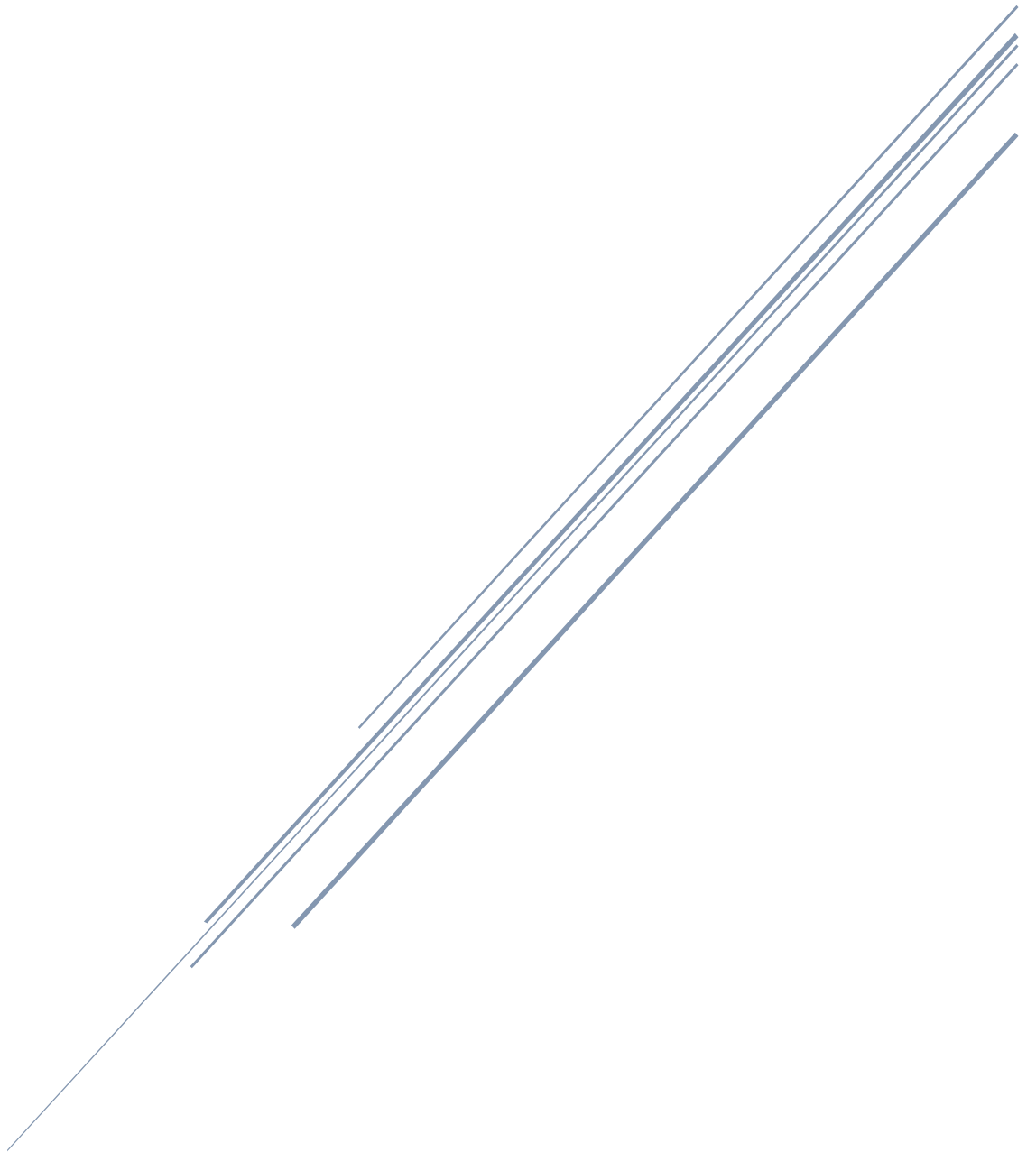


CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

4th to 10th December 2022





INTERNATIONAL

EUROPE'S CONCERNS ABOUT THE U.S. IRA

The story so far:

French President Emmanuel Macron during his two-day visit to the U.S. questioned Joe Biden about clean energy subsidies in the new Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which European countries believe are discriminatory to non-American companies. Addressing lawmakers at the Library of Congress, Mr. Macron described the IRA as “super aggressive” toward European companies. The EU has asked for a resolution of its concerns before the Act kicks in on January 1 next year.

What is the U.S. IRA?

Signed into law on August 16, the IRA is a \$430 billion package of federal spending, tax breaks, credits, and levies, aimed at fighting climate change, reducing healthcare costs, and making large corporations pay their “fair share” in taxes. The Act is a scaled-down version of Mr. Biden’s ambitious Build Back Better plan that did not get the Senate’s approval in 2021. Besides its goal of bringing down inflation, the Act is the biggest climate action package in U.S. history — earmarking \$370 billion for climate-focused funding and investments aimed at cutting emissions by around 40% below 2005 levels by 2030. The IRA combines climate action goals with industrial policy, aiming to transition to clean energy by incentivising local manufacturing of renewable energy components. It also seeks to reduce American reliance on China for materials and components for the clean energy industry.

In order to bolster clean energy development in the U.S., the IRA provides consumer and industry-side incentives. To promote the use of electric vehicles (EV) and to secure domestic supply chains for their manufacturing, the federal tax incentive policy for EVs has been changed. Now, only passenger EVs assembled in North America are eligible for a \$7,500 tax credit incentive. Those who buy used EVs will be eligible for a \$4,000 tax credit if 40% of the critical minerals used in the car batteries are extracted, processed and recycled in North America or a country having a free-trade agreement with Washington.

Additionally, the Act offers \$10 billion investment tax credit to build clean technology manufacturing facilities, two billion dollars in grants for refurbishing existing auto manufacturing facilities to make zero-emission vehicles, and up to \$20 billion in loans to build new EV manufacturing facilities across the country. It also offers billions in federal procurement to American-made clean technologies.

What are Europe’s concerns?

Europe’s high energy dependence on Russia led to energy shocks in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war, leading to energy shortages, skyrocketing power prices, and a harsh winter. The 27 member countries of the EU fear that the IRA tax credits and subsidies to EVs and other green product makers in North America and free-trade partner countries put European companies at a disadvantage and may push these companies to move critical parts of their supply chains to America. The EU’s own new green plan ‘Fit for 55’ is targeting to cut CO2 emissions from cars by 55% and vans by 50% by 2030 and all emissions from cars by 2035. For this, it will need to significantly increase its uptake of EVs. Although China dominates the EV purchasing market, Europe has also been posting high growth in EV demand vis-a-vis the total auto demand, even



faster than the U.S. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), nine of the top 10 countries by share of EVs in the total car stock are in Europe. To meet its emissions targets, the EU will benefit from its local automakers ramping up manufacturing, but the IRA raises fears of automakers moving to the U.S. Mr. Macron in November hosted several European CEOs of energy, auto, and pharma companies to convince them to not move manufacturing to America. Europe's fears may not be unfounded as several automakers, battery makers and energy companies have already made announcements or shown interest in setting up shop in America. South Korea and Japan have also raised similar concerns. For instance, Reuters reported that Swedish battery maker Northvolt was set to establish a lithium-ion battery factory in Germany, Europe's top car manufacturer, but after the IRA, the company's CEO Peter Carlsson said that it could get up to 800 million euros (\$836 million) in U.S. state subsidies, which was nearly four times what the German government was offering. EU members claim that around 200 billion euros of the subsidies are for locally produced content provisions, which they say potentially violates the World Trade Organization (WTO) rules.

What is the U.S.'s stand?

At a joint press conference during Mr. Macron's visit, President Joe Biden said that there was room for "tweaks" in the IRA to "make it easier for European countries to participate" and that it was "never intended" to exclude cooperating countries. However, he stressed that the "U.S. makes no apology" for promoting American manufacturing and would continue to create jobs for its people.

BACK TO THE PAST

A sitting judge, a former elite paratroops commander and a former police officer. They were among the 25 people arrested by the German authorities on Wednesday in a nationwide crackdown on what they called an extremist group that was planning to overthrow the state. While Germany has seen the rise of several far-right networks, their growing influence over serving and retired members of its security agencies and other state branches should be a matter of concern, given its Nazi past. Among those arrested were members of the Reichsbürger, or Citizens of the Reich, a far-right extremist group that has not recognised the post-War German state, as well as those inspired by conspiracy theories spread by QAnon, a U.S.-based far-right community. The authorities say the plan was to attack the Bundestag, bring down the government through a coup and have a new Reich modelled around the pre-First World War imperial state. Heinrich XIII, Prince Reuss, the 71-year-old former paratroops commander who is believed to be the ringleader, was known for his anti-Semitic dog whistles and attacks on the modern German republic, which he once called an illusion. So, irrespective of the actual strength and capabilities of the group, what Germany has seen is the coming together of anti-Semitic extremists from across society, driven by conspiracy theories and an imperial nostalgia, and who are ready to take up arms to overthrow the democratic German state.

This is not an isolated incident. Germany has also seen a rise in violent incidents by far-right extremists. In 2019, a centre-left local politician in western Germany was killed and a synagogue in Halle, eastern Germany, was attacked by a gunman, killing two. Last year, the government had to partially disband its elite special-forces unit, Kommando Spezialkräfte, after extremism within its ranks. Germany faces two types of far-right challenges — that posed by extremist groups such as Reichsbürger and the other by the mainstreaming of far-right politics — the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the far-right party that failed to cross the 5% threshold in the 2013 elections, but which won 83 seats in the Bundestag last year. While the AfD dissociates itself from violent organisations, there is an ideological overlapping between them — Birgit M.-W, the judge arrested

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on Wednesday, was an AfD lawmaker. Germany, which still keeps the memories of its horrific Nazi past alive and has strong laws to tackle extremist threats, should ask itself why, despite its precautions, far-right groups are gaining traction. It should make sure that state institutions are not infiltrated by extremists and continue to crack down on networks such as Reichsbürger. But the bigger challenge for Germany's leaders is to tackle the far-right ideology politically.

A CASE FOR CHANGE

The comments by Iran's Attorney General Mohammad-Jafar Montazeri that the Islamic Republic had disbanded its infamous morality police, after months-long protests, suggest that the regime is finally willing to make concessions. The latest spell of protests began in September after the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman, who was in the custody of the morality police for wearing the hijab (headscarf) "improperly". Thousands of protesting youngsters, mostly women, took to the streets demanding an end to the mandatory hijab rules and calling for other reforms. The regime used repression and propaganda to bring the situation under control. Hundreds have been killed while pro-government sections have blamed "foreign hands" for the protests. But none of this has helped restore order. It was against this background that Mr. Montazeri said the morality police had been abolished and that the regime was reviewing the hijab rules. There is still no official announcement and the protesters remain cautious. But the authorities have not dismissed Mr. Montazeri's comments either. A bigger question, however, is whether this would be enough to placate the protesters.

Iran's theocratic system is unique in both its substance and functioning. While it ensures that the clergy remains firmly in control, it also draws legitimacy from presidential and legislative elections. Principalists, the status quoist defenders of the revolution, and moderates, who call for gradual reforms from within, are the main opposing camps in the electoral field. The reformists, including former Presidents Mohammad Khatami and Hassan Rouhani, often acted as safety valves in an otherwise tightly held system. But the two terms of each of these Presidents brought in little systemic change, leading to pent-up frustration. The U.S.-led economic sanctions made matters worse for Iran's rulers. The clerical establishment responded by consolidating more powers in its hands. All branches of the Iranian state — the Presidency, the judiciary and the Majlis — are now controlled by the hardliners, who always have the office of the Supreme Leader. But this concentration of power in a few hands and the sidelining of the moderates seem to have boomeranged. The death of Amini lit a fuse leaving the regime in a spot. The sustainability of any system is dependent on its ability to reform from within. Iran's post-revolutionary order has resisted the calls for reforms till now. But as the revolution ages and the calls for change get stronger, the Ayatollahs face their greatest dilemma — tighten their grip further, risking more blowback, or start gradual political and social reforms.

INDONESIA APPROVES BAN ON SEX OUTSIDE MARRIAGE

Indonesia's parliament approved a law on Tuesday that would outlaw sex outside marriage in a move critics said was a huge setback to rights in the world's most populous Muslim country. Rights groups protested against the amendments, denouncing them as a crackdown on civil liberties and political freedoms as well as a shift towards fundamentalism in Muslim-majority Indonesia. The article criminalising sex outside marriage has been criticised by Indonesian business organisations as detrimental to tourism, though authorities insist foreigners travelling to Bali would not be affected. The new code, which still needs to be approved by President Joko Widodo, will come into force after three years.



Cohabiting couples

Some of the most controversial articles criminalise extra-marital sex, as well as the cohabitation of unmarried couples. According to the text seen by AFP, sex outside marriage will be punished with one year in prison while unmarried people living together could face six months in jail. The new rules could also be used to criminalise the LGBTQ community in Indonesia, said Andreas Harsono of Human Rights Watch, as the country does not acknowledge same-sex marriage.

CHINA'S XI SET TO VISIT SAUDI ARABIA FOR 'MILESTONE' SUMMIT

Chinese President Xi Jinping will visit Saudi Arabia this week for what Beijing is calling a "milestone" first ever China-Arab summit to boost relations and already deep economic ties.

The visit was announced on Tuesday by the official Saudi Press Agency, which said Mr. Xi, at the invitation of King Salman, would arrive in Riyadh on Wednesday and later this week attend a Saudi-China summit, where Prince Mohammed bin Salman will also be present. Mr. Xi will on Friday attend a summit with leaders from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

This will be Mr. Xi's second major overseas visit following the start of his third term in October, coming after a trip to Bali and Bangkok for the G20 and APEC summit last month, underlining the growing strategic importance of West Asia for China.

China in 2020 replaced the European Union as the GCC's largest trading partner with trade reaching \$161 billion, said a report this week from the Middle East Council on Global Affairs, which noted that China was involved in "massive infrastructure projects" in the region including the Lusail stadium that is hosting World Cup matches in Qatar and high-speed railway lines in Saudi Arabia, as well as being a major oil importer.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry as of Tuesday evening had not confirmed Mr. Xi's visit, with the government currently marking a mourning period for the passing of former leader Jiang Zemin. The Chinese Foreign Ministry earlier described the December 9 summit as "a milestone event" in a newly released report on China-Arab states cooperation.

JIANG ZEMIN: MAN, MOMENT, NATION

Jiang Zemin, who died Wednesday at 96, was China's president during a time when the country emerged as a global economic powerhouse. His rise to high office was sudden. Communist regimes in the late 1980s were haunted by glasnost and perestroika (openness and reforms), the buzzwords of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. In China, Deng Xiaoping, who started the process of reforming the Chinese economy in the 1970s, had other ideas. The reforms had unleashed forces of change and Zhao Ziyang was primed to succeed Deng as the party head. But when students mobilised in the Tiananmen Square in 1989 and challenged the authority of the Communist Party, Deng called in the tanks. Zhao, who resisted the crackdown, was removed from office. Hundreds of protestors died but China's party-state was saved. Deng chose Jiang, the party boss of Shanghai, to replace Zhao.

Jiang negotiated Beijing's entry into the WTO in 2001, which enabled China to access Western markets. Like Deng he was a pragmatic communist, engaged with the US and eschewed confrontation. His India visit in 1996 deepened bilateral ties. His theory of Three Represents provided a rationale for supporting private entrepreneurs. By the time he left the party leadership in 2002, and the presidency in 2003, China was on its way to becoming a global economic power.

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Jiang's funeral will take place in the backdrop of unprecedented protests across China, over the Covid lockdowns. As China mourns Jiang, could there be another twist in the tale?

CHINA'S MOVES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

The story so far:

On November 21, China's top development aid agency convened the first "China-Indian Ocean Region Forum" in the southwestern Chinese city of Kunming. The meet organised by the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) is the latest Chinese initiative focusing on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), underlining Beijing's growing strategic interests in a region where its economic footprint has been deepening.

What is the China Indian Ocean Region forum about?

The CIDCA, which is China's new development aid agency, currently headed by former Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui, said in a statement the forum was "the first high-level official development cooperation forum jointly held by China and countries in the Indian Ocean Region" and "over 100 participants, including senior officials from 19 countries bordering the Indian Ocean" attended. The forum issued a "Joint Press Statement" that noted China "proposed to establish a marine disaster prevention and mitigation cooperation mechanism between China and countries in the Indian Ocean region" and "all parties agreed" to "strengthen policy coordination, deepen development cooperation, increase resilience to shocks and disasters, and enhance relevant countries' capacity to obtain economic benefits through use of marine resources such as fisheries, renewable energy, tourism, and shipping in a sustainable way."

Which countries have backed the forum?

The organisers have said the forum was attended by "high-level representatives" and "senior officials" from 19 countries: Indonesia, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, Afghanistan, Iran, Oman, South Africa, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, Seychelles, Madagascar, Mauritius, Djibouti, and Australia.

But at least two of those countries, Australia and Maldives, subsequently released statements rebutting the claim, emphasising that they did not participate officially. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and former Maldives President Mohammed Waheed Hassan were reported to have virtually joined the meeting, and both were attending in their individual capacities. The Maldives Foreign Ministry said that "there was no official representation", stressing that "participation by individuals" did not constitute official representation. Australia's High Commissioner in Delhi, Barry O'Farrell said in a post on Twitter that "no Australian Government official attended the Kunming China-Indian Ocean Forum on Development Cooperation." He noted that Assistant Foreign Minister Tim Watts had attended another forum — the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) council meet — adding pointedly that this was "the only ministerial-level forum for Indian Ocean."

Where does India stand?

Xu Wei, spokesperson for CIDCA, said India as "a major country in the Indian Ocean region, was invited to this forum" and added that China "looks forward to meeting India at the next forum". That prospect appears unlikely. New Delhi has viewed China's recent moves in the region warily, including the recent visit of a Chinese military tracking vessel, the Yuan Wang 5, to Sri Lanka.



Moreover, India sees the IORA as an already established platform for the region, which has 23 members, including Australia and Maldives with 10 dialogue partners which include China, Japan, Russia, the U.K. and the U.S.

What are China's plans for the IOR?

The forum has underlined China's stepped-up interest in the IOR, where it is already a major trading partner for most countries and where lie sea routes vital to China's economic interests. The CIDCA forum is the latest initiative to reflect Beijing's view that it has a clear stake in the region, and that more such initiatives are likely. Earlier this year, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during a visit to Sri Lanka, proposed creating a forum "on the development of Indian Ocean island countries" to "build consensus and synergy, and promote common development". He called on Sri Lanka to "play an important role" in this initiative. The stepped-up regional diplomacy comes while China is establishing a more frequent military presence in the waters of the IOR. Beijing's first ever overseas military facility was set up in Djibouti near the Horn of Africa. Chinese military ships, tracking vessels, and submarines have been visiting ports in the region with greater frequency. Chinese military planners have previously said the PLA Navy, which earlier this year launched its third aircraft carrier, has a long-term plan to deploy six aircraft carriers to secure China's maritime interests, and that two of them will be based in the Indian Ocean Region.

YUAN WANG 5, SURVEILLANCE VESSEL OF CHINA, RE-ENTERS INDIAN OCEAN

The Chinese research and survey vessel Yuan Wang 5 has re-entered the Indian Ocean in what coincides with a planned Indian long-range missile test on December 15 or 16. In a similar incident last month, another vessel, Yuan Wang 6, entered the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) coinciding with a planned Indian missile launch, but the launch was then deferred.

According to the maritime vessel-tracking portal marinetraffic.com, Yuan Wang 5 had entered the IOR through the Sunda strait, off Indonesia, late in the evening of December 4. The vessel was in the IOR last month. As per the open-source intelligence handle on Twitter@detresfa, India had issued a NOTAM (Notice to Airmen) for a no-fly zone over the Bay of Bengal for a possible missile launch with a window between December 15 and 16, for a maximum distance of 5,400 km. Given the range, it is likely to be the test of the Agni-5 intermediate range ballistic missile.

While research activities are allowed on international waters as per international regulations, the data generated had a dual nature, including military, and on many occasions, the motive of the Chinese vessels seemed doubtful, defence officials had said.

Diplomatic clash

In August, the docking of Yuan Wang 5 at Hambantota in Sri Lanka had created a major diplomatic situation between India and Sri Lanka.

Last week, Navy chief Admiral R. Hari Kumar said that there were a lot of Chinese ships which operated in the region. He added that there were four to six Navy ships, research vessels and fishing vessels apart from 60-odd ships of extra-regional forces, and as a resident power, the Indian Navy kept track and ensured that "they do not undertake any inimical activities".

As reported by The Hindu earlier, there had been a steady rise in the deployment of Chinese research vessels in the IOR, and the general area of deployment observed was around 90-degree east ridge and southwest Indian ridge.



The research or survey vessels have powerful equipment for snooping and gathering a range of data. The Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean began in 2008 under the garb of anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and have since maintained continuous presence in the region, even deploying nuclear attack submarines (SSN) on occasions.

China had since set up a military base in Djibouti and developed several dual-use ports in the IOR in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan and other countries.

WHO WAS SLAIN IS LEADER ABU AL-HASSAN AL-HASHEMI AL-QURASHI

Abu al-Hassan al-Hashemi al-Quraishi, leader of the militant group Islamic State, has been killed, the group's spokesman said in an audio message posted on a Telegram channel. The group has selected Abu al-Husayn al-Husayni al-Qurashi as a successor, he added.

No one has claimed responsibility for the killing. US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters at The White House, "We're still working our way through that," adding, "We welcome the announcement that another leader of ISIS is no longer walking the face of the Earth."

Who was Abu al-Hassan al-Hashemi al-Quraishi?

In March this year, al-Quraishi was appointed as the leader of the Islamic State (IS), a terrorist group that gained notoriety in the mid-2010s in the regions of Iraq and Syria, release shocking videos of beheadings of civilians and taking control of large areas in a short amount of time with the help of massive online propaganda. IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the areas the group held sway over as part of an Islamic caliphate, in Iraq's Mosul in 2014, proclaiming himself caliph of all Muslims.

The announcement that Abu al-Husayn al-Husayni al-Qurashi would take over as IS leader came in March 2022, after the US authorities claimed the previous leader triggered a device to kill himself during a US raid in Syria.

At the time, little was known about al-Quraishi. However, even then it was speculated that the death of the group's leader was bound to weaken it, coming around two years after it lost longtime leader al-Baghdadi in a similar raid in 2019.

Connection to al-Baghdadi

It was later learnt that al-Quraishi was the brother of al-Baghdadi. Reuters reported that al-Quraishi's real name was believed to be Juma Awad al-Badr. "Badri is a radical who joined Salafi jihadist groups in 2003 and was known to always accompany Baghdadi as a personal companion and Islamic legal adviser," an Iraqi security official was reported as saying.

Badri's nom-de-guerre, also Quraishi, indicated that like his brother and his predecessor, he is believed to trace his lineage from the Prophet Mohammed, giving him religious clout among fellow jihadists, added the report.

While IS has undoubtedly shrunken in terms of both areas it holds influence in, and the finances it now has available, it is still a significant threat. According to a UN estimate, it still had a war chest of around \$25 million to \$50 million.



CURBING TERROR FINANCING IN AFGHANISTAN HOLDS THE KEY TO REGIONAL SECURITY: NSA

Curbing terrorism and terrorist financing in Afghanistan, and the use of trade and connectivity routes via Iran are key to regional security, said India's National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval chaired the first India-Central Asia meeting of NSAs and Secretaries of Security Councils in Delhi on Tuesday.

The day-long meeting, which was the outcome of the India-Central Asia virtual summit held in January this year, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and agreed to have security chiefs meet on a regular basis to discuss India's "extended neighbourhood".

STEPPING OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Twenty years into her political career, and 10 years after she became Pakistan's first female Foreign Minister, Hina Rabbani Khar, now Minister of State for Foreign Affairs in Pakistan, still generates comment for what she wears. Last week, it was the importance of her attire that took social media by storm again, when she met with the Taliban's top leadership during a visit to Kabul, the first by any female Minister since the ultra conservative radical militants took power in August 2021.

