is the explosion of ready-to-eat (ultra) processed foods and snacks, which depend on a high salt and sugar content.

These have penetrated rural areas and schools deeply. Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Nagaland have higher hypertension prevalence (over 35%) compared with the rest of India. Data from the NSSO survey of 2011-12 show that the highest salt-consuming regions are these States, with a per-capita intake of over 9 grams/day, while the median intake for India is about 8 grams/day.

There is a need now to think ahead: a need to screen and identify adolescents with hypertension; preventive interventions to control the burden of hypertension and its consequences in India; and a need to assess high blood pressure at even younger ages. This is important as many people with hypertension, particularly in India, are not aware of their disease and the detection, treatment, and control of it should be an urgent health priority.

BIG OMICRON SPIKE SHOWS LIMITATIONS OF CHINA'S ZERO-COVID POLICY

Coronavirus cases in China have just touched a new daily record, having crossed 30,000 new infections in a 24-hour period for the first time. China's National Health Commission reported 31,444 confirmed new infections on Thursday morning, higher than the previous record achieved in mid-April, according to a report by the South China Morning Post.

The US and France are reporting higher daily numbers right now; until a few days ago, Germany too was reporting more than 30,000 cases a day. But China is different — mainly because of the extremely restrictive containment strategy it has adopted, with a fair degree of success. When China last reported such high numbers in March-April this year, it was the first time the country had even seen 1,000 cases in a day.

The current wave of infections has come within days of China allowing some relaxations in its zero-Covid policy. The quarantine time, including for incoming international travellers, was reduced to five days, and only close contacts — not all — of an infected person were put in quarantine.

Following the surge, Zhengzhou, capital of Henan province, went into a five-day lockdown on Friday. The city has seen large-scale protests from workers at the giant Apple factory in the last few days, with the Covid regulations being cited as one of the triggers.

Chinks in zero-Covid strategy

While most countries have concentrated on not allowing infections to go out of control while allowing normal activities to continue, China has pursued a zero-Covid strategy from the beginning. Every known case, even asymptomatic, was mandatorily hospitalized, small outbreaks triggered hard lockdowns, and suspected cases, and all contacts, were kept under long isolation. The financial capital of Shanghai, home to more than 25 million people, was entirely locked down in March.



Though painful, the strategy was largely successful. According to Our World in Data, only 1.38 million people in China have been found to be infected till date, from the start of the pandemic in 2020. During its worst phases, the US reported similar numbers in a single day.

But this very success is now turning out to be a weakness. The vast majority of China's population has not been infected by the virus, and hence has no immunity. Vaccines are not known to prevent infection in very significant ways. Thus, when a fast-spreading variant like Omicron does manage to break through the strong defences of the zero-Covid strategy, as it sometimes will, it encounters a vast pool of susceptible people. The virus is able to spread very rapidly after that. This is what happened in March-April — and this is what seems to be happening now.

Vaccination troubles

A similar scenario played out in Hong Kong and South Korea in February. Those countries too had kept their populations protected from the virus until then, with Hong Kong adopting a zero-Covid policy and South Korea testing very aggressively to identify cases at an early stage. But when Omicron finally broke through, both countries saw thousands of cases and hundreds of deaths every day.

China faces a similar danger for the second time this year. Omicron causes milder disease compared to Delta or Beta, but it can still lead to deaths among the elderly population. China has administered almost 3.5 billion vaccine doses, but the penetration among the 80-plus population has been low. In addition, there have been question marks over the effectiveness of the two Chinese vaccines in use, Sinovac and Sinopharm.

China had managed to bring the situation under control in about a month and a half earlier this year. There is nothing to suggest that the current surge would be very different. The latest wave has exposed the weaknesses of the zero-Covid strategy again, and yet, it might result in a return to the tougher regime that the country had just begun to relax.

CHINA, INDIA POPULATION: IMPLICATIONS OF SLOWING DRAGON, RACING ELEPHANT

This year and the next will see two landmark demographic events. In 2022, China will for the first time register an absolute decline in its population. And in 2023, India's population, projected by the United Nations to reach 1,428.63 million, will surpass China's 1,425.67 million. The potential economic implications are huge. But the first question to ask is: What has been behind these shifts? There are two primary drivers of population change.

Mortality and fertility

Mortality falls with increased education levels, public health and vaccination programmes, access to food and medical care, and provision of safe drinking water and sanitation facilities. The crude death rate (CDR) — the number of persons dying per year per 1,000 population — was 23.2 for China and 22.2 for India in 1950. It fell to single digits for China first in 1974 (to 9.5) and for India in 1994 (9.8), and further to 7.3-7.4 for both in 2020.

