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DreamIAS



INTERNATIONAL

'RAMBO' RABUKA RETURNS AS PRIME MINISTER OF FIJI

Mr. Rabuka replaces the imposing Frank Bainimarama, who toppled the government in a 2006 coup and became Prime Minister a year later.

The 74-year-old Rabuka said he felt “humbled” as he made his way out of Parliament to be sworn in by the country’s President. The two-time coup leader and former Prime Minister — nicknamed “Rambo” — narrowly triumphed over Mr. Bainimarama by 28 votes to 27 in a secret ballot held in Parliament, speaker Naiqama Lalabalavu announced. A smiling Bainimarama appeared to accept defeat as he told reporters after the vote: “This is democracy”.

Shifting focus

Mr. Rabuka has signalled a willingness to shift away from Beijing in favour of traditional allies Australia and New Zealand. The military had been deployed on the streets of Suva as Mr. Rabuka and Mr. Bainimarama raced to cobble together a coalition government following a deadlocked general election.

Citing unsubstantiated reports of ethnic violence, Mr. Bainimarama said the military was needed to maintain “law and order”. But Mr. Rabuka — who served as Prime Minister between 1992 and 1999 — said the government was “sowing fear and chaos” and “trying to set the nation alight along racial lines”.

Many Fijians feared the government’s claims of ethnic violence — and the subsequent military deployment — were a pretext for a “creeping coup” designed to keep Mr. Rabuka in Opposition.

THE HOUSE REPORT ON CAPITOL ATTACK

The story so far:

“The central cause of January 6th was one man, former President Donald Trump...None of the events of January 6th would have happened without him,” concluded the U.S. House Select Committee in its final report released on Thursday, December 22, after an 18-month-long probe in which it conducted over 1,000 interviews, 10 public hearings, and collected millions of documents as part of the evidence.

What are the findings of the panel?

The nine-member Select Committee was launched in July 2021 by the U.S. Congress for the purpose of investigating the armed attack on Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, by far-right groups such as Proud Boys and Oathkeepers, and former President Donald Trump’s supporters, which resulted in the death of five persons, injuries to 140 police personnel, and large scale destruction of property.

Lawmakers in a Joint Session of Congress on January 6 were set to certify the electoral college vote and Joe Biden’s presidency; the session was to be presided over then Vice President Mike Pence. The 814-page final report describes through eight chapters, the “multi-part conspiracy” by Mr. Trump and his aides to “overturn the lawful results of the 2020 Presidential election”.



The report enlists 17 key findings. It notes that from the night of the election in November 2020 to the day of the attack next year, Mr. Trump, despite no evidential proof, “purposely disseminated false allegations of fraud related to the 2020 presidential election”, alleging the race was “stolen” from him. “These false claims provoked his supporters to violence on January 6.”

The report says the former President addressed multiple public gatherings making false claims of voter fraud and raised funds amounting to a quarter of a billion dollars between the election and January 6.

By the time the electoral college met to cast and certify the votes of each State on December 14, 2020, the Justice Department (DoJ) and Homeland Security had concluded that there was no fraud, and White House officials and his own family members urged Mr. Trump to concede.

He instead hired a new legal team headed by his lawyer Rudolph Giuliani, which then lost dozens of lawsuits alleging voter fraud in various States and federal courts.

After the lawsuits failed, Mr. Trump began to pressure his deputy Mike Pence to refuse the counting of electoral college votes of some States. He also pressured States to prepare and submit fake electoral slates to Congress.

In the chapters related to the day of the violence itself, the report notes that in a tweet on in December 2020, Mr. Trump “summoned tens of thousands of supporters to Washington for January 6th”, and instructed them to “take back” their country”. In a segment titled “187 minutes of dereliction”, it describes how Mr. Trump, despite being informed that the rioters had started their attack, refused over a multiple-hour period to make a statement that would stop his supporters and watched the riots on Fox News, till finally being persuaded to give a video statement asking the rioters to go home.

What are the panel’s suggestions?

The Committee recommended four criminal charges against Trump to the DoJ — aiding an insurrection, obstructing an official proceeding, conspiracy to defraud the U.S., and conspiracy to make a false statement. It recommended that using the 14th amendment, Mr. Trump be barred from ever holding federal or State office again.

The Select Committee’s recommendations and criminal referrals to the DoJ, however, are eventually symbolic and don’t bind the Justice Department to act against Mr. Trump. The panel also has no constitutional path to debar him from standing for 2024, which he has already announced his candidacy for. He is currently facing multiple federal investigations, including probes of his role in the attack and the presence of classified documents at Mar-a-Lago. The term of the Committee will also end on January 3, and House Democrats are ceding power to Republicans in less than two weeks.

BAD TO WORSE

The return of Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel’s Prime Minister for a sixth time marks a decisive shift in its domestic politics and its relationship with the Palestinians. If in the past his right-wing Likud party had formed diverse governing coalitions with centrist and relatively moderate parties, in the current six-party right-wing coalition, five are ultra-orthodox and far-right Jewish nationalist parties that make even Likud look moderate. The coalition agreement, a document that determines governing agendas, suggests that Mr. Netanyahu’s government would pursue radical



right-wing policies, seeking to expand illegal Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, remake the judicial system by handing more powers to Parliament over courts, and amend the Basic Law, removing hurdles for those with extremist views from contesting elections. Itamar Ben-Gvir, a far-right politician convicted for Jewish terror links and inciting racism in 2007, is the Security Minister, with powers over Israel's police force. Bezalel Smotrich, leader of the ultranationalist Religious Zionism Party, and now the new Finance Minister, wants to fund more Jewish settlements. Some of Mr. Netanyahu's coalition members are also known for their anti-LGBT positions.

For Mr. Netanyahu and Likud, the formation of Israel's most right-wing coalition is a natural progression of the politics they have followed. In the past, Mr. Netanyahu embraced ultra-orthodox and right-wing parties, pursued conservative agendas, walked back from peace and cracked down on the Palestinians, and deepened the occupation. It helped him become Israel's longest serving PM. But the Netanyahu era also reshaped Israel's politics, pushing it to the extreme right. The Prime Minister has dismissed criticism that his coalition would endanger Israel's democracy. At the same time, he has projected himself as a tough Prime Minister who would implement the coalition's agenda. "The Jewish people have an exclusive and indisputable right to the entire land of Israel," he said on Wednesday, referring to historical Palestine and suggesting that settlements would continue unabated. If the Knesset passes judicial reforms, the government, with the support of 64 MPs in the 120-member Parliament, can override even Supreme Court rulings. Besides, parties such as the Shas, the United Torah Judaism and Religious Zionism will influence the government's decisions that could alter the state-religion balance in a country where over 20% of the population are minorities. As Mr. Netanyahu's coalition seems determined to remake Israel's politics internally and deepen the occupation and subjugation of the Palestinians externally, it could also quicken the country's fall into an elected Jewish theocracy.

THE VICE AND VIRTUE SQUAD

Triggered by anger over the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in the custody of Iran's morality police back in September, women hit the streets and led a wave of mass anti-government protests that spiralled into one of the biggest challenges to the theocratic regime since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Protests reverberated widely. Hijab once again took centre stage to emerge as a symbol of defiance against the imposition of the veil and the Gasht-e Ershad (guidance patrol), commonly known as morality police, responsible for enforcing the strict Islamic dress code.

After around three months of unrest that left over 400 dead, reports claimed that Iran's Attorney-General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri had hinted at the suspension of the morality police. The spokesperson for Iran's headquarters for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice, which oversees the implementation of religious edicts, remarked that the era of the morality police was over. There was, however, no confirmation from the Interior Ministry that runs the squad. Protesters and activists called it hogwash and insisted that there has been no change to restrictive dress rules for women in the country.

Hijab has been an integral part of Iranian politics since the 20th century. In 1936, modernist Reza Shah Pahlavi issued a decree to ban all Islamic veils and headscarves. Women could dress as per their wishes. Then the Islamic Revolution shook Iran.

A familiar sight



Four years after the 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini established the Islamic rule of Iran and introduced Sharia. In 1983, he made hijab mandatory for all women, irrespective of nationality or religion. Though the clerical leadership was strictly enforcing the rules, a formal force called Gasht-e Ershad was established during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to “spread the culture of modesty and hijab”. Under the Sharia that governs Iran, women have to cover their hair and wear loose-fitting clothes. Iranian women are prohibited from wearing shorts, ripped jeans, or any other clothing that exposes the shape of their bodies, according to generally acceptable guidelines.

The morality police began patrolling in 2006 and have since been a familiar sight. The role of the units evolved, but the force was primarily tasked to uphold modesty laws and detain those violating the conservative dress code to “promote virtue and prevent vice”. A crew would wait in public spaces and scan for ‘violators’.

The morality police initially only issued warnings to women, but were later empowered to make arrests for moral code violations even for minor offences like showing a few strands of hair from under the hijab. They were released only after a male relative’s assurances.

Over the years, the force has come under heavy criticism for violation of basic rights. It was a controversial issue even for those running for the presidency. Two Presidents, Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and Hassan Rouhani in 2013, promised reform but failed. During the 2009 presidential elections, the need for such a force was debated with reformist candidates calling for its dissolution. They wished for hijab to be a choice and not a compulsion. There was, however, no substantial change.

In July this year, Iran attempted to reinforce the law. President Ebrahim Raisi called for the mobilisation of “all state institutions to enforce the headscarf law” by the use of surveillance tools to monitor and punish unveiled women.

The death of Amini, a Kurdish Iranian, put the morality police back in the global spotlight. The world questioned its conduct for policing women’s bodies. The UN imposed sanctions on the force and senior security officials for engaging in “serious human rights abuses”. Amid outrage, senior Iranian officials also demanded an investigation.

Uncertainty remains over Iran’s morality police, but activists maintain that not much will change for women even if the Guidance Patrol is abolished since Islamic laws still hold that the hijab is mandatory for women. Meanwhile, protests continue in Iran, deepening the internal crisis.

IN BANNING WOMEN FROM UNIVERSITIES, THE TALIBAN IS BEING UN-ISLAMIC

By the 1990s, 40 per cent of doctors in Afghanistan were women. Women also constituted 70 per cent of school teachers, 60 per cent of university professors and almost half of university students. All this has now changed for the worse. Women literacy today is at a meager 14 per cent. The Taliban has proved us right by continuing with the highly regressive policies of the past regime (1996-2001). Their Jim Crow-like decrees have not come as a surprise. Our worst fears regarding the US’s sudden withdrawal from Afghanistan have come true. Their promises during the Doha deal of respecting human rights in general and women rights in particular have proved to be just empty words. The pretence is gone and the reality as anticipated by the Taliban’s critics is now setting in.



The western world led by the United States too has to be blamed for first handing over to the Taliban highly sophisticated weapons to fight the Russians. After staying in Afghanistan for almost two decades, the United States meekly handed over power to the Taliban leaving Afghan women high and dry. Women who occupied one-fourth of parliamentary seats and 6.5 per cent of ministerial positions in 2021 have been completely excluded from the interim government of Taliban. Women, once again, cannot go out and work in most sectors. They are forced to cover their faces and must be accompanied by a male guardian. In November, Afghan women were denied access to public parks.