Instead of wearing the hijabs and burkhas mandated by the Taliban for Afghan women, the image of Ms. Khar dressed in her signature monochrome salwar kameez with a dupatta or scarf loosely covering her head, and looking the Taliban's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi squarely in the eyes as she sat as the sole woman in a room full of men, won favour back home in Pakistan.

Optics of the meeting

The optics of the event were as important for the Taliban as they were for Ms. Khar, however, as the regime has still not been recognised by any country in the world, and has broken every promise it has made over the status of women in Afghanistan. Since last August, Taliban decrees have kept millions of young Afghan girls out of schools and colleges, forced most women working in government, banks and other institutions out of jobs, enforced strict dress codes that cover women entirely, and most recently banned them from parks, gyms and any other public recreation. While Ms. Khar's visit didn't achieve any relief for Afghan women, it did allow Taliban Ministers to be seen welcoming a woman leader. The Kabul visit is just one of a number of visits made by Ms. Khar where her style is often seen overshadowing the substance. But she has made a reputation for being effective.

For all her political flair, she came to politics by fluke — she was chosen to run in place of her father, feudal politician Ghulam Noor Rabbani Khar, in the 2002 elections, held under General Pervez Musharraf, when politicians without a university degree were disqualified.

THE NEPAL ELECTION RESULTS: A SURGE IN FAVOUR OF YOUNG FACES, FRESH ASPIRATIONS

The Nepali Congress-led ruling alliance is poised to retain office in Kathmandu. However, the trends suggest a divided polity with voters refusing to give a decisive mandate to any party. The CPN-UML, the main opposition group, too will have a substantial presence in the federal



parliament. The impressive performance of the pro-monarchy Rashtriya Prajatantra Party and the rise of the Rashtriya Swatantra Party, a party of young activists set up in June this year, point to the presence of a range of ideological strands in an extremely competitive electoral space. This proliferation of political views and the successful conduct of an election under a contentious constitution augurs well for Nepal.

The results can also be seen as an endorsement of the leadership of NC chief Sher Bahadur Deuba. Deuba had negotiated a coalition with CPN-Maoists and CPN-Unified Socialists to form the government after CPN-UML leader K P Sharma Oli was forced to resign as prime minister. Deuba steered the government to a middle-path from the perceived pro-China stance of the Oli administration. Nepal's fiercely nationalistic populace is clearly uncomfortable with outsiders dictating terms to Kathmandu. Deuba has skillfully stayed away from aligning too closely with either New Delhi or Beijing, or for that matter with the Americans and Europeans. The challenge for Deuba is to stay on this middle-path and craft an economic agenda that can address the developmental concerns of his country. This is easier said than done for he has to achieve this while managing a coalition of ambitious and ideologically non-compatible allies. His coalition partners — Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda and Madhav Kumar Nepal of the Unified Socialists among them — will need to reconcile with the plurality of the polity, including the presence of monarchists. Oli, after having failed to deliver on the development front, had turned to anti-India nationalism, which failed to deliver him the election. The results are also a warning to the aging leaderships of the established parties — the NC to the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) offshoots. The surge in favour of the Rashtriya Swatantra Party indicates the presence of a groundswell for new, young leaders, fresh aspirations and an anti-corruption agenda.

Delhi has found it easier to do business with the Deuba-led coalition in the past: Under Oli, Kathmandu had become closer to Beijing — which facilitated the merger of the main communist groups, Prachanda's CPN-Maoist Centre and Oli's CPN-Unified Marxist-Leninist, before they split. However, it should be cautious not to be seen as intervening in Nepal's domestic affairs, including in the regional disputes.

DreamIAS



NATION

INDIA'S G20 PRESIDENCY: DELHI'S OPPORTUNITY

The broad agenda of the G20 is to ensure the world's financial stability and that the fruits of economic development, including technological advances, reach people across the globe. How to do this with a war raging in Europe that has disrupted economies by limiting access to fuel, foodgrain and fertiliser, just as the pandemic's grip had loosened and countries had begun to chalk up recovery plans – is the question. India will need to navigate the divide in the grouping not just over the war, but its own problems with China, as well as the rivalry between China and the US, for any meaningful ideas to emerge at the end of the year. The presidency presents a unique opportunity for India's foreign policy to put its stamp on the global agenda.

India's position in the Ukrainian war — not aligned to either camp — will no doubt guide its presidency. Delhi has officially declared it will use it to “reflect on concerns of the global South”. As a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, India has a rich history of autonomy in foreign policy, and of using it to speak up for what was earlier known as the Third World. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has indicated in an oped article (IE December 1), that he hopes to offer India's models of governance as “possible templates” for global solutions. Indeed, India's knowledge industry, one of the more consequential outcomes of the 1991 liberalisation of the economy, has enabled world class home-grown technological interventions in governance, such the Unified Payment Interface, and the digitisation of public goods delivery. Delhi is already in the process of sharing the technology for UPI and Aadhaar with some countries, and hopes to do that with more. At the same time, this may be the “fastest growing large economy” but there is no forgetting that it is a highly unequal one: The world's largest number of poor people live here. India will soon overtake China to become the most populous country, and to ensure more people are not born into poverty or do not slip back into it, India will need to put in place policies in line with the changing demographics.

PM Modi has indicated that India's “ambitious, action-oriented and decisive” agenda for this G20 year will include promoting environment-friendly lifestyles, and “depoliticisation” of the global supply chain of food, fertilisers and medical products will remain priorities. An intriguing appeal for an “honest conversation among the most powerful countries” on “mitigating risks posed by weapons of mass destruction and enhancing global security” could be a boiler plate reiteration of India's traditional position on nuclear disarmament, but may also pertain to the Russia-Ukraine theatre where Moscow's threat to use nuclear weapons has rattled the entire world. The role of a peace-maker is never easy and the G20, which includes diverse members with their own geopolitical choices, may not be the ideal setting. Any such project may only divert from the doable agenda.

INTENSE ENGAGEMENT

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's visit to India and talks with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar have set the stage for a more updated bilateral relationship. The two sides signed an agreement on mobility and migration that boosts travel for students, researchers and investors and businesses, and the meeting was preceded by Germany's agreement to fund renewable energy projects worth a billion Euros. The year 2022 has seen intense high-level engagement, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi made two visits to Germany — for the India-Germany Inter-Governmental Consultations with Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin and the G-7

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Telegram: http://t.me/DreamIAS_Jamshedpur



outreach summit in Bavaria. The leaders also met at the G-20 summit in Bali. In 2023, Mr. Scholz is expected to be in Delhi, in spring, and again in September for the G-20 summit in India. On the multilateral stage, Ms. Baerbock, a leader of the German Alliance 90/Green party, made countering climate change an important issue where New Delhi and Berlin can cooperate at the G-20 under India's presidency. Mr. Jaishankar spoke of the need to keep pushing for UN Security Council reform, where India and Germany have been part of the 'G-4' grouping since 2005. Ms. Baerbock also walked back previous controversial comments calling for the "United Nations track" to resolve the Kashmir dispute; she told The Hindu ahead of her visit that she believes Kashmir is a "bilateral dispute" to be resolved between India and Pakistan only.

The substance of the relationship will be tested in continuing differences over the war in Ukraine. Mr. Jaishankar's line to journalists was that India's imports of Russian oil, a national interest necessity, remain a fraction of the fossil fuels Europe continues to buy. While this may be correct, it is also true that the European Union countries have cut all other links with Moscow, and falling fuel imports are likely to drop further once the December 5 launch of the "oil price cap" for seaborne imports kicks in. On the other hand, India's imports of Russian oil have soared to a whopping 21-fold increase, making Russia India's biggest supplier. Writing in the Foreign Affairs Journal, Chancellor Scholz said that the world was facing an "epochal, tectonic shift", using the term *Zeitenwende* or "turning point" to describe the geopolitical transition post Russia's war in Ukraine, and accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of "shattering" an international peace architecture. For India, which inherits the G-20 presidency in the year of this *Zeitenwende*, it will be necessary to work more closely with Germany to bring all western partners on board with Mr. Modi's plans to forge "global unity", without letting the deep divisions with Russia derail consensus on important tasks such as fighting climate change, inequality, poverty and the digital divide.

SRI LANKA TO RESUME NEGOTIATIONS ON STALLED TRADE AGREEMENT WITH INDIA

Sri Lanka will soon resume talks with India on the stalled Economic and Technological Cooperation Agreement (ETCA), authorities said, as Colombo looks to trade pacts and foreign direct investments to rebuild its crisis-hit economy. The ETCA faced considerable resistance from sections within Sri Lanka, mainly from nationalist groups and trade unions who saw the pact as giving India an unfair advantage. The ETCA itself followed decade-long, but futile, negotiations on yet another pact — the "Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)".

Sri Lanka's recent emphasis on FTAs and FDIs is part of President Ranil Wickremesinghe's strategy for economic recovery in the island nation, reeling under the impact of its worst economic crash. The country's economy contracted by an estimated 9.2% this year and is estimated to contract by a further 4.2% in 2023, according to the World Bank. Meanwhile, the government is talking to its creditors to restructure its foreign debt and qualify for IMF support early next year.

In his Budget speech last month Mr. Wickremesinghe, who is also the Finance Minister, underscored the need for Sri Lanka to have greater access to the world market. "Towards this end, Sri Lanka has resumed efforts to integrate with key markets such as India and China. Sri Lanka will also resume trade negotiations with Thailand, which along with the FTA with Singapore, sets the steppingstone for Sri Lanka to engage in dynamic regional trading arrangements such as Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)," he told Parliament.

India and China are the top two sources of import for Sri Lanka.



CAN CHINA AND INDIA SETTLE THE CONFLICT OVER THE LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL?

China's objection to the ongoing joint US-India military exercise in Uttarakhand as a violation of the 1993 and 1996 India-China border agreements is disingenuous. With its large-scale intrusions across the Line of Actual Control in Eastern Ladakh in April 2020, Beijing virtually tore up these border agreements and three more signed in 2005, 2012 and 2013. All these laid down that boundary issues between the two countries will be resolved peacefully, and that neither side would use or threaten to use force. Among the consequences of Chinese action in 2020 was a bloody encounter between the two armies at Galwan, which resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and at least four on the Chinese side. India no longer has the confidence that China wants to resolve the border issue. Neither the disengagement in the so-called "friction" points, nor indeed the record high volumes of India-China trade, has restored this trust. The nature of the India-China relationship that successive Indian governments since 1989, irrespective of political colour, worked to restore has changed. The permanent deployment on both sides of the LAC is evidence of this change.

Operation Yudh Abhyas, the military drill that is being held 100 km from the LAC at Auli, is the 18th edition of the exercise. Certainly, there is a requirement in the 1993 and 1996 agreements that the two sides should not hold, or should give adequate notice of military exercises in "mutually identified zones". But with China having violated the 1993 and 1996 agreements so comprehensively, including in other sectors aside from eastern Ladakh, it is now moot if Auli is among the zones identified by these two agreements. As the Ministry of External Affairs said, China needs to reflect on its own actions.

Delhi and Beijing now need a new compact on the border issue, one that will settle the contestation over the LAC for good through peaceful means. The question is, does China want this, or does it believe its purpose is better served by keeping undetermined borders with claims and counter-claims that can always be used to raise the temperature against India. Delhi's relations with the US and its partnership in the Quad may irritate Beijing. But Delhi must deal with the Chinese presence in the south Asian neighbourhood, including an alliance with Pakistan clearly aimed at India, and attempts to establish a rivalry in the Indian Ocean region. China should know that it cannot push Delhi around by undermining and resurrecting agreements with India at will.

THE IMPASSE OVER APPOINTMENT OF JUDGES

The story so far:

Last week, Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar commented on the on-going heated debate between the Central government and the Supreme Court over the matter of judicial appointments. Referring to the 2015 verdict of the SC which struck down the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) and the 99th Amendment, Mr. Dhankhar asked how the judiciary could have run down a unanimously-passed constitutional provision which reflected "the will of people".

What was the NJAC?

In August 2014, Parliament passed the Constitution (99th Amendment) Act, along with the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) Act, which together provided for the creation of an independent commission to appoint judges to the Supreme Court (SC) and High Courts (HC). This commission was to replace the collegium system. The two Bills were ratified by the required number of State Legislatures and got the President's assent on December 31, 2014. Articles 124



and 217 of the Constitution deal with the appointment of judges to the SC and HCs of the country. Article 124(2) states “every Judge of the Supreme Court shall be appointed by the President” after “consultation” with the judges of the SC and the HCs. So, while the collegium system itself does not figure in the Constitution, its legal basis is found in three SC judgments — usually referred to as the ‘Judges Cases’. In order to replace this system which received criticism over the years for its lack of transparency, among other provisions, the Constitution (99th Amendment) Act, introduced three primary Articles. Article 124A which created the NJAC, a constitutional body to replace the collegium system, Article 124B which conferred the NJAC with the power to make appointments to Courts and Article 124C which accorded express authority to Parliament to make laws regulating the manner of the NJAC’s functioning. Under the NJAC Act, the Chief Justice of India and Chief Justices of the HCs were to be recommended by the NJAC on seniority while SC and HC judges were to be recommended on the basis of ability, merit, and “other criteria specified in the regulations”. Notably, the Act empowered any two members of the NJAC to veto a recommendation if they did not agree with it. In the collegium system, senior-most judges make appointments to the higher judiciary.

Why was the NJAC challenged?

In early 2015, the Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association (SCAORA) filed a plea challenging the provisions which had by then become laws. The SCAORA contended in its petition that both the Acts were “unconstitutional” and “invalid”. It argued that the 99th Amendment which provided for the creation of the NJAC took away the “primacy of the collective opinion of the Chief Justice of India and the two senior-most Judges of the Supreme Court of India” as their collective recommendation could be vetoed or “suspended by majority of three non-Judge members”. It invoked the Second Judges Case to say that CJI primacy had to be protected. It also stated that the amendment “severely” damaged the basic structure of the Constitution, of which the independence of the judiciary in appointing judges was an integral part. The Second Judges Case of 1993 emphasised the role of the CJI in appointing judges to SC and HCs. “The role of the CJI is primal in nature because this being a topic within the judicial family, the Executive cannot have an equal say in the matter,” the verdict reasoned. The “basic structure” doctrine meanwhile refers to the idea that the Constitution could not be amended or read in a manner that destroyed the document’s basic structure.

What were the arguments between the Centre and the Supreme Court?

Former Attorney-General Mukul Rohatgi, for the Union government, had argued in court that the Second Judges case, invoked by the petitioners was not valid in the case of the NJAC as the “very basis” of the ruling was now gone. The Centre also argued that the Act in no way took away the primacy of the judiciary but in fact, diluted the power of the executive as only one member, the Law Minister, was in the NJAC as opposed to three SC judges. It also said that the amendment was “perfectly consonant” with the basic structure as it strengthened the “independence of the judiciary, checks and balances and democracy”. Solicitor-General Ranjit Kumar further argued that the collegium was a “failure” and worked on a system of “intra-dependence”, where there was “no transparency”.

In October 2015, the five-judge bench of the top court hearing SCAORA’s plea gave its ruling, with a 4:1 majority, that the NJAC was “unconstitutional” and violated the “basic structure of the constitution”. Significantly, the Bench admitted that all was not well even with the collegium system of “judges appointing judges”, and that the time was ripe to improve the system of judicial appointments.



'CAN'T ACT ON JUDICIAL OFFICER'S EXPLICIT VIDEO WITHOUT ORDER'

Messaging platform WhatsApp on Friday told the Delhi High Court that it cannot take action against the circulation of a "sexually explicit" video of a judicial officer with a woman unless specific mobile numbers are provided and an appropriate order is passed.

It made the statement before Justice Yashwant Varma who is hearing a lawsuit by one of the aggrieved parties whose identity was earlier allowed to remain concealed by the court.

The lawsuit sought a permanent injunction restraining the publication and telecast of the "purported video dated 9 March 2022" which surfaced on social media on November 29. On November 30, the court had restrained the sharing and posting of the video and asked for the video to be taken down from various online platforms.

"They are expecting us to do something that we are not in a position to do. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology also says we cannot do it unless they give us the phone numbers... The order [to take any action] has to come from the court," senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for WhatsApp, told the court on Friday.

Observing that private exchanges are not web links, Justice Varma granted time to the plaintiff to provide phone numbers found to be sharing the content in question.

NO UNIFORMITY IN PAROLE AND FURLOUGH RULES

There was a huge uproar in the media when Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, a convict serving a 20-year prison sentence for raping two disciples, was seen organising an online 'satsang' while on a 40-day parole in October. On the other hand, S. Nalini, a convict in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case, who was serving life imprisonment, was given several extensions of parole from December 2021 until her release.

The Prisons Act, 1894, and the Prisoners Act, 1900, did not contain any specific provision pertaining to parole and/or furlough. However, Section 59 of the Prisons Act empowers States to make rules inter alia "for the shortening of sentences" and "for rewards for good conduct". Since "prisons, reformatories..." fall in the State List of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, States are well within their reach to legislate on issues related to prisons.

While 'furlough' is considered as an incentive for good conduct in prison and is counted as a sentence served, parole or leave is mostly a suspension of sentence. Emergency parole or leave is granted for specified emergencies such as a death, serious illness or marriage in the family. While most States consider only close relatives such as spouse, parents, son, daughter, brother and sister as close family, Kerala has a long list of more than 24 relatives in case of death and 10 in case of marriage.

Though regular parole or leave is granted after serving minimum sentence (varying from one year to four years) in prison, some States include other familial and social obligations such as sowing or harvesting of agricultural crops, essential repair of house, and settling family disputes. In Kerala, a convict becomes eligible for ordinary leave after serving one-third of a year in prison if he is sentenced for one year.

Haryana has a long list of 'hardcore' prisoners who are not entitled to be released except on 'custody parole' under certain conditions. Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kerala and West Bengal



do not permit release of habitual criminals and convicts, who are dangerous to society, under Sections 392 to 402 of the Indian Penal Code. Some States do not impose such conditions.

Each State has a different yardstick to punish a prisoner who does not surrender after parole or furlough in time. Haryana punishes such a convict for two-three years of imprisonment along with a fine up to ₹1 lakh if he overstays beyond 10 days. On the other hand, Tamil Nadu merely punishes the convict under prison rules; and Uttar Pradesh records indiscipline and puts restrictions on further 'suspension of sentence' depending on overstay.

Need for some uniformity

Despite the fact that temporary release cannot be availed of as a matter of right, the above provisions demonstrate that each State has its own set of rules which not only vary in scope and content, but may also be flouted to give favours to a few. Without any common legal framework in place to guide the States and check misuse, arbitrariness is likely to creep in, endangering the entire criminal justice system. With 'prisons' in the State List, this task is not feasible unless at least half of the States come together to request the Central government to legislate a common law for the country on parole and furlough.

Each State has its own set of rules which not only vary in scope and content, but may also be flouted to give favours to a few

THE DEBATE AROUND CONJUGAL VISITS FOR PRISONERS

The story so far:

The State of Punjab has furthered the cause of right to life and personal liberty of prisoners by allowing conjugal visits for inmates. It is expected that this initiative will lead to strengthening of matrimonial bonds and also ensure good conduct of prisoners.

What are conjugal rights?

Broadly speaking, conjugal rights are rights created by marriage, that is, the right of the husband or the wife to the company of their spouse. In the context of prisons, however, conjugal visits refer to the concept of allowing a prisoner to spend some time in privacy with his spouse within the precincts of a jail. It is often argued that conjugal visits can have positive impacts in the form of psychological health benefits for prisoners, preservation of marital ties and, reduction in the rates of homosexuality and sexual aggression within prisons. Aside from the above, it is also argued that conjugal visits are a fundamental right of the spouses of the prisoners. Prisoner rights are internationally recognised through the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights etc. Through such instruments, prisoners are guaranteed the right to life and inherent dignity. The right to maintain family relations including conjugal visits are included in these treaties. Most prison Acts and Rules across the country accept the importance of maintenance of continuity in family and social relations.

What are the judicial views?

In the case of *Sunil Batra vs Delhi Administration* (1979, SC), Justice Iyer observed that "visit to prisoners by family and friends are solace in isolation: and only a dehumanised system can derive vicarious delight in depriving prison inmates of this humane amenity." On the specific question of



conjugal rights of prisoners, however, High Courts have differed in their rulings. In the case of *Jasvir Singh vs State of Punjab*, a couple convicted of murder and on death row made a petition to the court to enforce their right to procreate. The primary question before the law was whether the right to conjugality and procreation is a part of the right to life. The High Court held that this right to conjugality is available to prisoners under Article 21, subject to restrictions. However, in the case of *Meharaj vs State* (2022), the Madras HC while considering the question of whether conjugal rights form part of the right to life and personal liberty guaranteed by Article 21, observed that there have to be differential standards in enforcement of Article 21 for law abiders and law violators. The Court observed that even though conjugal visits could not be held as a fundamental right, the prisoner would still be eligible to avail leave for conjugal visits if there are 'extraordinary reasons' such as 'infertility treatments.'

What is going to be the Punjab model?

The State guidelines clarify that conjugal visits are a matter of privilege rather than a right. It has been notified that the average time for conjugal visits shall be two hours, allowed once every two months. The visiting spouse will have to furnish a proof of marriage and medical certificates declaring that he or she is free from HIV or any other sexually transmitted disease, COVID-19 or any other infectious disease. Moreover, such a facility will not be extended to high risk prisoners, terrorists, child abuse and sexual offenders, death row convicts, prisoners who suffer from HIV etc.

WHAT ARE IN-CAMERA PROCEEDINGS, WHEN ARE THEY CONDUCTED

The Supreme Court on Monday rejected a plea by Tarun Tejpal, former editor of *Tehelka* magazine, for in-camera hearing of a rape case against him. The High Court of Bombay in Goa is to hear the Goa government's appeal against Tejpal's acquittal in the case his colleague's rape.

Tejpal was accused of sexually assaulting a then colleague in Goa in November 2013. After an in-camera trial, Additional Sessions Judge Kshama Joshi had acquitted him of all charges on May 21, 2021.

What are in-camera proceedings?

In-camera proceedings are private, unlike open court proceedings. Conducted as per the court's discretion in sensitive matters to ensure protection and privacy of the parties involved, the proceedings are usually held through video conferencing or in closed chambers, from which the public and press are excluded.

In an open court or open justice system, which is the usual course of proceedings, the press is allowed to report on the matter being heard.

In-camera trial in rape cases

Section 327 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) has detailed the types of cases that should be recorded on camera, including inquiry into and trial in rape case.

The said section states that if the presiding judge or a magistrate thinks fit, she can order at any stage of the proceedings that the public generally, or any particular person, shall not remain present in the courtroom or the court building.



The said provision says that the inquiry into and trial be held in camera for various offences punishable under section 376 (rape) of the Indian Penal Code; or offences including rape that could lead the victim to be in a vegetative state or death; rape of woman under 12 years of age; intercourse with wife during separation; intercourse by public servant with woman in his custody; sexual intercourse by person in authority; and gang rapes on adult and minor women. The law also prescribes that in such cases, the trial be conducted as far as possible by a woman judge or a magistrate.

Section 327 of the CrPC states that it shall not be lawful to publish any matter in relation to in-camera proceedings except with the previous permission of the court. It adds that the ban on publishing of trial proceedings for offence of rape may be lifted subject to maintaining confidentiality of name and address of the parties.

In which other cases are in-camera proceedings held?

In-camera proceedings are usually conducted at family courts in cases of matrimonial disputes, including judicial separation, divorce proceedings, impotence, and more. In-camera proceedings are also conducted during the deposition of witnesses of terrorist activities as per the court's discretion, so as to protect them and maintain national security.

What did Supreme Court say in Tejpal case

The Supreme Court bench led by CJI DY Chandrachud said that the object of section 327 of CrPC is to protect the victim's rights so that she can depose fearlessly. It noted that while inquiry leading up to the trial is to be conducted in-camera and the proceedings have crossed that stage, the accused has no vested right to demand in-camera hearing.

A WEEK MORE OF ELECTORAL BOND SALES FROM TOMORROW

The government has opened yet another week-long window for electoral bond sales, starting December 5, less than a month after it amended the Electoral Bond Scheme to enable an additional fortnight of sales in years when States and Union Territories have polls. The Finance Ministry on Saturday announced the 24th tranche of electoral bond sales through 29 branches of the State Bank of India (SBI) across the country which are authorised to issue and encash the bonds from December 5 to December 12.

