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INTERNATIONAL

OPPENHEIMER WRONGLY STRIPPED OF SECURITY CLEARANCE, US SAYS

The Biden administration has reversed a decades-old decision to revoke the security clearance of Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist called the father of the atomic bomb for his leading role in World War II's Manhattan Project. U.S. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said the 1954 decision by the Atomic Energy Commission was made using a "flawed process" that violated the commission's own regulations.

"As time has passed, more evidence has come to light of the bias and unfairness of the process that Dr. Oppenheimer was subjected to while the evidence of his loyalty and love of country have only been further affirmed," Granholm said in a statement on Friday. Oppenheimer, who died in 1967, led the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II.

The theoretical physicist was later accused of having communist sympathies and his security clearance was revoked following a four-week, closed-door hearing. In stripping Oppenheimer of his clearance, the Atomic Energy Commission did not allege that he had revealed or mishandled classified information, nor was his loyalty to the country questioned, according to Granholm's order.

The decision comes as the story of Oppenheimer is headed to the big screen. Christopher Nolan's "Oppenheimer" film is expected to be released in theaters in July. It's based on Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography "American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer," and stars Cillian Murphy in the title role.

BEYOND WEAPONS

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to Washington, his first overseas travel since Russia's invasion on February 24, and the Biden administration's decision to send a new \$1.8 billion military aid package, including Patriot missile defence systems and precision-guided missiles, are a testament to the deep relationship Ukraine and the U.S. share in the time of war. Ukraine has already received American financial and military funding from approved assistance worth around \$54 billion. The U.S. supply of long-range missiles (HIMARS) has played a major role in Ukraine's recent battlefield advances in Kharkiv and Kherson, after its heavy losses in Donbas. The Patriot missile system is expected to strengthen Ukraine's air defences at a time when Russia is bombarding the energy grid and water supplies. In Washington, President Joe Biden discussed a 10-point peace formula with Mr. Zelensky (the details are unknown) and also promised continued support "for as long as it takes". Both leaders tried to send out a message of unity amid concerns of cracks in the western alliance as the war is continuing indefinitely with its massive economic costs.

The U.S. has gradually stepped up its supply of weapons to Ukraine, but is still wary of sending offensive weapons out of fears of escalating the conflict. Ukraine has relentlessly campaigned for more advanced weapons, including U.S. aircraft, tanks and long-range tactical missiles. While Mr. Biden said his administration would continue to back Ukraine, he also warned of the risks of sending offensive weapons to Ukraine, which could "break up NATO, the EU and the rest of world". Currently, Ukraine has a battlefield advantage, recapturing swathes of territories in the northeast



and south. But Russia has air superiority. The Patriot missiles could offer some protection to Ukraine but could also prompt Russia to carry out heavier attacks. This leaves Mr. Biden in a dilemma. He is ready to bolster Ukraine's defence but does not want to provoke a wider war between Russia and NATO. His Ukraine policy should not be an open-ended weapons supply package. The U.S. could help its ally but it should also push for a sustainable solution to the conflict. It should use its continued support to Ukraine to mount pressure on Russia — as its weapons play a critical role in Kyiv's counterattacks — and persuade Ukraine to resume direct negotiations. At this point, no military solution seems likely. Unless there is a credible push for talks, the war is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

WHAT IS THE US GOVT'S EAGLE ACT, WHICH COULD BENEFIT INDIAN IMMIGRANTS?

Last week, the White House supported the US Congress pass a legislation whose aim is to eliminate the per-country quota on issuing green cards. If passed, the legislation will allow US employers to focus on recruiting people based on 'merit' over 'birthplace', and is likely to benefit Indian-Americans. The House of Representatives will soon vote on the (Equal Access to Green Card for Legal Employment) EAGLE Act of 2022.

What is a green card and what are its benefits?

Officially known as a Permanent Resident Card, a green card, issued to immigrants, allows them to live and work in the United States on a permanent basis. The card serves as evidence that the holder has been accorded the privilege of residing permanently.

Some of the benefits of having a green card are – it provides a pathway to citizenship, a green card holder can sponsor immediate family members for the same card, it provides easy access to US' social security system as also education assistance, travel to and from the country becomes much easier, a card holder can choose to live anywhere in the US, there is more freedom in terms of career opportunities as one can apply for a wide variety of jobs, and a card holder can also have some amount of engagement in the political process of the country.

What is H.R. 3648, or the EAGLE Act of 2022?

The goal of the Act is to allow US employers to “focus on hiring immigrants based on merit, not their birthplace, by eliminating the “per country” limitation on employment-based immigrant visas (green cards).” To reduce the impact of this on less-populated countries and ensure that eligible immigrants from these countries are not excluded when the Act is implemented, the legislation plans to phase out the per-country caps over the course of nine years.

As per a statement released by the Executive Office of the President, during the transition period, some visas would be put aside for physical therapists and nurses to cater to the demands in the healthcare sector, and “for employment-based immigrants and their family members who are not currently in the United States.”

Another goal of the EAGLE Act 2022 is to improve the H-1B specialty occupation visa program. This would be done by bolstering the recruitment requirements, strengthening protections for US workers and boosting transparency, among others.

“H.R. 3648 also includes important provisions to allow individuals who have been waiting in the immigrant visa backlog for two years to file their green card applications. Although the applications could not be approved until a visa becomes available, this would allow employment



based immigrants to transition off of their temporary visas and provide them with additional flexibilities in changing employers or starting a business,” the statement says.

How will the legislation benefit Indian-Americans?

There are 140,000 employment-based green cards available, and because of the per-country cap, the backlog has touched millions. The CATO institute’s 2022 report highlights that nearly all backlogged immigrants are from India.

According to the CATO report of 2020, in the United States, 75 per cent of the employment-based backlog was made up by skilled Indian workers. Notably, if they all could remain in the line, the backlogged Indian workers faced a wait of nine decades before they could get a green card.

The 2020 report also notes that over “200,000 petitions filed for Indians could expire as a result of the workers dying of old age before they receive green cards.”

Apart from the law that imposes limits on the number of green cards for immigrants from any single birthplace, the reason for Indians enduring much longer waits is employers filing far more petitions for Indians than the limits allow.

However, given the current situation, even if the per-country cap is removed, it would still leave waits of more than a decade for every employer-sponsored immigrant. Thus the per-country limits work at a disadvantage for Indians with more recent immigrants facing lifetime waits for green cards.

WHY NURSES ARE ON STRIKE IN THE UK AND WHAT COMES NEXT

As Britain braces for the second day of strike by nurses of the state-funded National Health Service, the government on Monday appeared adamant on not agreeing to their main demand of salary hikes, even as news reports suggested that the health secretary, Steve Barclay, was likely to urge health unions for fresh talks.

The first strike was on December 15, the first-ever nationwide walkout in the 106-year history of the nursing union. According to Reuters, an estimated 100,000 nurses went on strike at 76 hospitals and health centres, cancelling an estimated 70,000 appointments. The same number is expected to go on strike Tuesday. The strike affects England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, but not Scotland. Emergency care and treatment for life-threatening conditions are provided during the strike.

UK cabinet minister Oliver Dowden told the BBC on the nurses’ strike, “We will be resolute to this, because it would be irresponsible to allow public sector pay and inflation to get out of control and we owe a wider duty to the public to make sure we keep our public finances under control...We’re trying to be reasonable, we’re trying to be proportionate and we’re trying to be fair.”

Why the nurses are striking

The NHS nurses want better pay, claiming that due to the low salaries, many are quitting the profession, leaving it severely understaffed and overworked, and also compromising the quality of care offered to patients. According to The Guardian, “figures from NHS Digital show there were a record 47,496 full-time equivalent nursing vacancies in England at the end of September, representing a vacancy rate of 11.9 per cent.”



The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) union has demanded a salary hike of 5 per cent above the rate of inflation, which in November was 14 per cent. The union has claimed that the earnings of its members fell by 6 per cent in the last decade.

What the govt says

The government has said that the 4 per cent hike offered to nurses is fair, based on recommendations by an independent NHS Pay Review Body, and anything more than this is fiscally unsustainable.

The government has also pointed out that nurses received a 3 per cent salary hike after the pandemic, when hikes were frozen for several sectors. There are also fears that agreeing to negotiate on what the pay review body recommended can lead to similar demands in other sectors, which the government can ill-afford.

Pressure rising on govt

For all its firm stance, the Sunak government is under pressure, with large sections of the public supporting the nurses' strike, some Labour politicians, like Ian Byrne and John McDonnell, reaching picket lines to click pictures with striking workers, and rising nervousness in Tory ranks.

As reported by The Guardian, an opinion poll by Observer found that after Thursday's strike, three-fifths (60 per cent) of voters said they supported the nurses' action, up three points from the last poll a fortnight ago. Around 29 per cent opposed the nurses' move, down one point.

This comes when Britain is facing strikes in many other sectors, such as by airport and rail workers, ambulance drivers, and postal services workers.

DUTCH PM APOLOGISES: THE NETHERLANDS' ROLE IN SLAVERY

Netherlands Prime Minister Mark Rutte on Monday apologised for the country's historical role in slavery and slave trade, in a speech that has been seen by many as crucial but not sufficient.

While Rutte's apology is historic, members of the aggrieved communities say it smacks of "colonialist attitudes", as it was delivered without due consultation with them. Also, many have claimed, an apology without reparations is not enough. The increased engagement of the Dutch with their racist and colonial past has been spurred on by the murder of George Floyd in the US in 2020. Rutte's apology follows the report of a national advisory panel which was set up after Floyd's murder.

What exactly did Rutte say?

In a speech made at the National Archives in The Hague, Rutte said, "We who live in today's world must acknowledge the evils of slavery in the clearest possible terms, and condemn it as a crime against humanity. As a criminal system which caused untold numbers of people untold suffering. Suffering that continues in the lives of people today. And we in the Netherlands must confront our part in that history."

Saying that the slaves were "wrenched from their families and stripped of their humanity", and "treated like cattle", Rutte said while no one alive today was to blame for the past Dutch atrocities, "it is also true that the Dutch State, in all its manifestations through history, bears responsibility for the terrible suffering inflicted on enslaved people and their descendants."



What was the Dutch role in the slave trade?

According to the United Nations Slavery and Remembrance website, “Like other European maritime nations, the Dutch were quick to involve themselves in the transatlantic slave trade. Between 1596 and 1829, the Dutch transported about half a million Africans across the Atlantic. Large numbers were taken to the small islands of Curaçao and St. Eustatius, in the Caribbean... The Dutch also shipped about a half million Africans to their settlements in Dutch Guiana, notably Suriname, where they worked primarily on sugar plantations.”

The Dutch put slaves to work in their coffee, sugar and tobacco plantations, apart from household labour in colonies. The centuries of slave trade funded what is known as Netherlands’ ‘golden age’ – the period roughly between 1585-1670, when trade, arts, sciences and the military flourished in the country.

When slavery was formally abolished in 1863, it was not the slaves who received compensation from the Dutch state, but the slave owners.

What else is the government doing?

While Rutte made his apology in The Hague, representatives of his government are travelling to former colonies to make similar apologies – to Suriname, Aruba, Curaçao, St Maarten, Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba.

Apart from this, according to an official statement, “The government will make €200 million available in a fund for measures aimed at raising awareness, fostering engagement and addressing the present-day effects of slavery.”

An independent commemoration committee has been proposed, which will “be tasked with ensuring a large-scale, dignified commemoration of the history of slavery on 1 July 2023, together with the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom, Suriname and other countries.”

July 2023 is being seen as the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, as, while it was formally abolished in 1863, another 10 years were required to put it into practice.

A criticism frequently levelled at The Netherlands is that its school education system does not adequately engage with its colonial and slave trading past. The government in its recent statement said it will “give the Netherlands’ role in the history of slavery a substantial place in education, as this is where young people come into contact with history.”

Apart from this, the country is also looking at returning artworks looted during the colonial period.

Why are some unhappy with the apology?

Some activist groups had wanted the apology to come from King Willem-Alexander, in the former colony of Suriname on July 1, 2023, and the process to have been more consultative. Yet others have criticised the fact that the apology has not been accompanied with reparations.

“What was completely missing from this speech is responsibility and accountability,” Armand Zunder, chairman of Suriname’s National Reparations Commission, was quoted as saying by Reuters. “If you recognise that crimes against humanity were committed then the next step is you say I’m responsible for it, we’re liable for it Indeed I’m talking about reparations.”



The Guardian reported that the Sint Maarten Prime Minister, Silveria Jacobs, said the island would not accept any government apology “until our advisory committee has discussed it and we as a country discussed it”.

Allegations of racism today

In 2020, the then UN rapporteur on racism, Tendayi Achiume, had said that a self-image of “tolerance” was blocking the tackling of discrimination in The Netherlands.

The country has seen allegations of systematic racism in its police force and other government services, dual nationals have been unfairly accused of childcare benefits fraud, and migrants have in general been found to have lower levels of educational and professional success than White Dutch people.

As Rutte said in his speech, “Centuries of oppression and exploitation still have an effect to this very day. In racist stereotypes. In discriminatory patterns of exclusion. In social inequality.” The apology itself has been a long time coming. Sections of the Dutch population feel the nation today has nothing to apologise for in crimes committed centuries ago, while some fear that an apology can open the floodgates to demands for reparations.

INDIAN-ORIGIN DR. LEO VARADKAR TO RETURN AS IRELAND PM FOR SECOND TERM

Leo Varadkar will become Ireland’s prime minister for a second time this weekend under a coalition deal struck after the 2020 election.

Many things have changed since Varadkar left the office in June of that year during the initial onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some issues — such as the fallout from Brexit and the pressure on housing — will be more familiar. The Fine Gael leader will take over the position from Fianna Fail’s Micheal Martin for the second half of a parliamentary term shared between two historic rivals with support from the Greens.

Issues surrounding the Northern Ireland Protocol — the part of the Brexit treaty which Varadkar negotiated in 2019 to keep the region within the European Union’s customs block — remain unresolved, though there have been reports of positive progress and talks have recently intensified. It is expected that Varadkar will speak to UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak at an early opportunity on the matter.

Varadkar, who has served as deputy prime minister under Martin, returns to the helm as the country grapples with a cost-of-living crisis and high energy bills, exacerbated by Russia’s war on Ukraine. Meanwhile, an influx of refugees has amplified concern about an increasingly acute housing crisis.

LEAVE QUIETLY

Fiji, the tiny archipelago nation in the South Pacific that has seen several coups since it got independence from the British in 1970, is facing a new round of power struggle and political instability. The latest crisis broke out after the December 14 general election produced a hung assembly with the ruling Fiji First party of Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama winning 26 seats in the 55-member Parliament, three short of majority. The People’s Alliance of former Prime Minister and current opposition leader Sitiveni Rabuka came second with 21 seats. Mr. Bainimarama, who came to power through a coup in 2006 and later refashioned himself as a

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



democratic leader under a new Constitution that was introduced in 2013, has faced criticism of suppressing dissent and cracking down on the opposition. The election was marred by allegations of fraud. But after the results were announced, three opposition parties came together to unseat Mr. Bainimarama and form a coalition government. The People's Alliance and its coalition partner, the National Federation Party (which won five seats), have 26 MPs' support. This left the third opposition bloc, the Social Democratic Liberal Party which won three seats, in a kingmaker's role. The party decided on Tuesday in a close internal vote to support Mr. Rabuka, tilting the balance in favour of the People's Alliance.

Mr. Rabuka, who first came to power through a coup in 1987 and then faced elections, is an experienced politician who built the opposition unity based on their common enmity towards Mr. Bainimarama's rule. Mr. Bainimarama has emerged on the world stage as a major advocate of actions against climate change. His government also saw Fiji deepening its relationship with China, whose footprint in the South Pacific is rapidly expanding. The Fiji First still remains a strong party, but the opposition deal sealed its fate. The Prime Minister has not conceded yet. After the opposition announced the coalition agreement, the government called in the military. Authorities say there were incidents of ethnic violence (between indigenous Fijians and ethnic Indians). Fiji has a history of ethnic clashes, but the opposition say there is no law-and-order problem and that Mr. Bainimarama is trying to cling on to power. Any attempt to sabotage the election results will destabilise the country internally, disrupt its ethnic balance and complicate its foreign policy agenda. Mr. Bainimarama should accept the results, respectfully leave the office and set a strong precedent of peaceful transition of power for the country's political class.

ERDOGAN'S CHALLENGER

Thousands of protesters gathered in front of the municipal building in Istanbul on December 14 after a court sentenced the city's Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, 52, to two years, seven months and 15 days in prison for having insulted officials of Turkey's Supreme Electoral Council.

The Istanbul court also banned the Mayor, who belongs to the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), from participating in any political activity — including contesting elections or voting. Mr. Imamoglu, however, won't actually spend time in jail as the sentence falls below the minimum threshold (generally taken to be four years) for physical incarceration.

He has appealed against the conviction, and if the ruling again proves unfavourable to him, he can appeal to the Supreme Court. While the case winds its way through the Turkish judiciary, he will continue in office as Istanbul Mayor. The sentencing — especially the part that imposes a political ban on Mr. Imamoglu — has caused outrage among Turkey's Opposition parties, which have accused President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of having fabricated the whole case with the aim of eliminating the one politician who has the potential to defeat him in the elections coming up in June 2023.

Mr. Imamoglu, who hails from a business family, used to run a small restaurant before joining the CHP in 2008. His first political success came in 2014 when he became the Mayor of Beylikduzu, a district in the European side of Istanbul. He shot to international limelight when, as the Opposition candidate, he won the mayoral race for Istanbul in March 2019, defeating the candidate from Mr. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) by 13,729 votes. The post of Istanbul Mayor is one of the most prestigious and influential electoral posts in Turkey. The city, with a population of 16 million (nearly one-fifth of the total population of 85 million) and an annual budget of \$4 billion, has been the political home to the country's most powerful politicians, including Mr.



Erdogan himself. Mr. Imamoglu's victory — which handed over the city to the Opposition for the first time in decades — was a huge setback for the President. Mr. Imamoglu served as Mayor for just 17 days before the election results were annulled. Fresh elections were held in June 2019. But this time, Mr. Imamoglu won by a much bigger margin of around 8,00,000 votes — leaving Mr. Erdogan with no option but to concede defeat.

Trading barbs

During his tenure, Mr. Erdogan has been busy neutralising political opponents, often by displacing them from key positions. In 2019, he removed several Mayors from the Kurdish minority from their posts, on charges that they had links with the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Opposition leaders, including Mr. Imamoglu, criticised the removal of elected Mayors as a subversion of democracy. Mr. Erdogan's Interior Minister responded by calling Mr. Imamoglu an "idiot". Mr. Imamoglu replied that it was those who had overturned the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election who were the "idiots", prompting the Supreme Electoral Council to file a case against him for "insulting" them. It was this case which has now resulted in a political ban.

The June 2023 elections are expected to be a difficult test for Mr. Erdogan and his ruling AKP. Anti-incumbency apart the country is in economic turmoil, with the Turkish lira losing 44% of its value in 2021 alone and inflation at 85%. At the same time, there is finally some opposition unity, with six parties, including the CHP, joining hands to take on Mr. Erdogan.

Mr. Imamoglu, whose ratings have consistently topped Mr. Erdogan's, is the only politician to have gotten the better of him in high stakes electoral battles, not once but twice. He was, therefore, widely tipped to lead the Opposition's challenge as their joint Presidential candidate. But the political ban, if upheld in the appeals process, would weaken the Opposition's ability to mount a credible challenge.

BILAWAL BHUTTO-ZARDARI JUST DUG PAKISTAN A DEEPER DIPLOMATIC HOLE, DO HIS MASTERS IN ISLAMABAD APPROVE?

It has often been said that Pakistan likes to negotiate holding a gun to its head. Add to that: With its mouth shooting off. Pakistan foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's crude diatribe against Prime Minister Narendra Modi invoking Osama bin Laden may not affect India but it shows how unhinged the leader of the Pakistan People's Party is from the imperatives of diplomacy. Governments may target other governments for one or another reason, but personal attacks are rare, and are made perhaps only when it has been decided that the relationship is better broken. In Pakistan's case, it is not clear if that decision has been made. Bilawal is part of a coalition government led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). After Imran Khan's ouster, it was hoped that the two countries would be able to draw a line under a period marked by the former prime minister's personal invective against Modi. Bilawal's remarks have firmly turned the clock back.

It is academic now if the young foreign minister did this on his own to burnish his political credentials as a hardliner on India (to compete in this race to the bottom with Imran Khan) or he simply mouthed lines from the "militabishment", now under a new leadership. For its part, the PML(N), whether in or out of government, has always been a votary of normalising ties with India, only to see its vision of peace with India thwarted each time an opportunity presented itself to reach out. The saboteurs are usually one or the other of the security establishment-nurtured cross-border terrorist groups; this time, it is a cabinet minister. Pakistan's leaders may presume



it is easy to walk back from the more outrageous of their statements made for the benefit of domestic audiences. Imran Khan, who surfed a massive wave of popularity with his allegation of a Biden administration conspiracy behind his ouster, now says the accusation is “behind” him. But it is never easy to pedal back from the damage that has been done.

In any case, Indian diplomacy is Pakistan-proofing itself. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, two countries Pakistan describes as its “biradar” nations, have better terms with India than with Pakistan. Soon, India may sell a Brahmos missile to Indonesia, the nation with the largest Muslim population. Even Turkey’s President Recep Tayeb Erdogan, a persistent India-baiter, seems to have called a truce with Modi after their ice-breaker meeting at the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation. Pakistan must consider if it runs the risk of isolating itself with its thoughtless diplomacy, and of thinking that this can somehow mask the reality of the terrorist groups its army spawned on its soil towards realising its strategic objectives in the region. The consequences on Pakistan are all too evident as its constant struggles show, while India and the world have moved on.

INDIA ABSTAINS FROM UNSC VOTE ON MYANMAR, CALLS FOR QUIET AND CONSTRUCTIVE DIPLOMACY

The vote, which marked the first Security Council resolution on the situation in Myanmar in decades, and in particular, since the military overthrew the National Unity Government (NUG) in February 2021, demanded an end to the violence and the release of all political prisoners, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi.

The resolution (S/RES/2669 (2022)) proposed by the United Kingdom, which was passed by 12 votes, made several references to the importance of the “ASEAN” process, referring to the “five-point consensus” passed by the 10-nation Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) last year.

“We believe that the complex situation in Myanmar calls for an approach of quiet and patient diplomacy. Any other course will not help in resolving the long-standing issues which have prevented enduring peace, stability, progress and democratic governance,” India’s Permanent Representative to the UN, Ruchira Kamboj, said. She added that the Resolution would only “entrench” the parties concerned in Myanmar, and its neighbours such as India would be among those most affected by the instability in that country.

India’s abstention is being criticised by human rights advocates in Myanmar as indicative of a soft position on the junta that has not only imprisoned most of the democratic leadership but has also prosecuted them on charges of treason.

In an interview to The Hindu this month, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi appealed to India to “support ASEAN efforts”, adding that distancing from the ASEAN-led process would not be effective in helping Myanmar. Ms. Kamboj complimented the U.K. for taking the views of Myanmar’s neighbours and ASEAN countries into account while drafting the UNSC resolution but said India could not support it.

“Quiet and constructive diplomacy is the desirable recourse for seeking constructive and enduring solutions in Myanmar... In view of these concerns and our firm commitment to the democratic process and the well-being of the people in Myanmar, India has decided to abstain on this Resolution,” she said.



NATION

TIES WITH TALIBAN

In its latest outrageous decision, the Taliban regime has announced a ban on female students studying in universities. The “cabinet” meeting decision is one in a series that wipes out the many societal gains since 2001, the last time the Taliban was in power. These decrees include banning Afghan schoolgirls from studying above grade six, job restrictions and a ban on women at gyms and public parks, with public floggings for those travelling without male relatives chaperoning them. In effect, a regime that is growing crueller and less rational by the day, wants about half the country’s population out of public sight. Making the decision publicly and officially is the regime’s way of thumbing its nose at the international community by reneging on promises made during the Doha talks, including establishing an “inclusive” government. The international community must now review its current policy towards the Taliban 2.0 regime. While no country recognises the Taliban officially, many openly engage with the regime leaders; more than a dozen, including India, have diplomatic missions. The Government has sought to explain its decision to go back into Afghanistan and to even meet with Ministers such as Sirajuddin Haqqani who were responsible for attacks and killings at Indian missions as pragmatic policy to ensure India’s security and the smooth delivery of aid. In fact, these policies have only made it more comfortable for the Taliban to continue to rule, while giving shelter to terrorist organisations, including those that target India. In addition, New Delhi’s decision to cancel all visas to Afghans, hurt female students seeking an education in India the most.