Another mortality indicator is life expectancy at birth. Between 1950 and 2020, it went up from 43.7 to 78.1 years for China and from 41.7 to 70.1 years for India. Reduction in mortality normally leads to a rising population. A drop in fertility, on the other hand, slows down population growth, ultimately resulting in absolute declines. The total fertility rate (TFR) — the number of babies an average woman bears over her lifetime — was as high as 5.8 for China and 5.7 for India in 1950.



Between 1992-93 and 2019-21, it came down from 3.4 to 2; the fall was especially significant in the rural areas. In 1992-93, the average rural Indian woman produced one extra child compared to her urban counterpart (3.7 versus 2.7). By 2019-21, that gap had halved (2.1 versus 1.6). A TFR of 2.1 is considered as “replacement-level fertility”. Simply understood, a woman having two children basically replaces herself and her partner with two new lives. Since all infants may not survive to realise their reproductive potential, the replacement TFR is taken at slightly above two. It ensures that each generation replaces itself.

The next question then is: If India’s TFR is already below-replacement, why is its population still increasing?

Sustained lows necessary

The TFR is the average number of births by women aged 15-49 based on surveys for a particular period/year. Populations can keep growing even with TFRs falling. De-growth requires TFRs to remain below replacement levels for extended periods. The effects of that — fewer children today becoming parents tomorrow and procreating just as much or less — may reflect only after a couple of generations.

China’s TFR dipped below replacement first in 1991, which was almost 30 years before India’s. Recall that the CDR decline below 10, too, happened two decades earlier for China. Not surprising, China’s population more than doubled from 544 million in 1950 to 1.1 billion in 1987 — underpinned by falling CDRs — and continued to grow, peaking at 1,426 million in 2021. It took over 30 years for below-replacement fertility rates to translate into negative population growth.

China faces a crisis...

China’s TFR, according to its 2020 Census, was 1.3 births per woman — marginally up from the 1.2 in the 2010 and 2000 censuses, but way below the replacement rate of 2.1. China officially ended its one-child policy, introduced in 1980, from 2016. The UN, nevertheless, projects its total population at 1.31 billion in 2050, a 113 million-plus drop from the 2021 peak.

The real crisis for China, however, is the decline in its population that is of prime working age. The proportion of the population aged between 20 and 59 years crossed 50% in 1987 and peaked at 61.5% in 2011. This period also coincided with high economic growth, with China successfully harnessing the “demographic dividend” that comes from a young labour force. If there is a large population that’s able to work and earn, not only will there be relatively fewer people to support — those too old or too young — but also greater tax revenues and savings potential from the generation of incomes. As these are directed to finance investments, a virtuous cycle of growth is unleashed — as indeed it happened in China.

But that cycle has started to reverse, and the share of China’s working-age population is projected to fall below 50% by 2045. In absolute terms, the decline would be from a high of 839 million in 2014 to hardly 604 million in 2050. Moreover, the average (median) age of the population, which was 28.9 years in 2000 and 37.4 years in 2020, is expected to soar to 50.7 years by 2050. In short, China faces the prospect of a dwindling labour force having to support a rapidly aging population.

...India has an opportunity

India has just begun seeing fertility rates fall to replacement levels, including in rural areas. The latter has to do with the spread of education — and, perhaps, also farm mechanisation and



fragmentation of landholdings. Reduced labour requirement in agricultural operations and smaller holdings make it that much less necessary to have large families working the land.

But even with fertility rate declines, India's population is projected to expand and de-grow only after touching 1.7 billion about 40 years from now. More important is the working-age population: its share in the overall population crossed 50% only in 2007, and will peak at 57% towards the mid-2030s.

Percent share of working-age population in India, China

In absolute terms, the population aged 20-59 years will increase from 760 million in 2020 to nearly 920 million in 2045. The median age of India's population also will not go up much — from 27.3 years in 2020 to 38.1 in 2050 — adding up to a less depressing prospect than China's.

Overall then, India has a window of opportunity well into the 2040s for reaping its “demographic dividend”, like China did from the late 1980s until up to 2015. That is, of course, contingent upon the creation of meaningful employment opportunities for a young population.

Share of workforce in agriculture has slowed

Agriculture accounted for around 65% of the country's employed labour force in 1993-94. That share fell significantly to 49% by 2011-12. But the trend has slowed, if not reversed, thereafter.