Third month

This is the third successive month that bond sales have been opened up, starting with a 10-day window in October as per the original scheme, followed by a week of sales that began on November 9 ahead of the Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh elections under the amended norms. The Electoral Bond Scheme was introduced in January 2018 as an alternative to cash donations 'to cleanse the system of political funding in the country'.

Allows donors to fund

The scheme allows donors to fund the poll campaigns of political parties of their choice by purchasing bonds through specified bank branches.

The scheme originally envisaged making such bonds available for a period of 10 days each in January, April, July and October, with an additional 30-day period to be specified by the Central Government in the year of the general election.



Only those political parties that are registered under Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 and which secured not less than 1% of votes polled in the last general election or State Assembly election, are eligible to receive electoral bonds.

As per the scheme's rules, electoral bonds are valid for 15 calendar days from the date of issue and no payment shall be made to any payee political party if they are deposited after the validity period. The electoral bond deposited by an eligible political party in its account is to be credited on the same day. The scheme allows donors to fund the poll campaigns of political parties of their choice by purchasing bonds through specified bank branches.

EXTREME MEASURE

A political party's spokesman has been arrested for sharing an apparently false claim about the expenditure involved in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Morbi in Gujarat, in November, in the aftermath of the collapse of a bridge that caused nearly 140 deaths. Even if the claim that a fabulous sum of money was spent on preparations and the renovation of facilities for the visit was false, the arrest of Saket Gokhale, spokesman of the All India Trinamool Congress, is in striking contrast to the fact that the promoters and executives of the company, whose negligence could have caused the recently renovated bridge to collapse, have not been detained so far. It is difficult not to highlight the irony involved, as the penal sections invoked against Mr. Gokhale for the offence of forgery attract prison terms of two to three years only; whereas the acts of commission and omission that led to such a high fatality figure are punishable with prison terms ranging from 10 years to life. Nothing but an intention to teach a lesson to an Opposition political activist can explain the arrest of Mr. Gokhale when he could, instead, have been summoned for an inquiry. It is one of those cases in which arrest is obviously avoidable, even if the government of the day is seriously aggrieved by the purported falsehood in the claim that he shared on Twitter.

That police custody was sought and obtained in a case in which not much is needed to be investigated or unearthed — except perhaps the provenance of the purported Right to Information reply that contained the false claim — is quite strikingly indicative of vendetta. Another aspect, which is taking place with disturbing frequency, is the fact that the Gujarat police went to Jaipur in time to detain Mr. Gokhale and bring him to Ahmedabad. It is disconcerting that provisions relating to the inter-State operation of criminal law allow anyone to be held by the police from another State with ease, especially when the arrest is required by a State in which the Bharatiya Janata Party is the ruling party. It is not clear if the jurisdiction police were informed about the impending arrest. The dissemination of fake news is indeed a formidable problem in times when social media are a major source of information. That those with a significant following on these platforms should exercise due care before sharing information they receive is also not in doubt. However, it is questionable whether every instance of the dissemination of possibly false information should lead to arrest, unless grave consequences are likely to arise. An official fact-check and a legal takedown may well meet the ends of justice.

MAHARASHTRA-KARNATAKA BOUNDARY ROW FLARES UP

The simmering Maharashtra-Karnataka boundary row took another turn on Tuesday with activists of the Karnataka Rakshana Vedike (KRV) vandalising trucks from Maharashtra.

The Opposition alliance in Maharashtra, Maha Vikas Aghadi, lashed out at the "inaction" of the Eknath Shinde-Devendra Fadnavis government, while demanding the intervention of the BJP-ruled Centre to restrain the Basavaraj Bommai-led BJP government in Karnataka.

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



According to sources, KRV activists damaged at least six trucks from Maharashtra at the Hirebagwadi toll plaza (near Belagavi) and staged protests to stop any Maharashtra Minister from entering Marathi-speaking districts such as Belagavi in Karnataka.

Following the incident, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister and BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis was believed to have spoken with Mr. Bommai, who reportedly assured him of stern action against the miscreants.

Condemning the vandalism of vehicles by the KRV activists, Nationalist Congress Party leader Sharad Pawar, addressing a press conference in Mumbai, said, "If such attacks on our State's vehicles are not stopped within 24 hours, then the responsibility for Maharashtra's people losing restraint will solely rest on the Karnataka CM."

The protests were apparently triggered following a proposed visit to Belagavi by Maharashtra Ministers Shambhuraj Desai and Chandrakant Patil — appointed as coordinators — to resolve the boundary issue.

They were planning to meet Maharashtra Ekikaran Samiti (MES) leaders in Karnataka and visit houses of those the MES considered martyrs for Marathi.

But the Ministers did not turn up on Tuesday. This was being seen as a response to the appeal by the Karnataka government that the visit would be inappropriate at this time.

PM TO OPEN FIRST PHASE OF SAMRUDDHI CORRIDOR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will inaugurate the first phase of the 701-km 'Hindu Hrudayasamrat Balasaheb Thackeray Maharashtra Samruddhi Mahamarg' on December 11. The Expressway will reduce the time taken to 839-km distance between Nagpur and Mumbai, to seven hours. This currently takes at least 17 hours.

The Expressway, also called Samruddhi corridor, built at a project outlay of ₹55,335 crore, runs past 392 villages across 10 districts. This six-lane access-controlled road, designed for a top speed of 150 kmph, is the second expressway in the State after the Mumbai-Pune Expressway. Speaking to The Hindu, Chief Minister Eknath Shinde said Mr. Modi will inaugurate the Nagpur to Shirdi stretch on December 11. "The Expressway will have direct links to the Delhi-Mumbai Expressway and Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust in Navi Mumbai, which will facilitate rapid transportation of goods, agricultural products and other resources from Maharashtra to various markets across the country and abroad as well," Mr. Shinde said.

The Samruddhi corridor is expected to directly impact about 36% of the State's population, and will be the country's most extensive 'greenfield' route alignment with 23.65 lakh saplings and over 11 lakh trees on both sides.

It passes through three wildlife sanctuaries — 29.6 km through the Katepurna wildlife sanctuary in Akola; 29.15 km via the Karanja-Sohol Black Buck sanctuary in Washim; and 44.975 km through the Tansa wildlife sanctuary in Thane.

"All environment, forest and wildlife clearances were taken before starting the civil work. We have partnered with the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) to scientifically address issues concerning the protection of wildlife. Based on WII's suggestions, several measures have been planned and put in



place, and necessary structures built for uninterrupted movement of wildlife,” according to a Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation officer.

BOMBAY HC SEEKS DHARAVI REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY’S REPLY TO PIL FOR REMOVAL OF MAHIM NATURE PARK FROM PROJECT AREA

The Bombay High Court Monday asked the Dharavi redevelopment project authority if the area covered under Mahim Nature Park, which is a protected forest, will be included in the slum redevelopment project.

The Adani Group last Tuesday won the bid for the much-awaited Dharavi Redevelopment Project. The makeover of Asia’s biggest slum cluster will be undertaken by Adani Realty, the real estate wing of Adani Group.

A division bench of Chief Justice Dipankar Datta and Justice Abhay Ahuja was hearing a PIL by NGO Vanashakti and environmental activist Zoru Bhathena filed through advocate VG Shreeram that sought direction from the Court to the authorities to not include the area covered under the Mahim Nature Park for the project.

The NGO claimed that the area concerned was “erroneously and unlawfully” included in the area covered under the redevelopment project. It claimed that the tender dated October 1 clearly shows that Mahim Nature Park is inside the outer boundary of Sector-5 of Dharavi notified area and has been misleadingly marked as an ‘excluded area’ by the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA).

It claimed that the SRA has marked the area concerned as ‘recreational open space’ under its existing land use plan, whereas it is a protected forest under Indian Forest Act, 1927.

The PIL claimed that the project would unlawfully allow project proponents to acquire or develop the Mahim Nature Park in contravention of its status as a protected area.

As per the plea, the petitioners wrote to the project authority seeking clarification on whether the park was included within Dharavi notified area.

FAITH AND FREEDOM

Protracted litigation in the name of combating forcible religious conversion is taking up valuable time of courts. The Supreme Court is hearing a purported Public Interest Litigation (PIL) seeking action to curb deceitful religious conversion in the country. Not wanting to be left behind, the Gujarat government is seeking the removal of a stay on a provision in its anti-conversion law that requires prior permission from the District Magistrate for any conversion done “directly or indirectly”. The Gujarat High Court had correctly stayed Section 5 of the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act, 2003 (amended in 2021 to include ‘conversion by marriage’), while also staying the operation of other provisions that sought to cover inter-faith marriages as instances of illegal conversion. The High Court had noted that the prior permission requirement would force someone to disclose one’s religious belief or any change of faith, contrary to Supreme Court rulings that say marriage and faith involve an individual’s choice. In a strange claim, Gujarat argues that the stay on Section 5 is affecting even genuine inter-faith marriages that involve no fraud or coercion, as those who usually solemnise such marriages are unable to do so. This is based



on a claim that the prior permission requirement obviates the need to question the genuine nature of the conversion, if any, consequent upon an inter-religious marriage.

No one would buy the claim that the provision enables voluntary conversion. Freedom of religion is protected only when no questions are raised and no suspicion entertained based on the mere fact that an inter-faith marriage has taken place. Common sense would suggest that forcing someone to disclose an intent to change one's faith violates freedom of conscience and the right to privacy. Also, when a separate appeal against the High Court's interim orders staying the provisions is pending before the Supreme Court, there was no need for the State government's petition seeking to revive the prior permission requirement as part of the ongoing hearing on the PIL against religious conversions. On the larger issue, the observations of a Supreme Court Bench headed by Justice M.R. Shah to the effect that religious conversion through "allurement" or charity work is a serious problem indicate an eagerness to goad the Government into coming up with anti-conversion measures on a national scale. It is questionable whether courts should entertain exaggerated allegations of rampant fraudulent conversions across the country, instead of leaving it to States to identify the extent of the problem, if any, and adopt steps to protect religious freedom and communal harmony.

A LESSON FROM THE COURT: A CRITICISM OF BULLDOZER-HAPPY POLICE AND POLITICIANS

In a stinging criticism of the bulldozer-happy ways of law enforcing agencies, the Patna High Court has faulted police officers of a thana in the city for exceeding their remit. While responding to a petition in a local land dispute, Justice Sandeep Kumar asked: "Has the police station also been given power to sort out matters of land dispute? If someone has an issue, he will go to the police station, pay a bribe and get someone's house demolished. Why don't you close the court, civil court?" In times when government agencies — in UP, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Delhi — are showing a distressing tendency to raze houses with scant regard for the constitutional and procedural safeguards against such highhandedness, these words carry resonance beyond Bihar's capital.

In *Olga Tellis v the Bombay Municipal Corporation* (1985), a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court ruled that housing is an essential part of the Right to Life. It underlined that demolitions should be a last resort, only after the adversely affected people have been given a fair hearing. Since then, a substantial body of jurisprudence has strengthened the rights to notice, hearing and rehabilitation. In *Chameli Singh vs. State Of UP* (1995), the SC recognised the "right to shelter" as a component of the right to life under Article 21 and freedom of movement under Article 19(1)(e). In *Sudama vs Government of Delhi* (2010) — affirmed twice by the SC — the Delhi High Court ruled that before evicting people, the state must find ways to rehabilitate people. Governments have, however, continued to weaponise municipal laws to target people accused of being trespassers. Worryingly in recent months, what was essentially an urban housing problem to begin with, has intertwined with communal politics — in several parts of the country "Illegal encroachment" has become the ruse for administration to punish protestors or those accused of being "rioters," who belong overwhelmingly to one community.

Be it in Jahangirpuri in Delhi or UP and now Patna, the judiciary has had to step in to reestablish the sanctity of due process. Before the Patna HC, the Gauhati High Court last month, in a case related to the razing of a house belonging to an accused in an arson case in Nagaon, had warned that police cannot, "under the guise of investigation", bulldoze anyone's house without



permission, and if such practices continue then “nobody is safe in this country”. This pushback from the courts at a time of an overweening executive is welcome. Hopefully, politicians, especially those in high office, would take the cue from the judiciary and stop extolling the virtues of police highhandedness.

BJP MEMBER MOVES PRIVATE BILL ON UCC IN RS, DRAWS STIFF RESISTANCE FROM OPPOSITION

The introduction of a private member Bill by a Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) member on implementation of Uniform Civil Code (UCC) across the country witnessed vociferous protest from the Opposition members in Rajya Sabha on Friday.

The Opposition members requested the BJP member Kirodi Lal Meena to withdraw the Bill and also asked Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar to not accept the legislation as it will destroy the secular fabric of the country.

The Bill seeks constitution of the National Inspection and Investigation Committee for preparation of UCC and its implementation throughout India.

The introduction of the Bill was put for voting and was passed through a voice vote, of 63 votes in favour and 23 against. Many Opposition members from Congress, Trinamool Congress and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) were not present during the discussion and at the time of voting.

Opposing the Bill, MDMK’s Vaiko charged at the treasury benches saying “patriotism is not the monopoly of you people.”

IUML’s Abdul Wahab said the Bill was a deliberate provocation and it cannot be implemented in India.

John Brittas (CPI-M) said the the 21st Law Commission concluded that UCC is neither necessary nor desirable.

“Law Minister should be aware of this, if he takes some time away from attacking the Supreme Court, it is against spirit of the constitution... this is supposed to be an uncivil code, we should not use a piece of legislation for polarisation in society and it is detrimental for the country, please withdraw the bill immediately,” he urged the BJP member and the Chair.

Tiruchi Siva (DMK) said the same Bill was listed many times earlier as well but was not introduced after being requested by members.

ABVP’S CANCEL CULTURE: HOW THE ORGANISATION HAS DAMAGED ACADEMIC AUTONOMY

In the latest incident to speak to the embattled state of higher education in the country, a law college principal in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, was forced to resign. His decision, by all accounts, was precipitated by pressure exerted by members of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the students’ wing affiliated with the RSS. Hours after putting in his papers, the academic was booked for promoting enmity amongst religious groups along with three of his colleagues. His travails began on December 1, when ABVP members submitted a memorandum, alleging “religious fundamentalist thoughts being promoted by four Muslim teachers of the college”. A day later, the activists took offence to the presence of a book, Collective Violence and Criminal Justice



System, in the institution's library. Portions of the book, according to them, showed the RSS in poor light. The principal's defence that the book was acquired by his predecessor and a retired judge is investigating the allegations did not seem to have cut any ice with the protestors. Such strong-arm tactics have a chilling effect on academic freedom in the country.

Almost every education policy document in the past 50 years in India has underlined the importance of universities as spaces of critical thinking. The New Education Policy 2020 too has emphasised this objective. But academic institutions in the country have rarely enjoyed complete freedom from government interference. In recent times, the status of universities as self-regulating bodies where decisions are shaped by intellectual debates — and not political pressures — seems to be under even more duress. The Indore law college incident indicates that academic autonomy seems to have eroded to such an extent that an institution's discretion to keep a book in its library shelves is being questioned. Most education institutions have internal processes to requisition books for libraries. That teachers have the freedom to refer study material in classrooms is also cardinal to academic freedom. Of course, curriculum literature must not be shielded from criticism. Student-teacher debates enhance the creative quotient of education institutions and universities should, in fact, find more spaces for engaging with a diversity of ideas and books by writers of myriad persuasions — including those who espouse the RSS's principles as well as those critical of them. But the ABVP protestors seemed to have gone by a cancel culture playbook that's inimical to a healthy relationship between the two linchpins of the system.

The NEP 2020 lays great emphasis on creating an enabling atmosphere for teachers. That should be enough to reason for the government to intervene and restore sanity in the Indore law college.

MBBS STUDENTS PROTEST IN HARYANA: WHY GOVT CONCESSIONS FAILED

For the past month, MBBS students of Haryana's government medical colleges have been agitating against the state's bond policy. In face of the protests, on November 30, the government announced tweaks in the rules. However, the students have said they are not satisfied with the changes.

What is the bond policy?

As per the policy introduced in 2020, MBBS students have to sign a bond-cum-agreement to compulsorily serve for seven years in government hospitals after graduating from state-run medical institutions. If they join a private job before that, they have to deposit the bond amount of Rs 36.8 lakh with the government.

Priya Kaushik, an MBBS student leader from Rohtak's PGIMS, said they had been opposed to the policy since 2020, but could not launch an agitation then as gatherings were not possible amid Covid-19.

What triggered the agitation this year?

For the past month, students have staged protests in different forms including a chain hunger strike at PGIMS. According to the agitators, protests have also been on at Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee government medical college, Chhainsa; Kalpana Chawla Government Medical College, Karnal; SHKM Government Medical College Nalhar, Mewat; and BPS Government Medical College for Women, Khanpur Kalan, Sonapat.



This was triggered by an additional rule.

Kaushik said, "In 2020, the students were supposed to just sign a bond-cum-agreement. But from this year, medical institutes asked students to deposit a bond amount of Rs 9.2 lakh per annum at the time of admission. For four years, this amount adds up to Rs 36.8 lakh. Very few can afford to pay such a huge sum upfront. Thus, from November 1, we decided to launch an agitation."

How did the government respond?

Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar on November 2 announced that no one would have to pay the bond amount upfront. Instead, students would have to only sign the bond-cum-loan agreement with the college and the bank concerned.

The sole aim of the bond policy, the government said, was to meet the shortage of doctors in state-run hospitals.

What do the MBBS students want?

The agitating students want that the period of compulsory government job be reduced from seven years to one year, and the bond of Rs 36.8 lakh be brought down to Rs 5 lakh. They are also seeking a guaranteed job within four months of completion of the MBBS course. According to the agitators, the banks should be removed from the picture for bond purposes and the students should have a link with their institutes only.

What has the government now offered?

After discussions with students, the government on November 30 reduced the seven-year period to five years including postgraduate (PG) education, "eventually making the time limit of the bond as two years".

The bond amount has been cut to Rs 30 lakh with the course fee included, and thus "the amount will come up to about Rs 25 lakh," the government said. It was decided to give a 10 per cent relaxation to girls, excluding the institute fee.

On the question of employment, the state said MBBS graduates would get a government job (contractual) within one year of completion of studies. Also, if students take up a private job and their salary is lower than that given to a medical officer by the government, they will not have to pay the bond amount until their salary is equal to or more than the medical officer.

What is the stand of students now?

The students are not satisfied and have decided to continue their agitation. They say it would be difficult for MBBS students to wait for one year without a job after completing a five-year course. In addition, they are not satisfied with the rules of five-year compulsory service and Rs 30-lakh bond, alleging that no other state is imposing such "harsh conditions".

However, on Thursday night, following the government's announcement of concessions, the Resident Doctors Association of PGIMS, which was also on strike in support of the MBBS students, called off its protests.



MUMBAI MEASLES OUTBREAK: WHY ARE CHILDREN AT RISK? UNDERSTAND SYMPTOMS, VACCINATION AND TREATMENT

Administration of a measles vaccine within 72 hours of initial exposure may avert or modify the clinical course of the illness and is generally recommended as a preventive tool, says Dr Asmita Mahajan, Consultant Neonatologist and Paediatrician, SL Raheja Hospital, Mahim

Over 200 cases of measles have been recorded in Mumbai with 13 deaths. Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde has blamed the lack of vaccination behind the ongoing outbreak. In fact, data accessed by The Indian Express showed that in October, when the outbreak started, Mumbai recorded only 41 per cent vaccine coverage against measles.

Why has Mumbai seen a surge in measles-related cases?

Mumbai has certainly seen a surge in measles cases over the past few days, with most of the patients from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Poverty, poor hygiene practices, poor quality of nutrition and lack of vaccination in children have all contributed to the spiralling cases. Most cases have been reported from Bhiwandi (Thane) and Malegaon (Nashik) which lack vaccination coverage, especially among children. Some families didn't immunise their children because of religious and cultural backgrounds. Many lives could have been saved had the children been vaccinated on time and in more significant numbers.

Which age group is most vulnerable to contracting the infection?

Children below the age of five are the most vulnerable, especially those below the age of two. Children who have not been vaccinated are at the greatest risk. More importantly, if children are vaccinated and do contract the disease, the illness will be mild.

How important are the two doses of vaccines to stop the outbreak?

Studies have shown that vaccines are never 100 per cent protection against the disease but once taken, the child will report mild illness even if affected. At least complications or deadly issues like pneumonia, diarrhoea, further sepsis and other problems may be avoided.

Vaccination is considered the key strategy in limiting the spread of measles during outbreaks. At the individual level, administration of measles vaccine within 72 hours of initial exposure may modify the clinical course of the illness and is generally recommended as a preventive tool. Recent studies have confirmed a benefit from this intervention, with effectiveness of post-exposure immunisation ranging between 91–100 per cent, corroborating observations made in the pre-elimination era.

How much time does the vaccine take to produce antibodies to fight against the infection?

Post-vaccination, it takes at least four weeks to develop antibodies. However, the best possible method of dealing with an outbreak is to vaccinate a large number of individuals, in this case children. Antibodies are produced due to vaccination, and if you compare that to unimmunised children, definitely the ones who have received a vaccine will be at an advantage of fighting the infection if affected. We are hoping that by vaccinating a large number of children, the outbreak will be controlled in the near future.



Do you think the national immunisation programme got impacted during the pandemic?

Undoubtedly, there has been a dip in the national immunisation programme because of the pandemic and the lockdown. That has created a big gap. People were quite sceptical or scared about going to hospitals, clinics or healthcare centres to get their children vaccinated as they were afraid of them picking up Covid-19. Irrespective of this hesitancy, the BMC surpassed the vaccination drives and scheduled drives for polio. Its officials have also been keeping a record of vaccinations undertaken at private hospitals. The official BMC figure is that 20,000 children are estimated to have received the MR vaccine.

What are the symptoms to watch out for? What is the line of treatment?

After exposure to the virus, the symptoms take ten days to appear. Some initial common signs include cough, cold, runny nose, sore throat, loss of appetite, high-grade fever and body aches. After five days, rashes appear, which look like blotchy red marks. They usually start at the hairline or behind the ears of the child. These then spread to other body parts, including the throat, limbs and joints. In a few cases, there can also be tiny white dots on the roof of the mouth, which is another sign of measles.

Since measles is a symptomatic disease, some complications can also arise, especially when the child is unvaccinated and has reported low nutrition levels. Some common complications include red eyes, pneumonia, diarrhoea, ear infections and, in some cases, encephalitis, termed as brain inflammation. In rare cases, it can also lead to Subacute Sclerosing Panencephalitis (SSPE), a fatal disease of the central nervous system. Typically, SSPE develops seven to ten years after a child has had measles and recovered. The best way to prevent the above scenarios is to ensure that every child gets vaccinated against measles.

How can we prevent a future surge?

The best way to prevent future surges is by generating awareness among the community about the importance of vaccines. The measles vaccine must be provided to every child and there is a need to overcome any prejudice a community might have against it. It is entirely safe and prevents measles from becoming fatal in children. Some measures that can be implemented immediately include the following:

In studies in diverse settings, broad and early implementation of vaccination has been associated with shorter outbreak durations, smaller outbreak sizes, alterations in the epidemic curve, reduction in cases, lower than expected morbidity and mortality, and partial or complete avoidance of outbreaks in closed populations.

Wider use of this control measure may also impact disease transmission at the community level by directly reducing the number of secondary measles cases and by increasing immunity to levels that can impede the spread.

TRAFFICKERS ARE MOVING ONLINE IN SEARCH OF VICTIMS

As her classroom moved online during the pandemic, 16-year old Preeti (name changed) got a brand new mobile phone to carry on with her studies. With it came an introduction to social media and end-to-end chatting apps. The young girl from Alwar district of Rajasthan soon met Amit (name changed) on ShareChat and friendship blossomed, leading her to elope with him.



Three months later, she was rescued from Patiala in Punjab, after a relentless investigation and pursuit by police. Many others, however, are never found.

Confined to the digital world due to COVID-19 restrictions over the past two years, traffickers are scouring online classrooms, gaming platforms, matrimonial sites, dating apps, chat apps and even loan apps for potential victims.