Instead of pleading helplessness, there is much that the global community can do, acknowledging that women’s rights are at the core of the issue with the Taliban, and not just a “desirable” outcome that is optional in Afghanistan’s future. It must curtail engagement with the Taliban, which depends on external assistance to run its government structures. Leading nations should also create platforms outside Afghanistan for non-Taliban Afghan leaders, particularly women who had been elected in the past, to regroup, organise and voice an alternative vision to the dark one the Taliban seems set at thrusting the country into. India, as a regional leader, must review its “hands-off” approach to the people of Afghanistan who have clearly suffered many deprivations in the past year. Lofty words at the United Nations Security Council and other international fora have done very little to alleviate those hardships, and even less to further India’s interests or goodwill amongst a people that it has historically been seen as a good friend to.

FINLAND PITCHES FOR INDIAN NURSES, TECH WORKERS AMID LABOUR CRUNCH

Facing a massive skilled labour shortage, Finland’s government is planning to double the number of work immigrants entering the country and triple international student placements by 2030, said the Finnish Minister of Economic Affairs and Employment, Tuula Haatainen, during a visit to India aimed at pitching the country as a work destination for Indians.

In particular, Ms. Haatainen, who signed a “joint declaration of intent on migration and mobility” with Minister of State for External Affairs V. Muraleedharan, said that Finland hopes to attract workers in the technology and information and communications technology (ICT) sectors as well as nurses from India. However, the Minister said that while the government hopes to smooth the path for work migrants, a path to citizenship may not be on offer as yet.

India signed similar agreements with Germany this year and the United Kingdom (U.K.) last year.



The interest in Indian skilled manpower comes on the back of a massive labour crunch across Europe as businesses recover from COVID-19 losses and the border lockdowns enforced in the past two years. Finland, in particular, is a country of about 5.5 million people, with only about 2.5 million in the workforce, and an increasing rate of retirement.

A survey by Finland's Employment Ministry in March, as well as industry surveys showed that more than 70% of companies in Finland are now hampered by a shortage of skilled labour.

Ms. Haateinen said that in addition, her government wants to invest about 4% of its GDP in the research and development (R&D) sector, but needs more trained employees for that. As a result, Finland is offering to facilitate work migrants along with families, offering daycare, education and healthcare as well as undertaking half the cost of teaching them the local language.

"One area where we need professionals other than technology and ICT is the healthcare sector. We understand that in India, there are highly qualified nurses who will be willing to come to Finland," the Minister said, adding that Finland has broadened its search in the region.

According to a Ministry report that published an "occupation barometer" earlier this year, the top five occupations seeing shortages are all in the healthcare sector, including nurses, social work and counselling staff, general practitioners, and senior physicians.

DEALING WITH BEIJING DIPLOMATICALLY

The convening of the 17th round of India-China corps commander-level talks at the Chushul-Moldo border meeting point in eastern Ladakh on December 20, 12 days after the clash in Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern sector, is a positive development. But unfortunately, it does not inspire confidence about Chinese intentions vis a vis the Line of Actual Control. The last round of talks was held in July, and in September, the government announced that the two sides had finished disengaging at Gogra Hot Springs, as had been agreed in the 16th round. After that, Beijing appeared reluctant to accede to Delhi's push for another round, signaling that there was nothing more to discuss about the situation in eastern Ladakh, and certainly not a return to the status quo that existed before its incursions in April-May 2020. A joint statement that the two sides agreed to keep talking through military and diplomatic channels toward a "mutually acceptable resolution of the remaining issues at the earliest" suggests that there was no outcome from this round. It is also not clear if the "remaining" issues have been agreed upon by both sides. Apart from the fact that India now faces an altered status quo and that the PLA is rapidly building war-like infrastructure on its side, for India, the "remaining" issues are the presence of Chinese troops in the Depsang plains, and intrusions in the Demchok area.

Just as it did with the clash at Tawang, the Chinese side chose the timing for this round of talks in Ladakh, seeking to project the impression that it holds the cards. The sector-wise compartmentalisation makes the tensions seem manageable, but the reality appears to be that there is no predicting which part of the 3,500 km of the line will flare up suddenly, as it did on the morning of December 9. Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar flagged the seriousness of the situation when he told Parliament that the Indian deployment at the LAC is at its "highest level".

Delhi should make a push for talks at the diplomatic level even as it ramps up military preparedness. From the short statement by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, it is unclear how prepared the Army was for the transgression at Tawang, despite the advanced Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance devices that have reportedly been installed in that area.



Whatever the facts on the ground and regardless of how the tensions will unfold, the government would be well advised to take the Opposition parties into confidence at the earliest. A wide political consensus is what the country needs when confronted with tensions at the borders and it is the government's task and responsibility to build it.

THE NEW NORMAL IN THE INDO-PACIFIC CONTESTATION

As 2022 comes to an end, the world is embracing a 'new normal' where new fault lines are being reconfigured in the Indo-Pacific. The Indian Ocean and South Asian regions are at the heart of this contestation, considering their geo-political and geo-economic prominence and India's emergence as a major power. As tensions between an aggressive China and an emerging India intensify, New Delhi's Quad partners are also making inroads in its backyard, ushering significant changes in the region.

China's widening outreach

The contestation for South Asia and the Indian Ocean is not new. China has long tried to mark its influence in these regions and enhance its strategic ambitions, namely, to limit Indian influence, military power, and status and to sustain its energy supply and economic growth. Beijing's outreach in South Asia increased manifold in the early 2000s with its economic boom. It began to further its strategic ends in the region through loans, financial incentives, and mega-infrastructure projects; this became more institutionalised with the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. Subsequently, these investments enabled Beijing to access the Indian Ocean, promote political and security ties in the region, harbour military vessels and submarines, and take certain islands and ports on lease (including the Hambantota port of Sri Lanka).

It is only with the Galwan clashes in 2020 that the Indian strategic thinking is deeming Beijing as a bigger threat than that of Islamabad. While the possibility of a two-front war persists, Pakistan's strategic isolation, economic and political fallout, and border and terror challenges emanating from Afghanistan have minimised the likelihood of its aggression. On the other hand, Beijing's larger strategic and diplomatic presence and grand ambitions have continued to trigger angst for New Delhi.

Steps by India, the rest of the Quad

After Galwan, New Delhi has re-energised diplomatic efforts in its backyard. In the Maldives, New Delhi is reciprocating President Ibrahim Solih's 'India First' policy with massive economic assistance, grants, and infrastructure projects and by also cooperating on maritime security. In Nepal, Prime Minister Deuba's government has attempted to improve Nepal's overall bilateral relations with India. In crisis-hit Sri Lanka, India, this year alone, has provided economic and humanitarian assistance and investments worth \$4 billion. India's leading efforts in South Asia and the Indian Ocean have also attracted other Quad members (Japan, Australia, and the United States). Close cooperation has ensued among these partners to collectively push against China and offer genuine alternatives to the BRI - they have also been assisting Sri Lanka throughout the crisis. Japan is also finalising its talks with Sri Lanka on debt restructuring. In the Maldives, Australia and the U.S. have committed to opening their embassies and new areas of cooperation. In 2020, the U.S. signed a defence and security framework with the Maldives. Earlier this year, Nepal also ratified the U.S.'s Millennium Challenge Cooperation (Nepal Compact), much to China's displeasure.

However, the recent success of India and its partners is unlikely to deter China from furthering its presence in the region. Such an outcome is more unlikely, with tensions rising against India, and



the Quad partners making inroads in South Asia. Earlier this month, the Chinese surveillance vessel Yuan Wang-5 (it had docked in Sri Lanka in August), re-entered the Indian Ocean. A similar incident occurred last month when another vessel of the Yuan Wang series entered the Indian Ocean, coinciding with the test flight of the Agni-series missile. Beijing also hosted its first-ever China-Indian Ocean Region Forum, to institutionalise its presence in the region and challenge new initiatives such as the Quad and the Colombo Security Conclave.

A balancing act is likely

Beijing will continue to leverage its financial and economic might and political influence in South Asia. But, most importantly, South Asian countries would also hesitate to completely move away from China as they hope to exercise their agency by balancing with China and India — essentially making this competition a ‘new normal’. And this trend will only increase with new players entering the region.

Such a balancing outcome is very likely with most South Asian countries now facing economic and political turmoil. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have continued to haunt the region. Nepal, the Maldives and Bhutan are struggling with depleting forex reserves. Bangladesh has reached a bailout agreement worth \$4.5 billion with the International Monetary Fund. Sri Lanka is yet to chart its way out of the economic crisis. Energy shortages, inflation, and negative or slow economic growth are also disrupting day-to-day activities in these countries. As 2023 marks an election year for a large part of South Asia, these economic grievances combined with political opportunism will likely fuel more instability in the region. Ongoing protests in Bangladesh are a mere indication of such upcoming challenges. New Delhi and its partners which have only started to make recent gains against China, should be ready to embrace these challenges.

MUMBAI’S WORST-KEPT SECRETS

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) has “covered up” some of Mumbai’s slums in a bid to hide the financial capital’s economic inequalities during the G-20 meet that took place in the city last week.

Delegates from 20 countries participated in the first meeting of the Development Working Group (DWG) under India’s G-20 presidency from December 13 to 16.

The civic body put up screens, hoardings and banners with the G-20 meet branding alongside the Western Express Highway, along which the delegates travelled. As a part of a “beautification drive”, the BMC made sure it concealed any view of slums and buildings under construction with expansive green and white sheets. More than 50% of Mumbai’s population lives in slums or cramped housing.

Many of the delegates visited the Kanheri caves in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park as a part of their Mumbai sightseeing programme, and hence the entire stretch of Western Express Highway was spruced up: walls were given a lick of paint and road dividers decorated with potted plants.

The focus of the G-20 meet was to support developing countries in dealing with immediate concerns relating to food, fuel and fertilizer security as well as putting in place collective action plans to accelerate progress on the Sustainable Development Goals.



This is, however, not the first time authorities have tried to hide slums and areas considered unsightly before major international events or visits by foreign dignitaries. An entire wall was erected in Ahmedabad before then U.S. President Donald Trump visited Prime Minister Narendra Modi's State in 2020.

CENTRE RECEIVED FEEDBACK ON 'LACK OF TRANSPARENCY' IN COLLEGIUM SYSTEM, SAYS RIJJU

The Union government has received various "representations" on the lack of transparency, objectivity and social diversity in the Collegium system of appointment of Supreme Court and High Court judges, Union Law Minister Kiren Rijju told the Rajya Sabha on Thursday.

In a written reply, Mr. Rijju said the government had sent suggestions for supplementing the Memorandum of Procedure (MoP) for appointment of judges to the High Courts and the Supreme Court.

The MoP is a document which guides the appointment and transfer of judges in the higher judiciary.

The Law Minister made these remarks in response to a question by CPI(M) member John Brittas, who asked if the government was planning to reintroduce the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC).

Mr. Rijju said the government had brought the Constitution (Ninety-Ninth Amendment) Act, 2014 and the NJAC Act on April 13, 2015 to make the Collegium system of appointments of judges "more broad-based, transparent, accountable and bring objectivity in the system".

However, both the Acts were challenged in the Supreme Court, which eventually declared both the laws unconstitutional and void on October 16, 2015. On December 8, in response to a written question by Mr. Brittas and Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge, Mr. Rijju had said there was no plan to bring back the NJAC with suitable modifications.

Apart from regularly targeting the judiciary, Mr. Rijju recently told the Rajya Sabha that the issue of vacancies in the higher judiciary would linger till a new system of appointment was created.

PENDENCY POSES A HURDLE TO SUPREME COURT'S ROLE AS PROTECTOR OF CITIZENS' RIGHTS

Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud has said the very purpose of the Supreme Court is to hear every little cry for personal liberty and protection of the Fundamental Rights.

But pendency is a perennial drawback that affects the court's role as the timely protector of citizens' rights.

Law Minister Kiren Rijju has reportedly said the court is bogged down in "frivolous" public interest litigation and bail applications. The "extra burden" has reduced the efficacy of justice administration. The government's zeroing in on bail applications as one of the reasons for slow justice comes at a time when 10 bail pleas are heard every day by all 13 Benches of the Supreme Court. The CJI has made it clear that bail petitions deal with the question of personal liberty and should not be delayed.



Moreover, PIL petitions like the one for an independent and neutral mechanism for appointment of Election Commissioners have raised important issues, with a Constitution Bench recently pointing out orally how the government is paying mere “lip-service” to the independence of the poll body by appointing bureaucrats who cannot even complete the statutory six-year tenure in office.

But the statistics do show pendency as a constantly looming shadow, threatening to engulf the good work.

In fact, an exasperated Chief Justice Chandrachud in November remarked that “widened access to the Supreme Court” is making things dysfunctional. The Chief Justice said the judiciary is “overburdened because of the system”.

Figures in Parliament reveal that there are 498 Constitution Bench cases pending in the Supreme Court as on December 13, 2022.

2,870 PILs pending

Public litigation petitions claim a large portion of the court’s space with 2,870 of them pending. Special leave petitions and writ petitions number 4,331 and 2,209, respectively.

There are 487 pending election matters in the top court. The total number of pending cases concerning crimes against women relating to “harassment, dowry cruelty and death, sexual harassment, domestic violence” are 283, according to data from the Integrated Case Management Information System. Some of these cases date back to 2014. Contempt of court cases alone number 1,295 in the Supreme Court as on December 16, 2022.

The statistics placed on record by the Law Ministry in Parliament show that the Supreme Court has disposed of 10 Constitution Bench cases in 2022 as on December 13; a substantial 29,866 special leave petitions; 974 PIL pleas, which is about double the number disposed of last year; 1,316 writ petitions; 286 election cases and 1,590 contempt matters.

In its reply in the Lok Sabha in December on the “reasons behind the delay in disposing of cases”, the Law Ministry said it was a “multi-faceted problem”.

“With an increase in the population of the country and awareness among the public of their rights, filing of fresh cases is also increasing by leaps and bounds, year after year. Each case is distinct and variable in nature, therefore, no specific timelines can be determined concerning disposal of cases. Myriad factors come into play,” the Ministry said.

Vacancies of judges, frequent adjournments and lack of adequate arrangements to monitor, track and bunch cases for hearing are also factors which lead to pendency.

QUESTIONABLE REFUSAL

It is a matter of concern that the Supreme Court has declined to review its May 2022 order holding that the Gujarat government is the “appropriate government” to decide on the premature release of 11 convicts serving life terms in the Bilkis Bano gang-rape case, which also involved the gruesome murder of several others. A court’s jurisdiction to review its own order is limited to correcting any error apparent on the face of the record. It is also a discretionary remedy and generally not heard in open court. However, it appears that the two-Judge Bench has failed to address a significant error in its finding that the decision on remission should be made by the

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Gujarat government. The case, which arose from one of the many heinous crimes that took place during the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat, had been transferred for trial to Mumbai by the Court. The appeal arising from it was heard by the Bombay High Court. Section 432(7) of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) says the “appropriate government” is “the Government of the State within which the offender is sentenced”. Despite this clear provision, the Bench had taken the view that as the offence had taken place in Gujarat, and the trial in Mumbai, further matters had returned to the jurisdiction of Gujarat on conclusion of trial. It had also noted that the transfer of the trial to another State had taken place under “extraordinary circumstances”.

The Bench’s view was quite peculiar because it goes against a statutory provision. Also, the transfer took place only because a fair trial was not possible in Gujarat. It stands to reason that the Gujarat government ought to have been divested of the power to consider remission in the same case. Another aspect of the earlier order was that it had specified that the remission should be considered under its 1992 policy, as it was the one in force on the day of their conviction. Accordingly, in the absence of any specific curbs in that policy on the power to remit the sentences of those involved in heinous crimes, the convicts were released. The Centre, it was later revealed, had also concurred with the decision. Fortunately, the refusal to review the earlier order will not affect the outcome of a separate petition challenging their release. There seem to be enough grounds to question the remission. Court filings suggest that the trial judge’s opinion against their release was disregarded. Further, the presence of political functionaries, including BJP MLAs, on a committee that recommended their release, may have also vitiated the decision. The Supreme Court may still have an opportunity to examine the legitimacy of allowing the premature release of those directly involved in communally motivated crimes.

WHY CJI IS RIGHT TO EXPRESS CONCERN ON AGE OF CONSENT: CRIMINALISATION OF ADOLESCENTS UNDER POCSO ACT SHOWS AN OVERBEARING STATE UNAWARE OF SOCIAL CHANGE

The Chief Justice of India’s message to Parliament to address concerns about the age of consent under the POCSO Act is the culmination of a series of events. The Madras, Delhi and Meghalaya High Courts have flagged matters concerning criminalisation of romantic relationships between or with an adolescent under POCSO. On November 12, the Delhi High Court in *AK v. State Govt of NCT of Delhi* (order by Justice Jasmeet Singh) stated that the intention of POCSO was to protect children below the age of 18 years from sexual exploitation and not to criminalise romantic relationships between consenting young adults. This week, the government told Parliament that it does not have any plan to revise the age of consent.

The root cause of the problem at hand is that POCSO conflates exploitative sexual practice and general sexual expression by an adolescent, and criminalises both. As a result, criminal law has become an instrument to silence or regulate a non-exploitative consensual sexual relationship involving a minor girl, which is voluntary. The Tamil Nadu police guidelines directing police personnel to not act hastily when arresting youngsters for romantic cases under POCSO is one intervention to address the Act’s tendency to overcriminalise. However, the cumulative victimisation of the “consenting” girl also deserves the lawmakers’ attention. POCSO, MTP and the Child Marriage Act create a complex socio-legal web that deprives the minor girl of the rights to dignity, liberty, sexual and reproductive health, and undermines her privacy. This also feeds into a milieu of poor sexual awareness among young girls.



The legal aspects of teenage sexuality have undergone several changes since colonial times. The age of consent has increased from 10 to 12 to 14 to 16 and finally to 18 years by the 2013 amendment, in order to bring it in conformity with the then newly legislated POCSO Act. The law disregards the likelihood of a minor girl engaging in sexual activity voluntarily — it thus desexualises her. The law that criminalises adolescent sexuality either ignores social reality or pretends to do so. According to the NFHS-5, for instance, 39 per cent women had their first sexual experience before turning 18. The same survey provides additional evidence of sexual engagement among unmarried adolescent girls by reporting contraception use by 45 per cent of unmarried girls in the age group of 15-19 years.

The recent criminal law amendment in UP that imposed a blanket ban on granting anticipatory bail to a rape accused rubs salt on the already wounded. The state seems to be acting as *parens patriae* to protect children from sexual offences and paradoxically prosecuting the youth at the same time. The number of juveniles (especially those between the ages of 16 and 18) apprehended under the POCSO Act in the country has seen a staggering jump of 180 per cent between 2017-2021 according to the National Crime Records Bureau's report, 'Crime in India 2021'. Criminalising underage sexuality (25 per cent of total POCSO cases) burdens the already-overburdened courts thereby clogging up the criminal justice machinery even more.

What has been set wrong by the legislature has been attempted to be remedied by the judiciary. The Madras High Court in *Vijayalakshmi v State* (2021) made it imperative to draw a line demarcating the nature of acts that should not be made to fall within the scope of this stringent law. The obiter of the court that POCSO has become a tool in the hands of certain sections of society to abuse the process of law is corroborated by other courts too. *Prima facie* the judiciary seems to have a sympathetic approach in cases — it has readily granted bail — where the outcome of the love affair is marriage. However, courts are reluctant to grant bail in matters of a love affair with a minor girl gone bad — *X (minor) v State of Jharkhand & anr*, (2022) is a case in point.

In *Dharmendra Singh v State Govt of NCT* (2020), the Delhi High Court has attempted to increase the chances of bail of an accused in an “innocent yet unholy physical alliance” or where there is “tacit approval-in-fact” by the girl and the “age difference between the victim and the offender is less”. These guidelines issued by the court pertain to close-in-age exemptions, available in statutory rape cases in most US states. Also known as the Romeo-Juliet law, it provides a degree of protection to the offender where the age difference between him and the victim is within the stipulated limit.

In a recent speech at the Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights, former Supreme Court judge, Justice Madan Lokur talked about the need to evolve a separate procedure for children while dealing with POCSO cases. The relief accorded by a few high courts to “not so” criminal male adolescent/youth is disproportionate to the harm and harassment caused for the fault of falling in love with a girl who purportedly is “not so” immature. It would be not an overstatement to describe these “romantic” lovers in a mutually consensual relationship as victims of the abuse of the criminal justice system processes. The quest for more meaningful solutions should now come to a logical end before it creates greater havoc in society.

ACID ATTACKS: THE CRIME, THE LAW, REGULATION, AND COMPENSATION

A 17-year-old girl was on Wednesday attacked with an acid-like substance in Delhi's Dwarka by three assailants while she was on her way to school. While the victim has suffered 8% burns and disfigurement of the face and neck area, the accused have been arrested by Delhi police. The

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incident has once again brought back to focus the heinous crime of acid attacks and the easy availability of corrosive substances.

How prevalent are acid attacks in India?

Though heinous, acid attacks on women are not as prevalent a crime as others against women. According to data compiled by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), there were 150 such cases recorded in 2019, 105 in 2020 and 102 in 2021. West Bengal and UP consistently record the highest number of such cases generally accounting for nearly 50% of all cases in the country year on year.

The chargesheeting rate of acid attacks stood at 83% and the conviction rate at 54% in 2019. In 2020, the figures stood at 86% and 72% respectively. In 2021, the figures were recorded to be 89% and 20% respectively. In 2015, MHA issued an advisory to all states to ensure speedy justice in cases of acid attacks by expediting prosecution.

What is the law on acid attacks?

Until 2013, acid attacks were not treated as separate crimes. However, following amendments carried out in the IPC, acid attacks were put under a separate section (326A) of the IPC and made punishable with a minimum imprisonment of 10 years which is extendable to life along with fine.

The law also has provisions for punishment for denial of treatment to victims or police officers refusing to register an FIR or record any piece of evidence. Denial of treatment (by both public and private hospitals) can lead to imprisonment of up to one year and dereliction of duty by a police officer is punishable by imprisonment of up to two years.

What is the law on the regulation of acid sales?

In 2013, the Supreme Court took cognizance of acid attacks and passed an order on the regulation of sales of corrosive substances. Based on the order, the MHA issued an advisory to all states on how to regulate acid sales and framed the Model Poisons Possession and Sale Rules, 2013 under The Poisons Act, 1919. It asked states to frame their own rules based on model rules, as the matter fell under the purview of states.

According to the MHA's directions and the model rules, over-the-counter sale of acid was not allowed unless the seller maintains a logbook/register recording the sale of acid. This logbook was to also contain the details of the person to whom acid is sold, the quantity sold, the address of the person and also specify the reason for procuring acid.

The sale is also to be made only when the buyer produces a photo ID containing his address issued by the government. The buyer must also prove he/she is above 18 years of age.

Sellers are also required to declare all stocks of acid with the concerned Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) within 15 days and in case of undeclared stock of acid. The SDM can confiscate the stock and suitably impose a fine of up to Rs 50,000 for a breach of any of the directions.

The rules ask educational institutions, research laboratories, hospitals, government departments and the departments of Public Sector Undertakings, which are required to keep and store acid, to maintain a register of usage of acid and file the same with the concerned SDM.



“A person shall be made accountable for the possession and safe keeping of acid in their premises. The acid shall be stored under the supervision of this person and there shall be compulsory checking of the students/ personnel leaving the laboratories/place of storage where acid is used,” the rules say.

In August last year, MHA issued another advisory to all States/ UTs to review and ensure that the retail sale of acids and chemicals is strictly regulated in terms of the Poison Rules so that these are not used in crime.