Going forward, the challenge before India's policymakers is to promote growth that generates jobs outside of agriculture. These mustn't merely be in construction and low-paid informal services. The surplus labour from farms should find employment in sectors — manufacturing and modern services — where productivity, value-addition and average incomes are higher. In the absence of such structural transformation, the “demographic dividend” could well turn into a “demographic nightmare”.

HISTORY OF THE RED CAP OF LIBERTY, WHICH INSPIRED THE 2024 PARIS OLYMPICS MASCOTS, LES PHRYGES

Earlier this month, the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games doffed its hat to a powerful symbol of the French Republic. The mascots of Paris 2024 are designed like the red Phrygian cap and are called Les Phryges (pronounced free-jes).

“We wanted mascots that would embody our vision and be able to share it with the French people and the world...our mascots represent an ideal. The Phrygian cap is a symbol of liberty. Since it is familiar to us and appears on our stamps and the pediments of our town halls, it also represents French identity and spirit,” said Tony Estanguet, president of Paris 2024.

What is the history of this cap, and why has France chosen it to represent the upcoming games?

For three days in July 1830, French Romantic artist Eugene Delacroix watched as the grand streets and boulevards of Paris filled up with protestors — regular, working-class and middle-class people — who had had enough of their Bourbon king Charles X. They forced Charles X to flee to Versailles and Rambouillet, and to announce a week later that he was stepping down from the throne.

Delacroix commemorated the heroism of the people in one of his most evocative paintings, La Liberté Guidant le Peuple (Liberty Leading the People). At the centre of the work is Marianne, the



figure meant to represent the ideal of Liberty, surrounded by revolutionaries. She is dressed in symbolic garments that include, on her head, a limp, brimless red cap known as the Phrygian cap that the common people of France wore.

Symbol of freedom

The origin of the Phrygian cap, also known as the liberty cap and bonnet rouge, is tied to the history of suppressed people. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, “The Phrygian cap originated in the ancient country of Phrygia (in modern Turkey), and is represented in ancient Greek art as the type of headdress worn not only by Phrygians but by all inhabitants of Anatolia and of nations farther east.”

The cap’s floppy design can be traced to the pileus or pilos hats that were given as signs of freedom to Roman slaves. In Greek and Roman mythology, the twins Castor and Pollux hatched from an egg and are shown wearing the pileus —just as slaves are seen as being born into a new life with their freedom.

Political Colours

Headdress became a matter of importance in asserting political identity and loyalty during the French Revolution (1787–99).

“Hats adorned with a tricolour ribbon cockade became symbols of patriotism, while the liberty cap or bonnet rouge became a symbol of the Revolution,” according to the Metropolitan Museum. The French Revolution was also the time that the earliest representations of a woman wearing a Phrygian cap — the allegorical Marianne — made an appearance in art.

During the Third Republic in France, announced in 1870, Marianne began to appear in statues and busts either as a revolutionary figure or a wise woman. Incidentally, in some cases, it was thought that the Phrygian cap was too seditious and Marianne was made to wear a diadem or a crown. Nonetheless, to this day, the red cap is associated in France with liberty. It is also an international symbol of liberty present in many emblems in North and South America.

The Paris 2024 Olympic Committee said they are confident that their mascots, representing a new generation of Phryges, will write another glowing chapter of history. “Phryges’ aim to show that sport can change everything, and that it deserves to have a prominent place in our society,” Paris 2024 brand director Julie Matikhine said, as reported by Reuters.

The Olympic Games in 2024 will be held from July 26 to August 11, while the Paralympic Games will take place between August 28 and September 8, and two mascots have been created to represent both events.

SOMETHING WASN'T RIGHT WITH DYLAN'S SIGNATURE ON A NEW \$600 LIMITED-EDITION BOOK. THE PUBLISHER HAS SAID SORRY

Global publishing house Simon and Schuster has released an apology to customers of its \$600-a-piece limited-edition signed copies of Bob Dylan’s latest book, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*. In a statement released on Instagram, Simon and Schuster said the copies contained Dylan’s original signature, “but in a penned replica form”. The publishing house said it would provide each purchaser an “immediate refund”.



The apology followed outrage regarding the veracity of Dylan’s signature in the limited edition copies. Fans pointed out that the copies were not signed by Dylan himself, but rather contained a facsimile.

What is this book about?