The Afghan women are the worst victims of the Taliban regime. The recent dictates from the totalitarian and arbitrary Taliban regime must have shocked the conscience of the world. Last week, the Taliban cabinet took the indefensible and discriminatory decision of banning women from universities. For a pleasant change, not only the western world but even Islamic countries reacted sharply to it. The United States' spokesperson explicitly said that such decisions will further alienate the Taliban from the international community and deny them much-needed legitimacy in the comity of nations. Even the closure of secondary schools in March had a significant impact on American engagement with the Taliban.

Since the Taliban have no respect for the modern human rights covenants, they must be challenged on the basis of Islamic theology itself. The period prior to the advent of Islam in Arab history is called the period of ignorance. The Arabic word for knowledge is ilm which means knowledge. This root word has been used in the Quran 854 times — 397 times as a noun, 425 times as a verb and remaining times as an adjective. The first words of divine revelation in the Quran asked the Prophet to read: "Read in the name of your Lord who has created (all that exists). He has created man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is the most generous. Who has taught (writing) by the pen. He has taught man that which he knew not." (Quran 96:1-5).

For Muslims, Islam was truly a knowledge revolution. The Prophet himself had reportedly said that "seeking knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim male and female" (Al-Tirmidhi). The Prophet had also said that "the excellence of a scholar over another (ordinary) worshipper is like the excellence of the full moon over the rest of the heavenly bodies" (Abu Dawood). He in fact described himself as the city of knowledge and Ali (his son-in-law) as the door of this city. As per Islamic beliefs, even Adam's superiority over other angels, including Satan (the Devil) was determined by conducting a test of knowledge. He also said that "whoever takes a path in search of knowledge, Allah will cause him to walk on one of the paths of paradise. Indeed, the angels will lower their wings in great pleasure with the one who seeks knowledge." He also said that "whoever goes out seeking knowledge, then he is in Allah's cause until he returns" (Tirmidhi)

The Taliban should at least pay heed to Quranic injunctions. The Quran itself is explicit in asking humanity to explore the signs of God. The Quran says that "God will raise up, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge. He is fully aware of what you do" (Quran 58:11). Knowledge involves reflection. God says in the Quran that "He has subjected all that is in the heavens and the earth for your benefit, as a gift from Him. There truly are signs in this for those who reflect" (Quran 45:13). The Quran also tells us what to ask God — "And say: My Lord, increase my knowledge" (Quran 20:114). The Taliban, therefore, have scant regard for the Quran. Their decrees cannot and should not be allowed to have greater weight than the divine commandments by which they swear to justify their arbitrary decisions. There is not a single verse in the Quran or the Hadith that prohibits women from acquiring knowledge.



The Taliban seem to be ignorant of even the history of Islamic civilisation. The Prophet's own wife Ayesha was a great scholar and people used to consult her on theological matters. She was the most prominent and leading narrator of Hadith. In fact, it is impossible to talk of Islam without referring to her. Nafisa, a close relative of Ali, too used to be consulted by the people and even scholars including Imam Shafii. Other prominent women scholars were Shahda, Hujaimah, Asma, Masuda and Shanoun.

The Taliban leadership may not know, but one of the world's earliest modern universities was founded by an Arab woman: The University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco was founded in 859 by Fatima Bint Muhammad al-Fihri. Her family was originally from the city of Kairouan in Tunisia. Princess Fatima Bint Khedive had immensely contributed to the establishment of Cairo University.

Similarly, in the 12th century, another prominent woman, Sitt al-Sham Zumurrud Khatun, sister of Saladin, established schools in Damascus. In the thirteenth century, Razia Sultan even ruled over Delhi when Turkan-i-Chahalgani (Council of Forty Nobles) was extremely powerful. She also built several schools. The first Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University in 1920 was Mumtaz Jahan Begum of Bhopal.

Even in Saudi Arabia, Turkish born Queen Iffat al Thunayan, wife of King Faisal, was responsible for the establishment of Dar al Hanan schools for girls in 1955. In neighbouring Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto was Prime Minister and another Muslim country Bangladesh has been ruled by Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina for the most part of its 50 year history. Even in Afghanistan in 1880, Malalai had demonstrated her courage and bravery in the battle of Maiwand. In 2005, Habiba Sarabi was appointed as governor, and a few years later, Azra Jafari became the first female mayor.

Thus, what the Taliban are doing to women is absolutely unislamic. Their version of Islam had not only closed the doors of universities for the women but even the mosques. Their Islam is different from the Islam that was brought by the Prophet. The Taliban is undoing the Islamic revolution of enlightenment and pushing Afghanistan back into a period of ignorance. But they must remember this blatant discrimination cannot last forever. They should take lessons from the recent protests by Iranian women.

The international community must also understand that mere non-recognition of the Taliban regime would not help the Afghan women's cause. The United States' mere condemnations of such decisions would do no good to Afghan women. In 2019, India had enacted CAA to help the persecuted religious minorities of Afghanistan. As moral leaders of the world do we not owe anything to the women of Afghanistan? Let India under the Prime Minister's presidency of G20 use his international stature and influence to force the Taliban to honour the Doha commitments. Let India become the most vocal advocate of women empowerment in the world.

TAIWAN EXTENDS MANDATORY MILITARY SERVICE TO ONE YEAR CITING THREATS FROM CHINA

Taiwan on Tuesday announced an extension in mandatory military service from four months to one year, citing the threat from China. Beijing considers self-ruled, democratic Taiwan a part of its territory, to be taken one day, by force if necessary, and the island lives under the constant fear of invasion.



Under President Xi Jinping, China's sabre-rattling has intensified in recent years, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine deepened worries in Taiwan that Beijing might move similarly to annex the island.

The extended requirement will apply to men born after January 1, 2005, Ms. Tsai said. Mandatory service used to be deeply unpopular in Taiwan — once a brutal military dictatorship that has since morphed into a progressive democracy.

Its previous government had reduced compulsory military service from one year to four months with the aim of creating a mainly volunteer force. But recent polling showed more than three-quarters of the Taiwanese public now believes that is too short. The military has also struggled to recruit and retain full-time personnel because of low financial incentives.

Ms. Tsai described the extension as “an extremely difficult decision... to ensure the democratic way of life for our future generations”.

POWER ROLLER-COASTER

There seems to be no limit to the opportunism in Nepal's top polity. Newly minted Prime Minister Pushpa Kumar Dahal's Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist-Centre) was part of a six-party alliance led by the Nepali Congress that collectively finished just above the absolute majority mark in the parliamentary elections held in November. The CPN(M-C) won just 11.13% of the votes, getting 32 seats in the 275-member House of Representatives. The party's poor performance was hardly any disincentive for Mr. Dahal to claim the post of prime minister from his party's senior partner, the NC. After being denied this, legitimately, in his blatant hunger for power, he immediately took the expedient route of aligning with the leading Opposition party, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) led by Khadga Prasad Oli, securing the Prime Minister's post, for a period of half of the term of the new government. The new coalition led by the UML and the Maoists includes the newcomer Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) and five smaller parties. The RSP promised a break in the political wheeling-dealing that has characterised Nepali politics but the fact that it jumped at the first chance to join an opportunist alliance — its leader Rabi Lamichhane is now Deputy Prime Minister and a Home Minister in the government — would have belied the hopes of its adherents.

The renewal of the alliance between the two “leftist” parties — barely years after the falling out between the UML faction led by Mr. Oli and the Maoists led to a change of government with the NC aligning with the Maoists and a smaller UML faction led by Madhav Kumar Nepal besides other parties — suggests that the loaves of power, rather than ideology or principle, are what are more tempting for Mr. Oli and Mr. Dahal. The “Left” alliance had after all broken up due to legitimate grievances with Mr. Oli's authoritarian attitude and his manoeuvres to hold on to power. For Mr. Dahal to repeat his habit of performing political volte-faces and to join hands with Mr. Oli despite a clear mandate for the pre-election coalition that he was a part of, suggests yet another period of opportunistic political wrangling that would hamper governance in Nepal. Mr. Oli has managed to make the best out of an unfavourable situation for his party by securing nominations to the post of President and Speaker from his party, reportedly as part of the arrangement with Mr. Dahal, besides gaining plum ministerial posts to help with the usual politics of patronage. But by subverting mandates for short-term gains, the Maoists and the UML are only perpetuating instability and lowering the trust of the people in the democratic system in a country that endured two upheavals to become a constitutional republic.



AMERICA'S MISSILE DEFENCE UMBRELLA

When Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine on February 24, not many thought that the war would last this long. But 10 months later, it is still raging with surprisingly high-performing Ukrainian troops maintaining the offensive pressure against the Russians on the frontlines in the east and the south. Military and financial support from the West, particularly the United States, has been critical in Ukraine's successful counteroffensive.

When the war began, the U.S. mobilised the West under its leadership against Russia and imposed tight sanctions on Moscow, besides sending ammunition to Ukraine. Months later, after Ukraine lost territories along the border region, including Mariupol, Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, the U.S. decided to send medium-range rocket systems such as HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems) and MLRS (multiple launch rocket systems), which helped Ukraine turn around the battlefield momentum. After suffering setbacks in Kharkiv and Kherson, Russia launched a new phase of air strikes, targeting military and energy infrastructure in Ukraine, which strengthened Kyiv's calls for advanced defence systems. After much debate, the U.S. finally announced that it would send the Patriot, its most advanced ground-based air defence system, to Ukraine. U.S. President Joe Biden made the formal announcement, as part of a new \$1.8 billion aid package, when his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky visited Washington last week.

The Patriot is one of the most sought-after defence systems and has been deployed in 18 countries, including the U.S. It is operational across the NATO geography and is in high demand in West Asia, where America's allies such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel, all facing a common foe in Iran, have been using it. Now, Ukraine can be added to the list. Initially developed as a system to intercept high-flying aircraft, by U.S. aerospace and defence giant Raytheon Technologies Corp., the Patriot (Phased Array Tracking Radar to Intercept on Target) was modified in the 1980s to focus on other threats such as ballistic missiles. The programme's roots can be traced back to the 1960s when the Pentagon was looking to replace the HAWK and Nike-Hercules air defence systems.

Currently, Patriot batteries can defend against ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, drones, jets and "other threats", but it doesn't offer protection against low-flying small drones. A mobile Patriot system includes a control centre, a radar station to detect threats, missile launchers to take out those threats and other support vehicles. It can launch different types of interceptor missiles: The older PAC-1 and PAC-2 interceptors used a blast-fragmentation warhead, while the newer PAC-3 missile has a more advanced hit-to-kill technology.

According to NATO, the Patriot system's radar has a range of over 150 km and it can track over 50 potential targets at the same time. One system typically has eight launchers with each holding between four and 16 ready-to-fire missiles. According to the U.S.-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the U.S. Army is set to replace the legacy Patriot radar, which has a field of view limited to about 120 degrees, "with the Lower Tier Air and Missile Defense Sensor (LTAMDS), which has 360-degree coverage and multimission applications..."