Victim compensation and care

Based on Supreme Court directions, the MHA asked states to make sure acid attack victims are paid compensation of at least Rs. 3 lakhs by the concerned State Government/Union Territory as the aftercare and rehabilitation cost. Out of this, a sum of Rs 1 lakh is to be paid to the victim within 15 days of the occurrence of such an incident to facilitate immediate medical attention and expenses in this regard. The balance sum of Rs. 2 lakhs is to be paid “as expeditiously as may be possible and positively within two months thereafter”.

States are supposed to ensure that treatment provided to acid attack victims in any hospital, public or private, is free of cost. The cost incurred on treatment is not to be included in the Rs 1 lakh compensation given to the victim.

“Acid attack victims need to undergo a series of plastic surgeries and hence 1-2 beds at the Apex State Tertiary Hospital could be earmarked for the treatment of acid attack victims so that the victims need not run from pillar to post to get these operations performed expeditiously,” the 2013 MHA advisory said.

“In addition, private hospitals which have availed the facility of concessional land for setting up the hospital could also be persuaded to earmark 1-2 beds for treatment of underprivileged victims of acid attacks which the State Government can identify for treatment,” it added.

Apart from this, MHA suggested states should also extend social integration programs to the victims for which NGOs could be funded to exclusively look after their rehabilitative requirements.

How do these help in prevention?

According to sources in the police, the regulations on acid sales largely help in tracking the accused and not so much in prevention. “The implementation of the regulations is not very strict. Acid is still easily available in many places. Then these are crimes of passion. In a majority of cases the accused is not even thinking about consequences,” a senior police officer said.

Another officer said that things have improved compared to the past as social attitudes are changing and the focus of the police in dealing with crimes against women can cause some deterrence. “But the key to solving this problem will always remain in society. We must create more awareness. Parents must teach their children the importance of boundaries and consent,” the officer said.



MAHARASHTRA PANEL TO TRACK INTERFAITH MARRIAGES THREATENS TO LIMIT PERSONAL FREEDOMS, CAN BE WEAPONISED AGAINST MINORITIES

Following a report in this newspaper, the Maharashtra government has decided to limit the mandate of the recently constituted Intercaste/Interfaith Marriage-Family Coordination Committee (state level) to gathering information on interfaith marriages. The renamed Interfaith Marriage-Family Coordination Committee under the state Women and Child Development Ministry will, besides providing support and rehabilitation when necessary, ostensibly track fraud committed in the name of “love jihad”, the majoritarian paranoia of choice, that has found new assertion in the wake of the alleged murder of Vasai resident Shraddha Walkar by her partner Aftab Poonawala in New Delhi. With states such as Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand already having brought in anti-conversion legislation, the decision of the Maharashtra government is only the latest to add to the clamour for action against “love jihad”, whose spectre has been put to efficient political use over the last decade.

Such vigilance remains yet another indication of the State’s disproportionately burgeoning — and utterly unacceptable — interest in, and demand for, control over the lives of individual citizens. In its imagination of intended malice, it is not just violative of one’s rights of freedom and equality, it also reeks of misogyny in its steadfast denial of a woman’s choice of partner as her own free will and not an act of coercion. There is the IPC for all genuine complaints so the committee could be weaponised. In every aspect, monitoring of a citizen’s life for her own supposed benefit is a cautionary tale, a limitation of the freedoms of men and women, designed to deter them from leading fuller, freer lives.

The marriage between politics and communalism is not a new phenomenon, especially in a state that has been witness to one of the worst communal riots in Indian history or where politics of nativism had thrived on amping up parochial sentiments. Yet, for all that the state has witnessed, its capital remains a place of hope and freedom, anachronistic in its defiance of self-limiting labels. In a country increasingly becoming constrained by a narrow imagination of uniformity, Mumbai is still maya nagari — a cauldron of multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-cultural aspirations — where people come to lose themselves in the anonymity it offers, and find themselves in the opportunities that it holds out. To try to inhibit that idea of openness and possibility by casting communal aspersions on personal choice is a travesty.

UPHOLDING THE AUTONOMY OF THE ELECTION COMMISSION

Over the course of November and December, a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court of India heard a crucial case about the method by which the Election Commission of India (ECI) is constituted, and Election Commissioners appointed. At the time of writing, the Court has reserved its judgment, which is expected early in the new year. The issues before the Court are straightforward, but with far-reaching ramifications for Indian democracy: is complete executive control over appointments to the ECI constitutional? And if not, what manner of appointment is sufficient to preserve the independence of the ECI, and the fairness of elections?

According to the classical understanding of modern democracy, there are three “wings” of state: the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary. The task of the Constitution is to allocate powers between these three wings, and to ensure that there is an adequate degree of checks and balances between them. Traditionally, bodies that are involved with administrative and implementational issues — elections being among them — are believed to fall within the executive domain.



The erosion of a 'classical understanding'

However, in contemporary times, that understanding is no longer dominant. It is now commonly accepted that healthy constitutional democracies need what are known as “fourth branch institutions” (or, alternatively, “integrity institutions”). The reason why a “fourth branch” — in addition to the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary — needs to exist is the following: many of the basic rights and guarantees that we enjoy cannot be effective without an infrastructure of implementation.

Let us take, for example, the right to information, a staple feature of most modern constitutional democracies. Without an infrastructure of implementation, the right to information will remain only a paper guarantee. We need, for example, an information commission, adequately staffed and funded, which will oversee the on-ground enforcement of the right to information, compel recalcitrant public institutions to release public information, adjudicate disputes, and so on. These tasks involve elements of the judicial function as well as the administrative function, and, therefore, cannot only be performed by the judiciary, but need bodies — such as commissions — to perform them on a daily basis.

Now, it logically follows from the above that “fourth branch institutions” need to be functionally independent from the political executive. This is because they are the vehicles for implementing rights against the executive. Once again, think of the right to information: primarily, citizens will attempt to invoke this right to extract public documents from government departments, in the interests of transparency. Governments, therefore, have a direct interest in such cases, and as history has shown, governments are rarely willing to be transparent of their own accord. To be effective, therefore, an Information Commission needs to be thoroughly independent of the government, against which it will be obligated to enforce the constitutional right to information. This is not an abstract point: as we have seen in recent times, extensive government control over the Central Information Commission — including control over appointments — has led to it becoming a largely toothless and ineffective body, and the eventual frustration of the right to information.

Examples from overseas

Modern constitutions all over the world have recognised this.

Thus, for example, the South African and Kenyan Constitutions have dedicated constitutional provisions for “fourth branch institutions” such as Human Rights Commissions, Election Commissions, and so on, calling these “integrity institutions”, and requiring them to be “independent.” The appointments process for such bodies normally involves multiple stakeholders from different wings of the state.

The Indian Constitution also provides for such similar fourth branch institutions. While the ECI is, obviously, an example, others include the Comptroller and Auditor General, and the Public Service Commission(s), and the National Commission for Scheduled Castes. The problem, however, is this: while the Constitution goes to some degree to protect the independence of fourth branch institutions while officials are in office (such as, for example, a high threshold on the removal of an Electoral Commissioner), the power of appointment lies exclusively with the executive (formally, the President of India acting on the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers). To put the point simply, the government decides who gets to be in charge of running fourth branch institutions.



This is undoubtedly a problem. The link between the power of appointment to a body, and its control, is both intuitive and has been empirically established in multiple contexts. As the South African constitutional court correctly noted in one of its landmark judgments, true and functional independence is effectively impossible if the power to appoint rests entirely within a single individual, office, or entity. This, then, is the foundation of the ongoing dispute before the Supreme Court.

Indeed, Indian constitutional history as well points to the problem. The collegium system for the appointment of judges — which has recently seen controversy again — arose as a response to executive abuse and attempts to control the judiciary, stemming from the constitutional text, which again gave to the President (i.e., the executive) the power to appoint judges. In the landmark Vineet Narain case, the Supreme Court likewise held that for the rule of law to prevail, the appointment of the CBI Director would have to be ratified by a three-member body that included the Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition, and the Chief Justice of India. Thus, Indian constitutional history is no stranger to the perils of executive power over appointments to independent bodies, and the fashioning of remedies against that.

The appointments process

What, then, should the Court do in the case before it? It is important to note that almost no constitutional democracy in the world allows the political executive sole power to staff a body as important to sustaining democracy as an Election Commission. Appointment processes involve the government, the Opposition, independent experts, and judicial experts, in a manner that no one centre of power has dominance, or a veto. The problem, however, is that an appointments process is difficult to create simply by judicial decree: it is something that needs political consensus, public deliberation, and, perhaps, a carefully crafted legislation.

The Court, therefore, has its task cut out. It is obvious that the existing system where the executive has absolute power over appointments is unsatisfactory, has been historically problematic, and damages the rule of law. But the Court must be careful to avoid band aid or stop-gap solutions. One possible alternative is for the Court to hand down a suspended declaration of invalidity, i.e., a remedy where the Court puts into place certain interim guidelines, but leaves a more permanent, structural solution up to the legislature. It is for the Court to decide how best that might be achieved, but the guiding principles, at all times, must be functional and effective independence from the executive, from the moment of appointment to the retirement, and then beyond.

WHAT DO THE J&K LAND GRANTS RULES, 2022 ENTAIL?

The story so far:

The J&K Lieutenant Governor's administration, in the third week of December, notified fresh land rules under J&K Land Grant Rules-2022 and replaced the J&K Land Grants Rules-1960, which dealt with the special rules to grant government land on lease in erstwhile State of J&K. Under the previous rules, prime locations such as Srinagar, Jammu, Gulmarg and Pahalgam were opened up for construction of hotels, commercial structures and residential buildings in the past.

What do new land laws entail?

According to the new land laws, the leases of current land owners will not be extended in case of their lease expiry. It reads that all leases, except the subsisting or expired residential leases, expired or determined prior to the coming into force of these rules or issued under these



rules shall not be renewed and shall stand determined. Unlike the previous up to 99 years of lease, the lease period has been reduced to 40 years.

What is the L-G administration's plan for lease now?

An expert committee will enlist all properties where lease had ended. It will be e-auctioned afresh. The rules open bidding to "any person legally competent under Section 11 of the Indian Contract Act, 1872." These rules deem a person or an entity in default of Government Revenue accrued to the government under J&K Land Grant Act, 1960 or Government convicted under Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 shall not be eligible for participation in the auction.

According to now-repealed land laws, no such land shall be granted on lease to the person, who is not a permanent residence of the State; except where the Government, for the reasons to be recorded, relax this restriction in the interest of industrial or commercial development or in the favour of a registered charitable society.

Who all are eligible for lease rights in J&K after amendments?

The L-G administration has diversified the use of land on lease to education, healthcare, agriculture, tourism, skill development and development of traditional art, craft, culture and languages. The land could be leased for hydro-electric projects, stadiums, playgrounds, gymnasiums or other recreational purposes. It also included provisions for self-employment or for housing purposes of ex-servicemen, war widows and the families of martyrs, one who has sacrificed his life in the line of duty. In a first, the land could also be used for facilities of migrant workers, buildings and other construction workers.

What will be the immediate impact of the amendments?

The new rules have hundreds of properties open for fresh auction, where outsiders could also participate. The government has not yet released the list of properties where lease has ended. The impact will be of great significance in tourist hotspot Gulmarg, where 56 hotels out of 59 have their leases expired already. Similarly, properties in Pahalgam, Srinagar and Jammu's Patnitop will go up for auction.

Why are regional parties opposing these amendments?

National Conference vice president Omar Abdullah termed it as "unfortunate and aimed at settling outsiders". He said the first right to these lease properties "belongs to those who were already settled here". Kashmir's two key traders' bodies, the Jammu Kashmir Hoteliers Club (JKHC) and the Chamber Of Commerce Industry Kashmir (CCIK), said J&K's economy would come to a grinding halt and urged the L-G to reconsider the decision.

CITIZENSHIP PATH TO BE EASED FOR 6 MINORITY GROUPS FROM 3 NATIONS

The Union government is all set to ease grant of citizenship to members of six minority communities from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh whose passports and visas have ceased to be valid during their stay in India.

The Home Ministry is expected to revamp the citizenship portal to accept passports and visas with expired validity as supporting documents to process citizenship application of Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians, Buddhists and Jains from the three countries, says a government source.



The portal run by the Ministry currently accepts expired passports as supporting documents only for those Hindu and Sikh applicants from Pakistan and Afghanistan who entered India before December 31, 2009.

CAA not yet in force

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019, that intends to grant citizenship to undocumented (or illegal) migrants from these six non-Muslim communities from the three neighbouring countries is yet to come into force as the rules that govern the law are yet to be notified. The CAA could have helped the documented minority migrants in fast-tracking their applications as it reduces the mandatory requirement of 11-year aggregate stay in India to five years, to be eligible for citizenship.

Thousands waiting

According to Mr. Singh, there are 18,000 registered Pakistani Hindus who await citizenship.

According to the Ministry's report for 2021-22, from April to December 2021, 1,414 citizenship were granted to members of the minority groups from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

INCLUSION OF COMMUNITIES ON ST LIST STILL ON THE BACKBURNER

Over the past one week, while Parliament has discussed the inclusion of various communities on the Scheduled Tribe lists of Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Himachal Pradesh, Opposition MPs, specifically from Odisha, have questioned the government about the list of communities that were already recommended for inclusion on a priority basis over eight years ago by a government task force.

The task force, constituted in February 2014 under the leadership of former Tribal Affairs Secretary Hrusikesh Panda, had compiled a comprehensive list of over 40 communities from across the country that it felt should be included on the ST lists on a priority basis. Of those communities, nine are in Odisha, 26 are part of the tea tribes in Assam, eight are in Chhattisgarh, and a few are in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

A few of them are sub-sets of communities already categorised as STs, a few others are phonetic variations of existing tribes, a few are ones which were left out when lists were bifurcated, others still are those omitted from lists inexplicably, and a few more are those losing out on categorisation because they were forcibly taken away from their homelands as indentured labour to other States or were displaced by industrialisation, the task force had concluded.

The communities

Kandha Kumbhar, Jodia (and synonyms), Chuktia Bhunjia, Saara, Mankidia, Porja (and synonyms), Banda Paraja, Durua (and synonyms), and Paharia (in specific districts) communities are the ones in Odisha. In Tamil Nadu, it recommended the Pulayan (and synonyms) community. In Andhra Pradesh, it suggested the Konda Kumari community (and its synonyms).

The task force had concluded that as many as 26 of the tea tribes of Assam, those who were forcibly taken as indentured labourers from States such as Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha, should be included on the ST list. It justified this "based on the key principle that the 'indentured labourers' are a category which is distinct from 'voluntary migration'". It had also recommended for inclusion tribal communities of Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh that had been



displaced on account of the Narmada Dam Project, and various Devnagri versions of tribes on the ST list of Chhattisgarh, such as Bharia, Pando, Gadaba, Bhuihar, Nagasia, Dhangad and Kond.

Significantly, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs introduced a Bill in the Lok Sabha this Winter Session, proposing the inclusion of nearly all of the above mentioned synonyms on the ST list of Chhattisgarh. This Bill is expected to be taken up for discussion on Monday.

Odisha MP Chandrani Murmu (BJP), in the Lok Sabha last week, asked the Minister of Tribal Affairs to expedite the process of including the communities in Odisha on a priority basis. She had also pointed out that the Centre was currently sitting on the State's government recommendations to include as many as 160 communities on the State's ST list since the 1970s.

The task force had noted that these communities continued to be excluded or were facing delays in inclusion due to the current procedure and criteria for inclusion on ST lists and had recommended changes to both.

CONTROVERSY OVER AN IQBAL SONG IN A UP SCHOOL AND HOW THESE CULTURE WARS IMPOVERISH US ALL

A school principal and a shiksha mitra in Uttar Pradesh are the latest victims of an ongoing culture war in the state. These two staff members of a government school in Bareilly were suspended by the state education department on Wednesday and an FIR filed against them for "hurting religious sentiments" after a Vishwa Hindu Parishad activist filed a complaint against them. According to the FIR, a prayer song written by Allama Iqbal and recited by students in the school assembly "hurt the sentiments of the Hindus" and the teachers involved in the recital were "preparing the students for conversion". The 1902 song, "Lab pe aati hai dua", is recited in morning assemblies in hundreds of schools that follow secular curricula. The complainant, according to the FIR, was upset with the last two lines of the song — "Mere allah burai se bachana mujhko/ Nek jo rah ho, ussi rah pe chalana mujhko" (O Lord, protect me from evil/ Guide me to the path that leads to the good). The complaint and the administrative action taken on it — by the police and education departments respectively — is deeply disturbing. It reveals a wilful cultural ignorance and deepening social polarisation that, going ahead, could have an increasingly chilling effect in the teaching and learning of poetry and literature.

Iqbal, the author of *Sare jahan se achha Hindustan hamara*, is a leading light in the shared heritage of the Subcontinent. Like many poets, his poetic idiom has been shaped also by his faith and related cultural traditions. In fact, religious texts and epics are the fount of much of the literatures in India; any learning of Indian language and literature involves engagement with writers such as Tulsidas, Kambar, Basava, Thunchathu Ezhuthachan, Jnaneswar, Tukaram. In the case of a modern poet like Iqbal and the song in question, the words have to be read within the larger context of the text rather than in isolation and ascribed a broader meaning instead of confining it within a religious idiom.

Karnataka, which is acquiring a reputation for being the laboratory of Hindutva politics in the South, is also being roiled by a debilitating and polarising politics and policy which gathers around personal choices such as dress and food — the attempts to ban hijab in educational institutions, for instance, or the sale of halal meat. The government machinery seems to take a cue from the power corridors and acts with alacrity in favour of the majoritarian sentiment when such controversies erupt. In the process, in Karnataka as in UP, the cultural life of the common people is getting restricted and impoverished.



Muhammad Iqbal

This is not the first instance of a school head being suspended due to the recitation of the prayer. Three years ago, in October 2019, the headmaster of a government primary school in Bisalpur area of Pilibhit was suspended following a complaint by local VHP workers who alleged that the teacher made students recite a religious prayer that is usually recited in madrasas. In that case, too, the students had recited Allama Iqbal's 'Lab Pe Aati Hai Dua'. The headmaster was later reinstated, but was transferred to another school.

The poet and his poems

The prayer, written by Iqbal in 1902, has been sung at several educational institutions in India and Pakistan, including some prestigious schools which sing it in their morning assembly.

Among Iqbal's many writings, the most celebrated is the immortal 'Saare jahan se achcha Hindustan hamara', written in 1904, his beautiful ode to India, which became one of the songs that inspired the freedom fighters against British rule. Iqbal's first published collection of poems came out in 1923, and was titled 'Bang-e-Dara' (Call of the Marching Bell). He wrote mostly in Urdu and Persian.

Mohammad Iqbal (1877-1938) was born to a family with Kashmiri Pandit ancestry that had embraced Islam in the seventeenth century. Iqbal was born in Sialkot, Punjab (now in Pakistan) and died in Lahore when he was aged 60 years. Iqbal's tomb is located in Hazuri Bagh in Lahore. Iqbal is commonly referred to as Allama, which is a title given to Islamic scholars.

Apart from being a writer, Iqbal was also a lawyer and appeared at the Lahore High Court in several cases. After completing his BA and MA at Government College, Lahore, he went on to study in Europe in 1905. At Trinity College, Cambridge, he completed a second Bachelors degree, and completed a PhD at the University of Munich later. In 1922, he was knighted by King George V, giving him the title of "Sir".

The idea of Pakistan

In his later life, Iqbal came to favour the idea of a separate nation for Muslims, and is believed to have been the influence behind Muhammad Ali Jinnah's vision of a separate nation of Pakistan. In that country, Iqbal is regarded as the ideological founder of the nation — the man who envisioned the state that Jinnah gave physical shape to.

Iqbal's confidence in Jinnah is believed to have sprouted from Jinnah's integrity since he was the only Muslim leader with an unchallenged national status and because he did not have provincial or regional ties.

WHAT IS THE LATEST CLASH BETWEEN AAP AND THE DELHI L-G?

Delhi Lieutenant-Governor (L-G) Vinai Kumar Saxena has directed Chief Secretary Naresh Kumar to implement a 2016 order of the Committee on Content Regulation in Government Advertising (CCRGA). The order calls for recovering ₹97.14 crore plus interest from the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) for "political advertisements" published or telecast as government advertisements in 2015 and 2016. The move added to the long list of escalations between the AAP-led Delhi government and the L-G.



What is the CCRGA?

A three-member body, the CCRGA was formed by the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in April, 2016, on the directions of the Supreme Court in its judgment in the Common Cause vs. Union of India case in May, 2015. The body is set up to regulate the content of Central and State government advertisements in all media platforms. The SC had also mandated States to constitute their own respective bodies. While some States have set up committees to regulate public advertising content, some have given consent to the CCRGA to monitor their advertisements.

The SC, in its order had also issued a set of guidelines for public-funded advertising by governments. Some of the guidelines mentioned include that government advertising should maintain political neutrality and avoid glorification of political personalities or projecting a positive impression of the party in power or a negative impression of parties critical of the government. They also should not be used at patronising media houses.

What is the CCRGA's 2016 order?

Months after its formation, the CCRGA, following a complaint from Congress leader Ajay Maken, issued notices to the Delhi government on allegations of violation of the SC-mandated guidelines in publishing advertisements.

In its response, the Delhi government informed the CCRGA that it was going to form a committee of its own as per the 2015 order of the SC, which mandated that States have to set up their own respective bodies to regulate government advertisements' content. Mr. Maken meanwhile had also approached the Delhi High Court in the matter, which ruled in August, 2016, that Union Territories are not authorised to constitute their own committees and will therefore, come under the jurisdiction of the CCRGA. The CCRGA, after its investigation, passed an order on September 16, 2016, ruling that a number of Delhi government advertisements had violated the guidelines on various fronts such as publishing false/misleading ads, mentioning the party in power by name, self-glorification and targeting political opponents. The committee also directed the Delhi government's Directorate of Information and Publicity (DIP), which issues government campaigns, to identify specific advertisements, quantify the money spent on them, and recover it from the AAP.

After quantifying an amount of ₹97,14,69,137 spent on these advertisements, the DIP on March 30, 2017, directed AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal to pay ₹42,26,81,265 to the State exchequer immediately, and to release the remaining amount directly to the agencies/publications which ran the advertisements within 30 days.

What has been the AAP's response?

The AAP has been at the receiving end of political criticism, with rival parties accusing it of spending huge sums of money on government advertising campaigns and publicity. However, the party, since forming the government in 2015, has been defending its spending on advertisements stating that it is for public knowledge of different government schemes and various awareness campaigns.



FLUID BOUNDARIES

The dispute between Karnataka and Maharashtra over areas that both States claim to be theirs has become nasty and noisy in recent weeks, even leading to violence. Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai and Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis — both from the BJP — have crossed swords publicly. Campaigners for the merger of Karnataka's Marathi-speaking areas with Maharashtra upped the ante this week by organising a conference in Belgaum. Maharashtra politicians wanted to attend it but were stopped by the police, leading to a flare-up, possibly as intended by the invitees and the organisers. Karnataka's practice, since 2006, of holding the winter session of the Assembly in Belgaum, is itself an assertion of its authority over the place. Recently, Mr. Bommai reiterated Karnataka's claim over 48 villages of Sangli in Maharashtra, drawing a sharp rebuttal. With exchanges getting increasingly provocative, Union Home Minister Amit Shah has told the Chief Ministers to dial down the rhetoric and wait for the Supreme Court to adjudicate the matter. The Court is seized of the matter, but it can only do so much as the underlying factors that originated along with the 1956 linguistic reorganisation of Indian States are not easily amenable to technical and legal solutions.

Carving out political units that neatly correspond with various linguistic groups is impossible in India. As a result, almost all States have linguistic minorities that are accorded special rights. The Maharashtra-Karnataka row fundamentally arises out of a lack of appreciation of that reality. In 1957, Maharashtra claimed 814 villages and the three urban settlements of Belagavi, Karwar and Nippani in Karnataka; Karnataka not only rebuffed Maharashtra's claims but also began to claim areas in Kolhapur, Sholapur and Sangli districts in Maharashtra. Elsewhere, Maharashtra and Telangana are caught in a dispute across their border, in Chandrapur and Asifabad districts, respectively. Reports of populations wanting to have their places shift from one State to another have emerged in recent weeks. In the Northeast, some boundary disputes between States have cost lives. It is wise to defer to the Court's decision on any dispute, but harmony can be achieved only through embracing and promoting a political culture that is respectful of diversity that cannot be neatly demarcated. Fluid political and cultural boundaries criss-cross the landscape of India. If new fires are lit through divisive politics, the judiciary can do very little. That will be a double engine failure.