In the small towns and villages of India — especially in States which are already known as hotbeds of trafficking such as Rajasthan, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh — women and children are being abused, blackmailed and trafficked using Web applications.

A study on changing trends in online abuse and trafficking of women and children done in these four States shows that 44% of the respondents started using the Internet only after the outbreak of COVID-19. It also found that 98% of the respondents use cheaper devices such as smartphones to access the Internet. 51% use it for school or college work, more than 56% for social media, almost 42% for e-commerce and 35% for online gaming.

The study, conducted by Space2Grow and CyberPeace Foundation, further goes on to show that among those who had felt uncomfortable during an online interaction, 53% responded by simply blocking the sender. About 31% told the sender that they were uncomfortable, 25% ignored them, 21% deleted the posts, almost 16% deleted their social media accounts, and 8% relented to the sender's request after repeatedly saying no to them.

Risk group

Experts feel that it is these 8% who are at serious risk. The modus operandi of predators ranges from luring somebody through relationships, blackmailing them by morphing their social media photographs, and offering loans which are difficult to pay back in cash.

In fact, there has been a global explosion of such exploitation and India is leading it. According to the U.S.-based National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children's Cyber tipline report for 2021, India accounts for 4.69 million reports of online abuse of children out of the 29.3 million reports worldwide, the highest of any country.

TWO MONTHS AFTER NOTIFYING NEW NORMS, WAIT LIST FOR ADOPTION SHRINKS TO 644

The pendency in the adoption of children has come down to 644 from 905 over the last two months since the new Adoption Regulations were notified and in a total of 361 cases, adoption orders have been issued.

The Rules for adoption of the Juvenile Justice Act were notified on September 23 this year. The new rules empower the District Magistrates to issue adoption orders. Earlier, this power was exercised by the judiciary. The first adoption order was issued by the District Magistrate, Akola, Maharashtra on October 6.

Following the issue of the notification, over 589 children were adopted till December 5, official sources in the Ministry of Women and Child Development said. The sources said that among the host of reforms which the Ministry has brought about are pre- and post-adoptive counselling for prospective adoptive parents by counsellors trained with the help of the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS).



Opt for home State

A complete health check-up is being done through the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) of the child's district before processing the adoption. Changes have also been made to the Child Adoption Resource Information and Guidance System (CARINGS) online platform for adoption.

In accordance with the new rules, prospective adoptive parents can now opt from their home State or region. This has been mandated to ensure that the child and the family adjust well with each other, belonging to the same socio-cultural milieu.

Changes have also been made for children with foster families. Earlier, children placed in foster care waited for five years for adoption. Now, according to the new regulations, if the child adjusts well with the foster family, it can adopt the child after two years of fostering.

Official sources said that widespread consultations had been carried out before framing the Adoption Regulations, 2022.

THIS NAVY DAY, LET'S FOCUS ON BUILDING A STRONG NAVY TO MEET INDIA'S GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS

The 30-month-long Sino-Indian military impasse in the Himalayas and China's strategic posturing in the South China Sea should be clear pointers for India's decision-makers that maritime power will have a critical role to play as an instrument of state policy in future outcomes. Navy Day, celebrated annually to commemorate a famous naval victory, and to remind us of our maritime heritage, also provides an opportunity for "maritime stocktaking".

Still smarting from the ignominy of its — government imposed — inaction in the 1965 Indo-Pak war, the navy's leadership had pre-determined that maritime power would play a pivotal role in the 1971 conflict. On the night of December 4, 1971, a force of small missile boats audaciously approached Karachi port to unleash missile salvos that sank warships, set alight huge fuel reserves, bottled up the Pakistan Navy and blockaded merchant shipping. In the Bay of Bengal, while INS Vikrant's aircraft mounted sustained attacks on East Pakistan's airfields, ports and riverine traffic, its escorts cast a naval cordon that ensured that neither reinforcement nor evacuation was possible for the Pakistani army. The fact that maritime dominance had expedited Pakistan's surrender, however, failed to lift the pall of "sea-blindness" over Raisina Hill.

This is also an appropriate occasion to remind fellow citizens of some outstanding figures in our maritime past. The navy of 10th century South Indian Emperor Rajendra Chola vanquished the Sumatra-based Sri Vijaya thalassocracy to establish Chola power across present-day Malaysia and Indonesia. The resolute and visionary zamorins of Kozhikode waged a 90-year-long naval campaign led by the captains of the Kunjali Marakkar clan to eject the Portuguese from Malabar. The 17th century Maratha "sarkhel" or admiral Kanhoji Angre's Konkan fleet ceaselessly harried the British, Dutch and Portuguese, scoring many victories.

It is time also to recall two unsung shipbuilding pioneers. In 1736, Bombay's Lovji Nusserwanji Wadia started a tradition which saw seven generations of Wadia master shipbuilders constructing superb merchantmen and warships for the British. Two centuries later, in 1941, the visionary Seth Walchand Hirachand, resurrected Indian shipbuilding by founding Scindia Shipyard Ltd. in Visakhapatnam. The first modern, Indian-built merchant vessel, MV Jalusha, joined Seth Walchand's Scindia Steam Navigation Co. in 1948.



Carrying forward this tradition, India's far-sighted naval leadership in the 1960s persuaded a reluctant government that the nation must also embark upon indigenous warships production. In the face of great scepticism, Mazagon Docks delivered the first, licence-built frigate, INS Nilgiri, in 1972. In the half-century since, Indian shipyards have launched over a hundred warships; ranging from patrol boats to destroyers and from hydrographic vessels to nuclear submarines.

The navy's bold vision saw its pinnacle in 2013 when Cochin Shipyard Ltd. launched India's largest indigenously designed and built warship — an aircraft carrier. Commissioned in September 2022 by the Prime Minister as (the reincarnated) INS Vikrant, the conception and successful completion of this complex project signified a major achievement for our naval staff, ship designers and builders.

Initiated by the Directorate of Naval Design in the late 1970s, the aircraft carrier project assumed urgency when it was realised that both the navy's carriers — Vikrant and Viraat — would face retirement by century-end. Even as the navy juggled ship-design options, aircraft choices and other imponderables, the government, in a recurrence of "sea-blindness", rejected the project in 1990. It took 12 years and the persuasive powers of successive chiefs to obtain approval for a 37,500-ton ship, capable of operating the "navalised" Russian MiG-29K fighter from a ski-jump.

While the awe-inspiring sight of this mammoth, Indian-built warship kindles justifiable pride, there should be a pause for reflection, especially amongst our defence R&D scientists when it is described as an "indigenous product". Many of the ship's major systems, including gas-turbine engines, guns, missiles and radars, are imported. Of equal concern is the foreign origin of aviation-related facilities such as workshops, aircraft lifts, arrester-wires and landing-aids, vital for flying operations. Only when all these have been delivered and installed and have passed flying trials will Vikrant be combat-ready.

The hiatus between ordering, launch and commissioning of Vikrant may be excessive by international standards but this prolonged gestation would have served a purpose if the invaluable experience gained and the priceless skills acquired, are ploughed back into a bigger/better follow-on carrier; with much greater involvement and contribution from our scientists. The case for IAC-2 remains in limbo, even as China awaits the third ship in its carrier-building programme and envisions a carrier-led Indian Ocean task force. Navy Day stocktaking shows that the Indian Navy has in the past decade realised many of its long-cherished objectives in all three dimensions of capability. New, indigenously designed, destroyers and frigates, stealthy in form, fielding long-range sensors and heavily armed with missiles, guns and anti-submarine weapons are being delivered at a slow but steady pace by domestic shipyards. Voids, however, remain in mine counter-measures, amphibious-lift and fleet-support capabilities.

The haemorrhaging of our diesel-submarine strength will be temporarily halted by the addition of six, modern, licence-produced French boats. But the government must urgently green-light Project 75 (I) so that serial production of submarines can commence. With PLA Navy units now frequently prowling the Indian Ocean, aerial surveillance and anti-submarine warfare assume strategic dimensions. Recent inductions of US-built, shipborne helicopters and maritime-reconnaissance aircraft are going to not only boost the Indian Navy's surveillance and anti-submarine capabilities but also enhance interoperability with partner navies.

In the half-century since the Bangladesh War, our navy has emerged as a compact but potent and professional force. Given the political leadership's regional/global aspirations, the service has a significant contribution to make — whether as a Quad member or as the regional "net security



provider”. The navy’s role must be spelt out, and its force architecture defined as well as funded, accordingly. This can happen only if the national security elite conceives a comprehensive “maritime vision”, and articulates it in a “National Strategy for Maritime Security”.

THE KASHMIR FILES ROW: IFFI JURY CHAIR HAS A RIGHT TO CRITICISE THE FILM

Over the seven decades of its existence, the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) has developed into a prestigious show by a country that makes more films than any other in the world. It may not be a Cannes or Berlin, and despite being a government-run show, the IFFI has the convening power to attract some of the world’s best cinema and filmmakers aside from providing coveted space to India’s own best. As such, multiple views, not all of the same shade, are bound to be aired and exchanged. Thus it was natural that a film director of the eminence of Nadav Lapid, who headed the jury for the international competitive section, would have strong views about films and cinema. Presumably, this is what made him the right choice to chair the jury of the showcase segment of the film festival.

Lapid’s opinion of the film *The Kashmir Files*, which he described as “vulgar propaganda”, may not have gone down well with many who packed cinema halls earlier this year to see it and who saw, in the film, the breaking of a long silence — over the treatment of minority Kashmiri Hindus — in popular art. Of course, it is odd that a losing film was singled out for criticism — jury speeches are usually about the winners. Moreover, one of the jury members has come out to say that this wasn’t, as Lapid claims, a consensus view. But then what is a film festival where an artist, especially one invited to chair a jury, can’t speak his mind? Lapid, who has never made the specious claim of being “apolitical” — a term celebrities often use to mask their political choices — is not known for mincing his words including in his own country, Israel. Those who run the IFFI should know that without this freedom that top practitioners of the art like to take for granted, its annual celebration of India’s formidable soft power will be just another polite back-scratching film awards night. So the Lapid controversy must not become a justification for the IFFI to pack the jury with the like-minded.

Israel’s ambassador to India, Naor Gilon, took it upon himself to give Lapid a tongue lashing and apologise to India for the offence caused by the filmmaker’s remarks. This was uncalled for diplomatic intervention in a matter that had nothing to do with him or the Israeli state. For one, Lapid did not identify his views as those of Israel. More importantly, India-Israel ties, do not hang by the slender thread of a film review even if it was promoted by government leaders as a must-watch. As two countries that have come together in a considered and deliberate way to build their bilateral relationship over the last three decades, their ties are surely strong enough to shrug off Lapid’s remarks as par for the democratic course.

WHY ARE FISHERFOLK PROTESTING THE VIZHINJAM PORT PROJECT?

The story so far:

Vizhinjam has been on the boil for the past four months with protesters mainly fisherfolk and their families laying siege to the under-construction Vizhinjam port. The protestors led by the Latin Archdiocese have been demanding the halting of the construction work of the port by Adani Vizhinjam Port Private Limited.



What lies at the heart of the protests?

According to protesters, the port work has aggravated the coastal erosion along the coast of Thiruvananthapuram. They have raised seven demands which include, a scientific study to assess the impact of the port work on the shoreline after stopping the construction of the port. Further, around 300 families along the coastline were shifted to relief camps after their houses were destroyed due to high-intensity coastal erosion. The protesters demand a comprehensive rehabilitation package for the fisherfolk in the region, an assured minimum wage when the sea turns rough due to inclement weather, and subsidised kerosene for boats.

Has it aggravated coastal erosion?

All types of construction work along a coast, aggravate sea erosion (loss of beach) and accretion (gain of beach). Any structure — be it groyne, seawall, or breakwater — intensifies erosion on one side and accretion on the other. Although coastal erosion is dominant in all coastal districts of Kerala, it is more severe along the coastline of Thiruvananthapuram. A study conducted by the National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management, Society of Integrated Coastal Management, and the Ministry of Environment and Forest had noted that the erosion is minimum at Thrissur (1.5 %) and maximum at Thiruvananthapuram (23%), even before the port construction. In Kerala's case, the seasonal shoreline changes would be more severe during monsoon months due to the high-energy short storm waves that lash the coast almost in a perpendicular position moving the sand offshore. The latest report of the expert committee appointed by the National Green Tribunal and Shoreline Monitoring Cell observed that erosion in spots such as Valiyathura, Shanghumugham, and Punthura remained the same as before and after the commencement of the port construction (December 2015). However, during the October 2020–September 2021 period, spots like Kochuveli and Cheriyaathura to the north of Valiyathura suffered erosion. The report noted that the relatively high number of cyclones formed over the Arabian sea after cyclone Ockhi in 2017 was the main reason for the recent erosion and accretion and that the impact of the port activity on either side of the coast had less significance.

What is the government's stance?

The Kerala Government made it clear that since the coastal erosion is due to climate change as reported by various agencies, the demand for stopping the port construction cannot be conceded. Officials argue that the Vizhinjam seaport is being constructed inside a natural sediment cell which is a pocket-like area in which interruptions to the movement of sand along the coast do not significantly affect the adjacent coastline.

Is the Vizhinjam project important?

Located on the southern tip of the Indian Peninsula, just 10 nautical miles from the major international sea route and east-west shipping axis, and with a natural water depth of more than 20m within a nautical mile from the coast, the Vizhinjam port is likely to play a pivotal role in the maritime development of the country and Kerala. The port is expected to leverage the growth of minor ports in Kerala and other regional ports, creating thousands of employment opportunities.

CHOKING LAKE: NAINITAL GETS SOME HIGH COURT RELIEF BUT FINGERS CROSSED

After 19 months, work at Nainital's Sukhatal Lake came to a halt last week when the Uttarakhand High Court — acting on a PIL against the government's beautification plan that allegedly involved



laying a layer of concrete on the lake bed — asked for all construction activities at the lake to be suspended till further orders.

The Sukhatal catchment area, spread across 23,000 square metres, serves as the main recharge zone for the renowned Naini Lake, a km away. The lake gets its name because it is “sukha (dry)” for most part of the year since most of its water gets drained into the Naini, sustaining the larger lake even during the lean summer months.

In May last year, the government, based on a project report prepared by IIT Roorkee, began work on the Rs 25.51-crore beautification plan that involves, among other things, a fence with iron railings around the lake area and a paved walkway. But it’s the plan to make the lake impregnable, by allegedly lining the lake bed with concrete so that the lake retains water through the year, that raised the hackles of environmentalists.

Officials working at the site said around 80 per cent of the work was completed when the court order came in on November 22.

The High Court’s order followed a letter written by 104 signatories — local activists and citizen groups — to Uttarakhand HC Chief Justice Vipin Sanghi alleging an “ongoing destruction happening on Sukhatal Lake in the name of development”. In March this year, the court took suo motu cognisance of the matter, converted the letter into a PIL and appointed Advocate Kartikey Hari Gupta as amicus curiae.

In the letter, the group expressed concern about the “unscientific and unwanted” development of Sukhatal Lake and said its proposed development plan, which includes concretisation, has the potential to damage the ecology of Naini Lake and endanger the livelihood of Nainital residents.

The government, however, has denied that its plan involved concretising the lake bed, and said that it only planned to use a geosynthetic clay liner — factory-manufactured hydraulic barriers that do not make a surface completely impermeable but increase water retention.

Secretary of the District Level Development Authority, Pankaj Kumar Upadhyay, said that though the initial plan was to build a concrete bed in one portion of the lake to retain water, after meetings with civil society, it was decided that there should be no concrete bed. “Following the meeting, we again reached out to IIT-Roorkee and they suggested another option, which was to use a geosynthetic clay liner instead of a concrete bed. We started the work on the clay liner, but some people sent a letter to the court,” he said.

During the hearing, amicus curiae Gupta pointed out that the use of impermeable material on the Sukhatal lake bed is prohibited by all scientific bodies.

Talking to The Indian Express, Nainital-based Charu Chandra Pant, who retired as professor of geology from Kumaon University, said the area is ecologically sensitive and warned against tampering with it. “The lake is on a higher ground and thus works as a recharge zone for the Naini lake. In the last three-four decades, because this lake was seasonal, people had started using it as a dumping ground. Some built their houses around and encroached on the catchment area. Also, around three-four pumps installed here pump out around 3 million liters of water a day, which is a big portion of Nainital’s 8-million-litre per day demand. Had the lake ended up with a cemented floor, there would be no water in the lake. Even if there is enough water, there will be a bloom of algae as it will be stagnant water,” he said.



In 2014, a research team led by Dr Vishal Singh had identified Sukhatal as a 'critical recharge zone' for Nainital. "If we look at it in terms of a social and ecological perspective, intervention only if very necessary should be done keeping in mind the very important hydro-geological, functions and social values of Sukhatal which include maintaining the water balance of Nainital lake and providing drinking water to a large population of the city. Tampering to the lake bed should be avoided at all costs," he said.

ARE RHINO AND ELEPHANT CONSERVATION EFFORTS A SUCCESS?

The story so far:

Greens worldwide called the Kaziranga National Park the greatest conservation success story in 2005 when it completed a century. Much of it is attributed to a rhino protection force that shoots alleged poachers at sight; more than 55 armed men have been killed within the boundary of the 1,300 sq. km tiger reserve for unauthorised entry since 2012-13.

What is the rhino population?

The population of the one-horned rhino was about a dozen when Kaziranga became a protected area in 1905. According to the State of Rhino Report 2022, the poor-sighted herbivore's number in Kaziranga is an estimated 2,613, more than 65% of its total population of 4,014 across 11 habitats in India and Nepal. A decade ago, the rhino's population in these domains was 2,454. A section of conservationists say the focus is too much on the rhino but agree this has made other animals in its domains a beneficiary. The number of tigers, for instance, has increased in Assam at a rate higher than elsewhere in India. A 2010 count said Kaziranga has the highest density of tigers — 32.64 per 100 sq. km — in the world.

How have anti-poaching measures helped?

According to Assam-based rhino expert Bibhab Kumar Talukdar, the strengthening of the anti-poaching mechanism in India and Nepal with more manpower, capacity-building of frontline staff and equipping forest guards with better fighting gears have helped protect the rhino. The sentiments of local people attached to the rhino have also been a factor in the sharp drop in the number of rhinos killed, from 54 in 2013 and 2014 to one each in 2021 and 2022. The threat from poachers cannot be wished away because of the illegal wildlife trade in next-door Myanmar and beyond in Southeast Asia, he said. "While poaching remains a major threat to rhinos, alien invasive plant species grabbing key grassland habitats in rhino-bearing areas in the past decade has emerged as a bigger threat to the animal in India and Nepal," Mr. Talukdar, also a senior member of the Asian Rhino Specialist Group, said.

Are elephants endangered?

India is home to nearly 60% Asian elephants and the last count of the species in 2017 had put the number at 29,964. While the number of elephants in India has increased in the past few years, the species is listed as 'Endangered' on the IUCN Red List of threatened species and Schedule I of The Wildlife Protection Act.

What are the challenges?

The largest land-dwelling mammal is under continuous threat of poaching and conflict with humans. While incidents of poaching for ivory have come down, human-elephant conflict has been



increasing. On an average, about 500 humans and 100 elephants are killed every year across the country in such confrontations. The elephant population is not evenly distributed in the country. The south Indian States of Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu are home to nearly 44% of India's elephant population. Fragmentation of elephant habitats and construction of linear (railways and roads) and power infrastructure have led to many elephant deaths. The change of land use, particularly bringing erstwhile forested areas under agriculture, has aggravated the conflict. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change launched Project Elephant in 1992 to ensure the long-term survival of elephants in their natural habitats. The number of elephant reserves in India is 32 with the latest addition being the Agasthyamalai Elephant Reserve in 2022. Elephant corridors, linear narrow habitat linkages which allow elephants to move between secure habitats are crucial for conservation. So far, about 101 elephant corridors have been identified in the country which need to be secured for conservation of elephants.

CHEETAHS AND TIGERS: THE SAGA OF BIG CATS IN INDIA

The story so far:

This year marked the arrival of Namibian cheetahs to India, the first intercontinental transfer of wild cats into the country since independence. Eight cheetahs were flown into the Kuno National Park (KNP), Madhya Pradesh, from Namibia on September 17 as part of an ambitious project to reintroduce the big cat into the country. They were released into the quarantine zone at the KNP by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In February, the government went public with a plan to import a cohort of animals that could live in India, setting up a task force to implement the programme.

Has the transfer been successful?

The cheetahs — five females and three males — were flown into India following several weeks of medical supervision in Namibia. They will be released into the wild gradually so that they have enough time to adapt to Indian conditions, are at reduced risk of contracting and spreading infection and have honed the skills to hunt Indian prey. The eight cheetahs were housed in six 'bomas' (enclosures) and initially provided with buffalo meat. So far, three of the animals have been released into a larger enclosure outside of the 'bomas' after two of them — Freddie and Elton — successfully killed chital for prey in November. The third animal, Oban, was also released mid-November and all the animals are expected to be moved inside larger enclosures in weeks. The cheetahs are radio-collared and their movements will be tracked. Each animal has a dedicated tracking team. A team of wildlife scientists, biologists, and Laurie Marker, a renowned zoologist and founder of the Cheetah Conservation Fund, is monitoring the initiative.

Why should cheetahs be outside of Africa?

Cheetahs were once widespread in India as well as in many parts of the world until they were hunted to extinction. Only around 8,000 of them survive, and overwhelmingly in Namibia and South Africa. A different species, called the Asiatic cheetah, once abundant in India, is found in Iran. As part of improving their odds of long-term survival, young animals are being reared as part of conservation efforts in Namibia and then sent to different parts of the world, including India. While it is still early days for the cheetah, experts have raised concerns that the KNP has limited space for the cheetah to co-exist with other predators such as tigers and lions, for which the KNP was originally prepared.



What is the tiger population in India?

Every four years, India carries out a census of the tiger population across India. The latest estimate put the tiger population at 2,967. Tigers were reportedly increasing at a rate of about 6% per annum and the area that they occupied was roughly stable, at about 89,000 square km since 2014. These numbers are estimated using a sophisticated system that involves photographing animals via camera traps as well as mathematical analysis. In 2006, India had 1,411 tigers. This rose to 1,706 in 2010 and 2,226 in 2014 on the back of improved conservation measures and new estimation methods.

How did the numbers increase?

The consistent implementation of Project Tiger since 1973, whereby dedicated tiger reserves were established in India, as well as anti-poaching measures have played a significant role in tiger conservation. India has 53 tiger reserves with the latest being added early this year. However, rising tiger numbers have meant that nearly half the tigers are now outside designated protected zones that lead to increasing instances of human-animal conflict.

India is home to the largest population of tigers in the world and this is a testament to the success of wildlife conservation programmes implemented for nearly 50 years

PROTECTING THE GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD

On November 30, the Supreme Court asked the Government, whether a focussed approach, something like Project Tiger, can be taken up for saving the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard (GIB).

What is endangering the birds?

Hearing petitions highlighting deaths of the GIBs due to power transmission lines, a special bench of the apex court led by Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud directed Chief Secretaries of Gujarat and Rajasthan to undertake and complete a comprehensive exercise within four weeks to find out the total length of transmission lines in question and the number of bird diverters required. This is not the first time that the Supreme Court had intervened in the conservation of the GIB. In an earlier order in April 2021, the Supreme Court had directed the authorities to convert the overhead cables into underground power lines, (where feasible) within a period of one year and that till such time diverters would have to be hung from existing power lines.

Why do power lines pose a threat?

There are several threats that have led to the decline of the GIB populations; however, power lines seem to be the most significant. There have been studies in different parts of the world where bustard populations have shown high mortality because of power lines such as Denham's bustards in South Africa and the Great Bustard in Spain. Like other species of bustards, the GIBs are large birds standing about one metre tall and weighing about 15 to 18 kgs. The GIBs are not great fliers and have wide sideways vision to maximise predator detection but the species' frontal vision is narrow. These birds cannot detect power lines from far and since they are heavy fliers, they fail to manoeuvre across power lines within close distances. The combination of these traits makes them vulnerable to collision with power lines. In most cases, death is due to collision rather than electrocution. A study by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in 2020 recorded six cases of GIB mortality due to power-line collisions in Thar from 2017-20.