NATION

ZELENSKY CALLING NARENDRA MODI

The over 10-month-long Russia-Ukraine war seems nowhere close to an end. It is significant, though, that the two sides want to be seen as making an effort to bring it to a close with declarations that they are ready for talks. However, it is obvious there is no meeting ground yet. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said he wants dialogue with Ukraine, but its western allies are holding it back. Ukraine says Putin is diverting attention from his real intentions to usurp its territory. But amid the posturing, the realisation is sinking in that the war cannot continue forever. This was also obvious in the 10-point “peace formula” invoked by Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a phone call with Prime Minister Narendra Modi – India’s G20 presidency may have provided the immediate context for Ukraine to seek India’s support for the formula first laid out at the Bali summit of the G20 in November. It includes, among other things, troop withdrawal from Ukrainian territory and Russian reaffirmation of Ukrainian sovereignty, war reparations paid by Moscow, and a special tribunal to try Putin and others for the invasion of Ukraine. Zelenskyy, who said he would “now count on India’s participation” in the implementation of this plan, called a week after his visit to the US, where the Biden Administration announced it would pump \$1.84 bn more, including a Patriot missile battery system, into Ukraine’s war efforts. PM Modi’s cautiously worded response “strongly reiterated his call for an immediate cessation of hostilities”, asking that both sides “revert to dialogue and diplomacy”, and also conveying “India’s support for any peace efforts”.

Zelenskyy’s appeal to Modi may also be based on the expectation that Delhi is willing to play a role after the PM’s remark to Putin in September that this is “not the era for war”. This was seized upon in the west as an expression of India’s frustration that an old friend had put it in a tight spot. Significantly, the India-Russia annual summit, the most important event in the bilateral calendar, has not taken place. It is usually held in the closing weeks of the year, and would have entailed PM Modi travelling to the Russian capital.

While Delhi may want to play a role in ending the conflict in keeping with its aspiration to speak on behalf of the global south, where the economic brunt of the conflict is being most acutely felt, its wary engagement with both Moscow and Kiev suggests that it is uncertain about how it can do so. This is just as well. Delhi has much to worry about in terms of conflicts on its own borders that need the attention of the government. Of course, when Russia and Ukraine are genuinely ready to negotiate, India, as an important member of the international community, is bound to contribute to multilateral efforts to ensure a positive outcome.

ODISHA ORDERS CID PROBE INTO DEATH OF PUTIN CRITIC

Three days after Pavel Antov, a known critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin, died under mysterious circumstances at Rayagada in Odisha, the State police on Tuesday intensified their investigation.

Two days before Antov’s death, his friend Bydanov Vladimir was found dead in the hotel room on December 22. Doctors reported that Bydanov, 61, had died after a heart attack.

Sunil Kumar Bansal, Director-General of Police, ordered an investigation by the Crime Investigation Department into the “unnatural” deaths.



In a statement on Tuesday, the Russian Embassy in New Delhi said: “We are aware of the tragic demise of two Russian citizens in Odisha. One of those who died is Pavel Antov, a Vladimir Region Legislative Assembly member.”

Antov had taken a critical view of the Russian attacks on Ukraine. The 65-year-old millionaire lawmaker was the founder of the Vladimir Standard meat processing plant.

Antov, Bydanov and two other Russians had come to Odisha as tourists. Antov died after falling from the rooftop of Sai International Hotel at Rayagada.

The body was found in a pool of blood on the roof of a nearby building on December 24, the Rayagada police said on Tuesday.

The Odisha Crime Branch police began a probe after the identity of the deceased was revealed. “As of now, we have not found any foul play. The post-mortem report says heart problem was the reason behind the death of Bydanov. The exact reason would be known when the final report is received. Preliminary investigation says Antov had ended his life,” Mr. Bansal said.

“The Consulate General of Russia in Kolkata is following the case in touch with the local authorities. According to information available to the police, no criminal aspect is seen,” said the Russian Embassy in a statement.

The tourists who accompanied Antov are Turov Mikhail, 63, and Panasenko Natalia, a couple. After landing in Bhubaneswar, they had gone to Daringbadi in Kandhamal district.

Both cremated

“On the evening of December 21, 2022, they had a drink in the hotel room. Bydanov was found dead on the morning of December 22. According to doctors, Bydanov had died of a heart attack. He had consumed alcohol in empty stomach,” Rashmi Ranjan Pradhan, inspector in-charge of the Rayagada police station, said. “It took two days to receive permission for cremating Bydanov on December 24. After cremation, Antov fell from the hotel roof,” said the police inspector. Antov’s body was also cremated in Rayagada.

Antov appeared to have slipped into depression following the death of his friend, said hotel manager Kaushik Thakkar. Both the deceased were staying in one room.

Mr. Mikhail and Ms. Natalia, who are from the Krasnodar Territory, Belozechensk, Russia, have left for Bhubaneswar. Bydanov was from Yoshkar Ola Soviet Street of Russia.

FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURS

The conviction of former Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen by a criminal court in the Maldives just a year ahead of general elections could affect his plans to lead the PPM-PNC opposition alliance. He faces 11 years in prison and a \$5 million fine after being found guilty of corruption and money laundering links to a company he was accused of taking kickbacks from, during his tenure as President (2013-2018). The Maldives Constitution disqualifies any candidate convicted of criminal charges and sentenced to a term of more than a year unless they are later acquitted or a three-year period has elapsed since their release. In a sense, history has now come full circle for Mr. Yameen, as he had pursued cases against his predecessor Mohamed Nasheed and ensured that he would step down in favour of his party colleague Ibu Solih ahead of the last election. The conviction was his second in three cases. Mr. Yameen has had a rough relationship with India

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



during his presidential term after he declared an emergency in the island state. As opposition leader he has spearheaded the “India Out” campaign, and has been unrepentant despite the latest verdict, trying to link his incarceration to pressure from India.

Given the inimical relationship, as well as Mr. Yameen’s past close links with China, there may be some relief in South Block over the possibility of Mr. Yameen’s disqualification. However, the Government needs to tread carefully when it comes to the domestic politics roiling its close maritime neighbour. India’s infrastructure aid, credit lines, loans and commissioning of various projects (Greater Male Connectivity Project, Hanimaadhoo airport, Hulhumale cricket stadium, Gulhifalhu port) have meant high visibility. In addition, close ties and high-level military exchanges since 2018 have raised speculation that India is eyeing a base. Even as the Solih government has been prompt in countering Mr. Yameen’s allegations, condemning the “India Out” campaign, and arresting a senior opposition leader for threatening violence against the Indian High Commission, the protests have gained some traction in parts of the country. While Mr. Yameen may not be allowed to run in the next election, this might make space for even more radical elements in the opposition combine. New Delhi must keep a close watch on other parts of Maldivian politics, including the rift between India’s closest friends there, President Solih and former President Nasheed, who is threatening to split the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party. Despite having obvious favourites in the polity, New Delhi must actively project the image of the friendly and helpful neighbour without explicitly seeking to sway next year’s election in any direction.

A WARSHIP PROGRAMME THAT MUST GO FULL STEAM AHEAD

Early this month, the Indian Navy chief, Admiral Hari Kumar, at the annual press conference on the eve of Navy Day (December 4) had said that the Indian Navy had put on hold its plans to build a second indigenous aircraft carrier (IAC-2) that is larger than IAC-1 (INS Vikrant). Instead, he said, it is considering the option of a repeat order of the IAC-1. The Navy chief added that this decision had been taken as INS Vikrant had performed well during its trials and would also help capitalise on the expertise now available in the country.

Classification of carriers

In terms of size, aircraft carriers can be classified as light, medium and large/super-carriers. Light carriers can carry up to 25 aircraft, the medium-sized ones around 30 to 50 aircraft, while the large/super-carriers can carry over 90 aircraft. In terms of role, they can be categorised as fleet, escort, air defence, amphibious assault and anti-submarine warfare (helicopter) carriers. In terms of the methodology used to launch and recover aircraft, they can be categorised as Catapult Assisted Take-Off But Arrested Recovery (CATOBAR), Short Take-off But Arrested Recovery (STOBAR), and vertical/short take-off and landing (V/STOL) carriers.

India’s first aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant (British-built), predecessor to INS Vikrant (IAC-1), was a 19,000-tonne CATOBAR-type light carrier designed for fleet air defence. It could carry between 21 to 23 aircraft (including helicopters). Its replacement, INS Viraat (British-built), at 28,000 tonnes, was a V/STOL-type light fleet air defence carrier, with an air wing of 26 to 30 aircraft and helicopters. Notably, its Sea Harrier aircraft also possessed dedicated land attack capability. INS Vikramaditya (Russian-built), at 45,000 tonnes, is a medium-sized STOBAR-type aircraft carrier, capable of both fleet air defence and land attack, carrying up to 30 aircraft and helicopters. INS Vikrant (IAC-1) is almost similar in size, classification, role and capability to INS Vikramaditya.



The commissioning of INS Vikrant in September this year demonstrated India's capability to design and build the largest and most complex of warships, a capability held only by few countries. The planning for IAC-I, as it was called before commissioning, began in the mid-1980s. There were several iterations by the Indian Navy's Design Directorate before the plan was finalised and government approval obtained for construction in 2002. Built with indigenous steel developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation, its keel was laid in 2009 and the ship launched in 2013. Sea trials began in August 2021 and the ship was commissioned on September 2, 2022.

The elaboration of this timeline is to show the time and the effort that went into the design, construction and trials of India's first indigenous aircraft carrier. This time period can, of course, be shortened considerably if the next carrier is a repeat order. The expertise gained from the design and the construction of IAC-I will also enable faster development if a new and larger ship design is approved by the Government.

Due to the smaller and relatively less capable air wing carried on its first four carriers, as compared to other carrier-capable navies, the Indian Navy envisaged a medium-sized CATOBAR aircraft carrier in the region of 50,000 tonnes-65,000 tonnes, as a follow-up to INS Vikrant.

This is the tonnage of aircraft carriers operated by advanced navies such as the United Kingdom, Russia, China and France — with only the U.S. Navy operating nuclear-powered super-carriers of tonnage greater than 1,00,000 tonnes. Various constraints, principally financial in nature, seem to have curbed India's ambitions. However, the fall-back plan for a repeat order would ensure that valuable infrastructure, design capability, ship-building expertise and the indigenous industrial ecosystem, built through extensive investment and effort over two decades, are not lost.

It would also ensure that India finally achieves the goal of having three aircraft carriers — a target that has remained elusive since the first Naval Plan Papers in 1948 stipulated the need for three aircraft carriers for the Indian Navy. Having two aircraft carriers of similar design and configuration would also make their operation/maintenance easier.

China's ambitions

However, in the long term, India should not lose sight of the fact that China's first two aircraft carriers displace over 65,000 tonnes, and its third indigenously designed and built carrier, Fujian, displaces 85,000 tonnes, with a possible air wing of 60-odd aircraft. China's future plans for a seven-ship carrier force include ambitions to build nuclear-powered super-carriers of over 1,00,000 tonnes displacement, with construction reportedly having commenced in 2017.