WHY A RS 4.5 LAKH WATCH DOESN'T NEED JUSTIFICATION

For much of this week, Tamil Nadu BJP president K Annamalai was under fire for sporting a watch so expensive that it is often referred to as a "timepiece". It all began when a DMK minister asked on Twitter how the BJP leader who claimed to own only "four goats and two cows" could afford an item that costs around Rs 4.5 lakh. The timepiece, made by French watchmakers Bell & Ross in collaboration with Dassault Aviation, is manufactured using the same materials as the Rafale jet. And it is this collaboration that gave Annamalai the excuse he needed to justify the extravagance: "I wear this because I'm a patriot, and this watch is very important to me. Since I can't fly a Rafale jet, I'll wear this watch until the day I die."

The desire to spotlight the purchase of a watch worth nearly Rs 5 lakh in a country where the per capita monthly income is around Rs 12,500 could be seen as understandable. Less so is the tendency of so many at the top of the pyramid to justify their luxury purchases as useful. Some insist that a car that costs seven figures is not an expensive indulgence but only a way to save the environment and use the travel time more productively. Or that the high-end cellphone is better value for money than its counterparts, as though a higher-quality selfie means a better life. And



who doesn't have a colleague or friend who is a shopaholic? It is indeed tiresome to hear someone try to justify his 14th pair of shoes.

Annamalai, like so many people who have made their fortune in post-liberalisation India, is caught in the trap of publicly venerating austerity while privately indulging a weakness for the more expensive things money can buy. That kind of hypocrisy is forgivable, even inevitable, in a country as unequal as India. But equating consumerist excess with patriotic duty is perhaps going a touch too far.

BIHAR'S PROHIBITION POLICY IS NOT WORKING

The latest hooch (illicit liquor) tragedy in Bihar has put Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on the backfoot. With the death toll rising to 38 and with several people losing their vision and becoming critically ill, the Opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has appealed to Mr. Kumar to reconsider the government's prohibition policy and pay compensation to the family members of those who died. However, the Janata Dal (United) leader is seen in no mood to relent. His harsh response — "piyoge to maroge (if you drink liquor, you will die)" — was met with anger from many political parties.

The Bihar Prohibition and Excise (Amendment) Act came into force in 2016. However, liquor is still easily available in the State and can even be delivered at home at a premium cost. It is the poor who are forced to rely on country-made liquor, which has often proved fatal for them. In August 2016, three months after the liquor law was enforced, 19 people died after consuming illicit liquor in the Khajurbanni locality of Gopalganj district. The lower court of Gopalganj convicted all the 13 people accused in the case. However, in July 2022, the Patna High Court acquitted all of them saying "they could not pass the parameters of fair trial envisaged in the laws of land". The State government has challenged the Patna High Court judgment in the Supreme Court.

Since the enforcement of the liquor law, over 200 people, mostly the poor, have died in several such incidents. Senior BJP leader and party MP Sushil Kumar Modi claims that the toll is over 1,000. In the last six years, about 4 lakh cases in violation of the prohibition policy have been lodged by the State Police and Excise Department and 4.5 lakh people have been arrested. However, less than 1% (only 1,300 people) have been convicted. The rest were let off because of the "lack of corroborative evidence". Government records state that over 2 crore litres of liquor, including 80,000 litres of country-made liquor, have been seized in about 74,000 raids conducted by enforcement agencies since April 2016 in the State.

Seemingly alarmed by the amount of illicit liquor being seized as well as the number of arrests, Mr. Kumar amended the law thrice. He diluted some of the provisions, including those stating that a community fine would be imposed and everyone in a family would be arrested even if one of them was caught consuming or storing alcohol.

Despite this, huge amounts of illegal liquor are brought in through neighbouring States such as Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and West Bengal in innovative ways and seized by enforcement agencies. As a result, prisons are crammed with traders and consumers of alcohol. In December 2021, the then Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Justice N.V. Ramana, expressed concern that the law was enforced with "lack of foresight" which has led to the "clogging of courts in the State". In October this year, the Patna High Court expressed concern over how prohibition has led to a new drug culture in the State.



Earlier, all the parties in the State Assembly supported the liquor law. But now they admit in private that it has failed due to “poor implementation”. A deadly nexus of the liquor mafia, the police and local couriers has made liquor easily available everywhere in the State. When Mr. Kumar asserted that he doesn’t have any sympathy for those who died in the hooch tragedy and that there was no question of giving compensation to their families, Mr. Modi asked why the government was refusing to pay compensation when it had done so in the case of the Khajurbanni incident. Even the Left parties, allies of the JD(U), have demanded solatium to the family members of the hooch victims.

Mr. Kumar, on his part, seems determined to continue with the prohibition policy. Critics say this is for two reasons: one, to create a caste-neutral vote bank of women (they suffer the most due to the drinking problem of the male members in their families); and two, to hold on to an issue that could help him achieve his political ambitions at the national level. Perhaps Mr. Kumar views a rollback of the policy as a sign of weakness and personal failure. But the extent of seizure of illicit liquor, the number of people lodged in jail, the low conviction rate, the rising deaths due to consumption of hooch, and similar failed experiments in other regions all point to the fact that the policy is not working despite being diluted thrice, and to the need for yet another rethink.

THE INS MORMUGAO AND ITS CAPABILITIES

The story so far:

In a boost to the country’s maritime capabilities, INS Mormugao has officially joined the Indian Navy’s fleet, marking a significant milestone for indigenous military expedition. The warship ‘Yard 12705’, named after the Goan port city of Mormugao, is the second of the four Visakhapatnam-class destroyers being built under the Indian Navy Project 15B, or P15B. The destroyer has multi-dimensional combat capabilities which include surface-to-surface missiles, surface-to-air missiles and modern surveillance radar.

What is Project 15B?

Project 15 was launched in the 1990s to add guided missile destroyers to the inventory of the Indian Navy. The project was named ‘Delhi class’. It was followed by Project 15A or Kolkata class which primarily focused on advanced technology and equipment in surface ships. Project 15B or the Visakhapatnam class is a follow-on class of weapon-intensive Project 15A destroyers. The project was launched in January 2011 to incorporate advanced design concepts such as state-of-the-art weapons and sensors, advanced stealth features and a high degree of automation for “improved survivability, sea keeping, stealth and manoeuvrability”. The lead ship of Project 15B, INS Visakhapatnam, was the first of the class to be commissioned. Besides INS Mormugao, the other two destroyers are expected to be commissioned between 2023 and 2025.

What are the capabilities of INS Mormugao?

Regarded as “one of the most potent warships to have been constructed in the country”, the destroyer is 163 metres long, 17 metres wide and displaces 7,400 tonnes when fully loaded. The ship is propelled by four gas turbines in a combined gas and gas (COGAG) configuration. The propulsion system allows the ship to achieve a speed of more than 30 knots (50km/h) and a maximum range of 4,000 nautical miles. It can accommodate a crew of about 300 personnel.

INS Mormugao’s firepower comprises BrahMos surface-to-surface missiles (SSM), Barak-8 surface-to-air (SAM) missiles for a long range of shore and sea-based targets and a 76mm super



rapid gun mount. The ship is armed with RBU-6000 anti-submarine rocket launchers and 533mm torpedo launchers. It is also equipped to carry and operate multi-role helicopters. Its enhanced stealth features ensure a reduced Radar Cross Section or radar signature.

It is automated with sophisticated digital networks such as the Gigabyte Ethernet-based Ship Data Network (GESDN), the Combat Management System (CMS), Automatic Power Management System (APMS), Integrated Platform Management System (IPMS) and Ship Data Network (SDN). While the CMS performs threat evaluation and resource allocation based on the tactical picture compiled and ammunition available onboard, APMS controls power management. IPMS is used to control and monitor machinery and auxiliaries and the SDN is the 'information highway for data' from sensors and weapons. The ship has multiple fire zones, battle damage control systems, distributional power systems to enhance survivability in emergencies and a total atmospheric control system to protect the crew against nuclear, biological and chemical threats.

Built with over 75% indigenous content, the commissioning of INS Mormugao is a shot in the arm for India's self-reliance efforts and crucial for the 15-year Indian Naval Indigenisation Plan (INIP) 2015-2030 implemented in 2014 for indigenous development of its resources, equipment and to make the nation self-reliant in defence technology.

What is the strategic importance?

While India's interests are closely tied to the Indian Ocean, China has been rapidly expanding its naval footprint in the region. Amid growing Chinese strategic interests, India renewed its focus on bolstering its maritime capabilities in the region to counter the threat.

During the commissioning ceremony of INS Mormugao, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh reiterated the government's resolve to prepare the nation to deal with any situation arising due to the changing global scenario. "Economic, political and trade relations between countries are constantly evolving. The COVID-19 pandemic, the situation in the Middle East, Afghanistan and now Ukraine. It directly or indirectly impacts every country in one way or another. In this era of globalisation, almost all nations are dependent on each other in the field of trade. Hence, rule-based freedom of navigation, security of sea lanes etc. have become more important than ever for stability and economic progress of the world," he said.

The addition of a technologically advanced stealth warship to the naval inventory provides a strategic advantage to India and adds to the combat capabilities of the armed forces. Besides surface operations, guided missile destroyers are capable of engaging in anti-aircraft and anti-submarine warfare.

NAVY TAKES DELIVERY OF SUBMARINE VAGIR, TO BE COMMISSIONED IN JAN.

"It is a matter of great pride that Vagir has completed all major trials, including the weapon and sensor trials, in the shortest time in comparison to the earlier submarines," the Navy said in a statement. A notable achievement is that this is the third submarine delivered to the Navy in a span of 24 months, it added.

Sixth one in the works

Vagir was launched into water on November 12, 2020 and commenced sea trials on February 1, 2022.



The sixth and last of the Scorpène-class submarines, Vagsheer, was launched into water in April 2022 and is expected to be delivered to the Navy by 2023-end.

French collaboration

Six Scorpene submarines are being built under Project-75 by MDL under technology transfer from the Naval Group of France under a \$3.75-billion deal signed in October 2005. The project is about four years behind the original schedule.

The first submarine, INS Kalvari, was commissioned in December 2017, the second INS Khanderi in September 2019, the third INS Karanj in March 2021 and the fourth INS Vela in November 2021. Parallely, the tender to build six more advanced conventional submarines under Project-75I is in the Request For Proposal (RFP) stage but has suffered delays.

With delays in submarine induction, the SSKs-209s (German HDWs) and EKM (Russian Kilos) are being put through the medium refit life certification process, which will give them an additional life of 10 to 15 years.

AIP modules

The Navy currently has 15 conventional and one nuclear submarine in service. It includes seven Russian Kilo class submarines, four German HDW submarines, four Scorpene class submarines and the indigenous nuclear ballistic missile submarine INS Arihant.

The Navy has drawn up plans to install air independent propulsion (AIP) modules on all Scorpene submarines as they go for their refit beginning with INS Kalvari in the next couple of years to enhance their endurance.

Development of an indigenous AIP module developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation is in advanced stages.

SOCIAL MEDIA APPELLATE PANELS MAY DEAL WITH DEPLATFORMING, DATA ISSUES

In October, the Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) had notified amendments to the Information Technology (IT) Rules, 2021 where it said that the government will appoint one or more grievance appellate committees (GACs). The committees are being formed to offer users an avenue to appeal decisions taken by the grievance officer of online intermediaries.

So far, the common understanding was that the government-appointed grievance appellate committees will only look after user complaints raised around issues of content moderation and de-platforming. However, the remit of these committees could go far beyond that understanding.

Under the amended IT Rules, each GAC is slated to have a chairperson and two whole time members appointed by the Centre, one of which will be a government official and two “independent members”. GACs can seek assistance from people who may have adequate expertise and experience in a subject matter while dealing with users’ appeals.

The GACs will adopt an “online dispute resolution mechanism” where the entire appeal process, from its filing to the final decision, will be done online. Intermediaries such as social media companies and e-commerce platforms will also have to compile every order passed by the GAC and report them on their respective websites.



Any person aggrieved by a decision of the grievance officer of a social media intermediary will be allowed to file an appeal to the GAC within thirty days. The GAC is expected to deal with the appeal and resolve it within a month.

The appointment of such committees by the Centre has drawn the ire of civil society activists. Delhi-based digital rights group Internet Freedom Foundation, in a submission to MeitY in July, had said that the provision could “make the Central Government (rather than an independent judicial or a regulatory body) the arbiter of permissible speech on the internet. It would incentivise social media platforms to suppress any speech that may not be palatable to the government, public officials or those who can exert political pressure”.

CHINA’S COVID SURGE, INDIA’S WARNING

The renewed and unfolding Covid-19 emergency in China has set off warning bells in India. Rightly so. Even though there is no cause for alarm, reactivating surveillance procedures, which had become all but dormant in the last few months, is a step in the right direction, considering the proven unpredictability of the virus. Realistically speaking, the situation in China is a threat to India only as much as the several big and small waves in various countries were in the last nine months. What is happening in China is a consequence of the manner in which the pandemic has been dealt with in that country. Apprehensions are that infections would increase in China at an even faster rate and very large numbers of people would fall sick at the same time, overwhelming the country’s healthcare systems, and resulting in a chaos that China has managed to avoid till now in the pandemic. The possibility of a spillover effect on India, however, though not entirely ruled out, does not pose a major risk at this point.

The dominant variant in circulation in China, the BF.7, is essentially an Omicron sub-variant. There are hundreds of Omicron sub-variants circulating in the world right now — over 500, according to the World Health Organisation — each with some special characteristics, but none remarkably more dangerous enough to be designated as a new Variant of Concern (VoC), a WHO classification that marks out a global threat. Many of these sub-variants must be in circulation in the Indian population as well. Just because a lower number of cases are being detected in India does not mean the virus has disappeared from the country. The current sub-variants, including BF.7, which has been found to be floating around, are either not powerful enough to overcome the natural immunity in most Indians, or are able to infect only in harmless ways. But this situation could change, and this is why the Chinese situation needs to be monitored closely. Because of the very large number of infections that are likely in China, the chances of the virus mutating into newer forms is greater than at any point of time in the last one year. Whether it would evolve into a more powerful virus, or just more sub-variants of Omicron, cannot be predicted. Scientists say the possibility of a Delta-like variant re-emerging is very low, but not zero. From the Indian standpoint, therefore, stepping up surveillance makes a lot of sense.

It has been nine months since the Omicron wave petered out in India. A fresh wave in the coming months would not be surprising. The Chinese situation is only incidental in this regard — even the Omicron sub-variants can cause this new wave. Many countries have seen multiple waves of infections caused by Omicron, or its sub-variants. Both natural as well as vaccine-acquired immunity are not permanent. It is, therefore, good to see the government respond quickly to the emerging situation in China.



COVID SPIKE AND BHARAT JODO YATRA: POLITICS AND THE VIRUS

At the height of the campaign in Gujarat, at a well-attended rally, Union Minister of State for Agriculture and Farmer Welfare Purushottam Rupala made quite the boast. At a well-attended rally in Vadodara, he said: “Look at the crowd and no one is wearing a mask, neither am I... Two days ago, there was news that a city in China has been put under lockdown. A country like China has to grope in the dark to come out of Covid and you and I are sitting here and holding massive gatherings without masks... This doesn’t happen so easily. Remember the days of the lockdown and the grim situation we were in... Modiji has brought us out of it.” Earlier this week, Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya wrote to Rahul Gandhi asking him to either follow “all Covid protocols” or suspend the Bharat Jodo Yatra.

Mandaviya is, perhaps, right to advise caution in the face of the virus. In fact, a sound argument could be made that it is the duty of his office to do. But Mandaviya’s letter — and the Congress response, accusing him of selectively targeting the opposition with such a “request” — raise a larger question about the virus and politics.

Nearly three years into the pandemic, it now appears that Covid and its ever-evolving variants may well see periodic spikes in infections. Armed with the original vaccine, booster doses and the good fortune of less severe symptoms, India — like much of the world — is finding ways to live with the virus and avoid the economic, social and psychological costs of lockdowns. Unlike the “groping in the dark” in China thanks to the “zero Covid” obsession, it may be this pragmatism, along with a host of other political and epidemiological factors, that made Rupala’s hyperbole somewhat plausible.

At the same time, the fear the virus engendered in all of us in its early stages — the suffering and death it caused — and the enormous powers that governments arrogated to themselves may have tilted the political scales against the opposition even further.

When is Covid dangerous enough to merit control of political gatherings? In the first instance, “an 18-day war” to break the chain turned into a months-long halt of all political activity that put an end to the Shaheen Bagh anti-CAA, anti-NRC protests. At the time, there were less than 500 confirmed cases in India.

In the assembly elections held in 2021, there was a spike in cases in all the states that went to the polls and the subsequent “wave” was one of the worst to hit the country as yet. The protocols and precautions, many argued at the time, came too late. And in 2022, the concern over Covid has spiked since the polls came to a close. In addition, no letters have thus far been sent to the BJP leaders conducting yatras of their own in Karnataka and Rajasthan.

It is, of course, not fair to blame the government for all of these decisions. With regard to campaign schedules and protocols during elections, it is the Election Commission that has the final say. At the same time, the seeming bias and arbitrariness in when and how restrictions are imposed to control the spread of infections can lead to an erosion of trust in the state system as a whole. This, in turn, can have an adverse effect on how people view public health measures.

In the US, for example, “no mask protests” were a common sight at the height of the pandemic. Vaccine efficacy became a polarised debate, with the Republican right’s anti-science attitude, and the initial inability of Democrats to “sell” science to people who did not vote for the party. This lack of faith in health policy is something India can ill afford.



Perhaps the answer lies in neither taking political credit nor blame for the virus, and leaving it to the experts – not politicians – to decide on Covid protocols. For that, ideally, the government and Opposition should come together to agree on the appointment of public health commissioners — along the lines of Election Commissioners, but not appointed solely by the executive.

But in a country where an institution as hallowed as Parliament is barely a forum for discussion any longer, that sort of bipartisanship seems a distant dream.

WHAT IS MOLNUPIRAVIR, THE COVID-19 PILL APPROVED BY INDIA?

The Indian drug regulator on Tuesday cleared the first anti-viral Covid-19 pill: Molnupiravir. The drug developed by US-based biotechnology company Ridgeback Biotherapeutics in collaboration with US Pharma giant Merck — will now be manufactured by 13 Indian drug manufacturers. The drug, in India, has been cleared for the treatment of adults patients with Covid-19 and “who have a high risk of progression of the disease”.

Molnupiravir (MK-4482, EIDD-2801), developed initially to treat influenza, is a repurposed oral anti-viral candidate to treat Covid-19 patients. Molnupiravir is an anti-viral pill that works by introducing errors into the SARS-CoV-2 virus’ genetic code, which prevents the virus from further replicating. Molnupiravir is administered as four 200 milligram capsules taken orally every 12 hours for five days, for a total of 40 capsules.

On November 4, the United Kingdom became the first country to approve drug regulator Molnupiravir. The UK regulator said that molnupiravir works by interfering with the virus’ replication. “This prevents it from multiplying, keeping virus levels low in the body and therefore reducing the severity of the disease,” the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) said.

The MHRA said that molnupiravir has been found to be “safe and effective” following a “stringent review of the available evidence”. On the basis of this, the regulator has authorised the use of molnupiravir in persons with mild to moderate COVID-19 — and has at least one risk factor for developing severe illness. The risk factors listed by MHRA are obesity, older age (>60 years), diabetes mellitus, or heart disease.

On December 23, US drug also cleared Molnupiravir in “certain adults”. The drug regulator said that emergence use authorisation for molnupiravir for the treatment of mild-to-moderate coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in adults with positive results of direct SARS-CoV-2 viral testing, and who are at high risk for progression to severe COVID-19, including hospitalization or death. USFDA also recommends that Molnupiravir is not authorized for use for longer than five consecutive days. It specifically said that Molnupiravir is not authorized for use in patients younger than 18 years of age because molnupiravir may affect bone and cartilage growth. “It is not authorized for the pre-exposure or post-exposure prevention of COVID-19 or for initiation of treatment in patients hospitalized due to COVID-19 because benefit of treatment has not been observed in people when treatment started after hospitalization due to COVID-19,” the USFDA said.

Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya said that 13 Indian drug manufactures will be producing the drug domestically. Dr. Reddy Laboratories, Cipla, Natco Pharma, Optimus Pharma Pvt Ltd, Stride, and, Hetero are among the large drug manufacturers that will be manufacturing the drug.



GOVT. SAYS BREAST CANCER NOT A MATTER OF 'NATIONAL' OR 'EXTREME' URGENCY

Breast cancer, by the government's estimate, is the leading cause of cancer in women in India. However, it does not qualify as a matter of "national" or "extreme" urgency in the Health Ministry's reckoning, suggest court filings as part of an ongoing case in the Kerala High Court.

The case involves Saroja Radhakrishnan (now deceased), diagnosed with a type of breast cancer called 'Luminal A', which is among the most invasive and make up the bulk of invasive breast cancer cases. In her petition, in January this year, she argued that one of the drugs prescribed for her condition, Ribociclib, was "too expensive and unavailable at an affordable price" because it was patented and therefore India's generic drug makers, who routinely manufacture cheaper versions, were legally prohibited from making a version of the drug. Ribociclib is manufactured by the multinational pharmaceutical firm Novartis.

Most prevalent cancer

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), in a report this month, said that 100.5 out of 1,00,000 women were being diagnosed with breast cancer. From the approximately 1,82,000 cases of breast cancer at present, the report has projected cases to rise to 2,50,000 by 2030. There was no break-up of how many of these were Luminal A cancer. According to the World Health Organization, there were 23 lakh women diagnosed with breast cancer and 6,85,000 deaths globally. At the end of 2020, there were 78 lakh women alive who were diagnosed with breast cancer in the past five years, making it the world's most prevalent cancer.

The petitioner said that she and her husband had a joint income of ₹74,400 a month whereas expense on Ribociclib cost her ₹58,140. Adding other medications, the cost of medication was well above what she could afford and therefore the "unaffordable price of the medicine" impacted her right to health, which is a fundamental right under Article 21.

India's patent laws permit any drug, patented or non-patented, to be manufactured and made available at an affordable price, via a "compulsory licence", if the government is satisfied that a large section of people need the drug but are unable to access it, or if there is a "national emergency" or a health crisis that the absence of the drug is precipitating.

In June this year, the Kerala High Court directed the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), a Commerce Ministry body and one of the respondents in the case, to "consider compulsory licensing" of Ribociclib.

The DPIIT decides on the pricing of drugs and following a meeting, that included experts from the National Cancer Institute, the Drug Controller General of India and the Ministry of Health, decided that conditions necessary to issue a compulsory licence "were not fulfilled". The DPIIT drew on comments from the Health Ministry which said that Ribociclib was among 42 drugs on which the "trade margin" was capped at 30% and there also weren't "claimants" who were demanding that it be domestically manufactured. The Hindu has viewed documents submitted to the High Court that contain the government's submissions.



ORGAN DONATIONS RISE AFTER COVID-19 DIP: WHAT DO THE NUMBERS SHOW?

After a fall during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, organ donation numbers bounced back in 2021. However, the number of deceased donations — organs donated by the kin of those who suffered brain death or cardiac death — has remained lower than the number of donations from living persons, data presented by the government in Parliament show.

What do the numbers show?

Of the 12,387 organs — kidney, liver, heart, lungs, and pancreas among others — harvested in 2021, only 1,743 — a little more than 14% — were from deceased donors. The numbers harvested in 2021 were close to the highest in the last five years (12,746, in 2019), the data show.

The numbers are skewed in favour of living donations — organs like kidney and liver donated by living family members. A total 10,644 organs were harvested from living donors, which was more than the 10,608 living donations of 2019. Only 14.07% of the total organs harvested in 2021 were from deceased donors, much less than the 16.77% of 2019.

The proportion of deceased donations — and the absolute number of donations — was higher still in 2017 and 2018. Of the total donations, 2,152 or 22.5% were from deceased unrelated donors in 2017 and 2,493 or 23.6% in 2018.

There is also a geographical skew in deceased donations. All but two deceased organ donations in 2021 were in 15 states, with the top five — Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Karnataka — accounting for more than 85% of the total. Two organs were harvested from a deceased donor in Goa.