What steps have been taken?

Listed in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, in Appendix I of CITES, as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List, the GIBs enjoy the highest protection both in India and globally. The earliest estimates show the population was about 1,260 in 1969, but has declined by 75% in the last 30 years.

Historically, the GIB population was distributed among 11 States in western India but today the population is confined mostly to Rajasthan and Gujarat. Small populations are found in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The overall population of the GIB totals 150 across the country, which includes about 128 birds in Rajasthan. Along with the attempts to mitigate impacts of power transmission lines on the GIB, steps have been taken for conservation breeding of the species. A total of 16 GIB chicks, artificially hatched from eggs collected from the wild, are being reared in the satellite conservation breeding facility at Sam in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan. The objective of 'Habitat Improvement and Conservation Breeding of Great Indian Bustard-an integrated approach' is to build the captive population of the GIBs and to release the chicks in the wild. The initiative is likely to take 20 to 25 years. Experts, including scientists from the WII, have called for removing all overhead powerlines passing through the GIB priority/critical areas in Rajasthan; the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change too has constituted a task force. Questions, however, are being raised on the slow pace of implementation.

Are there other threats to the GIB?

According to scientists, the GIBs are slow breeders and they build their nests on the ground. The species have also been subjected to hunting and egg collection in the past. There also has been a decline in prevailing habitat loss as dry grasslands have been diverted for other use. Experts also warn of pesticide contamination and increase of populations of free-ranging dogs and pigs along with native predators, putting pressure on nests and chicks. While most of the population of the species is confined to the Jaisalmer Desert National Park (DNP), wildlife enthusiasts believe that more areas outside the protected area must be made suitable for the species. A conservation effort like 'Project Tiger' may not work for a large bird of an arid region that can always fly out of the protected area. Experts are calling for community-centric conservation of the species.

A TEMPLE, A DARGAH, AND 'INVADERS': WHY BJP IS TALKING ABOUT A PAVAGADH SHRINE

Among the many talking points in the BJP's ongoing election campaign in Gujarat is the renovation of the 11th-century Kalika Mata temple complex in Pavagadh in Gujarat's Panchmahal district, inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on June 18 this year. The BJP government in the state claims to have redeveloped the temple complex after "amicably shifting" a dargah built atop the temple, to construct the temple's 'shikhar and kalash' or superstructure and spire, and to unfurl the temple flag. As per the party, this was done 500 years after "invaders" broke down the shikhar and constructed a dargah over it.

Right from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah, to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the BJP's star campaigners have been citing Pavagadh as an example of "reclaiming and restoration of India's cultural and religious pride" under the Modi-led central government.



On Thursday, speaking at Kalol in the foothills of Pavagadh, Modi first invoked “the blessings of Mahakali” as India takes over the presidency of the G-20 summit, and went on to blame the Congress for “taking pleasure” in the insult to places of faith and worship. Modi said, “Earlier, seeing the Pavagadh temple without a shikhar used to be a heart wrenching experience. It was a 500-year-old insult meted out by invaders. I had vowed to change it... Was Pavagadh not in existence during the Congress rule? But they were not able to see the strength (of the shaktipeeth) that I could see. We launched a campaign to end the insults to Gujarat’s faith... The Congress party enjoys insults to faith and worship... I don’t know what is wrong with them. You can lose elections but it cannot become the reason for you to lose your mental balance... We used to lose our deposits earlier but we never behaved like this.” “The Congress has a mindset of slavery. There are many examples of it. One is the Maa Kali temple in Pavagadh, which was destroyed by invaders 500 years ago. They broke the Mahakali temple and destroyed its shikhar. For 500 years, there was no shikhar reconstructed, no dhwaja unfurled. This is the Congress mindset... Should it not have been done after Independence? It hasn’t happened now because of Modi, but because of the power of your vote... Their mindset of slavery doesn’t allow them to take pride in the country’s faiths...”

According to a note from the trustees of the Kalika Mata temple, shared during the inauguration of the renovated complex in June, the temple located in Champaner town, was an erstwhile kingdom ruled by Rajputs who “took pride in being descendants of Emperor Prithviraj Chauhan”. It is said that the toe of the right foot of Ma Sati fell here. Hence, the Kalika Mata temple is revered as a Shaktipeeth, and Rajput kings used to unfurl its flag. UNESCO has designated Champaner-Pavagadh as a World Heritage Site, calling it the “only complete and unchanged Islamic pre-Mughal city”. This also includes the Kalika Mata temple and the Jama Masjid at the foothill.

In the 15th century, Sultan Mahmud Begda conquered Champaner where he set up his capital and “destroyed the shikhara of the temple”, as per a note put out by the trust. The Sadanshah Pir dargah is believed to have been built around that time. A lore goes that Sadanshah Peer, originally a Hindu fakir who embraced Islam to be part of Mahmud Begda’s court after he established his Sultanate in Gujarat and captured Pavagadh, played a key role in saving the temple from being destroyed. Relocating the dargah was the most challenging part of the redevelopment work, a trust member said on condition of anonymity. “We also rebuilt the dargah as part of the settlement,” said the trustee. The temple and the dargah were rebuilt by Ahmedabad-based architect Ashish Sompura, who is also building the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

According to the developers, the redevelopment was done “without disturbing the idol, which is embedded in the wall, at the floor level”. The mountain was cut to size to bring the idol to a level where it would be visible to a person standing even outside the temple, the developers had told The Indian Express in June. The redevelopment used around 3,600 cubic feet of Bansi Pahadpur red sandstone from Rajasthan, the same that is being used to build the Ram temple at Ayodhya. The dargah was also rebuilt using the same stones.

The dargah, earlier situated atop the garbha griha of the Mahakali temple, was shifted to around 50 feet away as an independent structure in the same complex that has a distinct minaret design around the walls. The site where the dargah stood earlier made way for the shikhara and the gold-plated kalash. In March 2018, the family of the diwan administering the dargah moved the Gujarat High Court against the Gujarat Pavitra Yatradham Vikas Board, the tourism department as well as the temple trust. Later, in 2019, in a joint submission by the petitioner, Diwan Shamsher Sha Murtuja, and the respondents, it was decided to settle the matter with “allotment of a separate earmarked land in the temple complex”.



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

HOW TO READ Q2 GDP DATA

On Wednesday, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) released India's economic growth data for the second quarter of the current financial year (2022-23 or FY23). The second quarter or Q2 refers to the months of July, August and September. India's gross domestic product or GDP grew by 6.3 per cent in Q2 on a year-on-year basis. In other words, it was 6.3% more than the GDP in the same months in 2021. MoSPI also reported that India's Gross Value Added (or GVA) in Q2 grew by 5.6 per cent on a year-on-year basis.

What do GDP and GVA mean?

GDP and GVA are the two main ways to ascertain the country's economic performance.

Both are measures of national income.

The GDP measures the monetary measure of all "final" goods and services— those that are bought by the final user— produced in a country in a given period.

The GDP does this by adding up the total expenditures in the economy; in other words, it looks at who spent how much. That is why GDP captures the total "demand" in the economy.

Broadly speaking there are four key "engines of GDP growth". These are

*All the money Indians spent for their private consumption (that is, Private Final Consumption Expenditure or PFCE)

* All the money the government spent on its current consumption, such as salaries [Government Final Consumption Expenditure or GFCE]

* All the money spent towards investments to boost the productive capacity of the economy. This includes business firms investing in factories or the governments building roads and bridges [Gross Fixed Capital Expenditure]

* The net effect of exports (what foreigners spent on our goods) and imports (what Indians spent on foreign goods) [Net Exports or NX].

The GVA calculates the same national income from the supply side. It does so by adding up all the value added across different sectors. According to the RBI, the GVA of a sector is defined as the value of output minus the value of its intermediary inputs. This "value added" is shared among the primary factors of production, labour and capital.

By looking at the GVA growth one can understand which sector of the economy is robust and which is struggling.

How are the two related?

When one is looking at quarterly data, it is best to look at GVA data because it is this which is the observed data. The GDP is derived by looking at the GVA data.

The GDP and GVA are related by the following equation: $GDP = (GVA) + (\text{Taxes earned by the government}) - (\text{Subsidies provided by the government})$

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



As such, if the taxes earned by the government are more than the subsidies it provides, the GDP will be higher than GVA. Typically, that is how it is. For the second quarter too, the GDP (at Rs 38,16,578 crore) is much higher than the GVA (which is at Rs 35,05,599 crore).

The GDP data is more useful when looking at annual economic growth and when one wants to compare the economic growth of a country either with its growth in the past or with another country.

What does the GVA data show?

The biggest news in GVA data is the contraction in the manufacturing sector. In Q2, manufacturing GVA declined by 4.3%. This is significant because manufacturing carries a huge potential for job creation and can soak up excess labour from the agriculture sector. The contraction has meant that manufacturing GVA has grown by just 6.3 per cent over the three years since the Covid pandemic; look at the change between FY23 and FY20 in the CHART.

However, it would be a mistake to believe that only Covid and its after-effects are responsible for the lacklustre manufacturing performance.

The fact is, as borne by the data, manufacturing GVA grew by just 10.6% between FY17 and FY20. For perspective, it is important to remember that between FY14 and FY17, manufacturing GVA grew by 31.3%. In other words, Indian manufacturing has been struggling to add value for the past six years. This would explain why data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) shows that jobs in the manufacturing sector halved between 2016 and 2020.

The other big story is the almost 15 per cent growth in services such as trade and hotels, etc. This is also a huge sector for job creation. But again, if one looks at the Q2FY23 level and compares it to the pre-Covid level (Q2 of FY20), the growth is barely over 2 per cent. That this sector grew by over 26 per cent in the three years between FY17 and FY20 — when India was experiencing a serious economic deceleration — shows how badly it has been affected by the Covid disruption.

Another sector crucial for job creation, even though it is smaller in terms of overall contribution to India's GVA, is mining and quarrying. It, too, has contracted by almost 3%. Looking back over the past six years, it has contracted by 3.5% between FY17 and FY20 and grown by just 2.5% since then.

One positive story emerging from the GVA pertains to agriculture (along with forestry and fishing), which has done better than expected by growing at 4.6%. Typically, this is a good growth rate for this sector and has happened despite some worries that the sowing of crops did not happen in time.

Overall, while the GVA has grown by 5.6 per cent year on year, the growth is just 7.6 per cent when compared to the pre-Covid level set in FY20.

What does GDP data show?

On the GDP side, the biggest engine of growth is private consumption expenditure. It typically contributes over 55% of India's total GDP. This component is also crucial because if this is depressed, it robs businesses of any incentive to make fresh investments; and expenditures towards investments are the second biggest contributor to the GDP, accounting for around 33 per cent of the total.



Data shows that private consumption has grown by a healthy 9.7 per cent over the past year. However, the growth is relatively modest — just 11 per cent — when compared over the last three years. That between FY14 and FY17, this component grew by almost 28% provides some perspective.

The investment expenditures have grown by 10.4% over FY21 and by almost 21% between FY20 and FY23. This is the best growth over any three-year period going back to FY14. This suggests brighter prospects for the economy over the medium term.

The biggest surprise though from the GDP is the contraction in government final consumption expenditures. While these types of expenditures account for just about 10-11% of the GDP, they have the ability to prop up an economy during tough times when people and businesses hold back spending. Oddly enough, data shows that not only did government consumption expenditure contract by 4.4% per cent in Q2 (over the Q2 of 2021), but that it is almost 20% below the pre-Covid level.

The last component of the GDP equation is the Net Exports data. Typically, since India imports far more than it exports, the NX value is negative. In Q2, this negative value swelled by 89 per cent. Over the past three years, this drag on GDP has also increased in size by almost 150 per cent.

WHY THE G7'S OIL PRICE CAP IS UNLIKELY TO IMPACT RUSSIA

Oil prices surged higher on Tuesday, after a Group of Seven (G7), European Union and Australian proposal imposing a price cap on Russian seaborne oil came into effect on Monday. Both the global oil benchmarks – Brent and West Texas Intermediate crude – rose 60-70 cents a barrel in early trade on Tuesday, according to Reuters data.

How is the price cap intended to work?

Starting December 5, the European Union said it would implement a plan originally floated way back in May, with the G7 and Australia also signing up on the plan to impose the price cap on Russian crude oil shipments, pegged at \$60 to a barrel for now.

The price cap is essentially aimed at preventing firms in signatory nations from extending shipping, insurance, brokering and other services to Russian crude oil shipments that are sold at any value above the designated per-barrel price, i.e. \$60 for now. Since it came into effect on December 5, the cap will only apply to shipments that are “loaded” onto vessels after the date and not apply to shipments in transit.

What are the problems with this price cap?

The fact that it took nearly six months for the EU and the US to come to an agreement on the cap reflects the complexity of this proposal and the internal wrangling with the groupings for arriving upon a figure. The problems are on two counts:

As a solution, the price cap seeks to balance two contrasting objectives – how to cut Russia’s oil and gas earnings without simultaneously crimping the global supply of oil, which could stoke runaway inflation further? That’s where the problem lies.

In May, when the EU first proposed the ban, the inference was that this would deal a major blow to Russia’s oil cash flows. And what gave it further teeth is the fact that European shipping liners and insurers have long had a stranglehold on global energy markets.



But the hurdle here is that while a ban is intended to squeeze Russia, it cannot concomitantly be allowed to end up as a chokehold on Russian crude: because if Russian oil does not make its way into the global oil market, then crude prices could potentially spike, impacting consumers in the EU and the US, alongside those in the rest of the world. The concern of an inflationary spike is very real. So, the floor price formula was decided on.

Why at \$60, the price cap is unlikely to make any difference?

Robin Brooks, the chief economist at the Washington-based Institute for International Finance had tweeted last week that a \$30 cap would “give Russia the financial crisis it deserves.” The finally agreed cap is double that amount, something that countries including Poland and the Baltic nations have cited as being excessively high, given that it is broadly in line with the current market price for the Urals crude – Russia’s main export variant.

So, essentially, the embargo and price cap scheme has little bite, given that it is just marginally below the current market price for Russian crude. Russian oil is already trading at a discount of about \$68 per barrel as compared to \$85 for Brent crude, according to Vortexa data.

Also, the price cap of \$60 is way above Russia’s cost of production of its main crude variants such as the Urals, which is thought to be in the region of \$20-\$44 a barrel, according to estimates by the Economist. With the price cap of \$60 per barrel entailing a significant monetary cushion, Moscow would continue to have a commercial reason to pump crude and offer it to customers that are willing to buy it.

EU leaders have been quoted as saying after the decision that this \$60 cap might be lowered over time, but the problem is with the optics: that it took nearly 6 months for the grouping to come up with a price cap of \$60, and this figure barely makes a dent in Moscow’s oil profits that President Vladimir Putin is using to sustain the war with Ukraine.

According to analysts, If the price cap had been around \$50, it would have started to eat into Russia’s oil margins, but even that figure would have been above Russia’s cost of production. Even at \$45, analysts maintain that Moscow would have an incentive to keep selling crude simply to avoid having to cap wells that can be tough to restart from an economic viability point of view.

Also, with regard to the logistical hurdles envisaged in the price cap proposal, a paper by Reed Blakemore, the deputy director of the Atlantic Council’s Global Energy Center; Charles Lichfield, the deputy director of the Council’s GeoEconomics Center; and Brian O’Toole, a nonresident senior fellow at the GeoEconomics Center and a former senior adviser to the director of the Office of Foreign Assets Control at the US Department of the Treasury, “it is possible for the shipping industry to misrepresent or obscure the origin of its cargo” and there are historical precedents to that.

Also, exemptions for certain pieces of the Russian production complex (including the Sakhalin-2 project that was heavily funded by Japan) suggest that there will be “un-capped” Russian barrels still floating into the market, they noted in the paper. The price cap also does not fully address blends that include Russian crudes, suggesting that there may be additional opportunities to divert Russian barrels “through refined or partially refined products”.

In practice, the price cap will work only if the service providers ask their clients for proof that they have bought Russia-linked crude at a cap-compliant price. In end-November, the US Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) had published a determination to pursue



the cap and said in its guidance that shipping and insurance firms may not have complete information about how much their clients pay for each shipment and called upon the industry to request attestations that the cap has been respected via simple, and already standard, contract provisions.

WHY LOWER CRUDE OIL PRICES COULD BE GOOD FOR THE ECONOMY

On Monday, crude oil prices fell to their lowest levels this year as protests across major cities in China against the imposition of stringent Covid restrictions raised concerns over the economic outlook. Brent crude oil is currently trading at around \$81, down from the \$120-130 levels seen after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The volatility in crude prices is unlikely to subside in the near term. The Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies are meeting over the weekend to discuss their output level even as the EU countries continue to debate capping the price of Russian oil and the US allows Chevron to restart oil production in Venezuela.

For an oil importing country like India, lower prices could help ease price pressures in the economy and bring down the current account deficit. In January, the average price of crude imported by India stood at \$84.67 per barrel. Thereafter, prices rose to \$112.87 in March, and further to \$116 in June. However, since then, crude oil prices have been on a downward trend. As per latest data from the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell, the price of the Indian basket has fallen to \$82.14 as on November 25. This price is based on the crude basket comprising of sour grade (Oman and Dubai average) and sweet grade (Brent), which suggests that it perhaps does not take into account the recent discounts received in buying oil from Russia. To the extent that lower crude oil prices are passed on to consumers — retail prices have not been changed since May 22 — it could have a cooling effect on inflation. The RBI's projections which peg inflation at 6.15 per cent in the second half of the year assume crude at around \$100 per barrel. The government should, however, not exert pressure on oil marketing companies to reduce prices, even as it should refrain from raising the excise duty.

Lower crude oil prices will also have a bearing on the country's current account deficit. As per some estimates, every dollar reduction in oil prices lowers the current account deficit by around \$1.4 billion on an annualised basis. Considering that India's petroleum imports have risen by a staggering 60 per cent between April-October this year, exerting pressure on the currency, lower oil prices if sustained could help bring down the import burden, ease the risks to macroeconomic stability.

THE SUSTAINED GROWTH IN REMITTANCES

The story so far:

Remittances to India are set to touch a record \$100 billion in 2022, according to the World Bank's latest Migration and Development Brief titled, 'Remittances Brave Global Headwinds'. India received \$89.4 billion in 2021 — this is the first time a country will reach the \$100 billion mark.

What is a remittance?

It denotes a sum of money sent by one party to another. These days, the term describes the money sent by someone working abroad to their family back home. In the case of India, the largest sources of remittances have been from Indians working in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait), and the U.S./U.K.



What has been the general trend in remittances this year?

World remittances are expected to touch \$794 billion in 2022, up from \$781 billion in 2021. This represents a growth of 4.9%, compared to 10.2% in 2021, which was the highest since 2010. Of the \$794 billion, \$626 billion went to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Remittances represent an even larger source of external finance for LMICs in 2022, compared to foreign direct investment (FDI), official development assistance (ODA), and portfolio investment flows. The top five recipient countries this year are expected to be India (\$100 billion), followed by Mexico (\$60 billion), China (\$50 billion), the Philippines (\$38 billion) and Egypt (\$32 billion).

What are the reasons behind the sustained growth in remittances?

According to the World Bank, one of the main reasons is the gradual reopening of various sectors in host-country economies, following pandemic-induced closures and travel disruptions. This “improved migrant workers’ incomes and employment situations and thereby their ability to send money home.” An allied reason was the “migrants’ determination to help their families back home” during the tough post-pandemic recovery phase. The report notes that the 10.2% growth in remittances achieved in 2021, that too against the backdrop of the pandemic, owed a lot to the stimulus measures enacted “to underpin faltering high-income economies”, especially in the U.S. and Europe, which helped to support employment levels and maintain or increase incomes of migrant workers, enabling them to send money home.

What are the reasons behind the resilience of India’s inward remittance flows?

The report points to a structural shift in India’s remittance economy, both in terms of the top destination countries, and the nature of the jobs held by migrants. It notes that “remittances have benefitted from a gradual structural shift in Indian migrants’ key destinations from largely low-skilled, informal employment in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to a dominant share of high-skilled jobs in high-income countries such as the U.S., the U.K., and East Asia (Singapore, Japan, Australia, New Zealand).” In fact, between 2016-17 and 2020-21, while the remittances from the U.S., U.K. and Singapore increased from 26% to 36%, the share from five GCC countries dropped from 54% to 28%. In 2020-21, the U.S., with a share of 23%, surpassed Saudi Arabia as India’s top source country for remittances.

With 20% of India’s emigrants in the U.S. and the U.K., “the structural shift in qualifications and destinations has accelerated growth in remittances tied to high-salaried jobs, especially in services,” states the report. This made a big difference during the pandemic, when “Indian migrants in high-income countries worked from home and benefitted from large fiscal stimulus packages” while in the post-pandemic phase, “wage hikes and record-high employment conditions supported remittance growth in the face of high inflation”.

In the GCC countries, Indian migrants benefitted from governments’ direct support measures to keep inflation low.

Finally, the report adds that Indian migrants may also have “taken advantage” of the depreciation of the Indian rupee vis-à-vis the U.S. dollar – it fell by 10% between January and September 2022 – to increase their remittances.

What does the report say about future trends?

The report predicts that growth in remittances will fall to 2% in 2023 as the GDP growth in high-income countries continues to slow, eroding migrants’ wage gains. For South Asia as a whole, the



growth in remittances is expected to fall from 3.5% in 2022 to 0.7% in 2023. In the U.S., higher inflation combined with a slowdown will limit remittance flows, while the GCC countries will also see cooling of remittance outflows following a slowdown. The demand for labour is expected to soften as construction activities for the FIFA World Cup in Qatar have ended. Nonetheless, remittances to India are forecast to grow by 4% next year, “supported by the large share of Indian migrants earning relatively high salaries in the U.S., the U.K. and East Asia”.

Their salaries, the report notes, “may be more resilient than those of lower-wage migrants, for example in the GCC”.

ANCHORING PRICES

The Reserve Bank of India’s latest policy statement has unequivocally acknowledged that price stability must remain the primary focus of monetary policy now when, as Governor Shaktikanta Das admitted, “the CPI price momentum remains high”. Elucidating the rationale behind the Monetary Policy Committee’s decision to raise the benchmark repo rate by 35 basis points to 6.25%, he underlined that the ‘battle against inflation was not over’ regardless of a moderation in its pace. Retail inflation remains above the 6% upper tolerance mark and is projected to surpass and then ease just below that level in the last two quarters of this fiscal year. The MPC retained its full-year CPI inflation projection at 6.7%, but bumped up the forecasts for Q3 and Q4 by 10 basis points each to 6.6% and 5.9%, respectively, acknowledging that inflation expectations are now well adrift of the MPC’s mandated 4% target. Worse, core inflation, or price gains that strip out volatile food and fuel costs, has also stayed stubbornly stuck around the 6% level with price pressures across most of the constituent sub-groups. This is a far from reassuring outlook for price stability, especially when one considers that the resurgent demand across services is likely to trigger price increases when firms begin to pass on higher input costs.

The RBI’s policy panel was, however, far from unanimous in its decisions. While one of the six members voted against raising the policy rate, presumably so as to not dampen the as yet tentative economic recovery, two members dissented over the policy stance remaining ‘focused on the withdrawal of accommodation’. The majority was, however, emphatic that “further calibrated monetary policy action is warranted to keep inflation expectations anchored, break core inflation persistence and contain second round effects”. Anchoring price stability would ultimately serve to ‘strengthen medium-term growth prospects’, they reasoned. After all, as the RBI’s latest Monetary Policy Report observed, ‘second-round effects could keep inflation at elevated levels even beyond 8 quarters’ and it was therefore imperative to make policy interventions to anchor inflation expectations. Governor Das also pointed out that even after the latest increase, the benchmark interest rate still remains very much ‘accommodative’ when adjusted for inflation. The RBI’s own November round of the consumer confidence survey shows that a significant majority of respondents perceive and expect one year ahead a deterioration in price levels, making this the single biggest drag on consumer sentiment. Ultimately, savers and consumers need to regain confidence that prices will remain stable over a medium term to resume saving and buying to help entrench a durable economic recovery.