As a major emerging global power, with an inimical China at its doorstep, India can ill-afford to fall behind in its sea control and maritime deterrence capability, exemplified by an aircraft carrier-centric navy. While aircraft carriers are designed for 'arrested recovery' of aircraft, India should not allow the development of its aircraft carrier programme itself to be 'arrested'.

HAVE THERE BEEN CHANGES IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY?

The story so far:

By all standards, 2022 was a difficult year on the geopolitical and diplomatic stage, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February. For India, the choices grew more difficult, given its strategic ties with the U.S. and Europe and traditional ties with Russia. The most significant



defence of India's foreign policy was made by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, who won accolades back home for calling out western "hypocrisy" on Russian oil flows to India. However, the government continues to take criticism over its China policy and the stand-off at the Line of Actual Control.

How did India handle the Ukraine crisis?

The war in Ukraine saw the government spell out its version of "non-alignment", as it sought to keep a balance in the growing polarisation between the U.S. and the European Union on one side, and Russia on the other. In the past 10 months, the war has led to thousands of deaths, and nearly 8 million refugees. Meanwhile, a slew of sanctions by the West meant to target the Russian economy led to food and fuel shortages and price increases, which worried India. The government's stand through the year was a tight-rope walk: with the Prime Minister making his discomfort with the war clear directly to Russian President Vladimir Putin with the words "This era is not for war", but at the same time refusing to accept western sanctions, growing military and oil trade with Russia, and seeking rupee-based payment mechanisms to facilitate them. Most significantly, in more than a dozen resolutions at the UNSC, UNGA, IAEA, Human Rights Commission and other multilateral platforms seeking to censure Russia for the invasion and humanitarian crisis, India chose to abstain. Mr. Jaishankar said India's stand was guided by its national interests.

What were the other highlights?

The year was marked in many ways for Indian diplomacy, which will be at the forefront in 2023, during India's presidency of the G-20 and chairship of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which will bring all the major leaders of the world to Delhi for summits. In 2022, India returned to Free Trade Agreements, after a hiatus of several years when the Modi government had called for a review of all FTAs, scrapped all Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs) and walked out of the 15-nation Asian Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). In 2022, India signed trade agreements with the UAE and Australia, and hopes to progress on talks with the EU, Gulf Cooperation Council and Canada for others. India also joined the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF), although it later decided to stay out of trade talks. At the G-20, India is expected to highlight climate change transitions, "women-led" development and multilateral reform, among other key issues.

What about ties with neighbours?

In the neighbourhood, India's foreign policy was marked by economic assistance to Sri Lanka in the midst of its collapse, and regional trade and energy agreements with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal that could see a South Asian energy grid emerge. India has also strengthened ties with Central Asian countries on connectivity. The government kept channels open with repressive regimes like Afghanistan's Taliban and the Myanmar Junta, opening a "technical mission" in Kabul and sending the foreign secretary to Nay Pyi Taw. This week, India abstained on a UNSC vote calling for Myanmar to end violence and release political prisoners. With Iran too, where protests against the killing of activist Mahsa Amini has brought thousands onto the streets, India has steered clear of any criticism. However, with Pakistan, ties remain flat-lined, with a big showdown at the UN this month between Mr. Jaishankar and Pakistan Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto.



Has there been progress on LAC stand-off?

Despite a visit to Delhi by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and disengagement at some stand-off points, India-China tensions at the Line of Actual Control remained high, and the year ended with an unsuccessful Chinese PLA attempt to take Indian posts at Yangtse in Arunachal Pradesh, signalling more such violent clashes could follow in 2023. The government took some heat from the Opposition over its failure to hold an open debate in Parliament to discuss the LAC stand-off that has been ongoing since April 2020, especially after Prime Minister Modi shook hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Bali G20 meet in November. Regardless of the fraught state of ties, India is due to host Mr. Xi twice in 2023, at the G-20 and SCO summits, which could create opportunities for talks to end the stand-off.

WHAT GOVT & RBI DID NOT TELL SC: RBI OPPOSED KEY GOVT POINTS FOR NOTEBAN

In affidavits submitted to the Supreme Court hearing a clutch of petitions on demonetisation in which the verdict is scheduled January 2, the government said it was a "well-considered" decision and the consultation process with the Reserve Bank of India had begun in February 2016, a good nine months before Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement on November 8, 2016.

The RBI, too, in its affidavit said that due process was followed and it was the one that recommended the demonetisation.

What the Government and the RBI affidavits don't mention is the fact that the RBI's recommendation for the noteban – a procedural requirement – came after the central bank critiqued many of the government's justifications. These were put on record just hours before the announcement of the decision as minutes of the RBI's Central Board meeting.

The key omissions from the affidavits:

i. Currency in circulation (CIC) as percentage of GDP: This was a key metric cited to justify demonetisation. "The magnitude of cash in circulation is directly linked to the level of corruption," said PM Modi in his speech on November 8, 2016. "The ratio of CIC to GDP has been 11% or more in the last five financial years beginning from 2011-12 to 2015-16," the affidavit said. Quoting other reports, it noted that at 11.55%, India's Cash to GDP percentage ratio was much higher than that for the US (7.74%).

What the affidavit didn't mention: CIC as a percentage of GDP jumped back to pre-demonetisation levels within three years. The RBI's Annual Report for 2019-20 states: "...the currency-GDP ratio increased to its pre-demonetisation level of 12.0 per cent in 2019-20 from 11.3 per cent a year ago..." This ratio rose further to 14.4 per cent in 2020-21 before declining to 13.7 per cent in 2021-22, according to RBI.

ii. Steep rise in the circulation of Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 notes: "Increase in circulation of bank notes of denominations Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 vis-a-vis that of Rs 50 and Rs 100 for preceding 5 years (as per RBI data) had shown a steep rise for the two highest denominations i.e., 76.38% for Rs 500 and 108.98% for Rs 1,000," the affidavit states, adding this steep rise compared with the rise in the size of the overall economy makes it inexplicable. "Further, as per the data available in the Economic Survey for 2014-15 and 2015-16, the size of the economy has grown less than 30% from 2011-12 to 2015-16," it states.



What the affidavit didn't mention: The RBI's Central Board flagged a flaw in this analysis of the government. "The growth rate of the economy mentioned is the real rate while the growth in currency in circulation is nominal. Adjusted for inflation, the difference may not be so stark. Hence this argument does not adequately support the recommendation (for demonetisation)," state the minutes of the RBI's central Board meeting held on November 8, 2016 at 5.30 p.m., just two and a half hours before the PM announced the demonetisation.

iii. Quantum of fake currency: Fake currency notes in the system were the first of the "three specific mischiefs, which had a serious adverse impact on the Indian economy over the past year" according to the government affidavit.

What the affidavit doesn't mention: The RBI Central Board's response. "While any incidence of counterfeiting is a concern, Rs 400 crore as a percentage of the total quantum of currency in circulation (over Rs 17 lakh crore) is not very significant," stated the minutes of the RBI Central Board meeting.

iv. Use of Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 notes for storing black money: The second "mischief" demonetisation was to address was the "storage of unaccounted wealth in the form of high denomination notes which happened to be fake in many instances", according to the government affidavit.

What the affidavit doesn't mention: The RBI Central Board dismissed this claim. "Most of the black money is held not in the form of cash but in the form of real-sector assets such as gold or real-estate and that this move (demonetisation) would not have a material impact on those assets," stated the RBI minutes.

v. Use of fake currency for terrorism: The third "mischief" demonetisation sought to target, according to the affidavit, was the use of fake currency for terrorism and other subversive activities.

What the affidavit doesn't mention: The issue of fake currency or high-denomination notes being siphoned towards terror finds no mention in the minutes of the RBI Central Board meeting.

vi. Timed to benefit from a scheduled change in currency notes: In its affidavit, the government said RBI was, in any case, in the process of introducing a new series of currency notes and that the decision to demonetise simply attempted to benefit from that timing. Further, the RBI, in consultation with the government, was working on the new series since January 2014.

"The Government of India and the Reserve Bank considered that the introduction of new series of notes could provide a very rare and profound opportunity to tackle all the three problems of counterfeiting, terrorist financing and black money by demonetisation of Rs 500 and Rs 1000..." states the affidavit

The affidavit also states that "It was also presented (to the RBI's Central Board) that such a proposal (demonetisation) could not have come at a more opportune time than coinciding with the introduction of the MG (new) series of notes."

What the affidavit doesn't mention: There was no mention of such an "opportune" timing in the RBI Board's minutes. Also, if the decision to demonetise was taking advantage of the RBI's preparations to swap old series of notes with the new ones, why did remonetisation run into so many problems. The RBI constituted a Task Force for recalibration of ATMs on November 14, 2016, almost a week after demonetisation.



MATHURA COURT ORDERS SURVEY OF SHAHI IDGAH MOSQUE PREMISES

A civil court in Mathura has ordered a survey of the Shahi Idgah Masjid and sought a report on the same by January 20, in one of the petitions related to the Shahi Idgah mosque-Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi temple dispute.

Civil Judge (Senior Division) Sonika Verma passed the order earlier this week on a civil suit filed by Hindu Sena president Vishnu Gupta and its vice-president Surjit Yadav.

Directive to officers

The suit, filed on December 8, sought possession of the site at which the mosque stands and the removal of the Shahi Idgah mosque.

The Mathura court has now directed the court officers to visit the disputed premises and conduct a survey of the area.

The court officers have been asked to submit a report with site plans and maps before the court by January 20, when the petition will be taken up next.

'Illegal agreement'

The Hindu Sena chief's suit claimed that the Shahi Idgah mosque was built allegedly on the site where Lord Krishna was purportedly born, and sought that the agreement between the Shri Krishna Janmasthan Seva Sangh and the Shahi Idgah Masjid Committee in 1968 be cancelled, calling it illegal.

The argument presented is that the temple trust did not have the power to act against the interest of the people belonging to the faith and against the interest of the deity.

This is one of over a dozen petitions pending in the civil courts of Mathura with regards to the Shahi Idgah-Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi temple dispute.

The order comes on the back of the decision of a Varanasi court on more than one occasion that the Hindu plaintiffs' suit in the Gyanvapi dispute was maintainable.

Seeks support

Reacting to the order in Mathura district, Alok Kumar, working president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), said, "Similarly, in the Gyanvapi case, the survey was ordered and carried out. Even the Supreme Court (SC) had not granted them a stay on it. So, we believe this order will now be complied with. I would say that all those who have nothing to hide and who do not fear the truth would support this."

Hindu Sena chief Vishnu Gupta said, "We have submitted that we believe there is evidence within the mosque premises of Shahi Idgah that shows a temple predating it and we are confident the survey will bring out the truth."



AS COURTS INSIST ON TRIPLE-TEST RULE FOR OBC QUOTA IN POLLS, STATE GOVERNMENTS PUSH BACK

As the clamour for a caste census grows across India, with several States looking to introduce reservation for the Backward Classes in urban local body polls, the judiciary, over the course of 2022, has established time and again that caste population surveys conducted by the States are not enough to provide for political reservation in local body elections.