One reason for the geographical skew could be that most organ transplant and harvesting centres are concentrated in these geographies.

Dr Krishan Kumar, director, National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organisation (NOTTO), said the number of deceased donations were slowly picking up to pre-pandemic levels. “But our aim is to reverse the current trend of nearly 80 per cent transplants using organs from living donors,” he said.

Why is there a need to increase deceased donations?

The first reason is the gap in the number of organs needed and the number of transplants that happen in the country.

In absolute numbers, India conducts the third highest number of transplants in the world. Yet, of the estimated 1.5-2 lakh persons who need a kidney transplant every year, only around 8,000 get one. Of the 80,000 persons who require a liver transplant, only 1,800 get one. And of the 10,000 who need a heart transplant, only 200 get it.

Demand is on the rise because of the increasing prevalence of lifestyle diseases. Besides, organs like heart and lungs can be retrieved only from deceased donors. The second reason is that without deceased donations, a precious resource is wasted.

Nearly 1.5 lakh persons die in road traffic accidents every year in India, many of whom can ideally donate organs. Although donations are possible after the heart stops working, almost all organs are currently harvested from brain dead persons.



India has an organ donation rate of about 0.52 per million population. In comparison, the organ donation rate in Spain, the highest in the world, is 49.6 per million population. Unlike India where a person has to register to be an organ donor — and the family has to consent to it after death — Spain has an opt-out system where a person is presumed to be a donor unless otherwise specified.

As per the current mechanism, the availability of an organ is reported by the hospital to the state organ and tissue transplant organisation that matches it with recipients locally; if a match isn't found, it is referred to the regional organ and tissue transplant organisation, and then to NOTTO.

How can an individual become a donor?

To become a registered organ donor, you can take a pledge on the NOTTO website, or mail a filled-in Form 7 of the Transplantation of Human Organs Act.

In addition to registering, it is important for donors to explain their beliefs to the members of their family. This is because even with a donor card, the family's consent is sought for organ donation after the death of the individual. If the family refuses, the organs are not harvested.

KERALA TOPS THE COUNTRY IN TERMS OF CITIZENS WITH PASSPORTS

Indians can enjoy visa-free travel to 22 countries, according to Passport Index, an interactive and real-time ranking tool maintained by Arton Capital. Three of these countries (Nepal, Bhutan and Mauritius) are in the neighbourhood. There are quite a few Caribbean countries on the list such as Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago besides two Latin American countries (El Salvador and Haiti). Three of the countries are in the Pacific Islands — Micronesia, Vanuatu and Fiji (with a high proportion of Indian-origin citizens), while two African countries provide this facility (Gambia and Senegal). Only one European country — Serbia — allows visa-free travel for Indians.

According to the index, India ranked a joint 69th in 2022 in terms of ease of mobility of travel to other countries. This ease of travel was measured in terms of availability of visa-free regimes or visa on arrival for Indians in other countries.

While India marginally improved in the index (its rank jumped four places from 73 in 2021), it still ranked below many Asian and developing countries. Countries such as South Africa (ranked 46), China (59), Brazil (11) and Russia (37) ranked higher, while India did better compared to other South Asian countries. The largely immigrant-populated UAE was ranked No. 1, followed by European and other developed countries. South Korea (joint 2nd) and Japan (4th) ranked the highest among Asian countries.

More than 9.58 crore passports have been issued in India as of December 8, 2022, according to a reply given by the Ministry of External Affairs in the Lok Sabha recently. This amounts to nearly 7% of India's projected population in 2022.

A State-wise breakup shows that Kerala had both the highest number (nearly 1.13 crore) and the highest proportion (an estimated 31.6% of the State's population) of passport holders in the country. This is not surprising as Kerala is one of the States that has a high expatriate population and also is heavily dependent on remittances (10.2% of all inward remittances to India went to the State as of FY21, according to a recent Reserve Bank of India bulletin). Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu were placed second and third in terms of absolute number of passports. Tamil Nadu was



placed higher than Maharashtra in terms of the estimated proportion of population with passports (12.7% versus 8.4%).

In terms of the proportion of population with passports, Kerala was placed first again. It was followed by Punjab (25.3%), Delhi (18.6%), Telangana (13.2%) and Tamil Nadu (12.7%) among the major States and Union Territories. Goa was placed first among the smaller States (29.4%). Kerala was also placed first in the metric of passports not renewed (more than 10 lakh) followed by Tamil Nadu (8.84 lakh), Karnataka (7.73 lakh) and Maharashtra (6.49 lakh).

Among districts (Chart 3), Mumbai had the highest total number of passports issued (35,56,067) followed by Bengaluru (34,63,405), Malappuram (19,32,622), Chennai (18,85,855), Hyderabad (18,06,329), Ahmedabad (14,95,009) and Pune (14,52,236). While the estimated district population is difficult to arrive at, as Census 2021 has not yet begun operations, the projected district population based on Aadhaar saturation data shows that the estimated proportion of population in Malappuram with passports could be close to 47.1%, among the highest in the country.

GULF ACCOUNTS FOR MORE THAN HALF OF INDIAN CONVICTS IN FOREIGN JAILS

Gulf countries account for more than half of the Indian prisoners including undertrials and convicts lodged in foreign jails. According to data available with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), as many as 8,441 Indians including women are lodged in foreign jails in 69 countries in connection with various offences ranging from murder to domestic violence. Of them, 4,389 are lodged in jails of Gulf countries. Around 1,858 persons are lodged in prisons in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) alone, which accounts for the highest number of Indian convicts in a foreign country, followed by Nepal with 1,222.

Data also reveal that as many as 115 female prisoners are languishing in jails in 19 countries, while the gender-wise list of convicts in some countries is not available.

One Indian female was convicted on charges of drug trafficking in Finland which has been ranked as the world's happiest country for the fifth consecutive year in 2022 in an annual UN-sponsored index, while the jails in Afghanistan which is ranked as the unhappiest country in the world, has no Indian convicts or undertrials.

Among the developed countries in Europe and the Americas, the jails in the U.S. have 261 Indian inmates followed by the U.K. with 219. There is also a significant number of Indian convicts in countries like Australia (65), Canada (23), France (29), Germany (92), Singapore (26), Spain (40), Sweden (2), etc. Though Kerala is among States which send the highest number of people abroad, the State-wise list of prisoners or undertrials from the State is not available.

Speaking to The Hindu, NoRKA Roots Chief Executive Officer K. Harikrishnan Namboothiri said the government agency has launched 'Pravasi Legal Aid Cell' to provide free legal assistance to non-resident Keralites (NRKs) lodged in jails in various countries, especially in West Asia, for minor offences or cases in which they were falsely implicated. Mr. Namboothiri also said the agency is in the process of collecting data on the exact number of Keralites lodged in foreign jails, including the details of the offences.

As of 2021, an estimated 1.35 crore Indian nationals reside in countries outside India and Gulf countries alone account for 87.51 lakh Indians.



ALL IS WELL FOR MOA MAKERS THIS WINTER

This winter is going to be special for the Joynagar moa, the popular Bengal sweetmeat available only during the colder months of the year, with the number of registered manufacturers witnessing a massive rise and its Geographical Indication tag getting a 10-year extension.

The moa is a popped-rice ball held together with fresh date-palm jaggery, extracted from the beginning of December till the end of February. Its manufacture is so synonymous with Joynagar, a settlement on the outskirts of Kolkata, that it earned the Geographical Indication tag of Joynagar Moa in 2015. However, considering that the application for the recognition was submitted in 2012, the tag became valid from that year until 2022. Now, an extension has come through for another 10 years.

Also, this year, the number of manufacturers registered with the Joynagar Moa Nirmankari Society, which regulates the moa business, has gone up dramatically to 292 from 46. “We brought in many more manufacturers under our umbrella to ensure quality control, to make sure that all those who make the sweet keep up the quality and adhere to norms. You can say this is going to be a very good season for us. What’s more, for the first time, we even have an office of our own; so far we were functioning out of someone’s house,” said Ashok Kumar Kayal, founding secretary of the Society.

“This season, we are also looking at an increase in the sales. Last season, we did business of about ₹22 crore; this year, we expect to cross ₹30 crore. And last season, we exported about 400 kg to Bahrain; this year, we are also likely to send some boxes to Switzerland,” Mr. Kayal said.

Short shelf life

Said to date back to 1904, the moa is made of aromatic khoi (popped rice) that is mixed with jaggery, sugar, cashew nuts and raisins. Its only drawback is that it has a short shelf life, lasting not more than five days without refrigeration. The high perishability has prevented it from being shipped abroad all these decades. Its export began, on a very small scale, only in 2020.

Mr. Kayal said the Society was in touch with IIT-Bombay and IIT-Kharagpur in order to develop packaging material that would dramatically increase the shelf life of the sweetmeat. “We are yet to get the samples. But from what I am told, the new material would increase the shelf life of our products from five days to two and a half months — now that’s quite something!” he said.

THREE MORE SITES ADDED TO TENTATIVE LIST OF UNESCO

Gujarat’s Vadnagar town, the iconic Sun Temple at Modhera, and the rock cut sculptures of Unakoti in Tripura have been added to the tentative list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

The UNESCO tentative list is an “inventory of those properties which each State Party intends to consider for nomination”.

“With this, India now has 52 sites on UNESCO Tentative List. The list indicates rich cultural and natural wealth of India and shows huge diversity of our heritage,” Union Culture Minister G. Kishan Reddy tweeted.

The Sun Temple at Modhera which is dedicated to the sun god, is the earliest of such temples which set trends in architectural and decorative details, representing the Solanki style at its best.



Vadnagar is a municipality in Mehsana district of Gujarat. A multi-layered historic town, Vadnagar has a recorded past stretching back to nearly 8th century BC. The town still retains a large number of historic buildings that are primarily religious and residential in nature.

Unakoti is an ancient holy place associated with Shaiva worship. The site is a massive gallery set in a forested area displaying a number of towering low-relief images in a unique style, making it a masterpiece of human creative genius.

BENGAL VILLAGE BASKS IN THE LUSTRE OF METAL

Nestled in the forests with a population less than 100, Lalbazar was a nondescript village until not too long ago. Today, it is not only an art hub but also moving towards becoming a centre for dokra, a metalcraft popular in Bengal, all thanks to a Kolkata artist who made the place his second home four years ago.

“Two places are famous in West Bengal for dokra work — Bikna in Bankura and Dariyapur in Bardhaman. But if you notice carefully, the quality of their products is deteriorating. We are trying to keep things original,” said Mrinal Mandal, an alumnus of the Government Arts College who chanced upon Lalbazar, sitting on the boundary with Jharkhand, in 2018, while trying to document folk art.

He is, at the moment, curating a dokra workshop in the village with the help of Kolkata’s Chalchitra Academy.

“Dokra is an ancient tradition; its documented history is about 5,000 years old. Making dokra art is a difficult process. Each figurine takes about a month to make. There are many processes involved, for which seven or eight varieties of clay are required, apart from other raw material. What works in our favour is that the raw materials, including the metal, are easily available here [in Lalbazar],” he said.

“The workshop will continue all of next year and production too will continue. The craftsmen have already created about 300 pieces of art so far, which have gone to shops in Kolkata and also abroad. Once the villagers pick up the art, they will substantially add to their income,” Mr. Mandal said.

U.P. AND T.N. STRUGGLE WITH ENCROACHMENT IN CENTRALLY PROTECTED MONUMENTS, SITES

A total of 356 heritage structures have encroachments across the country, Tourism and Culture Minister Kishan Reddy told the Rajya Sabha; regular inspections being conducted by ASI officials

Uttar Pradesh has the largest number of Centrally Protected Monuments that have been encroached upon, closely followed by Tamil Nadu.

While 75 protected monument sites have been encroached upon in Uttar Pradesh, the corresponding number for Tamil Nadu is 74, Minister for Tourism and Culture G. Kishan Reddy told the Rajya Sabha.

Uttar Pradesh also has the largest number of Centrally Protected monuments in the country at 743, while Tamil Nadu has 412.



A total of 356 such heritage structures have encroachments across the country, Mr. Reddy said in reply to a question by Congress MP Mukul Wasnik. In 2019, the government had informed the Rajya Sabha that there were 321 protected monuments whose sites had been infringed.

Karnataka and Maharashtra are third and fourth with 48 and 46 such monuments, respectively, hosting encroachments. Gujarat has 35 protected monuments that have been invaded.

India has a total of 3,695 Centrally Protected Monuments or Sites in the country, under the protection of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). The monuments are regularly inspected by the ASI officials to assess their present condition. Necessary conservation and preservation works are taken up as per the requirement, he said.

The House was told that among the various action taken by the ASI are filing police complaints, issuing show-cause notices to defaulters for the removal of the said encroachments, and issuing demolition orders to the Collector for the demolition or removal of the said encroachments.

The ASI regulates construction around the protected monuments through the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment) Act, 2010. The Act prohibits construction within 100 metres of a protected monument.

The next 300-metre radius is regulated too. Proposed amendments seek to do away with the ban on construction within 100 metres of a monument and only regulate construction within 100-200 metres, under the Act that protects monuments and sites over 100 years old.

This is expected to give more powers to the ASI on the encroachments.

ASI, AGRA CIVIC BODY SPAR OVER TAX NOTICES TO TAJ MAHAL, AGRA FORT

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has been served notices by the Agra Municipal Corporation over dues in property, service, and water taxes for three city-based monuments, including the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort and the Itmad-ud-Daula Tomb.

For the Taj Mahal, a UNESCO World Heritage site, the ASI has to pay property tax to the tune of Rs 1.4 lakh and Rs 1.9 crore in water tax, according to the notices. While Agra Mayor Naveen Jain said the notices were served for the “structures outside the monuments”, senior ASI officials termed the MC’s move wrong, claiming that even a structure outside a monument is part of it and can’t be taxed as per the rules.

The officer claimed that these taxes are not applicable on monuments and their upkeep.

“The monuments are exempted from such taxes under various Acts and laws of the government and we have filed a reply to the notices,” he said.

Mayor Jain said, “It is correct that the monument (Taj Mahal) is not taxed under the MC rules. The notices served by the civic body for structures outside the monument that are being used for commercial purposes such as stay of staff. CISF officials are also staying there. This is a residential activity. We haven’t served notice for the monuments. As of the water tax, we have formed a team and sent it to the monument to examine the matter and submit a report. Further action will be taken accordingly,” said Jain.

On the mayor’s reference to a notice being served in 2017, Patel said, “I don’t know about it. And if it is the case, why were not we given reminders.” The monument is the nation’s property and



the ASI is merely a custodian, he said, adding the ownership of most monuments is with the state government.

LOST WORLDS IN INDIA'S JUNGLES

In the 1930s, a constable in the Rewa Kingdom in present-day Madhya Pradesh set out on foot into the forests of Bandhavgarh. In his lonely endeavour, lasting some two months, he traversed through the land of tigers, leopards, bears, deer, bamboo and sal trees. Once he reached the caves carved into the hills, he made 'eye-copies' of the strange script that was carved on its walls. His observations confirmed the presence of an ancient settlement that once thrived deep in these forests.

Nearly 80 years later, Nayanjot Lahiri, professor of history from Ashoka University, set about looking for these sites. Over the decades, she had built a reputation for her seminal work that covered the grand narratives of Indian history: from the hidden cities of the Indus valley to life in the Brahmaputra plains under the Ahom kings. The caves in the middle of Bandhavgarh National Park seemed like an odd choice.

Remote and neglected

While protected forest areas prevent encroachment and the destruction of the monuments, they also hinder research into these sites. Take, for instance, caves within the Kanger Valley National Park in Chhattisgarh, which date back to nearly 7,000 years, and could reveal the ancient roots of indigenous tribals in the region; or the 2nd century artefacts in Dhonchi islands within Sundarbans Tiger Reserve that have not been explored by historians. Remoteness adds to the neglect, as is the case with Naksa Parbat, a 14th century fortified settlement in Arunachal Pradesh, which had been last excavated a few decades ago.

"Historians have often focused on powerful kingdoms or grand and magnificent sites. Or, sites that are easily accessible," says Manjil Hazarika, assistant professor, department of archaeology, Cotton University, Assam.

In four phases, between March 2021 and June 2022, Lahiri and her team went into the jungle in jeeps and on foot: coming across elephants, gaurs and even the occasional tiger. What they ended up documenting were not just settlements frozen in time, but a thriving settlement catering to travellers and merchants dating to nearly 1,800 years ago.

The team, which published their findings in *Current Science* earlier this year, described 81 rock shelters in the region. As many as 26 had inscriptions, revealing names of donors, ministers and kings. Some caves were small, acting as places of rest for travellers or as shrines. There was a gymnasium, and large gathering halls. One cave was larger, with six rooms and a small pond in the middle. Some caves at higher reaches of the hills were perhaps made to house permanent residents there. The caves showed the relationship between man and jungle: they were designed to keep wilderness at bay.

Ashoka University's forays into forest archaeology joins a sparse list of projects that aims to uncover the histories of the marginalised. The Nilgiri Archaeological Project, which was founded by Ghent University in the Netherlands, will, between 2021 and 2026, use an inter-disciplinary approach that includes excavations in forests to detail the pre-colonial history of tribal communities.



Clues from the Northeast

A decade ago, Hazarika followed up on a mention of megaliths in a century-old British monograph. His explorations into the Garbhanga reserve forest on the Assam-Meghalaya border shed light on the histories of the Karbi tribal communities. Road cutting had exposed megalith sites and remnants of sizeable settlements within forests that showed the earliest signs of rudimentary shifting cultivation, a practice that continues in the hills today.

The exploration of narratives of the marginalised may not be historical curiosities. It may reveal insights into the contemporary debates of identity and belonging. Assam has been the centre of a resurgence of the Assamese identity: a debate on who is local and who is an outsider ignited by the implementation of the National Citizens Register (NRC).

A chance discovery

In 2018, Priyank Talesara, a Ph.D student at the Ancient Indian History, Culture & Archaeology department at Madhav University, a private university in Sirohi town of Rajasthan, decided to follow up on a hunch. He had found a nearly-1,000-year-old inscription that described the presence of 999 Shiva temples and 444 Jain temples in the high ridge forests of the Aravallis.

For days, he walked around the forest, scaling ridges and crossing streams, finding little success along the way. A chance encounter with local Bhil and Garasia tribesmen gave him another clue: a description of seemingly man-made stone structures in a remote corner of the dense forest. What he found were the remnants of a sprawling, nearly 1 sq.km. fort complex.

“There was no historical document that mentioned this fort. Even the Survey of India noted the area only as forest land,” says Talesara.

The study, published in 2019 and 2020, suggests that the site was a hide-out fortress, capable of housing a large army and civilian populations during conflict and warfare. The terrain of the forests and the thick three-metre stone walls were intended to act as a site of safety, giving a critical insight into the incessant warfare of 11th century Rajasthan between the local Paramara dynasty, other Rajput clans and invading Persians.

Historians hope that as more universities offer courses in archaeology in smaller towns and areas close to forests, critical aspects of local history can be studied; and that history hidden in India's forests can slowly, but surely, be unearthed.



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

THE MINIMUM TAX ON BIG BUSINESSES

The story so far:

Members of the European Union last week agreed in principle to implement a minimum tax of 15% on big businesses. Last year, 136 countries had agreed on a plan to redistribute tax rights across jurisdictions and enforce a minimum tax rate of 15% on large multinational corporations. It is estimated that the minimum tax rate would boost global tax revenues by \$150 billion annually.

What is it?

EU members have agreed to implement a minimum tax rate of 15% on big businesses in accordance with Pillar 2 of the global tax agreement framed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) last year. Under the OECD's plan, governments will be equipped to impose additional taxes in case companies are found to be paying taxes that are considered too low. This is to ensure that big businesses with global operations do not benefit by domiciling themselves in tax havens in order to save on taxes. Pillar 1 of the OECD's tax plan, on the other hand, tries to address the question of taxing rights. Large multinational companies have traditionally paid taxes in their home countries even though they did most of their business in foreign countries. The OECD plan tries to give more taxing rights to the governments of countries where large businesses conduct a substantial amount of their business. As a result, large U.S. tech companies may have to pay more taxes to governments of developing countries.

What is the need for a global minimum tax?

Corporate tax rates across the world have been dropping over the last few decades as a result of competition between governments to spur economic growth through greater private investments. Global corporate tax rates have fallen from over 40% in the 1980s to under 25% in 2020, thanks to global tax competition that was kick-started by former U.S. President Ronald Reagan and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. The OECD's tax plan tries to put an end to this "race to the bottom" which has made it harder for governments to shore up the revenues required to fund their rising spending budgets. The minimum tax proposal is particularly relevant at a time when the fiscal state of governments across the world has deteriorated as seen in the worsening of public debt metrics.

What lies ahead?

Some governments, particularly those of traditional tax havens, are likely to disagree and stall the implementation of the OECD's tax plan. High tax jurisdictions like the EU are more likely to fully adopt the minimum tax plan as it saves them from having to compete against low tax jurisdictions. Low tax jurisdictions, on the other hand, are likely to resist the OECD's plan unless they are compensated sufficiently in other ways. It should be noted that, even within the EU, countries such as Poland have already tried to stall the adoption of the global minimum tax proposal citing various non-economic reasons. Since the OECD's plan essentially tries to form a global tax cartel, it will always face the risk of losing out to low-tax jurisdictions outside the cartel and cheating by members within the cartel. After all, countries both within and outside the cartel will have the incentive to boost investments and economic growth within their respective jurisdictions by



offering lower tax rates to businesses. This is a structural problem that will persist as long as the global tax cartel continues to exist.

What good will the OECD's tax plan do to the global economy?

Supporters of the OECD's tax plan believe that it will end the global "race to the bottom" and help governments collect the revenues required for social spending.

Many believe that the plan will also help counter rising global inequality by making it tougher for large businesses to pay low taxes by availing the services of tax havens. Critics of the OECD's proposal, however, see the global minimum tax as a threat. They argue that without tax competition between governments, the world would be taxed a lot more than it is today, thus adversely affecting global economic growth.

In other words, these critics believe that it is the threat of tax competition that keeps a check on governments which would otherwise tax their citizens heavily to fund profligate spending programs.

HOW THE GREAT GAMBLE ON THE PRICE CAP ON RUSSIAN OIL MIGHT JUST FUMBLE

The Group of Seven (G7) countries, the European Union and Australia have imposed a price cap on Russian sea-borne oil to make it harder for Russia to fund its war against Ukraine. Under the plan, which took effect on December 5, western companies that dominate the global oil shipping and insurance business will be banned from offering their services to ship or insure Russian oil that is purchased at more than \$60 per barrel. The price cap is an attempt by the West to cut Russia's oil revenues without affecting oil supplies.

It should be noted that since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war, the West has been trying to limit Russia's energy revenues. At the same time, since Russia is a major oil producer that contributes more than 10% of overall global supplies, the West has been wary of imposing sanctions that could cause oil supply from Russia to fall steeply and send oil prices shooting up. In fact, it is estimated that crude oil prices could rise to as much as \$200 per barrel if oil supply from Russia were to be disrupted by western sanctions.

Noted economists such as Janet Yellen, currently U.S. Treasury Secretary, and Mario Draghi, till recently Prime Minister of Italy, have been at the forefront of pushing the idea of a price cap, which they believe will limit Kremlin's oil revenues without affecting global oil supplies. Even though the West has cut down its purchase of Russian oil this year, Russia has been able to sell its oil to India and China to keep its energy revenues buoyant.

The price cap could be seen as an attempt by the West to make buyers of Russian oil pay less for the oil they purchase, thus preventing the Kremlin from profiting too much from its oil sales. Russia has already had to sell its oil at discounted rates, which the West sees as a partial success in its efforts to choke Kremlin's revenues by refusing to purchase Russian oil. It is estimated that Russia, with a cost of production of somewhere between \$20 and \$45 per barrel, will earn a small profit on its oil sales.