A SMALL UPTICK

India’s gross Goods and Services Tax (GST) revenues grew almost 11% this November to nearly ₹1.46 lakh crore. While this is only the tenth such occasion since the onset of the GST in July 2017 that revenues have been over ₹1.4 lakh crore, that mark has been consistently topped for nine



months now. The two highest GST monthly receipts so far — over ₹1.67 lakh crore in April and ₹1.51 lakh crore in October — were partly bolstered by taxpayers filing quarterly returns. Discounting periodic spikes in compliance, one can possibly peg the ₹1.4 lakh crore as the new normal baseline for monthly GST revenues hereon. With almost ₹12 lakh crore already in the GST kitty this year, the Government is likely to end up with a not-insignificant surplus over its Budget. This is welcome fiscal headroom, especially since the Centre's subsidy bill on items such as fertilizers and foodgrains has also surpassed the Budget math, and may help the Government stick to its fiscal deficit target. On the flip side, however, November's GST revenues are not an enticing indicator about the state of the broader economy.

The 10.9% overall GST revenue growth in November, reflecting transactions undertaken in October when the major festivals, including Deepavali, occurred — is the slowest uptick recorded since June 2021. November revenues were the lowest in three months and marked a nearly 4% dip from October's kitty. E-way bills generation, broadly indicating outflow of goods from producers to the wholesale and retail supply chains, dropped a steeper 8.6% sequentially, perhaps as factories recorded higher downtimes amid extended holidays. One would have expected festive consumption to spike the GST intake despite the e-way bills decline, as inventories were already built up in anticipation. That effect appears muted and it is quite puzzling that revenues contracted year-on-year in as many as seven States, including Gujarat and Kerala. Growth in inflows from domestic transactions slowed from 18% in October to 8% last month, while revenues from imports of goods rose to 20% in November — a possible sign that the consumption recovery remains uneven, with goods consumed by higher income groups seeing a better rebound. December's post-festival GST collections could yield a clearer picture, both on the sustainability of the headline revenue numbers and the growth trajectory of the economy. The GST Council, meeting this month after another prolonged gap, must expedite long-awaited action on pending issues to bolster compliance, and not lose sight of the larger, currently-deferred plan to rationalise the tax rates with a view to spur broad-based and sustainable consumption growth.

LIC BETS ON ADANI: OVER 2 YEARS, STEADILY INCREASES HOLDING IN ITS GROUP COMPANIES

When mutual funds shy away from Adani Group companies, when their shares are tightly held, one investor finds it attractive: the government-owned Life Insurance Corporation of India.

In just eight quarters since September 2020, LIC has increased its shareholding sharply in four of the seven listed Adani Group companies, and in at least one of them almost six-fold.

Filings of the Adani Group companies to the stock exchanges reviewed by The Indian Express show that the total value of LIC's holdings in these seven companies stood at Rs 74,142 crore as on date. This is 3.9 per cent of the Adani Group's total market capitalisation of Rs 18.98 lakh crore. Of its own equity portfolio, which is about Rs 9.3 lakh crore as on June 30, 2022, the value of LIC's holdings in Adani Group companies at the closing price Thursday, accounts for 7.8 per cent.

How LIC shareholding in Adani Group companies increased between September 2020 and September 2022:

* From less than 1 per cent in flagship Adani Enterprises LIC's stake rose to 4.02 per cent.

* In Adani Total Gas, it jumped to 5.77 per cent from less than 1 per cent.



- * In Adani Transmission, LIC shareholding rose to 3.46 per cent from 2.42 per cent
- * In Adani Green Energy, it has increased to 1.15 per cent from less than 1 per cent.
- * The only exceptions are Adani Ports, where LIC holding is flat at 9.61 per cent, and two other firms Adani Power and Adani Wilmar, in which it is under 1 per cent.

Reflecting this increase in shareholding and stock prices, the worth of LIC's shareholding and its value of LIC's holding in the Adani Group companies has multiplied 10 times since September 2020: From just Rs 7,304 crore, or 1.24 per cent of the insurer's equity AUM (assets under management), to Rs 74,142 crore, or 7.8 per cent now.

This stands out for the following reasons:

- * In the insurance sector, LIC is the overwhelming No. 1 when it comes to investing in Adani Group companies. As on December 1, 2022, its Rs 74,142 crore is 98.9 per cent of the entire insurance industry's investment in the group.
- * LIC's investment is more than five times the value of the holdings of all equity mutual funds in Adani Group companies. As of October 31, 2022, just Rs 15,701 crore, or barely 1 per cent, of equity funds' total assets of Rs 15.22 lakh crore was invested in Adani Group companies – a level, in shareholding terms, that has held since September 2020.
- * Over the last two years, as LIC bought shares in Adani Group companies, the group's market capitalisation also rose – by almost seven times to Rs 18.98 lakh crore now from Rs 2.78 lakh crore on September 30, 2020. The benchmark Sensex increased 1.66 times to close at 63,284 points Thursday.

The Indian Express sent an email to the LIC spokesperson seeking response on the insurer's significant purchases of Adani stocks. No response was received. Incidentally, LIC holds 3.98 per cent of the aggregate market capitalisation of Tata Group companies (Rs 21.91 lakh crore), and mutual funds as a whole, hold 4.9 per cent.

Similarly, while LIC holds 6.45 per cent stake in RIL (market cap of Rs 18.42 lakh crore), mutual funds hold 5.68 per cent. The Tata Group companies and the Adani Group are the top two in terms of market capitalisation followed by RIL.

WHY HAS THE RESERVE BANK OF INDIA INTRODUCED AN E-RUPEE?

The story so far:

The Reserve Bank of India this week launched the digital rupee on a pilot basis. The digital currency will be offered by a select group of public and private banks in a few major cities initially, which can be used for both person-to-person and person-to-merchant transactions.

What is the digital rupee?

The digital rupee, or the e-rupee, is a central bank digital currency issued by the RBI. It is similar to the physical cash that you hold in your wallet except that the e-rupee is held electronically in a digital wallet overseen by the RBI. The digital rupee is recognised as legal tender by the RBI, and thus has to be accepted by everyone in the country as a medium of exchange. It is, however, different from deposits that you hold in a bank. Unlike deposits which are paid interest, the digital



rupees in your wallet are not paid any interest by the central bank. Deposits held in banks can be converted into digital rupees and vice-versa.

Is there a need for the digital rupee?

The RBI believes that the digital rupee will make the rupee more attractive as a currency to users when compared to cryptocurrencies. Cryptocurrencies have been viewed by many investors as alternatives to fiat currencies which progressively lose value over time due to debasement by central banks. Since such a trend could threaten their sovereignty, central banks have been trying to come up with their own digital currencies. The RBI also believes that the digital rupee will be easier and more economical to produce when compared to physical cash notes. More importantly, transactions carried out using digital rupees, in contrast to physical transactions, are more easily traceable by authorities.

What are the risks?

The introduction of central bank digital currencies internationally has worried many who believe that it could disrupt the banking system. When interest rates offered by banks are low, people may be more prone to converting their bank deposits into digital currencies since they would not lose out much in the way of interest income by making the shift. Such an event could cause the cash holdings of banks to drop and hinder banks' capacity to create loans. It should be noted that the ability of banks to create loans is influenced by the amount of cash they hold in their vaults. This is because the cash position of a bank determines its ability to expand its loan book while keeping the risk of a bank run under control. The digital rupee could also play a crucial role in India's transition towards a cashless society. A rise in the use of the digital rupee could eventually free banks from having to maintain sufficient cash deposits before they expand their loan books. This could happen if digital rupee deposits turn out to be considered equivalent to other forms of virtual money such as deposits created initially as loans by banks. In such case, banks will be freed from the risk of bank runs which have traditionally served as a check on the unrestrained expansion of loan books.

What do the critics say?

Critics are not so enthused by the idea of a digital rupee. They point to the power that digital currencies give central banks to supervise economic activity, and believe that this could act as a deterrent to economic growth if legitimate economic activities are deemed illegal by governments. The future of central bank digital currencies as an alternative to private cryptocurrencies may also be overblown. Private cryptocurrencies have found demand among certain investors not simply because they are digital. Rather, they are thought to be better stores of value, exhibiting more stable purchasing power than fiat currencies.

WHY UPI MARKET CAP DEADLINE HAS BEEN EXTENDED BY 2 YEARS, WHO BENEFITS FROM IT

The National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) has extended by two years the deadline to comply with its 30 per cent cap on the market share of platforms operating on the Unified Payments Interface (UPI). The move is being seen as a major relief for Walmart and Flipkart-backed PhonePe and Google Pay, which currently command a majority of the UPI market share.



Why did NPCI extend its UPI market cap deadline?

NPCI had initially planned to enforce the market cap rules in January 2021, saying it would limit any single payments app from processing more than 30 per cent of UPI transactions in a month, but has postponed the timeline several times since.

In a circular issued Friday, it extended the deadline yet again until December 31, 2024, “taking into account the present usage and future potential of UPI and other relevant factors”.

“In view of the significant potential of digital payments and the need for multi-fold penetration from its current state, it is imperative that other existing and new players (banks and non-banks) shall scale-up their consumer outreach for the growth of UPI and achieve overall market equilibrium,” read the NPCI circular.

How could it impact UPI platforms?

Industry analysts believe the move comes as a shot in the arm for PhonePe and Google Pay, which collectively control more than 80 per cent of UPI’s market share. For platforms like Paytm and WhatsApp Pay, however, the extension could be seen as a natural loss. As of October, Paytm had a market share of 15 per cent on UPI. In comparison, PhonePe had a 47 per cent market share, while GooglePay accounted for around 35 per cent.

“We are obviously relieved to see the UPI market share cap get extended by two years. At PhonePe’s scale, to reduce our UPI market share to 30 per cent we would be forced to deny UPI payment services to crores of Indians, and that would be totally detrimental to the incredible Indian digital payments growth story,” Sameer Nigam, CEO and founder of PhonePe said in a statement.

He added that the new regulatory circular “acknowledges that the burden is on other existing and new UPI players to invest more time, effort and money to increase their own UPI market share.”

How is UPI performing?

After touching a new high of Rs 12.11 lakh crore in October, the UPI transaction value for the month of November came in at Rs 11.90 lakh crore. However, the transaction count at 7.3 billion in October remained the same in November.

According to the Reserve Bank of India’s Payment Vision 2025, UPI is expected to register an average annualised growth of 50 per cent.

CAR SALES HIGH FOR 6 MONTHS IN A ROW. WILL THIS DEMAND SUSTAIN?

The passenger vehicles segment, comprising cars, SUVs and vans, closed November with sales of more than 310,000 units, making it the sixth straight month with sales crossing the 300,000 mark. December is expected to be yet another month of high sales as the industry works to improve deliveries and reduce the waiting period for cars.

With buoyant November sales, the PV segment of the auto sector is headed towards achieving a record sales of 3.8 million units in 2022 — likely to be best-ever sales in a calendar year. The previous record was 3.38 million clocked in 2018.



What is driving the auto industry's numbers?

The resumption of chip supplies to near normal levels has boosted production, while strong retail demand and new model launches in the SUV segment have helped in the strong growth. Incidentally, there is also a dichotomy of sorts, with sales at the middle and upper end of the price segments picking up, even as sales at the entry level continue to be sluggish. Also, the industry is sitting on estimated pending bookings of around 750,000 units, which is equivalent to more than two months of dealer-end deliveries.

Will demand sustain?

The pending order booking and new launches are set to sustain demand for sometime, but sales of entry-level cars need to pick up for demand to continue for a longer duration of time. Considering the macro-economic and geopolitical situation, it does not seem to be picking up anytime soon – a concern that Maruti Suzuki Ltd has raised.

ESIC TO INVEST SURPLUS FUNDS IN STOCK MARKET THROUGH ETFs

Government's social security body Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) on Sunday approved a proposal to invest its surplus funds in the stock market through exchange traded funds (ETFs).

The decision was taken in the 189th meeting of ESIC held on Sunday at ESIC headquarters under the chairmanship of Union labour minister Bhupender Yadav, a labour ministry statement said.

Due to relatively low returns on investments in various debt instruments coupled with the need to diversify investment, ESIC gave its approval for investments of surplus funds in equities restricted to ETFs. The investment will start with 5 per cent of surplus funds and will increase up to 15 per cent, based on the review of the investment after two quarters, it stated. The investment will be confined to Exchanged Traded Funds on Nifty and Sensex. It will be managed by fund managers of asset management companies (AMs), the statement said. Equity investments will be monitored by the existing custodian, external concurrent auditor and consultant looking after the debt investments, it said.

Acknowledging the increase in the number of insured workers and their dependents coming under the ambit of ESI Scheme, Yadav directed ESIC to focus on strengthening the infrastructure. He further informed that the 'Nirman Se Shakti' initiative has been started to strengthen and modernise the infrastructure of ESIC hospitals and dispensaries in a phased manner. During the meeting, Rameswar Teli, Minister of State for Labour and Employment, informed that the latest technologies are proposed to be adopted by ESIC for construction and monitoring of projects using drones and an online real-time dashboard.

In order to improve the healthcare benefits and service delivery mechanism and strengthen the infrastructure of ESIC towards managing the increasing number of insured workers, ESIC approved the proposals for setting up a new 100-bed ESIC hospital at Shyamlibazar in Agartala, Tripura and a 100-bed hospital at Idukki, Kerala. The hospitals at Agartala and Idukki will cater to the medical needs of around 60,000 beneficiaries each.

Two winners of the architectural design competition for a proposed 500-bed ESIC hospital at Manesar were felicitated by the Union labour minister with a prize money of ₹2 lakh and ₹1.5 lakh, respectively.



PENSION BILL EXCEEDED SALARY & WAGES SPENDING FOR CENTRE, 3 STATES: CAG DATA

Expenditure on pension has emerged as one of the major components of the Committed Expenditure of the Centre and states in recent years. In fact, it was higher than the 'salary and wages' expenditure of the Centre and three states – including Gujarat – during 2019-20, according to official data.

Incidentally, the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) has figured as a prominent poll promise in the Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat Assembly elections, even triggering debates beyond the political arena. Two Congress-ruled states – Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh – have already decided to implement the OPS, while the party has promised to restore it in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh if it comes to power.

According to data available with the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG), the Centre's total Committed Expenditure was Rs 9.78 lakh crore during 2019-20, which included an expenditure of Rs 1.39 lakh crore on 'salary and wages', Rs 1.83 lakh crore on pensions and Rs 6.55 lakh crore on 'interest payments and servicing of debts'.

The Centre's total Committed Expenditure accounted for 37 per cent of its total revenue expenditure of Rs 26.15 lakh crore in 2019-20.

"The Committed Expenditure in respect of the Union Government consists of 67 per cent on Interest Payment and Servicing of Debt. The remaining 19 per cent and 14 per cent expenditure constituted the expenditure on Pensions and Salary and Wages respectively. It is apparent that expenditure on pensions is more than the expenditure on salaries and wages," reads the CAG report titled 'Union and State Finances at A Glance' for 2019-20.

According to the report, the Centre's pension bill was 132 per cent of its expenditure on salary and wages in 2019-20, the last year for which comparable data for the Centre and states is available. This was just ahead of the Covid-19 outbreak in India in 2020.

The pension bill also exceeded the salary and wages expenditure across three states – Gujarat, Karnataka and West Bengal – in 2019-20.

In Gujarat, the pension bill (Rs 17,663 crore) was 159 per cent of the expenditure on salary and wages (Rs 11,126 crore). Similarly, Karnataka's pension bill (Rs 18,404 crore) was 126 per cent of the state's expenditure on salary and wages (Rs 14,573 crore). And for West Bengal, the pension bill (Rs 17,462 crore) was 103 per cent of the expenditure on salary and wages (Rs 16,915 crore).

The data shows that the combined pension bill of 30 states and Union Territories, for which comparable data is available, stood at Rs 3.38 lakh crore in 2019-20, which was 61.82 per cent of their combined expenditure (Rs 5.47 lakh crore) on salary and wages. Across five states – Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Odisha – the pension bill accounted for over two-third of their expenditure on salary and wages.

The expenditure on pension is one of the key components of the government's Committed Expenditure. The other two are the expenditure on salary and wages and interest payment and servicing of debt. If the Committed Expenditure is higher, it means that the government has lesser flexibility to determine the purpose for which revenue expenditure is to be incurred.



During 2019-20, the total Committed Expenditure of all states stood at Rs 12.38 lakh crore (Rs 5.47 lakh crore on salary and wages; Rs 3.52 lakh crore on interest payment and servicing of debt; and Rs 3.38 lakh crore on pension), which was almost half – 45 per cent – of their combined revenue expenditure of Rs 27.41 lakh crore.

The expenditure on pension in Rajasthan – where the Congress-led state government has decided to implement OPS – was Rs 20,761 crore in 2019-20. This is almost 42.7 per cent of its expenditure (Rs 48,577 crore) on salary and wages. Similarly, Chhattisgarh's pension bill (Rs 6,638 crore) was 30.62 per cent of the state's salary and wage expenditure (Rs 21,672 crore).

However, in Himachal Pradesh, where elections recently concluded, the pension bill (Rs 5,490 crore) was 47 per cent of the salary and wage expenditure of Rs 11,477 crore.

The latest edition of the Handbook of Statistics on Indian states, released by Reserve Bank of India on November 19, shows that the combined pension expenditure of all states and UTs has doubled to Rs 3.45 lakh crore in 2019-20 from Rs 1.63 lakh crore in 2013-14. In fact, the pension expenditure further increased to Rs 3.68 lakh crore in 2020-21 (revised estimate) and was budgeted at a higher at Rs 4.06 lakh crore for 2021-22 (BE).

THE LINGERING CRISIS OF LABOUR POST-PANDEMIC

The story so far:

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) recently released two reports that gave an indication of the global employment scenario post-pandemic. The 'Global Wage Report 2022-2023: The Impact of inflation and COVID-19 on wages and purchasing power' discuss the twin crises, inflation and economic slowdown, which created a "striking fall" in real monthly wages around the globe. The report blames the war in Ukraine and the global energy crisis for this situation. Another report, the 'Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2022: Rethinking sectoral strategies for a human-centred future of work' stated that the Asia-Pacific region lost about 22 million jobs in 2022. ILO Director-General Gilbert F. Houngbo said the decrease in wages is placing millions of workers in a dire situation. "Income inequality and poverty will rise if the purchasing power of the lowest paid is not maintained," he warned.

What does the data show?

The ILO report on wages looked at the real and nominal wages of employees. The word "wage", was defined as the total gross remuneration including regular bonuses received by employees during a specified period for time (monthly for the report) worked as well as for time not worked, such as paid annual leave and paid sick leave. The nominal wage data shows the adjusted figures after accounting for consumer price inflation while real wage growth refers to the year-on-year change in real average monthly wages of all employees. "In each edition of the Global Wage Report the objective is to collect wage data from as many countries and territories (about 190) which are then grouped into five separate regions," the ILO said on the methodology of its report.

In India, the nominal wages rose to ₹17,017 per month in 2021 from ₹4,398 in 2006. The data was taken from the Government of India's Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. But when inflation is factored in, the real wage growth in India plunged to -0.2% in 2021 from 9.3% in 2006. In China, the growth decreased from 5.6% in 2019 to 2% in 2022. In Pakistan, the growth is -3.8%. Figures of Sri Lanka were not available. The negative growth in India started after the pandemic.



The report said the increasing cost of living has the greatest impact on lower-income earners and their households as they have to spend most of their disposable income on essential goods and services, which generally experience greater price increases than non-essential items.

Is inequality rising?

At the Asia-Pacific level, only the jobs in high-skill occupations saw a recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, which is true across all subregions. The ILO said it is raising concerns about increased inequality. While there is an employment gain of 1.6% among high-skill workers between 2019 and 2021, there is no such substantial gain among low-to-medium-skill workers. Among the G-20 countries, the report noted a significant gap in the average level of real wages between advanced G-20 countries and emerging G-20 countries such as India. It is on the level of about \$4,000 per month in advanced economies and about \$1,800 per month in emerging economies.

What are the ILO's remedies?

The report suggests a set of policy options and responses to the cost-of-living crisis. Citing studies, the report said that 75 to 95 million people were pushed into extreme poverty during COVID-19. It said the bargaining process for future nominal wage adjustments should embrace a sufficiently large but prudent price expectation. "This could contribute to safeguarding the standard of living of households — particularly low-income households — against unexpected future inflation hikes, while avoiding an undesirable wage-inflation spiral," it said. The report said that there is a need to strengthen labour market institutions and wage policies. The ILO states that the creation of decent formal wage employment is a prerequisite for a more equitable distribution of wages and income, and is a key contributor to equitable and sustainable wage growth. It wants governments to focus on gender pay gap as when women leave the labour market, they are less likely to return than men. Most importantly, the report says that a multilateral approach is the key to solving the crises around us. There is an urgent need to address the negative effects of climate change; increasing inequalities; the poverty, discrimination, violence and exclusion endured by millions of people, including the discrimination that women and girls continue to suffer in many parts of the world; the lack of vaccines and access to adequate sanitation and essential healthcare for all; and the growing digital divide between poor and wealthier countries.

HOW IS TRAI PROPOSING TO HELP CALLERS IDENTIFY SPAMMERS?

The story so far:

On November 29, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) floated a consultation paper seeking comments about the potential introduction of a Calling Name Presentation (CNAP) feature. The feature would provide an individual with information about the calling party (similar to 'Truecaller' and 'Bharat Caller ID & Anti-Spam'). The idea is to ensure that telephone subscribers are able to make an informed choice about incoming calls and curb harassment by unknown or spam callers. Comments for the consultation paper are invited until December 27.

What is its purpose?

Existing technologies present the number of the calling entity on the potential receiver's handset. Since subscribers are not given the name and identity of the caller, they sometimes choose not to answer them believing it could be unsolicited commercial communication from unregistered telemarketers. This could lead to even genuine calls being unanswered.



Additionally, there have been rising concerns about robocalls (calls made automatically using IT-enabled systems with a pre-recorded voice), spam calls and fraudulent calls. Truecaller's '2021 Global Spam and Scam Report' revealed that the average number of spam calls per user each month in India, stood at 16.8 while total spam volumes received by its users were in excess of 3.8 billion calls in October alone. Smartphone users, at present, rely on in-built features or third-party apps to mark and tackle spam calls. However, as per the regulator, their reliance on crowd-sourced data may not be reliable.

Are there concerns about privacy?

Isha Suri, a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Internet and Society (CIS), opines that, notwithstanding the utility, it is not particularly clear how the CNAP mechanism would balance the caller's right to remain anonymous, an essential component of the right to privacy. To put it into perspective, an individual may opt to remain anonymous for multiple reasons, for example, whistle-blowers or employees being harassed. She observed that because customers accord consent only to their operators when completing the prerequisite KYC formalities for a connection, it would be ideal that a framework for the feature is developed along those lines rather than asking a centralised database operated by a third party to host and share data (one of the proposed models). "You have to see it in parallel with The Digital Personal Data Protection Bill (2022) which has a clause on deemed consent lacking adequate safeguards including sharing of data with third parties," Ms. Suri said.

Would the provisions be enough?

Previously, telemarketers were required to be registered as promotional numbers, making it easier to identify and block them. However, CEO and Founder of LocalCircles Sachin Taparia told The Hindu, that marketers have started deploying people who are not necessarily part of the entity's set-up, but rather "at-home workers" to whom work is being outsourced. They are given SIM cards not registered to a particular company, but rather to the individual themselves. Mr. Taparia says, "Just by showing the identity would not mean much, once the system (to identify and mark spammers) gets built and hundreds of people are able to utilise the system, only then would the system have a meaningful impact." Ms. Suri adds that the government must also invest in digital literacy, skilling citizens to navigate and use the tech better, ensuring they do not share their data indiscriminately and are informed about dangers such as financial frauds and spoofing.

WHAT IS WET LEASING OF AIRCRAFT, FOR WHICH GOVT HAS RELAXED RULES

In efforts to boost international air traffic, the civil aviation ministry has allowed Indian airlines to take wide-body planes on wet lease for up to one year.

A senior ministry official said on Sunday that the rules had been relaxed, allowing the wet leasing for a year as opposed to the six months permitted so far.

What is wet leasing?

Wet leasing means renting the plane along with operating crew and engineers, while dry leasing refers to taking only the aircraft on rent.