The most recent instance of this was when the Allahabad High Court on Tuesday shot down the caste census conducted by the Uttar Pradesh government to enumerate the Other Backward Class (OBC) population across the State, holding that an exercise of “counting of heads” cannot be enough, prompting U.P. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath to say his government would do whatever was required to reserve OBC seats in the local body polls.

Rapid survey

Within a month of taking office as Chief Minister in his first term, Mr. Adityanath’s BJP-led government had on April 7, 2017 ordered a caste census in the State, issuing directions for a “rapid survey” to count the population of OBCs ward-wise in each municipal corporation, municipal council, and panchayat area. A similar survey was called for in a June 2022 government order and based on the population, seats were reserved. Similarly, the Bihar government went on to reserve seats for the Extremely Backward Classes (EBC) in its local body polls.

The triple-test requires a State government to set up a dedicated commission for a contemporaneous rigorous empirical inquiry into the nature and implications of backwardness specifically with respect to local bodies; specify proportion of reservations required for political representation based on the dedicated commission’s recommendation; and ensure total reservations for Scheduled Caste (SC)/ Scheduled Tribe (ST)/ OBC groups do not exceed 50% of the number of total seats.

Political representation

In the case of Uttar Pradesh, the Allahabad High Court noted that the government’s enumeration exercise had “missed a crucial factor” as it “does not provide for inquiry into political representation of backward class of citizens in municipal bodies” — holding that the dedicated commission must also ascertain under-representation in municipal bodies (if any) and its extent, and reserve seats in accordance.

While shooting down the Bihar government’s notification on reserving seats based on population, the Patna High Court had made a similar point on distinguishing the social and education backwardness of a group from its political backwardness. Within days of this order in October, the Bihar government re-constituted its Extremely Backward Classes Commission and designated it as the “dedicated commission” to conduct this exercise.

The Commission submitted its report in a month, in favour of reservations and the State Election Commission notified the polls, which are currently under way.

Similarly, after the Supreme Court stopped attempts for reserving seats in local body polls of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, both State governments formed dedicated Commissions to look into this, which favoured quota in its reports — reports that the Supreme Court has accepted for the time being.



BIHAR SET TO START CASTE CENSUS EXERCISE FROM JAN 7

Preparing to begin the caste survey exercise from January 7, the Bihar government plans to compile data on each family digitally through a mobile application as part of the eight-level survey — from the panchayat to the district level.

The mobile app will have a set of questions in a format, mentioning place, caste, the number of people in a family, their profession, and annual income, among others.

The government expects to complete the process in two or three months, according to officials.

A government official told The Indian Express, “The General Administration Department has issued a circular, stating that it would entirely be up to a district magistrate to select census workers from among teachers, Anganwadi workers, MGNREGA or Jeevika workers.”

According to the official, once census workers are chosen, “they would be given training on how to make entry of caste survey in the mobile app”.

During the first phase of the caste survey, scheduled to begin January 7, houses would be numbered and caste details will be sought. The second phase of the exercise, likely to begin in mid-February, will involve compiling the economic status of the people. All composite information would be compiled in the app after scrutiny by senior officers, it was informed.

The government has been avoiding publicity of the caste census process given the sensitive nature of the exercise. Census workers would be advised against sharing any data of their area with outsiders, officials said.

The process of caste survey monitoring will involve the additional district magistrate (DM)/ district welfare officer/ district statistics officer at the top, with the DM concerned being the final monitoring authority. The next level will comprise the sub-divisional officer followed by the circle officer, block development officer, municipal commissioner/ chief executive officer.

Panchayati Raj Institutions will be kept completely out of the process, it is learnt. The government, however, will refer to panchayat-level data on beneficiaries of some government welfare schemes, including the PM Gramin Awas Yojana.

A senior government official said, “All BDOs have been asked to submit details of caste and residential certificates issued in their areas. PRIs [Panchayati Raj Institutions] would be consulted only if some facts need to be crosschecked regarding any confusion in disclosure of caste.”

Keeping caste issue alive

With the Centre having categorically turned down the demand for a caste census, and the Bihar unit of BJP reluctant to be seen opposing it, Nitish Kumar’s decision to start the survey immediately can be seen as a way to throw the saffron party off guard, forcing it to take a stand. The move will also keep the caste and reservation issues on the front burner as key state elections, followed by the General Election in the first half of 2024, draw up.



WHAT IS THE CASTE ROW IN K.R. NARAYAN INSTITUTE IN KERALA?

The story so far:

All 83 students of the State-run K.R. Narayanan National Institute of Visual Science and Arts, a film school at Thekkumthala, Kottayam, have been on an indefinite strike since December 5. The students have been demanding the ouster of Shankar Mohan, director of the school, for allegedly discriminating against the students and staff on the basis of caste. Although the State Higher Education Minister, R. Bindu, entrusted a three-member committee with investigating the complaints, it has now instituted a high-level inquiry on the issue. The new team has been instructed to submit their findings in two weeks.

What caused the strike?

The institute has witnessed several waves of protests since its opening in 2016. In the latest bout of protest, led by the students' council of the school, they have raised a set of charges against Mr. Mohan that varied from caste discrimination to forcing sanitation workers to do domestic labour at his official residence, including cleaning of toilets. According to the students, Mr. Mohan took the lead in shortening three-year courses offered by the institute into two-year programmes without due consultation and research.

The sanitation workers, employed by the institute on a daily wage basis, have testified their experience of receiving an inhumane treatment at the hands of Mr. Mohan. Another Dalit employee of the institute has approached the SC/ST commission with a complaint of caste discrimination against Mr. Mohan.

Documents that emerged in the public domain showed that as many as 26 out of the 30 seats reserved for different categories of students have not been filled while admitting students to the 2022 batch. It showed that several candidates were denied admission with the abrupt introduction of cut-off marks by the institute's academic committee.

How did the film world respond?

The protest, which had been largely limited to the institute's campus in the first few days, struck a chord with film makers, film students as well as cinephiles during the 27th International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK) in Thiruvananthapuram. An array of faces from contemporary Malayalam cinema, including filmmakers Aashiq Abu, Mahesh Narayanan, Jeo Baby, Kamal, K.M. Kamal, Vidhu Vincent, actor Sajitha Madathil and musician Shahabaz Aman joined the students at a protest staged at the main venue of the event.

How did the institute handle it?

Mr. Mohan has stayed largely aloof from the public eye. But talking to The Hindu, he denied all the charges and maintained that "the truth has a way of revealing itself". Eminent filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan, chairman of the institute, has been firm in his support for Mr. Mohan and described him as a 'well-bred man'. The statement, however, drew sharp reactions and the protesters issued an open letter challenging Mr. Gopalakrishnan's stance.

The institution, meanwhile, is also accused of indulging in retaliatory action by cancelling the room reservations for 52 students who arrived in Thiruvananthapuram to attend the IFFK. Though the students attempted to contact the director and other officials, their calls went



unattended. The State Chalachitra Academy later arranged temporary accommodation for the students.

What does the government say?

The State government has taken a serious note of the issue as is evident from its decision to institute a high-level inquiry into the issue. It, at the same time, does not want to antagonise Adoor Gopalakrishnan, a filmmaker of towering stature, and is treading a cautious path before taking any final decision.

EXPEDITE CLASSIFICATION OF NOMADIC TRIBES IN QUOTA LISTS, PANEL TELLS CENTRE

The parliamentary panel on Social Justice and Empowerment has pulled up the Union government over the “very slow” process to categorise over 260 denotified, nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes under the SC/ST/OBC lists. Government officials have pointed out that this has delayed the approval of benefits under the SEED (Scheme for Economic Empowerment of DNTs) launched in February this year.

The scheme was launched by Union Social Justice Minister Virendra Kumar, with the aim of providing free competitive exam coaching, health insurance, housing assistance, and livelihood initiatives. An amount of ₹200 crore has been allocated for this scheme — to be spent over five years from 2021-22 to 2025-26.

As of December 26 evening, a total of over 5,400 applications had been received under the SEED, none of which have been approved and no amount has been sanctioned.

The panel, in a report tabled in Parliament this Winter Session, noted that it had earlier too flagged the “inability of the department to take necessary action” on the speedy and accurate categorisation of these communities.

After the government said that the work was proceeding and would be finished by 2022, the panel said the process was still very slow. It added, “Delay in locating them would increase their suffering and they would not be able to get benefit of the prevailing schemes meant for the welfare of SC/STs.”

The panel further said it expects the government to expedite this exercise and finish it in a time-bound manner and sought detailed timelines for the same.

Department’s response

In response to the panel’s concerns, the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment had submitted that the Anthropological Survey of India had submitted reports on categorisation of 48 DNT communities so far. In addition, of the 267 communities not categorised so far, the AnSI has finished studies on 24 communities, with Tribal Research Institutes studying 12 of the communities.

Further, the AnSI is finalising studies on 161 communities and is expected to finish studying the remaining communities (about 70) by the end of 2022.

More than 10 crore Indians from over 1,400 communities are either denotified, nomadic or semi-nomadic. Of this, the Idate Commission had categorised 1,262 communities under SC/ST/OBC lists and 267 communities were left uncategorised. Even the communities categorised by the Idate



Commission are not accurate with many communities appearing in SC lists in one State or district and on the ST list in another.

EXPERTS SKEPTICAL OF PROPOSAL TO ENHANCE RESERVATION FOR LINGAYATS AND VOKKALIGAS

Under pressure in the election year from the Vokkaligas and the Panchamasalis (a sub sect of Veerashaiva-Lingayats), the State Cabinet on Thursday approved creation of two new categories of 2C and 2D for Vokkaligas and Veerashaiva-Lingayats, respectively.

The reservation quantum, to be determined after receiving the final report from the Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes (KSCBC), is proposed to be carved out from the 10% EWS quota.

“We will fix the percentage of EWS quota, considering their population. Then, the remaining percentage points will be allocated to the newly created categories,” said Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister J.C. Madhuswamy on Thursday.

However, experts say that the decision is unconstitutional. “Article 15 (6) and 16 (6) that provides for EWS reservation has specifically excluded Backward Classes,” said Ravi Varma Kumar, former chairman, KSCBC.

“Hundreds of communities classified as Backward Classes receive a total of 32% reservation. How can Vokkaligas and Lingayats alone be picked for proportional representation, when there are more backward communities in category 1 and category 2A that are languishing without proper representation?” he asked, also adding that 13% Muslims receive 4% reservation, calling it “discriminatory.”

Further, there has to be empirical data before such a decision is taken, he added.

Stating that the proposal may not pass legal scrutiny, another former chairman of KSCBC C.S. Dwarkanath said that it was not scientific and described it as an effort to cause confusion.

“The government is misguiding the two communities. Currently backward class reservation is under Article 16 (4) based on caste and the EWS reservation is under Article 16 (6), which is based on class. The two are unconnected. How can you convert caste into class?” he said.

Final report awaited

Meanwhile, chairman of Backward Classes Commission K. Jayaprakash Hegde, who submitted an interim report to the government following which the two new categories were formed, said: “When the final report has to be submitted, empirical data has to be submitted.”

When asked if the final report would be submitted in two to three months, he said: “We will try our best. We have to see whether we can consider the present data or take some of it.”