At the moment, Russian oil is trading at a price that is below the cap of \$60 per barrel imposed by the West. However, the average price of Russian Urals over the last 10 years has been about \$75 per barrel. So, while the price cap of \$60 per barrel is unlikely to adversely affect the supply of Russian oil or Moscow's revenue in the short run, it is likely to have adverse effects in the longer



run. When the market price of Urals rises above \$60, this would increase the chances of violation of the price cap by traders. The higher the market price when compared to the price cap, the higher also will be the incentive for traders to bypass the price cap and sell Russian oil at a price higher than \$60 per barrel to willing buyers. This would, in effect, undermine the West's efforts to prevent Russia from earning the market price on its oil. But even if the West somehow manages to effectively implement the \$60 per barrel price cap, it cannot really hope to restrict Russia's revenues through a price cap without also affecting oil supplies adversely at the same time.

Question of incentives

Restricting the price at which Russia can sell its oil will inevitably affect the country's incentive to pump oil into the market. Economists backing the price cap believe that Russia would continue exporting oil as long as the price cap is above Russia's cost of producing a barrel of oil. In particular, Russia kept up its oil production even during the COVID-19 pandemic when oil prices fell below \$20 per barrel. But expecting Russia to behave the same way in the future with price caps limiting its revenues may be unrealistic. It could well be that Russia expected the fall in oil demand during the pandemic to be a temporary blip; in such a scenario, it may have been more cost-effective to keep oil wells operating instead of shutting them down to reopen them later. If price caps persist over the long run, however, this is bound to affect Russia's incentive to keep its oil wells open.

It should also be remembered that in the long run production decisions are based not merely on the cost of production but also on the potential rate of return from other investments. If investments in oil do not offer returns at least equal to or better than other sectors, Russia may well decide to cut its oil investments, and this would affect supplies adversely. Such a tendency was obvious when oil prices dropped by about 70% from mid-2014 to early 2016, pushing West Asian oil producers such as Saudi Arabia to look at diversifying their economies away from the oil industry. The West would do well to keep these factors in mind when it imposes price caps in the belief they would have no adverse effect on oil supplies.

IN U.S. ACTIONS, THE WORRY OF GLOBAL TRADE LAWLESSNESS

In a significant development in international trade law, four separate World Trade Organization (WTO) Panel reports have ruled that the tariffs of 25% and 10% on steel and aluminium, respectively, that the United States (U.S.) had imposed during the presidency of Donald Trump are inconsistent with WTO law. The cases were brought by China, Norway, Switzerland, and Turkey.

The WTO panellists held that these tariff rates breached the U.S.'s obligations under Article II.1 of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which obligates countries not to impose tariffs beyond bound rates. Further, these tariffs breached Article I of GATT because they discriminated between some foreign producers of steel and aluminium over others.

The national security defence

Importantly, the U.S. tried to justify its tariff hikes under Article XXI of GATT which allows countries to deviate from their trade obligations on grounds of national security. Specifically, Article XXI(b)(iii) of GATT allows a country to take any action 'which it considers' necessary for the protection of its essential security interests taken in time of war or other 'emergency in international relations'. Contrary to the U.S.'s flaccid assertion, the panel held that the national security rule in Article XXI is not entirely 'self-judging'. A panel can review the action of a state



taken purportedly to protect its national security. The Panel's decision on this point is consistent with previous WTO jurisprudence laid down in the Russia-Transit and the Saudi Arabia- IPR cases.

The Panel rejected the U.S.'s argument that it increased the tariff rates due to global excess capacity, which could lead to excessive imports of these two commodities used in defence production, thus compromising the U.S.'s national security. The Panel held that the situation the U.S. referred to does not constitute an 'emergency in international relations' under Article XXI(b)(iii) because it lacked severity.

Neoliberal to geoeconomic order

For a deeper understanding, one needs to appreciate the larger political context in which this dispute arose. Anthea Roberts, Henrique Choer Moraes, and Victor Ferguson argue that the international economic order today is moving away from the post-Cold War neoliberal order toward a new geoeconomic order. In the neoliberal order, arguably, economic and security interests are relatively independent tracks. Neoliberalism is based on principles such as non-discrimination in international economic relations and a peaceful settlement of disputes through neutral international courts. It champions interdependence. These principles are achieved by legalising the neoliberal order through the creation of global institutions such as the WTO and a plethora of free trade and investment treaties. When the neoliberal order reigned supreme, the U.S. as the undisputed hegemon, supported free trade because it did not fear the growth of its strategic rivals such as China.

Although the neoliberal order is not dead, the avowedly independent economic and security tracks have started to converge, thus heralding the geoeconomic order. As the difference between the size of the Chinese and American economies began to shrink at a rapid pace, the U.S. seems to be giving up on championing free trade and swiftly embracing protectionism. The Trumpian tariffs wrapped in the cloth of national security, which the Joe Biden administration also backed, is a classic example of an American consensus on the geoeconomic order. The increasing use of the national security legalese to justify such economic nationalism is an attempt to blunt the possibility of international courts reviewing state action. This partly explains the U.S.'s erroneous argument that the national security defence is 'self-judging' and 'non justiciable'.

International trade lawlessness

The geoeconomic order will inevitably lead to what James Bacchus calls 'international trade lawlessness'. The Biden administration has rejected the WTO Panel's ruling calling it 'flawed'. Consequently, the U.S. will not remove the illegal tariff rates. Regrettably, the U.S. is using this ruling to double down on its unsound agenda of asking for reforms in the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism, which has been a shining star in the otherwise dull sky of international dispute settlement. The fear of being called out for economic nationalism by the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism has led the U.S. to block the appointment of judges to the Appellate Body — the highest court in the WTO — for the last several years.

The U.S. which always lectures countries such as Russia and China to steadfastly follow international law is turning its back to the rule-based order. This will only embolden other countries to brazenly pursue unilateralism and economic nationalism. In many ways, this unilateralism is reminiscent of the economic nationalism of the dark decades of the first part of the 20th century that led to the Great Depression and the Second World War. The days ahead will be trying times for the post-war liberal trade order because its most important chieftain seems to have lost interest in it.



AS DISRUPTIONS LOOM, SHRUGGING OFF CHINA IMPORTS NOT AN OPTION FOR NOW

There are also not many import options when it comes to other inputs such as active pharmaceutical ingredients used to manufacture medicines and rare earth minerals that go into electronics and gadgets.

Amid renewed concerns of supply-chain disruptions emerging in the wake of the sharp surge in Covid cases in China, the dynamics of the trade equation between India and China may not have much scope to be tweaked in terms of the inputs coming into India from there, at least in the short term.

The rising imports from China, a steady theme through 2021 and much of 2022, is being seen as crucial from India's perspective as a catalyst for its focussed manufacturing push, with imports of capital goods and intermediate products forming the major chunk of the import basket, officials said. There are also not many import options when it comes to other inputs such as active pharmaceutical ingredients used to manufacture medicines and rare earth minerals that go into electronics and gadgets.

"This is being part of the global supply chain and to make products of that quality, inputs have to be imported and that will take time to get tapered. Electronic components imports from China have almost doubled, but those are essential imports for manufacturing by many telecom manufacturers including for manufacturing iPhone. All countries are now involved in these value chains, can't wish away with it and only rely on domestic factors. Domestic strength is important from the perspective of an increase in consumption of items like petroleum, oil and lubricants," a senior government official told The Indian Express.

The recent emerging trend from China's imports to India has seen a marked shift towards intermediate goods instead of goods for final consumption. "The trend in import data from China is showing that 85 per cent of the goods imported are capital goods and intermediate goods, while 15 per cent are consumption goods," an official said.

Most of the goods imported from China are capital goods, intermediate goods and raw materials and are used for meeting the demand of fast expanding sectors like electronics, telecom and power in India. The rise in import of electronic components, computer hardware and peripherals, telephone components, etc. can be attributed to transforming India into a digitally empowered society and a knowledge economy. India's dependence on imports in these categories is largely due to the gap between domestic supply and demand.

Also, raw materials in the form of APIs and drug formulations imported from China are used for making finished products (generic medicines) which are also exported out of India. The electronic components such as mobile phone parts, integrated circuits, video recording or reproducing apparatus etc are used for making finished products (e.g. mobile handsets) which are also exported to other countries.

According to government officials, the PLI schemes in APIs, bulk drugs, key starting materials and Large-Scale Electronics Manufacturing that have been launched by the Centre recently have started to "deliver results" in terms of showing early potential of lowering the dependency on imports.

The PLI Scheme for Large- Scale Electronics Manufacturing that was notified on April 1, 2020, with targeted segments being mobile phones and



WHAT TRADE DATA SHOW

Latest trade data released by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry show India exported goods worth almost \$32 billion in November 2022 while its imports were valued at almost \$56 billion. Exports grew by 0.6 per cent over November 2021 while imports grew by 5.4 per cent over the same month last year.

In terms of growth rate, India's exports did better than in October when they had contracted by over 12 per cent (over October 2021).

For the period April to November in the current financial year (2022-23 or FY23), India's merchandise exports stood at \$295 billion as against \$266 billion during April-November 2021. India's merchandise imports for the period April-November 2022 were \$494 billion as against \$381 billion during April-November 2021.

What to look for in trade data?

There are three main variables — exports, imports and the trade deficit. The deficit is nothing but the difference between exports and imports. Typically, India tends to have a trade deficit every year because it imports far more (in terms of value, measured in \$) than it exports.

A trade deficit implies that Indians need dollars more than the rest of the world needs rupees for the trades to settle. As such, a trade deficit puts pressure on the rupee's exchange rate against the dollar (presuming that all imports require payment in US dollars). Persistently high trade deficits tend to weaken the rupee's exchange rate.

Within the exports and imports trend, apart from knowing whether exports (and imports) are growing or contracting, it also matters whether the growth (or contraction) is happening more on account of a change in the total volume of goods traded or because the prices of the goods traded are changing.

For instance, it is possible that India's exports of a particular commodity, say bananas, doubles in value terms (\$ terms) not because India exports more bananas, but because the price of bananas in the international market has doubled. Similarly, it is possible to double the volume of bananas exported without registering any growth in exports in value terms because the price of bananas has halved.

Have exports rebounded from the October contraction?

Most observers believe that India's export momentum remains weak. For one, the growth in November is just 0.6 per cent. This is lower than even the growth in recent months such as 5 per cent in September and 11 per cent in August.

Moreover, as pointed out in a recent research note by economists at Nomura research, "Export growth improved in November, but the rebound largely reflects the reversal of the effects of fewer working days (owing to Diwali in October this year vs November last year)".

Simply put, since growth rate is calculated year-on-year or by comparing the performance over the same month last year, this November's performance appears better because last year, Diwali was in November and that resulted in fewer working days and, as a result, lesser exports. It is over that smaller base that exports have grown by less than a percentage point.



That is why the rebound in exports is not a robust one. For instance, if one calculates the average export growth over October and November this year and compares it to what it was in the same two months last year, then exports register a contraction of almost 6 per cent.

What is causing the decline in exports growth?

The chart, sourced from Nomura Research, shows not just the trajectory of exports growth rate but also breaks it down by volume and price components. It removes the exports of oil to get a better understanding of the underlying trend of India's exports.

The analysis shows that the bulk of the decline in India's growth rate is being contributed by the fall in volumes exported. This is understandable to the extent that across the world, economies — especially those of India's biggest trading partners such the US and European countries — are either in recession or struggling to grow. This, in turn, implies a fall in demand for Indian goods that reflects in weaker exports growth.

What about India's imports?

As the similar chart on imports shows, the decline in imports growth has been more a balanced effect of declines in volume and prices. Overall, imports grew by just 5.4 per cent in November and import growth fell sharply over the past few months. In August, imports grew by almost 42 per cent; since then they have decelerated to 15 per cent in September, 10 per cent in October, and 5.4 per cent in November.

The fall in imports growth suggests that India's domestic demand is weakening as the effect of a tighter monetary policy — that is, the higher interest rates and their drag on overall consumption and investment demand.

What about the trade deficit?

The gap between the exports and imports line in the chart shows the fluctuation in trade deficit every month since the start of the current financial year in April.

On the face of it, the trade deficit narrowed in November. But as the data show, this narrowing has happened because the loss of momentum was more in India's imports than in India's exports. The more desirable way to bridge the trade deficit is for exports to grow relatively faster than imports.

India's trade deficit during April to November stood at \$196 billion. As the chart shows, this is considerably higher than the trade deficit in the same period in any of the last 10 years. It is more important to compare the FY23 performance with that in FY22 and FY20 because they are recent and more comparable years; FY21 was a clear aberration as a result of the breakdown of global trade in the wake of the pandemic.

Higher trade deficit will not only push up India's current account deficit (which includes the trade in goods as well as services) but also create pressure on the rupee's exchange rate to weaken further.

WHY THE PROPOSAL TO RAISE IMPORT DUTIES ON NON-ESSENTIAL ITEMS MUST BE ABANDONED

The Narendra Modi government, according to a report in this newspaper, is planning to raise import duties on all "non-essential items". Non-essential would cover not luxury goods — the likes



of Giorgio Armani perfumes, Johnnie Walker single malts or Bentley limousines — but those for which “adequate domestic manufacturing capacity” exists. Individual ministries would identify and prepare a list of such goods based on a “granular” assessment, following which their tariffs will be hiked. The whole idea reeks of protectionism and should be immediately abandoned. This isn’t simply a throwback to an earlier pre-reform era, when the infant-industry argument was used to justify protection against international competition. Here, higher import duties are being proposed neither on luxury nor newborns, but on products of fully-grown and mature adult industries. There can be nothing more perverse than mollycoddling those requiring no nurturing.

Infant industries apart, import substitution was another rationale for protectionism offered by Nehruvian era policymakers. Those very ideas are gaining acceptance, ironically, under a regime that has left no stone unturned in destroying the last vestiges of a past they label as inglorious. Between 1991-92 and 2007-08, India’s peak customs duty on non-agricultural products had come down from 150 per cent to 10 per cent. That trend has reversed, especially during the Modi government’s tenure. The country’s average applied import tariff, which stood at 13.5 per cent in 2014, rose to 18.3 per cent in 2021. The last 4-5 years have also seen an aggressive deployment of the “granular” approach, with import duty increases in diverse products — from solar modules and cells, mobile phone parts, smart meters, earphones and loudspeakers to apples, almonds, sodium cyanide and umbrellas. All in the name of protecting and promoting domestic industry, of course.

The fundamental problem with the “granular” approach is that it favours one industry over the other: What may be output for one (say, steel or polyester staple fibre) is input for another (automotive and clothing makers). Inevitably, the one that lobbies best benefits the most, even as the focus of CEOs moves from factory floors and dealerships to the corridors of North Block and Udyog Bhawan. The losers are the consumers and user industries. True atmanirbharta lies in India producing not just for itself, but also the world — and earning foreign exchange to be able to import things it needn’t or cannot produce competitively. While the Modi government’s Production Linked Incentive scheme to invite investments from both domestic and foreign manufacturers in specific industries is consistent with this objective, the same cannot be said about erecting tariff walls to ward off import competition. Atmanirbharta should not become a backdoor entry for protectionism.

81 CR. PEOPLE TO GET FREE FOODGRAINS FOR ONE YEAR

The Union Cabinet on Friday decided to provide free foodgrains to all 81 crore beneficiaries covered under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) for one year. The beneficiary families which used to pay ₹1 for coarse cereals, ₹2 for wheat and ₹3 for rice per kilogram will now get 35 kg of foodgrains a month free of cost for the next one year, and others will get five kilogram free each month till December 2023. The Centre has estimated an additional amount of ₹2 lakh crore for the scheme.

‘Pro-poor stand’

Speaking after the Cabinet meeting, Union Food Minister Piyush Goyal said the move was yet another reflection of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s pro-poor stand. He said that for 28 months, the Prime Minister Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) ensured five kg of foodgrains for free for the poor. “This is another remarkable decision of the government. The Prime Minister has taken a decision to provide free foodgrains for 81.35 crore people who are covered under the NFSA,” Mr. Goyal said, adding that the entire expenses of the scheme would be borne by the Centre.



Mr. Goyal said though the economic situation after the pandemic was normal, a decision was taken to extend the benefits of the Antyodaya Anna Yojana, PMGKAY and the NFSA to more people by merging them. The PMGKAY, launched during the lockdown in April 2020, was scheduled to end on December 31, 2022.

The Centre has been maintaining that the country has adequate storage of foodgrains to meet the welfare schemes. The Opposition has also been urging the Centre to provide foodgrains for needy people considering the economic situation, inflation and unemployment. The ruling BJP had used the schemes as a point for political campaign in the recently held Assembly elections too.

A WASTED CHANCE

Convened after a gap of six months, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council on Saturday cleared what officials called a 'pathbreaking' move to decriminalise certain offences by taxpayers, with a higher ₹2 crore threshold for initiating prosecutions, except in cases involving fake invoices. Aimed at reducing disputes and chances of tax payer harassment when the stakes are not too high, these changes will take time to materialise. The Centre intends to introduce these changes in the Finance Bill of 2023-24 to be presented on February 1, 2023, and State legislatures will have to amend their respective GST laws too. While industry believes the prosecution threshold could have been raised further, there is greater disappointment that the GST Council side-stepped the broader solution to deal with rising GST disputes — the long-pending move to set up appellate tribunals as envisaged at the launch of the new indirect regime five and a half years ago. To be sure, a report with recommendations on the functioning of these tribunals submitted by a group of ministers of the Council was part of this meeting's agenda, but for now, such disputes will continue to clog High Courts.

The Council took up a handful of other items — a 5% levy on husk of pulses used as a cattle feed input was scrapped, while the tax rate on items such as Fryums and Sports Utility Vehicles was 'clarified'. These minutiae apart, the larger takeaway is the outcomes not pursued — including the tribunal proposal, virtually half the agenda was abandoned and discussions were curtailed to a little under three hours. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said this was done as some States' representatives had other 'committed business' to attend to. This is most surprising as the December 17 date was notified well in advance. It is not clear if some States, otherwise vocal about their pending GST dues and reforms to improve their revenue share, sought any rescheduling, if the said Saturday did not suit them. Ostensibly, some State Finance Ministers are busy formulating their Budgets for the coming year, but the Union Budget preparations did not hold back Ms. Sitharaman from making time for this critical dialogue. This almost casual approach of some States towards the apex GST governance mechanism, not only means delays in efforts to plug tax leakages in the tobacco and Gutkha business, or fix the tax for the booming online gaming business but also bodes ill for the effectiveness of the Council. Taxpayers deserve more than such ad hoc, half-hearted, half-day deliberations with insipid outcomes.

DECODING THE DISSENT WITHIN THE MPC

In its December meeting, the monetary policy committee of the Reserve Bank of India had voted to raise the benchmark repo rate by 35 basis points. The MPC had retained its stance, choosing to remain focused on the withdrawal of accommodation. However, committee member Jayanth Varma voted against the rate hike. Varma, along with Ashima Goyal, also objected to the stance of the committee. As differences within the committee begin to sharpen, the minutes of that



December meeting, released on Wednesday, not only provide an understanding of the considerations guiding individual MPC members, but also indicate the likely trajectory of monetary policy.

The minutes of the meeting reveal that several committee members continue to worry about price pressures in the economy despite the recent dip in inflation. Headline retail inflation declined to 5.88 per cent in November, falling below the upper threshold of the RBI's inflation targeting framework. Much of the decline was due to falling food inflation — the consumer food price index fell to 4.67 per cent in November, down from 7.01 per cent in October. Worryingly, however, core inflation remained elevated, signaling continuing price pressures in the economy. RBI's state of the economy report also acknowledges the risks, saying that "inflation may be slightly down, but it is certainly not out." And that "if anything, it has broadened and become stubborn, especially at its core." In his comments, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das also noted the "persistence" in core inflation. However, Varma, while arguing that inflationary pressures are "easing", points towards "heightened growth concerns" — this perhaps indicates a shift within the committee with greater emphasis now being placed by some on growth considerations. After all, the effects of a slowing global economy are already being felt across the Indian economy. India's export growth has plummeted in recent months, as has industrial production. Domestic demand also appears to be slowing as seen through the recent import data.

Since May, the MPC has raised the repo rate by 225 basis points. While the size of the hike was lower in December, indicating perhaps that the end of the rate hike cycle is near, there continues to be uncertainty over the extent of tightening the RBI still envisages. Das has said that a "premature pause in monetary policy action would be a costly error at this juncture," while Patra has noted that a "decisive decline in inflation over a series of monthly readings" needs to be seen before a shift. These comments only increase the possibility of another rate hike when the committee meets next in February. A pause thereafter cannot be ruled out.

RBI GOLD BONDS: DOES IT MAKE SENSE TO INVEST?

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has announced the Sovereign Gold Bond Scheme 2022-23 – Series III, which will be open for subscription during December 19-23, 2022.

The quantity of gold for which the investor pays is protected, since he receives the ongoing market price at the time of redemption or premature redemption. Investors who put money in gold bonds three years ago are now sitting on a gain of 45 per cent and five years ago have made a valuation gain of 89 per cent.

The offer

The nominal value of the bond based on the simple average closing price, published by the India Bullion and Jewellers Association Ltd (IBJA), for gold of 999 purity of the last three working days of the week preceding the subscription period — December 14, 15 and 16, 2022 — works out to Rs 5,409 per gram of gold. There is a discount of Rs 50 per gram less than the nominal value to those investors applying online and the payment against the application is made through digital mode.

While banks are offering 6.70-7 per cent interest on one-year deposits, gold bonds bear interest at the rate of 2.50 per cent (fixed rate) per annum on the amount of initial investment. Interest



will be credited semi-annually to the bank account of the investor and the last interest will be payable on maturity along with the principal.

However, the attraction is that, on maturity, gold bonds will be redeemed in Indian rupees and the redemption price will be based on a simple average of closing price of gold of 999 purity of previous three business days from the date of repayment, published by the IBA.

Issued so far

The government has issued gold bonds for 96,283 kg (96.28 tonnes) in 61 issuances since 2016-17, which is worth Rs 52,080 crore at the current market price. Investors have made premature redemption of 876 kg of gold bonds so far.

What are gold bonds?

Gold bonds are government securities denominated in grams of gold. They are substitutes for holding physical gold. Investors have to pay the issue price in cash and the bonds will be redeemed in cash on maturity. The bond is issued by the RBI on behalf of the government.

These bonds offer a superior alternative to holding gold in physical form. The risks and costs of storage are eliminated. Investors are assured of the market value of gold at the time of maturity and periodical interest. It's free from issues like making charges and purity in the case of gold in jewellery form. The bonds are held in the books of the RBI or in demat form eliminating risk of loss. While the tenor of bonds is eight years, it can be redeemed after five years.

DRONE INSURANCE IS TAKING OFF. WHAT DOES THE POLICY COVER?

The nascent drone insurance market in India is seeing a flurry of activity. After HDFC Ergo, ICICI Lombard, Bajaj Allianz, and Tata AIG, public sector New India Assurance has launched its unmanned aircraft system insurance.

What's on offer?

Insurance players are now offering drone coverage within the framework set by the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI). According to the firm, the 'New India Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS/ UAV/ RPAS/ Drone) Insurance' will cover large aircraft to solo flying gliders. Coverage will be offered to drone owners, operators, and manufacturers.

"The product provides a diverse option of over 15 different add-on covers for customers to pick and choose from. These add-on covers are designed as per the drone industry's requirements. The policy covers physical damage to the aircraft and its theft. It also provides cover for accidental physical injury to the third party and/or damage to their property due to the aircraft's operations," New India said.

What is covered under drone insurance?

The policy is designed to cover fixed wing, rotor wing and hybrid UAS that can be controlled remotely (with pilot intervention) or autonomous drones (without pilot intervention). These aircraft are generally deployed for military and non-military applications, including surveillance, geography and infrastructure inspections and aerial photography, New India said.



The insurance protection offered for the damage to the drone and payload it carries will provide coverage for the replacement or repair, accidental loss of or damage to the UAS arising from the risks covered, including disappearance if the UAS is unreported after the commencement of Flight. Third-party liability coverage will cover legal liabilities like bodily damage or property damage claims to third parties arising out of the usage and operation of drones, Bajaj Allianz said.

How big is the drone market in India?

A recent EY – FICCI report, 'Making India the drone hub of the world,' indicated that drones and allied component industries can boost India's manufacturing potential by approximately \$23 billion by 2030. The report emphasised the need for innovative and competitive manufacturing capabilities and a strong action plan to help India become a global hub for drone manufacturing by 2030. It also highlighted the importance of generating a strong demand, increasing manufacturing, drawing investments and facilitating exports. "India's drone manufacturing industry clocked annual sales of Rs 60 crore in FY 2021 and is expected to grow to Rs 900 crore by FY 2024."