OAG, a global travel data provider, says on its website, "The technical term for wet leasing is ACMI which stands for aircraft, crew, maintenance and insurance. These are the aspects of the operation that the wet lease airline takes care of, while the airline client will still be responsible for paying



for direct operating costs such catering and fuel as well as fees such as airport fees, ground handling charges and navigation fees.”

Operations of an aircraft on wet lease is not encouraged by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) as the crew is often not approved by Indian authorities. Also, wet leasing is generally a short-term arrangement, as it is more expensive than a dry lease.

Why limit extended

The country’s largest airline, IndiGo, has announced it plans to wet lease some aircraft. “We have plans for inducting B777 aircraft on wet/damp lease basis during the current winter schedule,” the airline said.

The relaxation will be available to all Indian carriers and will be granted based on international destinations they wish to operate to.

With Covid-related restrictions lifting, international travel is picking up, and the wet leasing will allow airlines add more flights at a short notice. Wide-body planes can accommodate more passengers and fly longer flights, thereby, boosting revenue.

Also, as most airlines acquire more aircraft to scale up operations, there is a shortage of planes, and wet leasing is sometimes the only solution available

Why airlines lease aircraft

A lot of planes used by airlines in India are not owned but leased. Airlines and aircraft operators prefer leasing planes in order to avoid massive lump sum payments that buying them would entail, and to quickly increase capacity, perhaps temporarily, on certain routes or sectors.

DIGIYATRA: THESE AIRPORTS IN INDIA NOW HAVE FACIAL RECOGNITION TECHNOLOGY. HOW DOES IT WORK?

Starting Thursday, the government has introduced paperless entry at select airports to make air travel hassle-free. Under this initiative, airports will use a facial recognition software called ‘DigiYatra’ for entry. This means, passengers won’t need to carry their ID card and boarding pass.

In the first phase, the initiative will be launched at seven airports, starting with three — Delhi, Bengaluru, and Varanasi, followed by four airports namely Hyderabad, Kolkata, Pune, and Vijayawada by March 2023. Subsequently, the technology will be implemented across the country.

The Delhi International Airport Ltd (DIAL), run by GMR, had in August announced the soft launch of the Centre’s DigiYatra initiative, rolling out the beta version of its app for Android platforms. The Delhi airport has the required infrastructure set up at the airport’s Terminal 3, and other airports are also setting up the requisite infra for it.

What is DigiYatra and how will it work?

DigiYatra envisages that travellers pass through various checkpoints at the airport through paperless and contactless processing, using facial features to establish their identity, which would be linked to the boarding pass. With this technology, the entry of passengers would be automatically processed based on the facial recognition system at all checkpoints – including entry into the airport, security check areas, aircraft boarding, etc.



Among airlines, passengers travelling Air India, Vistara and IndiGo on their domestic network can avail this facility at the three airports. SpiceJet, GoFirst and Akasa Air are yet to offer the DigiYatra facility.

How can people avail the DigiYatra facility?

For availing the service, a passenger has to register their details on the DigiYatra app using Aadhaar-based validation and a self image capture. In the next step, the boarding pass has to be scanned, and the credentials are shared with airport authorities.

At the airport e-gate, the passenger has to first scan the bar coded boarding pass and the facial recognition system installed at the e-gate will validate the passenger's identity and travel document. Once this process is done, the passenger can enter the airport through the e-gate.

The passenger will have to follow the normal procedure to clear security and board the aircraft.

Facial recognition technology is beneficial as it makes flying more convenient and reduces congestion at airports. The facial recognition system at various airports across the globe, including Dubai, Singapore, Atlanta and Narita (Japan), have helped bring in efficiency.

THE WORKINGS OF CHATGPT, THE LATEST NATURAL LANGUAGE PROCESSING TOOL

On November 30, a tool called ChatGPT was released on the internet. It created quite a stir especially among the artificial intelligence (AI) crowd because this tool 'knew' every topic under the sun; it could answer questions and carry on a conversation. Experts in the AI community call this an epochal moment, stressing how powerful ChatGPT is. This tool interacts with humans in natural language and is impressive because aside from answering general queries, it has many other functions. ChatGPT has been developed by OpenAI, which is a research institute and company that focuses on developing artificial intelligence technology in a responsible and safe way. It was founded in 2015 by a group of entrepreneurs and researchers, including Elon Musk, Sam Altman, and Greg Brockman.

Language models

ChatGPT is much more than a chat bot. For example, you can ask it to write a program or even a simple software application. It can also do creative tasks such as writing a story. It can explain scientific concepts and answer any question that needs factual answers. ChatGPT is what is called a Language Model, rather than a chat bot. A language model is a software that prints out a sequence of words as output that are related to some words given as input with appropriate semantic relation; in practical terms, it means that it can perform tasks like answering questions and carrying on a conversation with humans. It is often used in natural language processing (NLP) applications, such as speech recognition, automatic translation, and text generation.

It is also a neural network. A neural network can be thought of as a large network of computers that can fine tune its output of words based on the feedback given to it during stages of training; this training process and the technology together are called Reinforcement Learning. The input data is typically huge corpus of text. All these technologies are part of the artificial intelligence (also called Machine Learning) that has been witnessing tremendous advancements.

While one tries to understand how a language model works, we should also look at "word embedding" which represents words as a matrix of numbers that can be manipulated inside



computers. When a neural network processes these numbers, it can differentiate words according to different contexts: for example, when “shoot” appears with “gun” the neural network knows that the words that will follow may mostly be “bullets” or “victims”, whereas when “shoot” appears with “camera”, the neural network knows that the following words may be “picture” or “pixel”. With a further refining technique called “Transformer”, a neural network can accurately “understand” the context of a sentence or a paragraph. This “comprehension” can be used for multiple purposes like answering a question, summarising a paragraph or an article, translating documents and so on.

The conversational AI

The accuracy of ChatGPT or any language model can be measured using standard techniques. One such technique is “Recall-Oriented Understudy for Gisting Evaluation” or the ROUGE metric which compares ChatGPT’s output of content against a standard expected content and measures the overlap as success percentage. For language models like GPT that are also used in translation, another metric called the BLEU metric (Bilingual Evaluation Under Study) is employed; this metric compares overlap in translated content with a standard translation.

In addition to the conversational nature of the tool, the creative generating capability is very appealing. ChatGPT can become a powerful pedagogy tool on any topic to anyone, because we can instruct it to “explain it to me like I am a six year old”. It can explain in simple terms anything from philosophy to cooking recipes, including new recipes of its own. If you are in mood for some fun, you can ask ChatGPT to narrate a new story to you!

Is ChatGPT the most powerful NLP tool? For conversational purposes, the answer is yes. However, it may not be equally powerful in specialised contexts. For example, if a doctor needs an automatic conversational assistant for medical queries, the neural networks behind ChatGPT need to have been trained on specialised data. Considering that ChatGPT can write programs, it should be possible to make it knowledgeable on any specialised topic eventually. For general purposes, ChatGPT can be considered the most powerful for now. (The tool can be accessed by anyone from this site, <https://chat.openai.com/chat>)

DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

RED PLANET DAY: THE MANY MISSIONS THAT BROUGHT HUMANS CLOSER TO MARS

Commemorating the day one of the most significant space missions to Mars was launched, November 28 is marked as Red Planet Day. On this day in 1964, the United States launched the space probe Mariner 4 on a course towards Mars, which it flew past in July 1965, sending back pictures of the red planet.

This was the first time that a spacecraft undertook the first flyby of the red planet, becoming the first-ever spacecraft to take close-up photographs of another planet. Subsequently, considerable interest has been sparked around Mars, and missions have been launched, to the point that at present, the idea of settling a colony of humans on Mars (as suggested enthusiastically by billionaire Elon Musk) has also been put forth.

Here's a brief look at how Mars became prominent in the popular imagination, aided by crucial space missions that helped advance knowledge about it.

In one of the earliest known cases of a fascination with the planet, NASA's website notes how in the late 19th century, Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli claimed to have observed linear patterns on the surface of the planet that he called canali. This was mistranslated into English as canals, leading some to believe canals were built by intelligent beings on Mars — an early instance of Mars being thought to have life, similar to Earth.

Although that idea fell out of favour among scientists by the early 20th century, it did permeate into science fiction as well as popular culture, says NASA, helped by the fact that Mars was at a similar distance from the sun as the earth was and thus, shared certain structural characteristics.

1964: Mariner 4

After an eight-month voyage to Mars, the Mariner 4 helped humans see images showing lunar-type impact craters, some of them touched with frost. A television camera onboard took 22 pictures, covering about 1% of the planet. These photos were transmitted to Earth in four days.

“Although originally not expected to survive much past the Mars flyby encounter, Mariner 4 lasts about three years in solar orbit, continuing long-term studies of the solar wind environment and making coordinated measurements with Mariner 5,” according to the NASA website.

The photographs also revealed a cratered surface resembling the Moon, although because of their limited range, they failed to cover the more geologically diverse features that we know about now. “All in all, these findings dashed many scientists' expectations of Mars as a place hospitable to life,” NASA said.

Viking missions of the 1970s and the 1980s

The Viking missions in the mid-seventies carried out the first chemical analysis of Martian soil, as well as four biology experiments to detect biological activity, wrote Dr Amitabha Ghosh, a NASA Planetary Scientist based in Washington DC, in The Indian Express.

In the early 1980s, scientists hypothesised, based on mineralogic composition and rock texture, that certain meteorites might have a source region in Mars. In 1984, a study showed that the



isotopic composition of rare gases (Xenon, Krypton, Neon and Argon) matched the isotopic ratios of the Martian atmosphere measured by the Viking spacecraft. This discovery provided a way for geochemists to study Martian samples – and provided a huge boost to our understanding of the geochemical evolution of Mars.

Odyssey, 2001 and water on Mars

In 2001, the Gamma Ray Spectrometer on board the Mars Odyssey spacecraft detected a fascinating hydrogen signature that seemed to indicate the presence of water ice. But there was ambiguity – this was because hydrogen can be part of many other compounds as well.

NASA's Phoenix landed on the Martian North Pole in May 2008, and survived for about 150 days. The robotic arms of Phoenix scooped soil and ice from the surface, heated the material in eight ovens, and measured the composition of the gases with a mass spectrometer. The Phoenix mission established conclusively that the initial discovery of hydrogen by Mars Odyssey in 2002 was indeed water ice.

Beyond the West

After the Cold War, which saw intense competition between the USSR and the US in terms of deepening their forays into space, other countries also launched their explorations.

NASA has a lander (Mars Insight), a rover (Curiosity), and three orbiters (Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter, Mars Odyssey, MAVEN); India has an orbiter (Mangalyaan-1); the EU has 2 orbiters (Mars Express and ExoMars Trace Gas Orbiter); and China and UAE will have an orbiter each (Hope and Tianwen-1 respectively).

The UAE mission will study the Martian atmosphere, and will seek to address the billion-dollar question of how and why Mars lost its atmosphere. India's Mars Orbiter Mission — a technology demonstration venture — carried five scientific payloads (total 15 kg) collecting data on surface geology, morphology, atmospheric processes, surface temperature and atmospheric escape process.

ISRO INKS MOU TO ESTABLISH SPACETECH INNOVATION NETWORK

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has signed an MoU with Social Alpha, a multistage innovation curation and venture development platform for science and technology start-ups, to launch SpaceTech Innovation Network (SpIN).

SpIN is India's first dedicated platform for innovation, curation, and venture development for the burgeoning space entrepreneurial ecosystem. The space agency said that the tie-up is one-of-a-kind public-private collaboration for start-ups and SMEs in the space industry.

“This novel partnership is a significant step forward in providing further stimulus to India's recent space reform policies and will work towards identifying and unleashing the market potential of the most promising space tech innovators and entrepreneurs in India,” the space agency said. It added that SpIN will primarily focus on facilitating space tech entrepreneurs in three distinct innovation categories: Geospatial Technologies and Downstream Applications; Enabling Technologies for Space & Mobility; and Aerospace Materials, Sensors, and Avionics.



TWITTER FILES EXPLAINED: WHAT ARE THEY, AND WHAT TO MAKE OF THEM

Twitter's new owner Elon Musk heralded the release of exclusive emails that show some of the internal discussions at the social media company over a controversial decision, taken in 2020 before the US Presidential elections, to censor a story by the tabloid, New York Post, about the information it had obtained from a laptop purportedly owned by Hunter Biden, son of US President Joe Biden.

The revelations, dubbed the "Twitter Files", were billed as a bombshell. "This will be awesome," Musk had tweeted, teasing the announcement with a popcorn emoji. The details were later shared by Substack writer Matt Taibbi in a tweet thread who said he had to "agree to some conditions" to obtain the emails.

Here is the lowdown on the revelations and how to make sense of them.

What are the 'Twitter Files'?

The 'files' released as part of screenshots by Taibbi on Saturday claim to detail the decisions that were taken within Twitter in 2020 when it made the decision to censor a story published by the tabloid, which contained unverified claims about Hunter Biden's business activities in Ukraine. At the time, Twitter had said that it censored the story because it violated its "hacked materials" policy.

In essence, the revelations appear to show that Twitter independently decided to limit the spread of the article, without any political party or intelligence agency exerting any kind of control over the company. The only input from a sitting politician that Taibbi noted was from Silicon Valley Rep. Ro Khanna, who told the company that they should distribute the story, regardless of the potential consequences for his party.

While Taibbi did not reveal how he obtained the internal communications of Twitter – even as Musk himself was promoting the thread on his personal handle – he noted that the data he had accessed showed the "extraordinary steps" Twitter took "to suppress the story."

The key takeaway from Taibbi's revelation is that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) played no part in getting the story censored, as had been previously claimed by conservative commentators. Another noteworthy thing is that requests to delete content from Twitter were routinely made to the company from across the political aisle.

What was the Hunter Biden story Twitter had allegedly censored?

In October 2020, three weeks before the 2020 US Presidential election, the New York Post published an exclusive story: "Biden's Secret Emails: Ukrainian exec thanked Hunter Biden for 'opportunity to meet' veep dad". The story purported to report the contents of a laptop brought to the tabloid by the owner of a computer repair shop, who said it had belonged to and been abandoned by, President Biden's second son, Hunter Biden. At the time Biden was the Democratic nominee for the upcoming Presidential polls.

Emails and files found on the laptop purportedly revealed how Hunter Biden had peddled influence with Ukrainian businessmen, the Post claimed – and also included "a raunchy, 12-minute video" showing intimate moments of Hunter Biden.



After the story was published, Twitter barred anyone from tweeting a link to it or sending it via direct message, labelling it “hacked material.” The company also suspended the Post’s account for multiple days, preventing it from tweeting further.

Jack Dorsey had later tweeted that blocking the links without providing more context was “unacceptable,” and Twitter changed its policies shortly after restricting the Biden story, saying it would “label tweets to provide context instead of blocking links” to stories.

What to make of the ‘Twitter Files’?

While Musk promised that the revelations would be a “bombshell”, Taibbi’s Twitter thread failed to create the impact he would have hoped for. That is mostly because of one major reason: while the screenshots show how the company decided to suppress the Post’s story, it sheds no light on why that decision was taken. It reaffirms a number of things that had already been known publicly — like who takes content moderation decisions at the company — and at the same time fails to shed light on questions about whether those decisions were taken because of any political influence or control. The revelations have also been criticised for making public the personal details of people involved in the process like their email addresses. “Publicly posting the names and identities of front-line employees involved in content moderation puts them in harm’s way and is a fundamentally unacceptable thing to do,” former Twitter Trust and Safety chief Yoel Roth, who was among the employees named in the tweets, said in a social media post.

MONEY TO FIGHT CLIMATE CHANGE: ARE TAXES THE ANSWER?

As the world struggles to check rising global temperatures, it is getting increasingly clear that the single-biggest challenge in putting up an effective response to climate change is the failure to mobilise adequate financial resources. The money currently being channelised for climate action is barely one to 10per cent of the estimated requirements.

At the recently concluded climate change meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, countries agreed that a complete transformation of the international financial system was needed to significantly scale up resources for climate action. Accordingly, the meeting called upon the multilateral development banks, lending agencies and other financial institutions to align their priorities with the global climate goals, and redesign their structures and processes.

Enormity of the problem

The final Sharm el-Sheikh agreement includes an estimate of the scale of money required. It says that the global transition to a low-carbon economy would likely require about US\$ 4-6 trillion every year till 2050. About US\$ 4 trillion would need to be invested annually in the renewable energy sector till 2030 if the net-zero emissions targets were to be achieved. The cumulative requirement of the developing countries, just for implementing their climate action plans, was about US\$ 6 trillion between now and 2030.

Of course, these are not mutually exclusive requirements. There would be considerable overlap. But even US\$ 5-7 trillion every year is a huge ask. It means that at least five per cent of the global GDP would need to be directed into climate action every year. It also shows how quickly the cost of inaction has been rising. Just a few years ago, the estimated requirements ranged between 1 and 1.5 per cent of global GDP.



The current requirements are, therefore, about two orders of magnitude higher than the money being made available. The US\$ 100 billion amount that the developed countries have promised to mobilise every year represents practically the entire money in play right now. And even this US\$ 100 billion has not yet been fully realised. Developed countries say they would reach this target by 2023. As of now, all that is flowing in is about US\$ 50-80 billion every year.

Overhaul of financial system

There are two main dimensions to the problem of climate finance — availability and access. The transformation of the financial sector needs to address both of these.

One straightforward way of ensuring funds is for the developed countries to increase their contributions. But even if this happens, it will likely result in only a marginal increase in the overall pie. The more significant jump would come from businesses and corporations investing money into green projects.

In social or health sector projects, every dollar of public money invested is expected to mobilise about four dollars in private money. In climate finance thus far, private investments have lagged behind public money. Barely 30 per cent of current financial flows are coming from private sources. There is a clear opportunity here.

But businesses and corporations do not invest unless they are reasonably sure of healthy returns. It is here that the international financial institutions can engage with governments, central banks, commercial banks and other financial players operating at national or regional levels to create the right environment for investments in green projects. Incentivising climate-friendly investments and discouraging, or even penalising, dirty investments would be at the heart of this approach.

The current rules and regulations of the global financial system make it extremely difficult for large number of countries to access international finance, particularly those with political instabilities, or weaker institutional and governance structures. The transformation would, therefore, also involve simplification of practices, changes in the way risks to investments are assessed, and an overhaul of the credit rating systems.

Besides availability and access, there is a third element as well — transparency. Climate finance flows through a maze of channels — bilateral, regional, multilateral. It is in the form of grants, concessionary loans, debt, equity, carbon credits, and more. There are differences of opinion over whether a particular sum of money is actually climate-related. As a result, there are widely differing assessments of the quantum of climate finance currently being mobilised. This needs to be addressed.

Where will the new money come from?

Whether we like it or not, bulk of the additional financial resources to fight climate change would come from the pockets of the common citizen. There already are growing number of voices calling for an early fixing of carbon price, so that the carbon markets can start functioning quickly.

Invariably, this would, sooner or later, also result in different types of carbon taxes, even at the consumer level. The use of petrol and diesel, and other fossil fuels is almost surely going to be taxed. The production of coal is already being taxed for several years in India, and it has been generating valuable resources for the government, which has utilised it mainly for investing in clean technologies. These funds have also been utilised for works in the Clean Ganga Mission and during the Covid-19 pandemic.



Newer forms of carbon tax are likely to be imposed on businesses as well. In many cases, these would filter down to the common person.

Many more innovative sources of money would have to be explored. For example, the efforts to prevent urban flooding in a city like Mumbai or Bengaluru can seek financial participation of the corporate houses who suffer losses because of damage to their assets or disruptions in activities. As of now, it is the job of the government to build resilient infrastructure or early warning systems. But very soon, it would make sense for the corporates to join hands and facilitate these processes. Bankers who have lent money to build up corporate assets, or the insurers of those assets, would have an interest in pushing businesses into doing so. It is likely that more climate money would be raised locally, rather than sourced from outside.

More money is flowing into the green economy than a few years ago, but the pace of increase is nowhere adequate. Unfortunately, when it comes to climate action, the other thing in short supply, besides money, is time.

COMING CLEAN ON COAL

In an Idea Exchange with this paper last week, Union Minister of Power and New and Renewable Energy, RK Singh, underlined the importance of coal-fired plants in meeting developmental requirements. He clarified that India's climate commitment to "phase down" coal use will not come in the way of expanding its coal power capacity. The share of this fossil fuel in the energy mix will come down in percentage terms, but not in absolute measure. About 50 per cent of the electricity generated in the country currently comes from coal-fired plants. This is expected to come down to 30 per cent in the next 10 years. But India is planning to ramp up its electricity generation capacity to 865 GW from 407 GW. About 40 GW of this additional power will come from plants that burn coal.

At the UNFCCC's Conference of Parties (COP) in Glasgow last year, countries agreed to "phase down" their coal-based electricity generation. According to several experts, the meet's final declaration watered down the language of an earlier draft, and India and China were accused of playing tough to "soften" the Glasgow COP's anti-coal stance. The declaration of the just-concluded COP at Sharm El-Sheikh persists with the language of its predecessor. However, much has changed in one year. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has led to reconfigurations in the energy sector. In recent years, several EU countries had begun to substitute coal with relatively clean natural gas from Russia. But after February 24, several decommissioned coal plants in the EU have been re-evaluated. According to the International Energy Agency, the EU's coal consumption rose by more than 10 per cent in the first six months of 2022, and it's likely to increase in the coming weeks and months as winter intensifies. EU governments maintain that the fossil fuel's comeback will be temporary. That may well be correct but the past nine months have shown the fragility of the world's resolve on eliminating coal. If geopolitical considerations can force developed countries to bring back coal, can India be faulted for continuing to use this fossil fuel for its developmental needs?

In the past 10 years, India has made rapid strides in expanding renewable energy. However, given its unstable nature, the grid will continue to fall back on coal-generated electricity. Also, new coal plants are more efficient — they emit less GHG. That said, India must begin work on plans for an energy scenario which has a negligible role for coal. The commitment to becoming a net zero GHG emitter by 2070 will require that the country prepares for it.



POOR SOIL MANAGEMENT WILL ERODE FOOD SECURITY

Healthy soils are essential for our survival. They support healthy plant growth to enhance both our nutrition and water percolation to maintain groundwater levels. Soils help to regulate the planet's climate by storing carbon and are the second largest carbon sink after the oceans. They help maintain a landscape that is more resilient to the impacts of droughts and floods. As soil is the basis of food systems, it is no surprise that soil health is critical for healthy food production.

World Soil Day (WSD) 2022, annually observed on December 5, aligns with this. WSD 2022, with its guiding theme, 'Soils: Where food begins', is a means to raise awareness on the importance of maintaining healthy soils, ecosystems and human well-being by addressing the growing challenges in soil management, encouraging societies to improve soil health, and advocating the sustainable management of soil.

Degradation and its consequences

Today, nutrient loss and pollution significantly threaten soils, and thereby undermine nutrition and food security globally. The main drivers contributing to soil degradation are industrial activities, mining, waste treatment, agriculture, fossil fuel extraction and processing and transport emissions. The reasons behind soil nutrient loss range from soil erosion, runoff, leaching and the burning of crop residues. Soil degradation in some form or another affects around 29% of India's total land area. This in turn threatens agricultural productivity, in-situ biodiversity conservation, water quality and the socio-economic well-being of land dependent communities.

Nearly 3.7 million hectares suffer from nutrient loss in soil (depletion of soil organic matter, or SOM). Further, excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides, and irrigation with contaminated wastewater are also polluting soils. Impacts of soil degradation are far reaching and can have irreparable consequences on human and ecosystem health.

India's conservation strategy

The Government of India is implementing a five-pronged strategy for soil conservation. This includes making soil chemical-free, saving soil biodiversity, enhancing SOM, maintaining soil moisture, mitigating soil degradation and preventing soil erosion. Earlier, farmers lacked information relating to soil type, soil deficiency and soil moisture content. To address these issues, the Government of India launched the Soil Health Card (SHC) scheme in 2015. The SHC is used to assess the current status of soil health, and when used over time, to determine changes in soil health. The SHC displays soil health indicators and associated descriptive terms, which guide farmers to make necessary soil amendments.