THE KARNATAKA-MAHARASHTRA BORDER ROW

The story so far:

The border town of Belagavi has been a part of Karnataka since boundaries were demarcated along linguistic lines under the States Reorganisation Act, 1956. But the inter-State border dispute

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



between Karnataka and Maharashtra erupts every now and then. The decades-old dispute flared up again in 2022 when Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai said the Karnataka government was considering laying claim to Jath taluk in Maharashtra, evoking a strong response. The Karnataka Legislative Assembly, on December 22, unanimously passed a resolution to protect its interests and called the dispute a “closed chapter”. On December 27, the Maharashtra government retaliated by passing a unanimous resolution in its Assembly to legally pursue the inclusion of 865 Marathi-speaking villages from Belagavi, Karwar, Nipani, Bidar, Bhalki and others in Karnataka into the State.

What are the claims of the two States?

The raging boundary dispute between the two States dates back to the reorganisation of States along linguistic lines. In 1957, unhappy with the demarcation of boundaries, Maharashtra demanded realignment of its border with Karnataka. It invoked Section 21 (2)(b) of the Act, submitting a memorandum to the Union Ministry of Home Affairs stating its objection to Marathi-speaking areas being included in Karnataka. It filed a petition in the Supreme Court staking a claim over Belagavi.

Karnataka has argued that the inclusion of Belagavi as part of its territory is beyond dispute. It has cited the demarcation done on linguistic lines as per the Act and the 1967 Mahajan Commission Report to substantiate its position. Karnataka has argued for the inclusion of areas in Kolhapur, Sholapur and Sangli districts (falling under Maharashtra) in its territory. From 2006, Karnataka started holding the winter session of the Legislature in Belagavi, building the massive Suvarna Vidhana Soudha in the district headquarters to reassert its claim.

What has been the politics around the dispute?

In the immediate decades of the formation of States, no national party was willing to take the risk and address the dispute, especially the Congress which has a social base in both States. This helped Maharashtra Ekikarana Samiti (MES) sustain its fight with a single agenda — Belagavi’s inclusion into Maharashtra.

The MES-supported candidates, who have been winning one or more seats in the district since the 1957 Karnataka Assembly elections, were defeated in the 2018 Assembly elections. As another election draws close in 2023, the MES is keen to revive its political fortunes.

The dispute strongly resonates in the cultural arena too. For instance, two Sahitya Sammelanas — the 73rd Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Sahitya Sammelana (ABMSS) and the 70th Akil Bharatiya Kannada Sahitya Sammelana — were held in Belagavi in 2000 and 2003, respectively. Both events prepared the ground for the re-opening of an otherwise muted issue.

What were the terms of the Mahajan Commission?

In 1966, at Maharashtra’s insistence, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi established a one-man commission led by Mehr Chand Mahajan, which recommended that 264 villages be transferred to Maharashtra and that Belagavi (Belgaum) and 247 villages remain with Karnataka.

Maharashtra rejected the report, while Karnataka welcomed it. Karnataka argued that either the Mahajan Commission Report should be accepted fully, or the status quo maintained.



What is the recent controversy around Jath taluk?

A war of words broke out between BJP leaders in Karnataka and Maharashtra over the border row last month after CM Basavaraj Bommai said the BJP-led government was “seriously considering” laying a claim on Jath taluk and held meetings with senior advocates to resolve the boundary issue.

In 2021, all 40 gram panchayats of the drought-prone Jath taluk passed a resolution to join Karnataka, stating that the Maharashtra government was unable to provide water to its people and they were being treated unfairly.

This fuelled tension between the two states, with Maharashtra Deputy CM Devendra Fadnis saying they would not cede even an inch of land to Karnataka. Mr. Bommai then upped the ante by stating that Solapur and Akkalkoti thought to be part of Karnataka as well.

In the same week, violence broke out at Dhound village in Maharashtra when some pro-Marathi activists vandalised a KSRTC bus. In retaliation, a few pro-Kannada activists blackened the boards of an MSRTC bus in Kalaburagi district.

How is the issue being resolved?

Attempts are often made to resolve inter-state disputes with the cooperation of both sides, with the Centre working as a facilitator or a neutral mediator. If issues are resolved amicably, Parliament can bring a law to alter state boundaries, such as the Bihar-Uttar Pradesh (Alteration of Boundaries) Act of 1968 and the Haryana-Uttar Pradesh (Alteration of Boundaries) Act of 1979.

In the Belagavi issue, Union Home Minister Amit Shah met Chief Ministers Basavaraj Bommai and Eknath Shinde and asked them to form a six-member team, comprising three ministers from each side, to address all boundary issues.

What are the other methods available?

There are other formal methods in the Constitution to resolve inter-state disputes.

Judicial redressal: The Supreme Court in its original jurisdiction decides disputes between states. Article 131 of the Constitution reads: “Subject to the provisions of this Constitution, the Supreme Court shall, to the exclusion of any other court, have original jurisdiction in any dispute

(a) between the Government of India and one or more States; or

(b) between the Government of India and any State or States on one side and one or more other States on the other; or

(c) between two or more States, if and in so far as the dispute involves any question (whether of law or fact) on which the existence or extent of a legal right depends: Provided that the said jurisdiction shall not extend to a dispute arising out of any treaty, agreement, covenant, engagements, and or other similar instrument which, having been entered into or executed before the commencement of this Constitution, continues in operation after such commencement, or which provides that the said jurisdiction shall not extend to such a dispute.

Inter-state Council: Article 263 of the Constitution gives powers to the President to set up an Inter-state Council for resolution of disputes between states. The Council is envisaged as a forum for discussion between the states and the Centre. In 1988, the Sarkaria Commission suggested that



the Council should exist as a permanent body, and in 1990 it came into existence through a Presidential Order.

The provision reads: “provisions with respect to an inter State Council If any time it appears to the President that the public interests would be served by the establishment of a Council charged with the duty of

(a) inquiring into and advising upon disputes which may have arisen between States;

(b) investigating and discussing subjects in which some or all of the States, or the Union and one or more of the States, have a common interest; or

(c) making recommendations upon any such subject and, in particular, recommendations for the better co-ordination of policy and action with respect to that subject, it shall be lawful for the President by order to establish such a Council, and to define the nature of the duties to be performed by it and its organisation and procedure.

In 2021, the Centre reconstituted the Inter-state Council and the body now has 10 Union Ministers as permanent invitees. The standing committee of the Council has been reconstituted with Home Minister Amit Shah as Chairman. Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman and the Chief Ministers of Maharashtra, UP, and Gujarat are some of the other standing committee members.

What are some other inter-state disputes in India?

In a reply to Parliament, in 2015, the Centre said that there are border disputes mostly arising out of claims and counter-claims over territories between Assam-Meghalaya; Assam-Nagaland; Assam-Mizoram; Assam-Arunachal Pradesh and Maharashtra- Karnataka.

EC TO BEGIN DELIMITATION EXERCISE IN ASSAM, TO USE CENSUS FIGURES OF 2001

The Election Commission on Tuesday said it would begin the delimitation exercise of Assembly and Lok Sabha constituencies in Assam.

The Census figures of 2001 would be used for the delimitation process.

Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar and Election Commissioners Anup Chandra Pandey and Arun Goel have directed the Chief Electoral Officer of Assam to take up the matter with the State government to issue a complete ban on the creation of new administrative units from January 1, the EC said in a statement.

The term of the current Assam Legislative Assembly will end on May 20, 2026. The State has 14 Lok Sabha, 126 Assembly and seven Rajya Sabha seats.

The commission added that the delimitation exercise was being carried out following a request from the Ministry of Law and Justice in November. It would be carried out as per Section 8A of the Representation of the People Act, 1950.

“As mandated under Article 170 of the Constitution, Census figures of 2001 shall be used for readjustment of parliamentary and Assembly constituencies in the State. Reservation of seats for SC and ST will be provided as per Articles 330 and 332 of the Constitution of India,” it said.

The entire guidelines and methodology for the delimitation process would be designed and finalised by the Election Commission itself. During the exercise, the commission will keep in mind

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



the physical features, existing boundaries of administrative units, facility of communication, and public convenience.

Public review

Once a draft proposal for the delimitation of constituencies is finalised by the commission, it will be published in the Central and State gazettes for inviting suggestions or objections from the general public.

“In this regard, a notice will also be published in two vernacular newspapers of the State specifying the date and venue for public sittings to be held in the State,” the commission said.

The last delimitation of constituencies in Assam was done based on the Census figures of 1971 by the then Delimitation Commission in 1976. The delimitation process in the four north-eastern States of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh was deferred in 2008 due to security issues.

KARNATAKA GOVERNMENT’S STANCE ON MARITAL RAPE TAKES THE CONVERSATION FORWARD

Last week, the Karnataka government came out in support of putting a married man on trial for allegedly sexually assaulting his wife. In an affidavit filed before the Supreme Court, the state government has indicated that it does not disagree with the Karnataka High Court’s decision in March this year, refusing to quash rape charges filed by a wife against her husband, defying the exception in law. The issue of criminalising marital rape is a crucial and necessary conversation that is taking shape in courts. The state government’s stance is a welcome intervention in this debate at a time when the Centre is still to formulate its view.

Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code that defines rape carves out a crucial exception: “Sexual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under eighteen years of age, is not rape.” This immunity for married men in law prevents a wife from filing a case of rape against her husband. In this context, the Karnataka HC ruling draws a new line. Justice M Nagaprasanna’s order while acknowledging the existing law defies it by calling out the “age-old...regressive” thought behind the provision. The ruling called on lawmakers to hear the “voices of silence” while holding that “rape is a rape” even if the accused is the husband. However, much of the reasoning in this case is couched in references to the grim facts of the case (the complaint alleges sexual assault of the man’s child as well) narrated by the woman. The Supreme Court has stayed the Karnataka HC order but the case has revived the debate on marital rape. Before this ruling, in 2018, the Gujarat High Court also called for a relook at the marital rape immunity but quashed the charge of rape against the married man. In May this year, the Delhi High Court delivered a split verdict in a case where it examined the constitutionality of the marital rape immunity. A two-judge bench of Justices Hari Shankar and Rajiv Shakdar recorded diametrically opposite findings in the decision. Justice Shakdar’s decision holding that the provision is unconstitutional because it impinges on the personal liberty and right to equality of a woman has set the ball rolling.

The issue is complex, especially since the dominant social consensus on the subject is shaped by a conservative understanding of marriage as an institution. But neither social mores nor the letter of law are set in stone. The ongoing conversation in the courts needs to resonate in legislative bodies considering the social sensitivities in the matter. Legislators tend to pass the buck to the



judiciary on issues considered socially controversial — for instance, decriminalising homosexuality, adultery or reform in personal law. However, when the idea of change is filled with fears of misuse, legislation alone can carefully reflect on the issue and reach a nuanced conclusion.