What are the regulations in the sector?

The Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) initially offered coverage to drones within a visual line of sight (VLOS) and during the day. However, the regulator changed the guidelines to offer coverage beyond VLOS. Insurance regulator IRDAI asked insurers to offer drone insurance coverage in February 2021. Globally, drones are classified as 'aircraft' and aviation regulators have stepped in to regulate the sector. The Government of India has brought in policies (Drone Policy 1.0, 2018 and Drone Policy 2.0, 2019) which nudged the DGCA to come out with Regulations – Civil Aviation Regulation CAR 1.0, 2018 and recently, Draft Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Systems, 2020.

THE COST TO THE COUNTRY JUST FOR SAVINGS IN CTC

According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2021, India has about 100 million casual workers and 50 million salaried workers with no written job contract. This gives us an estimate of 150 million contract workers — or about 30% of the total labour force in the country. In the Annual Survey of Industries, the share of contract employment in total industrial employment increased from 24% in 2004 to 38% in 2017. These non-payroll contract workers are ubiquitously sighted as technicians, drivers, housekeeping staff in offices and commercial complexes, or just unskilled labour in factories. As outsourcing became the trend, many manpower supplier firms mushroomed in the country to meet the ever-growing demand.

After 2001, the public sector also started outsourcing many vacancies, citing them as non-core activities. In the Public Enterprises Survey 2021, the share of casual/contract workers in public sector units (PSUs) was 17.1% in 2011-12, which increased to 19% in 2015-16 and 37.2% in 2020-21. There were 4,81,395 contractual workers in central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) in 2021. This figure was 2,68,815 in 2011, indicating the conversion of many permanent jobs into contractual ones.

Why it is considered 'beneficial'

Apparently, the cost to the company (CTC) is lower for contract employment when compared to permanent employment. This is considered beneficial for the economy as reduced CTC has not only improved profits for India Inc., but also attracts foreign investment.



However, is there a cost to the country (the other CTC) also, when permanent jobs (mostly involving the perennial nature of work) are outsourced to contract labour? To answer this question, let us first analyse the reason behind this global trend of outsourcing.

Besides wages, there are five typical human resource costs: hiring costs, induction costs, career progression costs, severance and superannuation costs. Hiring costs are higher for the public sector when compared to the private sector. Millions apply for a few hundred vacancies in the public sector. Conducting examinations on this scale becomes a nightmare for the state machinery. Hiring through manpower suppliers is cost and time efficient. As contract labour requires minimal training, it reduces CTC. Management prefers contract labour as they are not entitled to the generous paid leave enjoyed by a permanent employee. Further saving comes from no commitment to promotion or post-retirement benefits to contractual workers. Lastly, the flexibility of firing contractual employees is considered to be positively impacting labour productivity.

Wage suppression

A major saving in CTC comes from wage suppression. It is a known fact that contractors somehow manage to pay less than minimum wages to labour. This means that a majority of the 150 million contractual workers in the country are underpaid. Notwithstanding the profits earned by contractors or firms this way, the economy stands to lose on account of reduced consumption and saving. Corners cut in hiring and training lead to a deterioration in service quality, which results in second-order losses, and sometimes accidents. According to a recent study published in The Lancet, an annual increase in outsourced spending of 1% in the National Health Service in England is associated with a rise in treatable mortality of 0.38%.

Since underpaid contractual workers cannot afford adequate health care for themselves and their family members, the country's overall human capital declines. As nobody invests in the upskilling of contractual workers, the labour productivity of the economy is also adversely impacted. Low in morale, contractual workers are not as interested in improving the quality of the product and services, thus affecting the export competitiveness of the economy.

Innovative tactics companies use

Platform and tech companies have devised innovative ways to get around the legal provisions of labour acts. For example, designating employees as business partners (in the case of online cab booking and food delivery companies), and segmenting core activity as tech business (in the case of most of the service aggregators). The exploitative nature of contract employment has a detrimental distributional effect which keeps the wages of permanent workers suppressed too. While more research is required to quantify the adverse impact of replacing permanent jobs with contract employment, it certainly costs the country's economy if millions of workers are underpaid and vulnerable to health hazards. The well-being of contract workers and their family members should not be the price the country should pay for savings in CTC. The argument that permanency of employment breeds inefficiency has its own merit and should be dealt with for its root causes. The public sector should reform its appraisal mechanism so as to reward the efficiency of permanent workers. The private sector should realise that outsourcing's cost to the country might be much more than the cost to the company in the long run.



WHAT IS CAUSING DELAYS AND CHAOS AT DELHI AIRPORT?

The story so far:

Over the past few weeks, there have been delays and long queues at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi, prompting Minister of Civil Aviation Jyotiraditya Scindia to step in to initiate corrective measures. A parliamentary panel summoned the CEO of Delhi International Airport Limited (DIAL), and the Airports Authority of India has issued a notice to examine whether it failed to meet “service quality requirements.”

What are the reasons for over-crowding?

Passengers have complained of long queues at entry gates, check-in counters as well as security lanes at the Indira Gandhi International Airport, with Terminal 3, built in 2010 to handle 3.4 crore passengers per annum, worst affected. So far December has witnessed a record number of air travellers since the COVID-19 outbreak with the highest number seen on December 11 when airlines carried 4.27 lakh domestic passengers. Delhi airport alone has seen 1,95,000 domestic and international passengers per day at all its three passenger terminal buildings.

According to a senior BCAS (Bureau of Civil Aviation Security) official, the number of flights and passengers at Delhi airport have grown exponentially, but its “infrastructure has frozen over time.” Equipment like X-ray machines and door frame metal detectors are bought by the airport out of its capital expenditure, while the CISF provides personnel and their cost is met through the aviation security fee component of airfare paid by passengers.

After Mr. Scindia visited the airport last week, a decision was taken to install seven more X-ray machines and take the number of total security lanes to 20 from the current 13, which were found to be adequate only for 15 flights, while the airport saw up to 21 flights during peak hours. A parliamentary panel also met DIAL officials, and the Airports Authority of India has also issued a notice to DIAL.

What are the service quality requirements?

The DIAL is supposed to submit a quarterly report on the “service quality requirements” spelt out in Schedule 3 of the Operations Management Development Agreement of 2006 under which certain functions at Delhi airport were privatised and given to the DIAL. The agreement specifies 13 different categories of services and the minimum time within which they should be available.

After the furore on overcrowding at Delhi Airport, the Airports Authority of India sent a notice to DIAL last week to examine whether it was failing to conform to the requirements. These include service parameters such as maximum queuing time; within two years of the deal, the airport has to ensure that for check-in the maximum waiting time is five minutes for business class and 20 minutes for economy. Similarly, for security check as well as customs, immigration and quarantine, as many as 95% of passengers should be cleared within 10 minutes. As far as baggage delivery is concerned, the first bag should arrive on the conveyor belt within 10 minutes, and the last bag should arrive within 30 minutes after the aircraft lands. The airport should also ensure wheelchairs for 100% of passengers who need them within five minutes.

There are other service parameters too, which include time taken to find parking space, maximum waiting time for taxis, and response to customer complaints on phone. If the airport operator fails to provide these standards, it is liable to pay 0.5% of the monthly revenue for every month that



the standards are below the laid down requirements. A senior AAI official said so far the airport was able to meet these criteria.

Why has infrastructure not kept pace with the growth in demand?

COVID-19 turned the clock back as passenger traffic suddenly dropped to 56% to 6.3 crore in calendar year 2020. However, passenger numbers have been growing steadily since March this year after the fear of Omicron faded away. Moreover, with Diwali and Dussehra festivals in October, resurgence in demand was established. But expansion plans at various airports were put on the backburner due to the impact of COVID-19 on revenue as well as unavailability of manpower and material. Delhi airport embarked on an expansion plan that would take its passenger handling capacity from 6.9 crore now to 10 crore by mid-2023, but it is already a year behind schedule. The development of airports such as Mumbai and Chennai is also behind the growth curve.

Though the government has granted in-principle approval to 21 greenfield airport projects, construction has only begun in nine of them.

MAHINDRA EXCELS, MARUTI SUZUKI DISAPPOINTS: WHAT LATEST CRASH TEST RESULTS SHOW

Four Indian cars were tested in the latest round of crash tests conducted by Global NCAP, a UK-based road safety NGO, with the three featured cars from India's largest carmaker Maruti Suzuki faring poorly. The results have triggered a fresh debate on safety of cars sold by global manufacturers in India and also the sanctity of these independent tests carried out by Global NCAP.

Crash test norms

NCAP stands for New Car Assessment Programme, a series of safety tests instituted by Global NCAP, a British organisation that counts Bloomberg Philanthropies, FIA Foundation (the governing body for Formula 1 racing), International Consumer Testing and Research, and the Road Safety Fund among its promoters, and has editions in several car markets to assess safety and build quality parameters in new vehicles. The higher the NCAP score, the safer the car is supposed to be.

The only non-Maruti Suzuki car in the list of the latest vehicles — the Mahindra Scorpio-N — scored five stars for adult occupant protection and three stars for child occupant protection.

The popular mid-range hatchback Suzuki Swift got one star each for adult and child occupant protection, while Suzuki's entry level S-Presso and premium hatchback Ignis both scored only one star for adult occupant protection and zero stars for child occupant protection. The three Maruti Suzuki models were tested in their basic safety specification with two frontal airbags and ABS (Anti-Lock Braking System), with none of the three models providing ESC (electronic stability control) or side curtain airbags as standard or as optional equipment.

All three models, Global NCAP said, "demonstrated unstable structures during frontal crash testing".



Global NCAP's updated protocols assess frontal and side impact protection for all tested models, while ESC, pedestrian protection and side impact pole protection assessments are also required for vehicles scoring the highest star ratings.

Sanctity of Global NCAP tests

While the Global NCAP tests are useful when customers make a choice about the vehicle they plan to buy, these are third-party tests that are seen as being additional to safety standards prescribed by the government. The UNECE World Forum for Harmonization of Vehicle Regulations (WP.29) is, by default, the worldwide regulatory forum within the institutional framework of the UNECE Inland Transport Committee, which are part of three UN Agreements, adopted in 1958, 1997 and 1998, and provide the legal framework allowing Contracting Parties (member countries such as India) attending the WP.29 sessions to establish regulatory instruments concerning motor vehicles and motor vehicle equipment. These regulations are – the UN Regulations, annexed to the 1958 Agreement; the United Nations Global Technical Regulations (UN GTRs), associated with the 1998 Agreement; and the UN Rules, annexed to the 1997 Agreement.

India had signed the UN WP.29 1998 Agreement in February 2006 and continues to actively participate in the GTR formulation by furnishing data and subject matter expertise, and currently has more than 70% safety regulations that are either partially or fully technically aligned with GTRs and UN Regulations while retaining Indian specific driving and environmental conditions. These regulations are reviewed periodically and amendments are recommended to the Technical Standing Committee on Central Motor Vehicles Rules for adoption and subsequent notification by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways under these Rules. They form the backbone of the compliance architecture for passenger vehicles in India.

So, technically, all the cars that currently ply on Indian roads meet these government's safety norms that were last upgraded in 2019. Cars such as the Maruti Suzuki Omni or the Tata Sumo that failed to meet these norms had to be phased out as soon as the new government norms kicked in. The Global NCAP ratings are over and above the government norms, purely to help customers make an informed choice of the models they choose and to push manufacturers into improving safety standards. But the Global NCAP norms are not mandatory, so cars that come in for testing are either sponsored by the manufacturer or picked by the agency randomly from showrooms. And they typically pick car models that have a sketchy safety record.

Carmakers such as Maruti Suzuki have previously reacted to these Global NCAP tests by stating that they are conducted at speeds that are higher than those prescribed by the regulatory authorities not only in India but in Europe and the US, and that they are in compliance with the rules and regulations. To that extent, they are right.

But there are some issues that could raise questions: for instance, the Suzuki Ignis with two airbags available in the African market that was tested by Global NCAP in 2019 recorded three stars for adult occupant protection and one star for child occupant protection, while the 2016 Euro NCAP tests of the Ignis sold in the UK market recorded a three star overall rating with the standard safety equipment and five stars with a safety pack. So there seems to be differing yardsticks adopted by the manufacturer for different markets.

But there is also an India-specific reason cited by carmakers manufacturing entry-level vehicles: that the customers that typically buy entry level cars in India are graduating from a two-wheeler and that the move from two wheelers to four wheelers itself entails a certain safety upgradation, and that the price of these cars cannot be jacked up substantially as that would delay the transition



from two-wheelers to four wheelers. Carmakers such as Maruti Suzuki have cited this as a reason for opposing the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways' push to implement six airbags in all cars.

New Bharat NCAP norms

On the specific issue of standardisation of crash tests and on the sanctity of Global NCAP, the government has been trying to make some headway, even though it is much delayed. The Union Ministry of Road Transport & Highways has recently approved a draft notification to introduce Bharat NCAP (New Car Assessment Program). The programme will be rolled out from April 1, 2023. Passenger vehicles with up to eight seats weighing under 3.5 tonnes will be tested under this. Automobiles in India will be accorded star ratings based on their performance in crash tests factoring in the existing Indian regulations and driving conditions. The Bharat NCAP program was first announced back in 2016.

In a series of tweets earlier this year, MoRTH Minister Nitin Gadkari said Bharat NCAP would serve as a consumer-centric platform that allows customers to opt for safer cars based on their star ratings, while promoting healthy competition among Indian manufacturers. "Star rating of Indian cars based on crash tests is extremely crucial not just for the safety of passengers, but also to increase the export-worthiness of Indian automobiles," he said.

Emphasising that the testing protocol of Bharat NCAP shall be aligned with global crash test protocols factoring in the existing Indian regulations, Gadkari said it will allow Indian manufacturers to get their vehicles tested at our own in-house testing facilities.

Also, Bharat NCAP will not just be limited to passive safety tests and testing internal combustion engined vehicles, but also rate CNG cars and electric vehicles based on their crash test performance. Also, unlike formats followed by GNCAP, which award separate star ratings for adult and child protection, BNCAP is likely to get a single combined rating. Once these norms kicks in, manufacturers would be left with little wriggle room.

DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

THE UNCONTROLLED RE-ENTRIES OF SATELLITES

The story so far:

More than 140 experts and dignitaries have signed an open letter published by the Outer Space Institute (OSI) calling for both national and multilateral efforts to restrict uncontrolled re-entries — the phenomenon of rocket parts falling back to earth in unguided fashion once their missions are complete. Among others, the letter is addressed to S. Somanath, chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).

What are the stages of a rocket launch?

The Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite in 1957. Today, there are more than 6,000 satellites in orbit, most of them in low-earth (100-2,000 km) and geostationary (35,786 km) orbits, placed there in more than 5,000 launches. The number of rocket launches have been surging with the advent of reusable rocket stages.

Rockets have multiple stages. Once a stage has increased the rocket's altitude and velocity by a certain amount, the rocket sheds it. Some rockets jettison all their larger stages before reaching the destination orbit; a smaller engine then moves the payload to its final orbit. Others carry the payload to the orbit, then perform a deorbit manoeuvre to begin their descent. In both cases, rocket stages come back down — in controlled or uncontrolled ways.

What is an uncontrolled re-entry?

In an uncontrolled re-entry, the rocket stage simply falls. Its path down is determined by its shape, angle of descent, air currents and other characteristics. It will also disintegrate as it falls. As the smaller pieces fan out, the potential radius of impact will increase on the ground.

Some pieces burn up entirely while others don't. But because of the speed at which they're travelling, debris can be deadly.

A 2021 report of the International Space Safety Foundation said, "an impact anywhere on an airliner with debris of mass above 300 grams would produce a catastrophic failure, meaning all people on board would be killed".

Most rocket parts have landed in oceans principally because earth's surface has more water than land. But many have dropped on land as well.

Why are scientists worried about the re-entries?

The OSI letter cited examples of parts of a Russian rocket in 2018 and China's Long March 5B rockets in 2020 and 2022 striking parts of Indonesia, Peru, India and Ivory Coast, among others. Many news reports have focused on Chinese transgressions of late, but historically, the U.S. has been the worst offender.

Parts of a SpaceX Falcon 9 that fell down in Indonesia in 2016 included two "refrigerator-sized fuel tanks". If re-entering stages still hold fuel, atmospheric and terrestrial chemical contamination is another risk.



As per the letter, “Conservative estimates place the casualty risk from uncontrolled rocket body re-entries as being on the order of 10% in the next decade” and that countries in the ‘Global South’ face a “disproportionately higher” risk of casualties.

The U.S. Orbital Debris Mitigation Standard Practices (ODMSP) require all launches to keep the chance of a casualty from a re-entering body to be below 0.01%. But the U.S. Air Force and the NASA have waived this requirement on multiple occasions.

A July 2022 study by researchers in Canada found that this threshold, which some other countries have also adopted, is “arbitrary and makes little sense in an era when new technologies and mission profiles enable controlled re-entries,” and because many places have become more densely populated.

There is no international binding agreement to ensure rocket stages always perform controlled re-entries nor on the technologies with which to do so. The Liability Convention 1972 requires countries to pay for damages, not prevent them. These technologies include wing-like attachments, de-orbiting brakes, and extra fuel on the re-entering body, and design changes that minimise debris formation.

What can make minimum damage?

While the OSI letter admits that any kind of re-entry will inevitably damage some ecosystem, it recommends that bodies aim for an ocean in order to avoid human casualties.

The letter concludes by asking that future solutions be extended to re-entering satellites as well. Advances in electronics and fabrication have made way for smaller satellites, which are easier to build and launch in large numbers. These satellites experience more atmospheric drag than if they had been bigger, but they are also likelier to burn up during re-entry.

India’s 300-kg RISAT-2 satellite re-entered earth’s atmosphere in October after 13 years in low-earth orbit. The ISRO tracked it with its system for safe and sustainable space operations management from a month beforehand. It plotted its predicted paths using models in-house. The RISAT-2 eventually fell into the Indian Ocean on October 30.

DEEPPFAKE TECHNOLOGY: HOW AND WHY CHINA IS PLANNING TO REGULATE IT

The story so far:

The Cyberspace Administration of China, the country’s cyberspace watchdog, is rolling out new regulations, to be effective from January 10, to restrict the use of deep synthesis technology and curb disinformation. Deep synthesis is defined as the use of technologies, including deep learning and augmented reality, to generate text, images, audio and video to create virtual scenes. One of the most notorious applications of the technology is deepfakes, where synthetic media is used to swap the face or voice of one person for another. Deepfakes are getting harder to detect with the advancement of technology. It is used to generate celebrity porn videos, produce fake news, and commit financial fraud among other wrongdoings. Under the guidelines of China’s new rules, companies and platforms using the technology must first receive consent from individuals before they edit their voice or image.

What is a deepfake?



Deepfakes are a compilation of artificial images and audio put together with machine-learning algorithms to spread misinformation and replace a real person's appearance, voice, or both with similar artificial likenesses or voices. It can create people who do not exist and it can fake real people saying and doing things they did not say or do.

The term deepfake originated in 2017, when an anonymous Reddit user called himself "Deepfakes." This user manipulated Google's open-source, deep-learning technology to create and post pornographic videos. The videos were doctored with a technique known as face-swapping. The user "Deepfakes" replaced real faces with celebrity faces. Deepfake technology is now being used for nefarious purposes like scams and hoaxes, celebrity pornography, election manipulation, social engineering, automated disinformation attacks, identity theft and financial fraud, cybersecurity company Norton said in a blog.

Deepfake technology has been used to impersonate former U.S. Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg and Hollywood celebrity Tom Cruise. China's new rule aims to combat the use of deepfake for spreading disinformation.

What is China's new policy to curb deepfakes?

The policy requires deep synthesis service providers and users to ensure that any doctored content using the technology is explicitly labelled and can be traced back to its source, the South China Morning Post reported. The regulation also mandates people using the technology to edit someone's image or voice, to notify and take the consent of the person in question. When reposting news made by the technology, the source can only be from the government-approved list of news outlets. Deep synthesis service providers must also abide by local laws, respect ethics, and maintain the "correct political direction and correct public opinion orientation", according to the new regulation.

Why has such a policy been implemented?

China's cyberspace watchdog said it was concerned that unchecked development and use of deep synthesis could lead to its use in criminal activities like online scams or defamation, according to a report by the South China Morning Post. The country's recent move aims to curb risks that might arise from activities provided by platforms which use deep learning or virtual reality to alter any online content. If successful, China's new policies could set an example and lay down a policy framework that other nations can follow.

What are other countries doing to combat deepfakes?

The European Union has an updated Code of Practice to stop the spread of disinformation through deepfakes. The revised Code requires tech companies including Google, Meta, and Twitter to take measures in countering deepfakes and fake accounts on their platforms. They have six months to implement their measures once they have signed up to the Code. If found non-compliant, these companies can face fines as much as 6% of their annual global turnover, according to the updated Code. Introduced in 2018, the Code of Practice on Disinformation brought together for the first time worldwide industry players to commit to counter disinformation.

The Code of Practice was signed in October 2018 by online platforms Facebook, Google, Twitter and Mozilla, as well as by advertisers and other players in the advertising industry. Microsoft joined in May 2019, while TikTok signed the Code in June 2020. However, the assessment of the



Code revealed important gaps and hence the Commission has issued a Guidance on updating and strengthening the Code in order to bridge the gaps. The Code's revision process was completed in June 2022.

In July, last year, the U.S. introduced the bipartisan Deepfake Task Force Act to assist the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to counter deepfake technology. The measure directs the DHS to conduct an annual study of deepfakes — assess the technology used, track its uses by foreign and domestic entities, and come up with available countermeasures to tackle the same.

Some States in the United States such as California and Texas have passed laws that criminalise the publishing and distributing of deepfake videos that intend to influence the outcome of an election. The law in Virginia imposes criminal penalties on the distribution of nonconsensual deepfake pornography.

In India, however, there are no legal rules against using deepfake technology. However, specific laws can be addressed for misusing the tech, which include Copyright Violation, Defamation and cyber felonies.

PUBLIC SPHERE VITIATED

It has been nearly two months since business magnate Elon Musk took control of Twitter, Inc. after a \$44 billion acquisition. The fear that there would be a loosening of content standards under his helmsmanship has played itself out to be eerily true. Yet, no one could have foreseen the chaos that has reigned since the takeover of the popular social media platform. There has been a whittling down of the workforce which has also included summary dismissals based on whimsical reasons. The loss of employees, especially those working in the appeals process and other content moderation teams, has hurt redress processes. Poorly thought-out decisions such as users paying a monthly fee to get a “verified account” have been overturned after an embarrassing increase in impersonation. The Twitter accounts of some journalists critical of Mr. Musk or who merely reported on a controversial decision by Mr. Musk to suspend the accounts of flight trackers have been suspended too without proper notice or explanation. Twitter also came up with a controversial rule about users not posting links to specific and rival social media platforms. This resulted in a severe backlash and forced Mr. Musk to post a poll asking his over 122 million followers whether he should step down as the “head of Twitter”, and in turn eliciting a majority response in the affirmative. Mr. Musk has now promised to find another CEO.

The past two months have made it clear that Mr. Musk is out of his depth in running operations in a platform that has gained outsized significance and appeal despite being unable to remain a financial success consistently. For better or worse, Twitter has become a key member of the Internet public sphere, connecting journalists, public officials and powerful corporate leaders to the people and allowing for the dispersal of news, opinions and critiques, even if it has also retained aspects related to hate speech, bullying and disinformation. Twitter had tried to mitigate misgivings about the platform by coming up with content moderation principles and a rules-based order to govern content, although it has been a work in progress. But ever since Mr. Musk took over, this has been overshadowed by his arbitrary diktats and posturing. He seems to be aware that the loss of advertisers (a process that has continued because of the lowering of content standards) and of reputation (because of his arbitrariness) will further hurt the company's financial interests. This explains why he has agreed to step down. But his innate tendency of being a political reactionary seems to get in the way of doing the right thing. A more democratic and



well-governed social media universe with newer platforms can help reduce the harm, but Twitter and its users also deserve better.