Other pertinent initiatives include the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana, to prevent soil erosion, regeneration of natural vegetation, rainwater harvesting and recharging of the groundwater table.

In addition, the National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA) has schemes promoting traditional indigenous practices such as organic farming and natural farming, thereby reducing dependency on chemicals and other agri-inputs, and decreasing the monetary burden on smallholder farmers.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) undertakes multiple activities to support the Government of India's efforts in soil conservation towards fostering sustainable



agrifood systems. The FAO is collaborating with the National Rainfed Area Authority and the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare (MoA&FW) to develop forecasting tools using data analytics that will aid vulnerable farmers in making informed decisions on crop choices, particularly in rainfed areas.

Working with target States

The FAO, in association with the Ministry of Rural Development, supports the Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission's (DAY-NRLM) Community Resource Persons to increase their capacities towards supporting on-farm livelihoods for the adoption of sustainable and resilient practices, organic certification and agri-nutri-gardens. The FAO works in eight target States, namely, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Haryana and Punjab, for boosting crop diversification and landscape-level planning. In Andhra Pradesh, the FAO is partnering with the State government and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) to support farmers in sustainable transitions to agro-ecological approaches and organic farming.

There is a need to strengthen communication channels between academia, policymakers and society for the identification, management and restoration of degraded soils, as well as in the adoption of anticipatory measures. These will facilitate the dissemination of timely and evidence-based information to all relevant stakeholders. Greater cooperation and partnerships are central to ensure the availability of knowledge, sharing of successful practices, and universal access to clean and sustainable technologies, leaving no one behind. As consumers and citizens, we can contribute by planting trees to protect topsoil, developing and maintaining home/kitchen gardens, and consuming foods that are mainly locally sourced and seasonal.

Soil degradation can have irreparable consequences on human and ecosystem health, which cannot be ignored

A LARGE STUDY SHOWS IMMENSE BENEFITS OF REDUCING SALT INTAKE

A recent study published in the Journal of American College of Cardiology showed a higher incidence of heart attacks, heart failure and strokes with higher frequency of adding salt to one's food. This did not include the salt used for cooking.

Over 1.76 lakh participants from the U.K. Biobank were followed up for an average of 11.8 years. Nearly 7,000 heart attacks and over 2,000 strokes were documented during this period.

DASH diet

After adjusting for all other risk factors, it was found that adding less salt with food was associated with fewer heart attacks and strokes. This was found to be true even in participants who were following the DASH diet (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension).

DASH is the best recommended diet to prevent cardiovascular events. DASH diet involves eating fruits, vegetables, lean meat, poultry, nuts, whole grains, and reducing the intake of saturated fats, cholesterol, and sugar. The WHO recommends only 5gm of salt per day. The recent study points to the immense benefit of avoiding salt on the table.

There is a paucity of large and reliable studies estimating the daily salt intake in our country. Whatever data we have still shows a consumption of more than 10 gm per day, far exceeding the



recommended allowance. It could be worse in children since the recommendation is almost half. A study conducted by Sapiens health foundation amongst school and college students in Chennai showed a 10% prevalence of hypertension.

Intake of salt may be worse in Indians since pickles are often introduced early in life. We cannot forget the hidden salt in preserved and packaged foods. The consumer is not given a choice to choose food items based on salt content.

High sodium content

Another confusion is that the majority of labels show sodium content. The ordinary consumer is not aware that 1 gm of sodium is 2.5 gm of salt. It is high time that a product is available in two forms — normal and low salt content like the fat content in milk.

Salt substitutes are good since majority of them contain upto 25% potassium chloride. A 2001 study found salt substitutes reduced the incidence of stroke and heart attack by almost 10%, and deaths too. It's time to remove that salt shaker from the table.

NATOVENATOR POLYDONTUS: A GOOSE-NECKED DINOSAUR FROM MONGOLIA, BUILT LIKE A DIVING BIRD

The expansive dinosaur group that included big predators such as T. rex also was populated by a number of oddballs, weirdos and outcasts. A newly described dinosaur from Mongolia – the size of a goose and looking a bit like one, too – fits that description.

The dinosaur, called Natovenator polydontus, lived about 72 million years ago during the Cretaceous Period and was built like a diving bird with a streamlined body while possessing a goose-like elongated neck and a long flattened snout with a mouth bearing more than 100 small teeth, scientists said on Thursday. It almost surely was covered in feathers, they added.

While it was a cousin of speedy little predator Velociraptor, Natovenator was adapted to a semi-aquatic lifestyle in a freshwater ecosystem, perhaps floating on rivers and lakes, paddling with its front limbs, and using its flexible neck to catch fish and insects or diving underwater to capture its prey, the researchers said.

Its well-preserved remains – a skeleton about 70% complete – were unearthed in the Gobi Desert, which over the decades has been a treasure trove for dinosaur fossils.

Natovenator is part of the dinosaur group called theropods – sharing traits including bipedalism – best known for large meat-eaters including Tyrannosaurus, Tarbosaurus and Giganotosaurus. But the theropods, many of which were feathered, branched out in unusual directions with examples such as long-clawed ground sloth-like Therizinosaurus, ostrich-like Struthiomimus, termite-eating Mononykus and the entire bird lineage.

Not many of the dinosaurs called “non-avian” – in other words, not the birds – are known to have lived a semi-aquatic lifestyle. A close relative of Natovenator named Halszkaraptor, described in 2017, lived a similar lifestyle at roughly the same time in the same region. Both had a very bird-like appearance and were closely related to the bird lineage.

Natovenator measured about 18 inches (45 cm) long, with a skull about 3 inches (7 cm) long. Its front limbs appeared somewhat flattened, perhaps as an adaptation for paddling and swimming.



The streamlining of its body is shown by ribs that point toward the tail, as in diving birds, an arrangement that reduces drag in the water and allows efficient swimming.

“Natovenator – which means ‘swimming thief’ – is an amazing little animal for several reasons. First it is small and delicate. When we found it, we were uncertain as to its identification because it looked more like a lizard or mammal skeleton than a dinosaur. Once it was prepared, we realized it was a theropod dinosaur, but what kind? Finally it made sense once Halszkaraptor was described,” Currie said.

“It is very specialized for living in an environment not typical for an animal related to Velociraptor and its other relatives. Most people think of dinosaurs as specialized land animals, not competing with crocodiles in the water,” Currie added.

There were various diving birds during the Cretaceous, including North America’s Hesperornis, which reached about 6 feet (1.8 meters) long, but none are known from the area Natovenator inhabited.

“More than 30 different lineages of tetrapods (terrestrial vertebrates) have independently invaded water ecosystems,” Lee said. “Why not dinosaurs?”

INCREASING THE SHELF LIFE OF STORED BLOOD

Our team at the Institute for Stem Cell Science and Regenerative Medicine (DBT-inStem), an autonomous institute of the Department of Biotechnology, has developed a novel blood bag technology to enhance the quality and shelf life of stored blood.

Despite inadequate blood donation, millions of blood units are discarded due to decline in quality during storage. Stored blood has a finite shelf life. Typically, stored cells produce various extracellular components known as damage-associated molecular patterns (DAMPs), which damage the blood cells during storage.

Previous attempts

Although multiple attempts have been made to increase the quality of stored blood, they have limited success. Thus far, studies have focused on improving storage conditions through additives, rejuvenation solutions, and cryopreservation protocols. However, none of those approaches addressed the cause of the problem — the presence of damage causing extracellular components in the blood.

To tackle this issue, contrary to the conventional approaches, we have developed a novel approach to scavenge/capture and remove the damage-causing extracellular components during blood storage. This prevented the damage of stored blood cells, and enhanced their quality, and increased the shelf life of stored blood by about 25%.

Typical extracellular components being generated are free-iron and free-hemoglobin, bioactive lipids such as poly unsaturated fatty acids, extracellular DNA, nucleosomes, and proteins. During the storage, these components interact and damage red blood cells (RBCs). Capturing these DAMPs components without causing damage to the stored blood cells is highly challenging. Therefore, we have custom-designed nanofibrous sheets that can capture such damage-causing components and protect RBCs.

Nanofibrous sheets

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



The key design factor is the following. Critical damage-causing agents are charged molecules. We hypothesised and demonstrated that charged nanofibrous sheets made with cationic and anionic polymers will help scavenge damage-causing agents through ionic interactions. These nanofibrous sheets can be made into blood bags.

DAMPs are produced when cells get destroyed and the DAMP components, in turn, damage the membrane of RBCs and reduce the membrane integrity, which makes the RBCs fragile. Upon transfusion, the fragile RBCs break down, leading to poor blood transfusion outcomes.

Intermittent capturing of DAMPs on day 21 or 28 after collection using the novel blood bags helped protect RBCs from losing their membrane integrity, and enhanced the transfusion efficiency. Scavenging of DAMPs can be completed in 15 minutes.

Typically, blood can be stored for 42 days before transfusion. Compared to fresh blood, blood loses its quality upon storage, and overall blood transfusion efficiency reduces. 42 days of stored old blood has the least transfusion efficiency than either fresh blood or 21 days of stored blood.

Increased shelf life

However, we have demonstrated that with our technology, the quality of 42 days of stored old blood is as good as freshly collected blood. Additionally, with our technology, the maximum shelf life of stored blood has increased by 25%. The results were published recently in Nature Communications.

Besides increasing the shelf life of stored blood, it may be a boon for preserving rare blood groups.

RACIST, STIGMATIZING: WHY WHO WILL NOW CALL MONKEYPOX 'MPOX'

The change of name, announced after a series of consultations with global experts, has been provoked by the racist connotations that “monkeypox” sometimes carries. Both names will be used simultaneously for one year while “monkeypox” is phased out, the WHO said.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) announced on Monday that it would start using the term “mpox” for monkeypox, which has infected about 80,000 people in the first major outbreak of the viral disease outside Africa that began early this summer. The disease spread mainly in the Americas including the United States and Europe, primarily among men who have sex with men (MSM).

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“When the outbreak of monkeypox expanded earlier this year, racist and stigmatizing language online, in other settings and in some communities was observed and reported to WHO. In several meetings, public and private, a number of individuals and countries raised concerns and asked WHO to propose a way forward to change the name,” the WHO said in a news release.

In fact, monkeypox, which was named in 1970 because the virus that causes the disease was first discovered in captive monkeys in 1958, does not have much to do with monkeys. The most likely reservoir for the virus, which has circulated for several years in a few central African countries after jumping to humans through zoonosis in the bush, are rodents.



This year's outbreak mainly among MSM has increased the marginalisation of the community that has traditionally been stigmatised for its association with HIV and AIDS.

The WHO said that assigning names to new and, in some cases, existing diseases is the responsibility of the global body under the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) and the WHO Family of International Health Related Classifications through a consultative process which includes WHO Member States. In the case of monkeypox, the process was accelerated, the release said.

According to WHO best practices, "new disease names should be given with the aim to minimize unnecessary negative impact of names on trade, travel, tourism or animal welfare, and avoid causing offence to any cultural, social, national, regional, professional or ethnic groups".

The release said "various advisory bodies were heard during the consultation process, including experts from the medical and scientific and classification and statistics advisory committees which constituted representatives from government authorities of 45 different countries".

ONE STEP CLOSER TO A UNIVERSAL FLU VACCINE: WHAT A NEW STUDY SAYS

Imagine a single dose of vaccine that prepares your body to fight every known strain of influenza — a so-called universal flu vaccine that scientists have tried to create for decades. A new study describes successful animal tests of just such a vaccine, offering hope that the country can be protected against future flu pandemics. Like the COVID vaccines made by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, the experimental flu vaccine relies on mRNA.

It is in early stages — tested only in mice and ferrets — but the vaccine provides important proof that a single shot could be used against an entire family of viruses. If the vaccine succeeds in people, the approach could be used against other virus families, perhaps including the coronavirus.

The vaccine would not replace annual flu shots but would provide a shield against severe disease and death from potential pandemic threats.

"There's a real need for new influenza vaccines to provide protection against pandemic threats that are out there," said Scott Hensley, an immunologist at the University of Pennsylvania, who led the work.

"If there's a new influenza pandemic tomorrow, if we had a vaccine like this that was widely employed before that pandemic, we might not have to shut everything down," he said. He and his colleagues described the vaccine last week in the journal *Science*.

By the age of 5, most children have been infected with the flu multiple times and have gained some immunity — but only against the strains they have encountered.

"Our childhood exposures to influenza lay down long-lived immune memory that can be recalled later in life," Hensley said. But "we're sort of living the rest of our life dependent on the random chance of whatever we got infected with as a kid."

Current influenza vaccines protect against seasonal flu but would provide little protection against a new strain that may emerge as a pandemic threat. During the 2009 H1N1 swine flu pandemic, for example, the conventional vaccine offered little defense against the virus. But



older adults who had been exposed to H1N1 strains in childhood developed only mild symptoms.

Scientists have long tried to create a vaccine that would introduce children to every possible strain of flu they may encounter later in life. But researchers have been constrained by technical hurdles and by the diversity of the flu virus.

Broadly speaking, there are 20 subgroups of influenza that each represent thousands of viruses. Current vaccines can target four subgroups at most. But the experimental vaccine contains all 20, and it would be faster to produce.

The vaccine elicited high levels of antibodies to all 20 flu subtypes in ferrets and mice, the researchers found — a finding that several experts said was unexpected and promising.

If the vaccine behaves similarly in people, “we’ll have a more broad coverage of influenza viruses — not only those that are circulating, but those that might spill over from the animal reservoir that might cause the next pandemic,” said Alyson Kelvin, a vaccinologist at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada.

Packing 20 targets into one vaccine does have a downside: Antibody levels in the test animals were lower than when they were given vaccines aimed at individual strains. But the levels were still high enough to be effective against influenza.

Because a new pandemic strain of influenza might differ from the 20 targets included in the experimental vaccine, the researchers also tested it against viruses that were imperfectly matched. The vaccine still provided strong protection, suggesting that it would prevent at least severe illness, if not infection, from a novel pandemic flu virus.

This phenomenon is akin to that with the current COVID vaccines: Although the latest omicron variants are so different from the ancestral virus that the original vaccine does not prevent infections, it continues to help safeguard most people against severe illness.

This quality may be a particular advantage of mRNA vaccines, Kelvin said. Conventional flu vaccines target only the specific viruses they are designed for. But mRNA vaccines seem to produce antibodies that defend the body against a broader range of viruses than those included.

The experts noted some important caveats and questions that must be answered before the vaccine becomes a viable candidate.

The animals in the study built defenses against all 20 flu strains equally. But “these animals have not seen flu before,” said Richard J. Webby, an expert in influenza viruses at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee.

Such a complete lack of immunity against flu is only true of very young children, Webby noted. Older people are exposed to many different strains over their lifetimes, and it’s not clear whether their immune responses to a universal vaccine would be quite so uniform.

“The proof of the pudding will be what happens when it goes into humans and how going into a preimmune population skews the response to it,” Webby said.



Designing universal vaccines for varying age groups, if necessary, would be a challenge. It would also be important to see how long protection from such a vaccine lasts, some experts said.

“The biggest issue about universal flu is what you need to target and how long you can continue to use the same vaccine,” Ted Ross, director of Global Vaccine Development at the Cleveland Clinic, said. “If you have to keep updating it, it may not increase the advantage of how we do vaccines today.”

The next step for the vaccine would be to test it in monkeys and in people. But proving its effectiveness might be challenging. “How do you evaluate and regulate a vaccine where their targets aren’t circulating, and so you can’t really show effectiveness?” Kelvin said.

Perhaps the vaccine could be tested in small sporadic outbreaks, or in poultry workers who are at risk of becoming infected with an avian flu virus, she said: “Those are questions that I think we need to answer before we have our next pandemic.”

CHINA: EMBRACING A PLANNED EXIT FROM ZERO-COVID STRATEGY

China’s zero-COVID strategy aims at not allowing a single infection to happen in the country, aiming at an infection-free population over a prolonged period, achieved through two actions. First, all infected persons, regardless of their health status, are placed in strict isolation in demanding circumstances. Two, all the members in the community are segregated at home or work where even a single case has emerged until no new infections have occurred in the isolated group, usually for a period of two to three weeks.

At the same time, millions of people are continuously tested, and strict contact control is implemented. Also, most travel to and from the country is restricted, with infrequent visitors having to undergo a seven-day quarantine and several tests.

Is it unsustainable?

Proponents of the zero-COVID strategy believed that SARS-CoV-2 virus is amenable to eradication, a term reserved for the disappearance of the virus. Far from extinction, the virus has thrived and morphed into more infectious variant forms. The zero-COVID strategy postponed the inevitable outbreaks to a later point in the timeline, with the virus waiting to find a vast susceptible pool of persons.

The strategy offers a glowing short-term euphoric goal of minimal cases, only to see a rebound in increased cases and deaths, often resulting in excessive pressure on the healthcare system later and derangements in society’s normal order. Consequently, people’s suffering is prolonged.

This strategy would have been theoretically successful if the virus diminished in its capacity to infect or if the population was protected with both primary and booster vaccine doses. Neither of these were realistically achieved in China while the virus was continuously evolving.

While the virus is ubiquitous, it is unwise, disproportionate, costly, and useless to drive all resources toward detecting every case. Many countries including Singapore, Vietnam, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Australia, and New Zealand realised that the zero-COVID strategy was a blunder as a destination and pursuit, and abandoned it after initial trials.



Still most vulnerable

Most countries have had more than three or four waves of infection, resulting in high natural infection levels. Coupled with immunity induced by effective vaccines, the rest of the world is witnessing endemic levels of COVID-19. In contrast, mainland China is extremely vulnerable, with poor vaccination coverage, especially among the elderly. With only one wave earlier, the current upsurge is yet to take off due to the zero-COVID strategy, making China a fertile ground for large-scale spread of the virus. Compounding the problem is that the two locally-made vaccines have shown poor efficacy and offer protection only for a shorter duration.

The virus will not spare any susceptible population pools; impositions of relentless lockdowns and restrictions cannot keep the virus at bay for long.

Instead of scaling up the manufacturing of effective vaccines and expanding the vaccination coverage in the population, China has frivolously prolonged the zero-COVID strategy.

Exit plan

Abandoning the zero-COVID strategy without a proper exit plan will undeniably lead to several massive waves of infection with multiple SARS-CoV-2 variants in China. China must relax restrictions, combined with expanding primary vaccination and booster coverage with effective vaccines, especially among the elderly and other vulnerable. The Chinese and world leaders need to ensure that China follows a balanced approach that tailors restrictions to subgroups at greater risk of severe disease and death while paying attention to equity.

What happens in China will have an impact everywhere in the world. The WHO can offer technical support for revamping the strategy, effective vaccines, and escalating care provisions for the severely sick during the inevitable impending waves.

HOW A FRENCH MAN WON THE RIGHT TO SAY NO TO COMPANY-MANDATED FUN

There is a sad, quiet desperation about mandated fun. Companies — well-meaning, perhaps, in their intentions — ask employees to participate in everything from fancy dress competitions (there is invariably an email asking you to dress up during festivals) to official picnics and official unofficial dinners and drinks. For introverts or people who just don't wish to spend their free time with colleagues, this can be an ongoing, prolonged chore. A man in France, though, has struck a great blow for the rights of the cantankerous worker. He has won the "right to be boring" in office in court. And by doing so, he has managed a victory for all those who have rolled their eyes at the exclamation-mark-ridden enthusiasm of an email from HR.

The unnamed worker was reportedly terminated from his job at a consultancy firm because he refused, among other things, to go out for mandated after-work drinks every week. This, according to his employer, flew against the company's culture, which believed in "team-building through fun". His refusal had the company label him boring, tough to work with and a poor listener. The worker sued, arguing that he had a right to "critical behaviour and to refuse company policy based on incitement to partake in various excesses".

Companies, to be fair, are often merely trying to build camaraderie, to try and make the workplace something employees look forward to rather than dread. And they often do so because it makes financial sense — happy workers, study after study has shown, are more productive. The sad fact, though, is that "fun" and friendship cannot be mandated. Organically, after a hard day's work,



people may end up at a bar, blowing off steam and complaining about those in-charge who pay them. But, the odd person out has the right to spend her time as she likes. And in France, where philosophers have long recognised that hell is other people, solitude should be a worker's right.

GASLIGHTING: ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MERRIAM-WEBSTER'S WORD OF THE YEAR

Picture this: You are about to confront someone about a wrong you are sure they have committed. You have run the potential conversation in your head, practised the beginning, middle and end. But no sooner do you bring the matter up than they fly off the handle and launch into a barrage of defences, so convincing that you are led to believe it was you who misunderstood them. You end up apologising, they 'forgive' you, and you move on. What has happened here is that you have been subjected to "gaslighting" — Merriam-Webster dictionary's word of the year.

What is gaslighting?

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines gaslighting as "psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, uncertainty of one's emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator."

According to Psychology Today, gaslighting is "a form of manipulation where targets are urged to doubt their memories, beliefs, feelings, or sanity."

The dictionary's reason to pick it as the word for 2022 is backed by hard data: "there was a 1740% increase in lookups for gaslighting, with high interest throughout the year."

Sounds interesting, but where does this curious-sounding word come from?

The term comes from the title of a 1938 play by Patrick Hamilton, and the movie based on that play, the plot of which involves a man attempting to make his wife believe that she is going insane. His mysterious activities in the attic cause the house's gas lights to dim, but he insists to his wife that the lights are not dimming and that she can't trust her own perceptions.

When gaslighting was first used in the mid 20th century, it referred to a kind of deception like that in the movie. But in recent years, according to the website, we have seen the meaning of gaslighting refer also to something simpler and broader: "the act or practice of grossly misleading someone, especially for a personal advantage."

Cool, can you suggest some examples where I can use this word?

This simple example by Cambridge dictionary is sure to clear all your doubts.

"His gaslighting was a deliberate attempt to convince her that she was losing her grasp on reality"

What contexts is it used in?

A person can be gaslit by anyone, and not just a romantic partner: A toxic friend, a controlling parent, a boss given to harassment. One can also be gaslit by a whole entity, and not just one individual. For example: "In the words of one company official, Big Oil is 'gaslighting' the public."



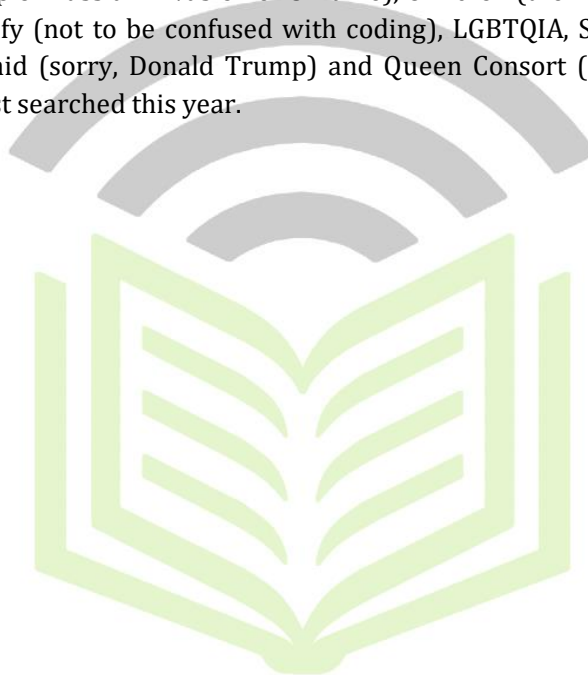
Or Medical gaslighting: When a doctor dismisses a patient's health concerns without a proper diagnosis.

The word was invented in the 1930s. So, why has it assumed significance in 2022?

With the internet, and its side effects, permeating every aspect of modern life, gaslighting is relevant more than ever before. As Merriam-Webster puts it: "In this age of misinformation—of "fake news," conspiracy theories, Twitter trolls, and deepfakes—gaslighting has emerged as a word for our time."

Makes sense. What other words kept search engines busy this year?

Oligarch (in backdrop of Russian invasion of Ukraine), Omicron (the most widespread variant of Covid in 2022), Codify (not to be confused with coding), LGBTQIA, Sentient (think AI), Loamy (thanks, Wordle), Raid (sorry, Donald Trump) and Queen Consort (Camilla Parker) are other words that were most searched this year.



DreamIAS