INDIA MUST BUILD AWARENESS ON POPULATION CONTROL

Early in December, two Members of Parliament of the Bharatiya Janata Party, Ravi Kishan and Nishikant Dubey, introduced in the Lok Sabha a private members' Bill aimed at population control in India. Stating that population rise is the most significant reason for India's slow rate of development, the Bill argues for an immediate need for population control. The debate and the discourse around India's rising population is not recent, having begun since Independence. India was among the first nations to address its population problem as early as 1951, raising awareness about the ills of overpopulation. While there has been a significant rise in India's population, there has also been a sharp decline in India's total fertility rate (TFR). In 1950, the TFR was at around 5.9%, and is now 2% (fifth round of the National Family Health Survey, or NFHS). There was a steep decline after the 1970s, indicating an inversely proportional relationship between economic prosperity and the fertility rate.

A politicised debate

The debate around the need for population control has been greatly politicised in India. The entirety of this discourse around such a sensitive issue is often reduced to a petty religious issue, and, ultimately, the subject of development suffers.

Nearly six months before the 2022 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, the Yogi Adityanath government and the State Law Commission of Uttar Pradesh came up with a proposed draft Bill, i.e., the Uttar Pradesh Population (Control, Stabilisation and Welfare) Bill, 2021. Population is a grave concern in the Hindi heartland, especially Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, but the suggestions were more political than practical. The visible attempt was towards an affirmation of the majoritarian politics being played out. For instance, the Bill said that no government job would be offered to couples with more than two children. However, there was no clarification about what would happen to a person who had a third child after being in a government job or if, for some reason, a person with two children remarried and had a third child.

In another instance, in July this year, while speaking on the occasion of population control fortnight, Mr. Adityanath, said, "It should not happen that the speed of population growth or the percentage of some community is high and we stabilise the population of the 'moolniwasi' (natives) through awareness or enforcement." This statement was perceived to underline the belief in parts of the Hindi heartland that it is a minority community that is responsible for the population burst. The Bill was seen to strengthen political polarisation and facilitate the politics of majority appeasement.

Data shows otherwise

However, data indicate otherwise. NFHS data indicate that although the fertility rate of Muslims is higher than Hindus, the gap between the two has shrunk substantially. In 1992-93, the gap between the Hindu and Muslim fertility rate was 1.1, which now has reduced to 0.35. A close comparison of Census data on average fertility rates is insightful. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, with around 20% Muslim population, the TFR declined from 5.8% in 1981 to 2.7% in 2011. In Assam, where the Muslim population is about 33%, the TFR is 1.9%. Similarly, in Jammu and Kashmir, where the Muslim population is the majority, the TFR fell from 4.5% in 1981 to 1.4% in 2011. Data also show that Muslims have adopted better family planning measures than Hindus.

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



India's TFR, 2%, is even lower than the replacement level, signifying a remarkable step in the population control parameters. It is clear that India does not need a law for forced population control. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar too has countered the need for such a law by saying, "forced population control can have very dangerous consequences, it can create a gender imbalance". Forced population control measures have not shown promising results in the countries that have implemented them, the most relevant example being India's immediate neighbour, China. The one-child policy has proved to be disastrous, causing a demographic imbalance. The population of China is aging faster than in any other modern country, owing to the policies of forced population control.

Strengthen the health infrastructure

India needs to adopt population control measures. But the focus should be on strengthening public health infrastructure and raising awareness about the need for population control. Any forced control method will impact the rate of aging. United Nations data show that there is a projected rise in the population of older people and a decline in the young population in many countries. Although the trend started in rich countries such as Japan, the trend is now visible in developing countries as well, especially Southeast Asia. Among these trends, implementing forced population control can only have negative consequences.

STUDY SHOWS T.N. IS WORST PERFORMING IN RTI RESPONSIVENESS

The State Information Commission of Tamil Nadu has been the worst performing in responsiveness under the Right to Information Act, furnishing only 14% of the information sought.

Maharashtra was the second worst, sharing 23% of the information asked for, according to a report card on the performance of Information Commissions (ICs) in India for 2021-22 by the Satark Nagrik Sangathan.

Only 10 ICs provided full information in response to the RTI applications filed as part of this assessment. These included Andhra Pradesh, Haryana and Jharkhand and the north-eastern States of Sikkim, Nagaland and Tripura.

The organisation said that as part of the assessment, in order to access information about the functioning of ICs, it filed RTI applications with the 28 State Information Commissions (SICs) and the Central Information Commission (CIC). "A total of 145 RTI applications were filed seeking identical information from all the 29 ICs. The RTI applications were tracked to assess how each IC performed as a public authority, in terms of maintaining and disclosing information," it said.

"The SIC of Tamil Nadu was the worst performing as it denied most of the information sought, including regarding the number of appeals and complaints dealt with by the IC, details of penalty imposed and compensation awarded stating that the information could be provided only 'after getting the approval of State Legislative Assembly'," though no such provision exists in the RTI Act.

No orders passed

The SIC of Chhattisgarh denied information on several points stating that under the prevailing State rules, in one application, information on only one topic could be sought, while the SIC of Bihar, which failed to provide any information under the RTI Act for the assessments published in



2020 and 2021, significantly improved its performance and furnished 67% of the information that was sought.

The report card further said that a large number of ICs across the country were returning cases without passing orders. Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh returned around 40% of the appeals or complaints received by them.

Of the 18 Information Commissioners who provided relevant information, the assessment found that 11 returned appeals or complaints without passing any orders.

It also found that several ICs have an extremely low rate of disposal per commissioner. Of all the 29 ICs, only the CIC has adopted a norm on the number of appeals or complaints to be disposed of by each commissioner in one year.

MEITY BECOMES NODAL MINISTRY FOR ONLINE GAMING

The Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) will soon publish rules for online gaming platforms and start public consultation on the regulations, Minister of State for Electronics and IT Rajeev Chandrasekhar said Tuesday.

According to an official gazette on Monday, MeitY is now the nodal ministry regulating online gaming.

In a tweet, Chandrasekhar said that the government is “committed to fully encouraging technology innovation — but also to ensure that no illegal content or services are possible”.

Earlier this month, Chandrasekhar had told Parliament that the government was aware of the possible risk and challenges of online gaming, including the risk of “violence abetting video games, addiction to it, and consequential financial loss.”

The online gaming industry has been for a long asking for central-level law to regulate the sector. In May, MeitY set up an inter-ministerial task force to propose rules for regulating online gaming.

In October, the task force recommended the creation of a central regulatory body for the sector, clearly defining what games of skill and chance are and bringing online gaming under the purview of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, among other things.

The online gaming industry has welcomed the ministry’s appointment as the nodal agency.

As per a report by VC firm Sequoia and management consulting company BCG, the revenue of the Indian mobile gaming industry is expected to exceed \$1.5 billion in 2022 and is estimated to reach \$5 billion in 2025. The industry grew at a CAGR of 38 per cent between 2017-2020, compared to 8 per cent in China and 10 per cent in the US. It is expected to grow at a CAGR of 15 per cent to reach Rs 153 billion in revenue by 2024.

India’s percentage of new paying users (NPU) in gaming has been the fastest growing in the world for two consecutive years, at 40 per cent in 2020 and 50 per cent in 2021. According to a report by EY and FICCI, transaction-based games’ revenues grew 26 per cent in India, with the number of paying gamers increasing by 17 per cent from 80 million in 2020 to 95 million in 2021.



NCPCR WARNS NGOS OVER DEPICTION OF VULNERABLE CHILDREN FOR FUNDRAISING

The practice of civil society organisations using representative visuals for fundraising activities concerning development issues such as malnutrition now faces new scrutiny, with the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) issuing a directive to non-governmental organisations (NGO) not to depict vulnerable children.

A 2013 campaign by a U.K.-based NGO, Save the Children, titled “Khushi”, featured a 20-month-old baby lying on a hospital bed at a malnutrition treatment centre in Tonk, Rajasthan. The baby was videographed as a helpless and needy child, with the camera zooming into a close-up of her face and eyes as she looks morosely into it.

The narrator describes her as a malnourished child in need of help and makes an ardent appeal: “Please, will you help? Please, donate ₹500 a month and make a difference.”

The campaign, which aimed to raise money for the NGO’s initiative against malnutrition, came under scrutiny from several corners over the use of the images of a vulnerable child.

The campaign ran for several years even as some within the NGO were shocked that their organisation did not know the latest on the well-being and whereabouts of the child featured in its campaign.

Now, another campaign by the same NGO, titled “Anand”, depicting an emaciated infant whose ribs can be seen sticking out under his skin, is at the centre of a fresh controversy that has sparked a debate on the imagery among child rights organisations.

On December 2, the NCPCR wrote to NGOs across the country on the practice of “raising funding, domestic as well as international, for their NGOs through advertisement while showing vulnerable minor children in deplorable conditions”.

The letter asked NGOs to refrain from such depiction as it amounted to a violation of the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015. This missive was preceded by another letter from the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MoWCD) on November 2 to all States and Union Territories.

The letter named Save the Children and its campaign to tackle malnutrition in tribal children by raising ₹800 from the general public, and called it misleading on the ground that the issue of malnutrition was being “vigorously pursued” by the government through its Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 scheme.

It also asked States to “report” similar incidents involving NGOs, take “appropriate measures to expose the false information” and “alert beneficiaries about false claims made by them”. Both the letters were based on a detailed complaint by a Rajya Sabha member.

Sudharshan Suchi, CEO of Save the Children, did not respond to a questionnaire e-mailed to him, seeking details of his organisation’s policy on the use of imagery involving children, and the whereabouts of the child “Khushi”.

Images taken down

The images from the “Anand” campaign have since been pulled down and the NGO’s website is now replete with images of happy children.



Save the Children’s “statement of principles” regarding the use of imagery, specifically the portrayal of children in a 2017 document — it updated its media policy following widespread criticism — available on its website states its “clear priority is to generate the response that will help fund our work” which requires that “we create and publish challenging, hard-hitting imagery”.

However, efforts are made to ensure it does not objectify, belittle or dehumanise children, the NGO says. Informed consent of the subject or their family is obtained for photos and it is ensured that they understand the use to which their images may be put as well as the possible consequences, the NGO says. It adds that rigorous procedures are also undertaken to minimise any risk to the children, and no more than two of the following pieces of information are given out: a child’s full name, image and location.

The Ethical Image Policy of another NGO, WaterAid, also pays attention to what is allowed or not allowed in post-production, and how long images can be used. In order to ensure visual representation is more egalitarian and participatory, it has also started hiring and training local people to work as “photo, film and story gatherers”, and trains children and young adults in Pakistan and Nepal to use cameras to communicate issues that affect them.

The UNICEF’s “Eight quick steps to ethical imagery” suggests asking the question — “If she/he were my child, how would I want her/him portrayed?” It also warns against the other extreme of using happy and cute images of children as they “tend to objectify children into an idealised and sentimentalised happiness that negates the complexity of their real life”.

Many in the civil society have welcomed the government’s directive.

“We ensure that we don’t present children in their vulnerability, though those representations appeal most to the people. Instead we present strength and dignity. The poorest of children do laugh and have managed to live with dignity. Therefore, the government’s position is the right one,” Kavita Ratna, director, advocacy and fundraising, The Concerned for Working Children, said.