RECALLING THE LIFE AND CRIMES OF 'BIKINI KILLER' CHARLES SOBHRAJ

To those who have known him personally, serial killer Charles Sobhraj appeared affable and charismatic. He had a keen grasp of human nature, and used his charms to control people and situations over his entire storied life. The so-called Bikini Killer committed at least 12 murders and repeatedly escaped the law with serpentine slipperiness.

Sobhraj, now 78, is set to be released from prison in Nepal, where he was arrested in 2003 for the murder of an American backpacker.

Difficult childhood

Sobhraj was born to an expatriate Indian moneylender and a Vietnamese woman in French-occupied Saigon in 1944. His birth father left him and his mother when he was just three; his mother then married a French army officer. Charles' childhood was defined by crises of identity and belonging as he was "shunted back and forth between parents and continents", according to his biographers Richard Neville and Julie Clarke.

Charles spent most of his adolescence in and out of juvenile offender homes — he stole cars, robbed housewives, and mugged people on the street. By his 20s, he was moving between Parisian high society and the underworld, making money through scams and burglaries. He grew close to Chantal Compagnon, whom he married in 1969.

From early on, Sobhraj displayed little remorse for his actions, Neville and Clarke reported. Rather, he saw himself as a victim of an unjust society and wretched fate, with his only way to power, wealth and opulence being the path of crime.

Victims on the hippie trail

In the 1970s, many Westerners journeyed to the 'Orient' to "find themselves" outside the capitalist decadence of their native lands. Hordes of young Europeans came to South and East Asia on shoestring budgets — and it was in the obscurity and transience of the hippie trail that Sobhraj committed his worst crimes, often targeting those who were allured by his magnetism. He was arrested multiple times in Athens, Delhi, and Kabul — he got away each time through bribery or audaciously planned escapes.

After Chantal left Charles, taking their baby along, a young Canadian named Marie-Andrée Leclerc fell for the criminal after meeting him in India. She became his close companion and remained devoted to him despite his addiction to gambling and women. The ability to gain people's trust and make them want to do things for him remained Charles' abiding character trait.

Thailand, India murders

In 1975, Sobhraj and Leclerc found themselves in Thailand, where he committed his first confirmed murder. The American Teresa Knowlton was found dead in a tidal pool wearing a bikini, the first of similar murders that earned him his name of Bikini Killer. He would be accused of killing at least another 11 people in Thailand, Nepal, and India; some estimates put the number of his victims at 30.



In 1976, Sobhraj, along with Leclerc and an Indian accomplice Ajai Chaudhary alias Mohan Lal, was accused of murdering, robbing, and forging the identity of an Israeli tourist in Varanasi. Like most of his murders, Sobhraj had allegedly killed his victim by poisoning. A trial court convicted him, but he was acquitted by the Allahabad HC and then the Supreme Court in 1996 after the prosecution failed to prove its case beyond reasonable doubt.

He had been arrested earlier in Delhi for trying to rob an emporium at Hotel Ashoka and a con job in Tilak Nagar among other petty crimes. He was subsequently arrested and sentenced for trying to poison and rob some French tourists.

Why Sobhraj killed so many remains a mystery. Sobhraj has himself claimed that many of the deaths were either accidental drug overdoses or cartel killings. He often used the passport and identities of his victims to travel to multiple countries.

Herman Knippenberg, a Dutch diplomat who was key to uncovering details about Sobhraj, told The Guardian in 2020 that he killed his victims because they rejected his criminal entreaties. “In resisting the overtures of Sobhraj,” he said, “they triggered his childhood preoccupation with being rejected”.

Tihar stay, Nepal arrest

In 1976, Thai police issued a warrant against Sobhraj for the murder of six women, all of whom were found dead in bikinis on beaches. But he was caught in Delhi before Thai authorities could get to him. He was charged with the murder of Frenchman Jean-Luc Solomon and received a 12-year sentence.

Sobhraj lived lavishly in Tihar, bribing guards and befriending prisoners for special treatment. In 1986, he escaped after drugging inmates and guards — but was recaptured in Goa soon, and had 10 years added to his sentence.

It has been speculated that this was precisely what Sobhraj wanted — he had realised that if released before Thailand’s 20-year statute of limitation expired, he would be deported and would receive the death penalty — and had planned the escape to extend his stay in prison in India.

In 1997, when Sobhraj was finally released, most warrants against him had expired, and evidence and witnesses gone. He returned to France, where he sold film rights on his life for \$15 million, and charged big money for interviews and photographs.

It was probably hubris that caused Sobhraj to return to Nepal in 2003 — one of the few countries where he was still wanted. He was arrested and convicted of murders he had committed in 2006, and received a 20-year sentence.

LIONEL MESSI HAS WON THE FIFA WORLD CUP, BUT HE CAN'T TAKE THE TROPHY HOME. HERE'S WHY

On Sunday, after a glorious night of football at the Lusail Stadium in Doha, Lionel Messi finally got his chance to lift the Fifa World Cup trophy with Argentina winning in the final against France. It took him more than 16 years after playing his maiden World Cup tournament, and several heartbreaks in between, to land the coveted prize.

But, will Messi and Co. get to take the trophy back home to Argentina? No, is the simple answer.



The Jules Rimet Trophy

The original World Cup trophy was called the Jules Rimet Trophy, in honour of former Fifa president Jules Rimet. Rimet was instrumental in the conceptualisation of a global football tournament like the World Cup. From when the first World Cup was held in 1930 to 1970, the trophy, made of gold-plated sterling silver, weighed 3.8 kg and was given to the champions.

Back then, Fifa had a rule in place that allowed countries which won the World Cup three times to keep the original trophy. Thus, Brazil took home the Jules Rimet Trophy after their third title in 1970.

The trophy gets stolen

In 1983, the Jules Rimet Trophy that Brazil took home in 1970 was stolen from a display case at the Brazilian Football Confederation headquarters in Rio de Janeiro. Till date, it has not been recovered and it is widely believed that the trophy was melted down and the gold sold. Only the base of the trophy was discovered and is currently on display at the Fifa World Cup Football museum in Zurich, Switzerland, according to the BBC.

Incidentally, this was the second instance of the trophy being stolen.

Earlier, in 1966, ahead of the World Cup hosted by England, it was stolen during a public exhibition in London. However, the trophy was retrieved just seven days later, wrapped in newspaper at the bottom of a suburban garden hedge, by a dog named Pickles.

Fifa World Cup Trophy

Since 1974, the champions have been presented with the Fifa World Cup Trophy, which replaced the Jules Rimet Trophy after Brazil took it home. Designed by artist Silvio Gazzaniga and weighing 6.175 kg, the trophy contains 4,927 gm of pure gold.

However, nowadays, the winners receive a gold-plated bronze replica of the trophy and are not allowed to take home the original. This is chiefly due to security concerns, especially considering the two instances of theft in the past. The original is displayed at the Fifa World Football Museum.

At the end of each tournament, the winning country's name gets inscribed on a plate that is attached to the base of the Fifa World Cup Trophy. Ahead of each World Cup, the trophy is taken on a global tour covering several countries. It also makes an appearance at World Cup draws and other official ceremonies.

JAPAN REVERSES NUCLEAR PLAN ADOPTED POST FUKUSHIMA CRISIS

Japan on Thursday adopted a new policy promoting greater use of nuclear energy to ensure a stable power supply amid global fuel shortages and to reduce carbon emissions, in a major reversal of its phase-out plan following the Fukushima crisis.

The new policy says Japan must maximize the use of existing nuclear reactors by restarting as many of them as possible and prolonging the operating life of old reactors beyond their 60-year limit, and by developing next-generation reactors to replace them.

Anti-nuclear sentiment and safety concerns rose sharply in Japan after the 2011 Fukushima disaster, and restart approvals have since come slowly under stricter safety standards. Utility



companies have applied for restarts at 27 reactors in the past decade. Seventeen have passed safety checks and only 10 have resumed operations. That was in line with Japan's earlier plan to phase out nuclear energy by 2030.

In a reversal, the new policy says nuclear power provides stable output and serves "an important role as a carbon-free baseload energy source in achieving supply stability and carbon neutrality" and pledges to "sustain use of nuclear power into the future."

A NEW GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY FRAMEWORK

The story so far:

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations agreement to conserve and sustainably use earth's biodiversity, got a boost at a conference held in Montreal recently, when 188 of 196 member governments agreed on a new framework to halt the sharp and steady loss of biological species. These governments, supported by the U.S. and the Vatican, who are not party to the Convention, adopted the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) that sets out four goals for 2050, and 23 targets for 2030, to save existing biodiversity and ensure that 30% of degraded terrestrial, inland water, coastal and marine ecosystems come under effective restoration.

Why is biodiversity important?

Often called the web of life, biodiversity signifies the variety of species on earth, which are all connected and sustain the balance of ecosystems, enabling humans to coexist. They interact with the environment to perform a host of functions. The CBD states that only about 1.75 million species have so far been identified, including numerous insects, while there may be some 13 million species.

Some familiar ecosystem services rendered by diverse living forms, of which plants and animals are the most visible, include providing humans with food, fuel, fibre, shelter, building materials, air and water purification, stabilisation of climate, pollination of plants including those used in agriculture, and moderating the effects of flood, drought, extreme temperatures and wind. A disruption of these produces severe impacts such as failed agriculture, aberrant climate patterns and cascading losses of species that accelerate the degradation of earth.

According to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), a quarter of the plants and animals it assessed for the 2019 Global Biodiversity Outlook are threatened, which translates to about one million species facing extinction. Similarly, a review on the economics of biodiversity by Cambridge professor Partha Dasgupta commissioned by the U. K. government reported that the current model of economic growth would require 1.6 earths to maintain current lifestyles.

What does the Kunming-Montreal pact aim to achieve?

The agreement to implement the GBF was pushed through on December 18 by the Chinese conference presidency and host Canada in the face of objections from some African countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon and Uganda. It sets out targets for 2030 on protection for degraded areas, resource mobilisation for conservation, compensation for countries that preserve biodiversity, halting human activity linked to species extinction, reducing by half the spread of invasive alien species (introduced plants and animals that affect endemic



biodiversity), cutting pollution to non-harmful levels and minimising climate change impact and ocean acidification, among others.

The GBF goals and targets do not prohibit the use of biodiversity, but call for sustainable use, and a sharing of benefits from genetic resources. Target five specifically states that the use, harvesting and trade in wild species should be “sustainable, safe and legal, preventing overexploitation, minimising impacts on non-target species and ecosystems...and reducing the risk of pathogen spillover...” The GBF emphasises respect for the rights of indigenous communities that traditionally protect forests and biodiversity, and their involvement in conservation efforts. It advocates similar roles for women and local communities.

Agricultural practices also find a strong focus. Besides emphasising sustainable practices in agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries and forestry, the agreement calls upon members to adopt biodiversity-supporting methods such as agroecology and sustainable intensification. This acquires significance, since growing Genetically Modified (GM) crops is not favoured by agroecologists as they could contaminate nearby wild species of the same plants.

One target also looks at turning cities into hosts of biodiversity, by expanding the area of and improving the quality and access to urban green and blue spaces. Urban planning should also be biodiversity-inclusive, “enhancing native biodiversity, ecological connectivity and integrity, and improving human health and well-being and connection to nature.”

Earlier, the CBD had launched the Aichi biodiversity targets for 2020, which included safeguarding of all ecosystems that provide services for humanity’s survival, and the Nagoya Protocol which went into effect in 2014 to ensure sharing of biodiversity access and benefits.

A PLANET IN CRISIS

A month after the 27th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27) in Egypt, diplomatic retinue went into a contentious huddle again to save the planet — in Montreal, Canada, this time, and as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). While both these conferences can trace their origins to the Rio summit of 1992, the CBD does not get anywhere near the media attention COP commands. There are no world leaders and heads of state making grandiloquent commitments because the CBD largely continues to be framed as an ‘environmentalist’ concern, much like what COP used to be, until the forces of capitalism managed to reimagine the idea of a planet being inexorably slow-cooked in greenhouse gases to one that may yet be saved by renewable energy sources — and at the very least — make some entrepreneurs rich.

Unlike cyclones and melting glaciers that have become visual aids to bring home the climate crisis wrought by invisible gases, biodiversity loss continues to be largely invisible despite its victims being extremely visible. Based on current trends, the UN reckons, an estimated 34,000 plant and 5,200 animal species, including one in eight of the world’s bird species, face extinction. About 30% of breeds of main farm animal species are currently at high risk of extinction. Forests are home to much of the known terrestrial biodiversity, but about 45% of the earth’s original forests are gone, cleared mostly during the past century. Yet, because much of this extinction is not finely accounted for as the rise in per capita carbon emissions or temperature swings, it fails to evoke the urgency it deserves. In this light, India’s stance, i.e., of not wanting hard targets on proposals such as reducing the use of pesticides, given that their effects on impacting biodiversity are documented, and conserving 30% of land and sea, seems anachronistic particularly when it sees itself as a



champion of conservation and living in harmony with nature. While India, adopting a negotiating tack from climate conferences, has argued that different nations have differing levels of responsibility towards biodiversity conservation (which requires richer nations to be more generous funders of global conservation efforts), it is well known that such demands are a dead end unless countries agree to definite targets. What cannot be measured, as the adage goes, cannot be understood or addressed. Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, Executive Secretary of the CBD, has described the negotiations as one that should result in a “Paris moment for nature”; while this was not quite what happened, countries have agreed on preparing concrete road maps by 2024 and the richer ones, committing \$30 billion an annum by 2030. But seeing tangible outcomes is a long time away.

WHAT ARE CARBON MARKETS AND HOW DO THEY OPERATE?

The story so far:

The Energy Conservation (Amendment) Bill, 2022 was passed in Parliament on December 12, despite the Opposition’s demands to send it for scrutiny to a parliamentary committee. The Bill empowers the government to establish carbon markets in India and specify a carbon credit trading scheme.

What are carbon markets?

Article six of the 2015 Paris Agreement provides for the use of international carbon markets by countries to fulfil their nationally determined contributions (NDC) to keep global warming within 2°C. Carbon markets are essentially a tool for putting a price on carbon emissions — they establish trading systems where carbon credits or allowances can be bought and sold. A carbon credit is a kind of tradable permit that, as per UN standards, equals one tonne of carbon dioxide removed, reduced, or sequestered from the atmosphere. A United Nations Development Program (UNDP) release this year noted that interest in carbon markets is growing globally — 83% of NDCs submitted by countries mention their intent to make use of international market mechanisms to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There are broadly two types of carbon markets that exist today — compliance markets and voluntary markets. Voluntary markets are those in which emitters — corporations, private individuals, and others— buy carbon credits to offset the emission of one tonne of CO₂ or an equivalent greenhouse gas. Such carbon credits are created by activities which reduce CO₂ from the air, such as afforestation. In a voluntary market, a corporation looking to compensate for its unavoidable emissions, purchases carbon credits from an entity engaged in projects that reduce, remove, capture, or avoid emissions. For instance, in the aviation sector, airlines may purchase carbon credits to offset the carbon footprint of the flights they operate. Compliance markets on the other hand which are set up by policies at the national, regional, and/or international level are officially regulated.

What are the challenges?

The UNDP points out serious concerns pertaining to carbon markets — ranging from double counting of greenhouse gas reductions, quality and authenticity of climate projects that generate credits to poor market transparency. There are also concerns about ‘greenwashing’ — companies may buy credits, simply offsetting carbon footprints instead of reducing their overall emissions.

What are concerns about new Bill?



The Bill empowers the Centre to specify a carbon credits trading scheme. Under the Bill, the central government or an authorised agency will be able to issue carbon credit certificates. These carbon credit certificates will be tradeable in nature. Other persons would be able to buy carbon credit certificates on a voluntary basis. Opposition members pointed out that the Bill does not provide clarity on the mechanism to be used for the trading of carbon credit certificates and about who will regulate such trading. Members also raised questions about the right Ministry to bring in a scheme of this nature, pointing out that while carbon market schemes in other countries are framed by their environment ministries, the Indian Bill was tabled by the Power Ministry.

Another important concern raised is that the Bill does not specify whether certificates under already existing schemes would also be interchangeable and tradeable with carbon credit certificates. Two types of tradeable certificates are already issued in India— Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) and Energy Savings Certificates (ESCs).

DOMESTICATED CATS

Nearly 10,000 years ago, humans settling in the Fertile Crescent, the areas of the Middle East surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, made the first switch from hunter-gatherers to farmers. They developed close bonds with the rodent-eating cats that conveniently served as ancient pest-control in society's first civilisations.

A new study (Heredity) found this lifestyle transition for humans was the catalyst that sparked the world's first domestication of cats, and as humans began to travel the world, they brought their new feline friends along with them.

The analysis of feline genetics in the study strongly supports the theory that cats were likely first domesticated only in the Fertile Crescent before migrating with humans all over the world, says a release.

After feline genes are passed down to kittens throughout generations, the genetic makeup of cats in western Europe, for example, is now far different from cats in Southeast Asia, a process known as 'isolation by distance'.

GENES FOR LONG LIFESPAN OF BANYAN, PEEPAL TREES IDENTIFIED

Researchers at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) Bhopal have carried out whole genome sequencing of banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*) and peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) from leaf tissue samples. They also undertook a comprehensive genome-wide phylogenetic analysis with 50 other angiosperm plant species, including four other sequenced *Ficus* species.

Genome sizes of these two *Ficus* species were corrected compared to the previously estimated genome sizes. The draft genome assemblies were over 392 Mbp for banyan and nearly 333 Mbp for peepal.

The work helped in identifying 17 genes in the case of banyan and 19 genes of peepal with multiple signs of adaptive evolution (MSA) that play a pivotal role in long-time survival of these two *Ficus* species.

The genes with multiple signs of adaptive evolution came about in response to population bottleneck faced by both trees around 0.8 million years ago. The study has been published in The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism.



Undertaking the comparative evolutionary analyses of closely related plant species helped the researchers in precisely identifying the genes with evolutionary signatures in both plants. Similarly, comparing other plant species with long lifespan in the comparative analysis helped in the identification of adaptively evolved genes, which could have played a significant role in longevity of both banyan and peepal tree species.

HOW CAN MRNA VACCINES HELP FIGHT CANCER?

The story so far:

The results of a trial of an experimental cancer vaccine built on the mRNA (messenger ribonucleic acid) platform, made by Moderna and MSD (Merck&Co.), have shown promising results, media announcements claimed last week. Patients taking an immunotherapy drug Keytruda for advanced melanoma (a kind of skin cancer) were less likely to die or have the cancer recur, if they took the vaccine (mRNA-4157/V940) also, the companies said.

What did the trial involve?

It was a small study, involving 157 patients. The vaccine showed a 44% reduction in the risk of dying of cancer or having the cancer progress. Moderna's Paul Burton was quoted as saying: "This is a significant finding. It's the first randomised-trial testing of an mRNA therapeutic in cancer patients." Reuters reported that "the combination was generally safe and demonstrated the benefit compared with Keytruda alone after a year of treatment. Serious drug-related side effects occurred in 14.4% of patients who received the combination compared with 10% with Keytruda alone."

As a personalised cancer vaccine, it is tailor-made for every patient. As a consequence, it is expected to be very expensive to make. The results too will have to be independently scrutinised by experts, western media has reported. But oncologists across the world have welcomed this as an exciting new opportunity in cancer care.

How does the vaccine work?

The personalised cancer vaccine uses the same messenger-RNA technology that was used to produce the COVID vaccine. It allows the body's immune system to seek and destroy cancerous cells, in this case melanoma, but with the hope that it could lead to new ways to fight other types of cancers too.

According to an article by Thomas Schlake et al, in RNA Biology, RNA as a therapeutic was first promoted in 1989 after the development of a broadly applicable in vitro transfection technique. A couple of years later, mRNA was advocated as a vaccine platform. He says, "mRNA offers strong safety advantages. As the minimal genetic construct, it harbours only the elements directly required for expression of the encoded protein."

The refinement of the mRNA platform owes everything to COVID. Rapid advancements within a remarkable period of one year allowed the technology to gain several revolutionary steps ahead, in order for it to be used successfully to drive vaccines that work. While the mRNA vaccines were notoriously unstable, in the National Cancer Institute website on 'Can mRNA Vaccines Help Treat Cancer?' Edward Winstead writes that researchers have learned how to engineer stable forms of mRNA and deliver these molecules to the body through vaccines. "Once in the body, the mRNA instructs cells that take up the vaccine to produce proteins that may stimulate an immune



response against these same proteins when they are present in intact viruses or tumour cells.” The mRNA-based cancer treatment vaccines have reportedly been tested in small trials for nearly a decade, with some promising early results.

As far as the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine was concerned, the mRNA included in the Pfizer-BioNTech and the Moderna vaccines instructs cells to produce a version of the “spike” protein that studs the surface of SARS-CoV-2, he explains. The immune system sees this spike protein as foreign and mobilises immune cells to produce antibodies to fight off the infection.

A Reuters story on the breakthrough study explained that the personalised cancer vaccine works in concert with Merck’s Keytruda, to disable a protein called programmed death 1, or PD-1, that helps tumours to evade the immune system. To build the vaccine, researchers took samples of patients’ tumours and healthy tissue. After analysing the samples to decode their genetic sequence and isolate mutant proteins associated only with the cancer, that information was used to design a tailor-made cancer vaccine. When injected into a patient, the patient’s cells act as a manufacturing plant, producing perfect copies of the mutations for the immune system to recognise and destroy. Having been exposed to the mutations without the virus, the body learns to fight off the infection.

What does it mean for the future?

Vincent Rajkumar, Editor-in-Chief, Blood Cancer Journal, and Professor, Mayo Clinic, told The Hindu, “It’s a really important result and shows the potential of mRNA vaccine technology.”

Listing out CAR-T cells and bi specific antibodies among newer cancer therapies, he said both approaches have already produced spectacular results in many cancers. While in CAR-T treatment, scientists take the immune systems cells out, engineer them to target a specific cancer and then put them back in the body to kill cancer cells, bispecific antibodies attach to immune system cells with one arm and cancer cells with the other, thereby bringing powerful immune system killer cells right next to the cancer cells. A few bispecific antibodies have been FDA-approved already, he said.

“The possibility of using mRNA vaccine technology to fight cancer just got a boost. The idea of cancer vaccines has been around for a long time. But mRNA vaccine technology and personalisation of the vaccine that it allows provides a lot of optimism,” Dr. Vincent explained. On a more general note, he added, technology has managed to connect investigators like never before, making collaborations between nations much easier.

FIGHTING CANCER

India has taken up the fight against cervical cancer in earnest with the Central government announcing that it will roll out vaccination for girls aged between 9 and 14 years through schools. The decision comes at a critical juncture with a study in The Lancet published this month showing that India accounts for the highest number of cervical cancer cases in Asia, followed by China. More than 58% of all cases of cervical cancer and deaths globally were estimated in Asia with India accounting for 21% of cases and 23% of deaths, followed by China (18% and 17%). Cervical cancer is a preventable and treatable cancer. It is caused by infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV) and there are vaccines which protect against carcinogenic HPV. With more than 6,00,000 women diagnosed with cervical cancer worldwide in 2020, the World Health Organization laid down several guidelines that countries need to follow to eliminate it as a public

health problem. According to the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the WHO has specified that countries must reach and maintain an incidence rate of fewer than 4 new cases of cervical cancer per 1,00,000 women a year. To achieve that goal, it is necessary that 90% of girls will have to be fully vaccinated with the HPV vaccine by the age of 15.

To that end, the government's intent to introduce the HPV vaccine in the Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP) is a welcome move. India's immunisation network, as was evident during COVID-19, has worked well, and diseases such as polio and maternal and neonatal tetanus have been eliminated. The UIP is one of the largest public health programmes targeting over 2 crore newborns and 2 crore pregnant women annually, and offers free vaccines for at least 12 diseases. To battle cervical cancer, India is expected to roll out the indigenously developed Cervavac vaccine by mid-2023. It has received the Drugs Controller General of India's approval and has been cleared by the National Technical Advisory Group for Immunisation for use in the UIP programme. The vaccination will be provided primarily through schools, but importantly the government has clarified that girls who do not go to school will be reached through community outreach and mobile teams. This is a vital step because studies show that there is a link between cervical cancer incidence and human development index values, with progressively lower rates observed as HDI rises. Together with vaccination, screening programmes must be conducted to detect early signs of the disease to allow time for treatment.



DreamIAS