The Philosophy of Modern Song is Dylan’s first book after receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016. Published on November 1, 2022, this book contains Dylan’s commentary on 66 songs by a wide range of artists, including Frank Sinatra, Elvis, Hank Williams, Cher, and Santana.

Simon and Schuster decided to release 900 copies of a limited edition, hand-signed version of the book. Ardent fans of the Bard quickly signed up for the chance to get their hands on a book touched by Dylan himself, only to be left disappointed.

What is a “penned replica” of a signature?

Justin Steffman, a professional authenticator who runs a Facebook group for collectors, told The New York Times that the autograph was most likely created by an autopen. Latest autopens are programmed with a signature which is then accurately recreated by a motorised mechanical arm holding a pen. According to Steffman, “a pen machine, it goes from point to point” with each stroke beginning and ending with more pressure applied to the page. Hence, autopen signatures lack the flow of actual penmanship.

Was Bob Dylan involved in any of this?

In all probability, 81-year-old Bob Dylan was not directly involved in this whole fiasco. He has a long history of being decent to fans, keeping ticket prices reasonable and cordially interacting with them when the opportunity arose. He has also recently sold his entire music catalogue to Sony Music for approximately \$200 million and had netted over \$300 million with the sale of his songwriting rights in 2020. Trying to dupe fans would be uncharacteristic and, at this stage of his life, unnecessary, most people feel. His spokesperson has declined to comment, media reports said.

MANX LANGUAGE, ONCE ALMOST SILENCED, IS NOW TALK OF THE TOWN

The squeals of laughter echoing from the playground sound like any other elementary school in its first week back in session.

Listen closely, though, and there’s something rare in the children’s chatter: the Manx language, an ancient tongue once feared forgotten.

But thanks in part to these students at Bunscoill Ghaelgagh, a school on the Isle of Man, the language that was deeply intertwined in hundreds of years of local history is now becoming a part of the island’s future. It was a little over a decade ago when UNESCO declared the language extinct, and students then studying at the school took strong exception. To make their case that the language was anything but dead, they wrote a letter to the United Nations body — in Manx.

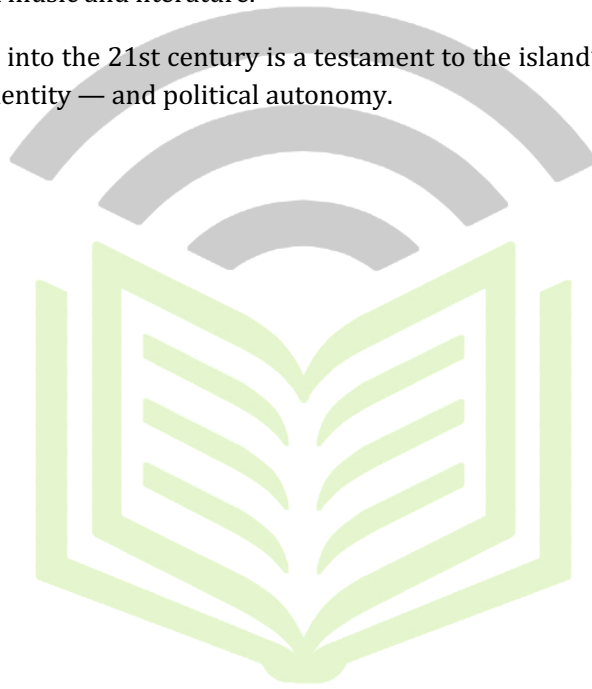
“It sort of was on the brink, but we’ve brought it back to life again,” said Julie Matthews, the head teacher of the school, who noted that her students’ determined effort prompted a new UNESCO categorization of Manx as a “revitalized” language.



While UNESCO was incorrect in 2009 when it said that Manx was dead, the mistake was understandable. For centuries, Manx — part of the Celtic language family like Irish and Scottish Gaelic — was how people on the island communicated in their everyday lives. But by the 19th century, the English language had overtaken it, and many on the Isle of Man raised their children to speak only English amid an increasingly derogatory, sometimes even hostile, attitude toward Manx.

But even as the use of the language was waning, there were people fighting for its preservation. The Manx Language Society was founded as early as 1899, and by the late 1940s, there were efforts to record the last native Manx speakers. In the 1960s, the revival efforts began in earnest, and the advent of new technologies has allowed speakers to connect online and to digitize old texts and share Manx music and literature.

The survival of Manx into the 21st century is a testament to the island's sense of itself as a place apart, with its own identity — and political autonomy.



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