But the agency of the subjects involved is crucial and if it is the decision of the community to be depicted in a difficult situation, then that is also taken into account, she added.

Ms. Ratna, however, points out that there is also a need for a mind shift as the donor community appears to need or respond to evocative pictures in fund-raising.

The government’s concern over visual representation of children comes at a time when it has doggedly challenged global reports on rising levels of malnutrition in India.

In 2020, a warning on how COVID-19’s impact on access to healthcare services and food systems could result in a rise in malnourished children led to Smriti Irani, the Minister for Women and Child Development, calling up the UN headquarters.

The Union government has also repeatedly rejected India’s performance in the Global Hunger Index and questioned the methodology. India was ranked 107 among 121 countries in 2022 on the index.



THE LATEST VIDEO FROM A POSH NOIDA CONDOMINIUM AND THE CASUAL CRUELTY OF THE PRIVILEGED

The CCTV footage from Cleo County, a gated community in Noida, that shows a resident assaulting a domestic worker is shocking. It is also, unfortunately, an increasingly routine occurrence in metropolitan India. In the video, which was shared across social media on December 27, the resident can be seen dragging a young woman from a lift, even as the latter tries to resist, clinging desperately to the door. Earlier this year, also in Noida, Shrikant Tyagi and Bhavya Roy became symbols of elite entitlement when they were caught on camera assaulting a woman co-resident and security guards, respectively, in their posh condominiums. And in August, Varun Nath slapped, abused and threatened to kill a lift operator and security guard in his Gurgaon housing complex.

A common thread runs through these cases: The casual cruelty of the privileged stands exposed because of a video — either from a CCTV or through one surreptitiously taken on a mobile device. Public outrage and media attention mean that the police file cases and the seemingly interminable process of justice begins. But what of the incidents that aren't recorded or shared? The roots of the impunity — fed by inequalities of class and caste, region and religion, gender and access to justice — that allows one human being to strip another of her dignity in the workplace, remains unaddressed. There are at least two systemic shortcomings that need to be examined.

The first is a question of the law and order machinery. Are the thana, PCR van and beat constable — the most immediate points of access in distress — somewhere the less privileged can go to complain about their employers' excesses? The police must assure citizens that there is understanding and no threat of further violence or intimidation when they are approached. Given the difference in power and status between those who live and those who work in gated communities, the police must ensure that the might of the former will not be used to crush the latter. The second issue is more pervasive but far more difficult to address. Fraternity is a foundational idea of the Indian Constitution precisely because BR Ambedkar and many others saw "graded inequality" and the violence that upheld it as something that needed to change for India to march into modernity. But as can be seen in video after video, education, wealth and urban life do not make people treat fellow citizens, especially those who are more vulnerable, with respect and reciprocity. The everyday acts of violence in lifts, parking lots and corridors of gated enclaves indicate a moral and civic blindness. Ending it calls for a conversation that goes beyond the temporary outrage generated by a video.

MENTAL HEALTH HELPLINE GETS 20,000 CALLS IN TWO MONTHS

Tele Mental Health Assistance and Networking Across States (MANAS), a toll-free 24/7 number (14416) that was launched on October 10 on World Mental Health Day by the Union government, has received over 20,000 calls to date, reported the International Institute of Information Technology Bangalore (IIITB).

While stress, sleep disorders and anxiety have been the main issues for which help is being sought, the highest number of calls have been received from Tamil Nadu (3,631).

Based on the Karnataka government's e-Manas service, which was launched during the first wave of COVID-19, Tele Manas under the National Mental Health Programme (NMHP) now has 24 States and Union Territories on board, and provides basic support and counselling along with emergency psychiatric facilities. While the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences



(NIMHANS) was appointed as the nodal centre for the helpline, IIITB has been providing technical support for it.

The data also showed that people in the age group of 18-45 years called the helpline the most.

Emergency cases

Apart from the aforementioned issues, emergency cases were also dealt with by the e-counsellors through the helpline, IIITB said.

Apart from Tamil Nadu, places such as Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir and Telangana were the top regions from where more people reached out to the helpline, according to the recorded data.

NIMHANS is also conducting training for counsellors and plans to advertise the helpline. "We have not advertised about the facility aggressively yet, as we first want to develop adequate capacity across State Tele Manas cells to provide quality support to the callers. Once a demand is created, it becomes imperative to provide quality services. Once full-time counsellors are hired and trained, we will actively advertise Tele Manas facilities to reach out to persons across the country," Dr. Pratima Murthy, Director, NIMHANS, said.

ADVERTISERS HAVE FREEDOM TO MAKE GENERIC COMPARISONS WITH OTHER PRODUCTS, CREATIVITY CANNOT BE STIFLED, SAYS DELHI HC

While declining to grant an interim order to Zydus Wellness restraining Dabur India from broadcasting TV commercials of its orange glucose drink, the Delhi High Court has recently observed that a TV commercial (TVC) cannot be analysed in a "hypercritical manner" and must be viewed from the point of view of an ordinary consumer.

A single judge bench of Justice Prathiba Singh in its December 22 order observed that it was usual for companies marketing and selling products to portray their products as superior and in the "process of depicting superiority, a generic comparison ought to be permitted and creativity cannot be stifled". Justice Singh observed that in a claim for "disparaging advertisement" the message portrayed in the commercial would have to be seen and if it is not derogatory, no objection can be raised.

On advertising freedom the HC further held, "The purpose of advertising any product is for marketing the attributes of that product. Such attributes could be unilateral or relative in a generic manner. An advertiser ought to have the freedom to make advertisements with generic comparison highlighting the features of its own product and if the same is done without an allusion to any market leader, objection cannot be raised unless the representation being made is absolutely false or misleading".

The HC was hearing a lawsuit moved by Zydus Wellness Products Ltd., a consumer goods company, that claimed that one of its most popular variants of 'Glucon-D' range of products is 'Glucon-D Tangy Orange' which has been marketed and sold by its predecessor for decades. Zydus claimed that two TV commercials for 'Dabur Glucoplus-C Orange' aired by Dabur India Ltd. denigrated and disparaged all orange glucose powder drinks and especially its product 'Glucon-D Tangy Orange' which holds 74 per cent of market share in orange glucose powder category.



Zydus claimed that the TV commercial gives the impression that all the orange glucose powder drinks are entirely inefficacious in providing energy and only Dabur's product is capable of providing energy.

On Dabur's TV commercial the HC said that it merely highlights the qualities of its product and it does not disparage any orange glucose powder drink.

The court held that Zydus's inference of the alleged disparagement was far-fetched and opined, "Disparagement cannot be a far-fetched inference. In the impugned commercial, the mother asks a probing question as to how when her daughter drank the same orange glucose, the other lady's daughter won the race. This is being interpreted by the Zydus as a comparison as it leads to an inference that 'DABUR GLUCOPLUS-C ORANGE' is more effective, hence, superior and the other products, including Zydus's product, are ineffective, hence, inferior – thus disparaging. Zydus's case is that the gestures of disappointment and frustration on the face of the mother whose daughter lost the race are sufficient to infer disparagement. This, in the opinion of the court, is far-fetched".

The HC further said it would not be proper for the court to "flip the coin to conclude–'mine is better as 'yours is bad'". It opined that the comparison in the commercial may be unfavourable to Zydus, but it cannot be held to be disparaging and that its intent and the overall effect seemed to merely promote Dabur's glucose drink. Observing the messaging of the TV commercial, the court held that it was "by and large truthful and there is no falsity involved".

Refusing to grant interim injunction, the HC said that the TV commercial when viewed from the perspective of an ordinary viewer does not give the impression of denigration or disparagement. It said that consumers are aware of the fact that advertisements are "one-sided commentary" put out by the manufacturers and sellers for the promotion of their own products and are "inherently biased in nature".

WHAT IS THE DELHI HC VERDICT ON 'ROOH AFZA' TRADEMARK?

The story so far:

On December 21, the Delhi High Court, in the case of Hamdard National Foundation (India) vs Sadar Laboratories Pvt. Ltd., restrained Sadar Laboratories from manufacturing and selling beverages under the impugned trademark 'Dil Afza'. The court observed that the trademark 'Rooh Afza' is prima facie a strong mark requiring a high degree of protection as it has acquired immense goodwill.

What is a trademark?

A trademark is a distinctive sign or indicator used by a business organisation to distinguish its products or services from those of other entities. It serves as a badge of origin exclusively identifying a particular business as a source of goods or services. Trademark infringement is the unauthorised usage of a sign that is identical or deceptively similar to a registered trademark.

What is the dispute?

The manufacturers of 'Rooh Afza' moved an appeal against the rejection of its application seeking an interim injunction against Sadar Laboratories Pvt. Ltd. for their product 'Dil Afza'. The appellant stated before the court that the trademark 'Rooh Afza' is a highly reputed mark in the market with



regard to sharbat (sweet beverage). Furthermore, it was claimed that the design of the product 'Dil Afza' is deceptively similar to the get-up and trade dress of the appellant's product.

What was the court's verdict?

A Division Bench of the Delhi High Court restrained the respondent (Sadar Laboratories Pvt. Ltd.) from manufacturing and selling any product under the trademark 'Dil Afza' till the final disposal of the trademark infringement suit. The court held that "it is not difficult to conceive that a person who looks at the label of 'Dil Afza' may recall the label of 'Rooh Afza' as the word 'Afza' is common and the meaning of the words 'Rooh' and 'Dil', when translated in English, are commonly used in conjunction. In the case of M/s Kirorimal Kashiram Marketing & Agencies Pvt. Ltd. vs M/s Shree Sita Chawal Udyog Mil, the Delhi High Court observed that "it is not permissible to copy a prominent part of the registered trademark of another person" and restrained the respondent from using the trademark 'Golden Deer' as it was deceptively similar to the plaintiff's registered trademark 'Double Deer' with regards to rice.

What is a strong trademark?

A mark is said to be strong when it is well-known and has acquired a high degree of goodwill. The degree of the protection of any trademark changes with the strength of the mark; the stronger the mark, the higher the requirement to protect it. "Rooh Afza requires more protection as it is more likely to be subjected to piracy by those who seek to draw an undue advantage of its goodwill", the judgment said.

What were the Court's rationales?

Firstly, the impugned trademark 'Dil Afza' has a phonetic similarity with 'Rooh Afza'. Secondly, "if recall from memory is triggered by the English meaning of the words 'ROOH' and 'DIL', the fact that heart and soul is a commonly used phrase, provides a common conceptual background". Thirdly, the trade dress of the impugned trade mark, which consists of the bottle's shape, design, the placement of the house mark, colourfully busy design of the label, are the material contributors to the commercial impression of the competing trademark. Lastly, the value of the product was taken into consideration as well. The court held that as the product is a low-priced consumable item, "the average customer would not deliberate on the details of the product as one would do while taking a high-value investment decision".

WHAT IS THE PROPOSAL TO BAN THE SALE OF SINGLE CIGARETTES?

The story so far:

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare, in its latest report about cancer management, prevention and diagnosis, recommended that the government institute a ban on the sale of single sticks of cigarettes. It also recommended that the government increase taxes on all tobacco products and utilise the acquired revenue for cancer prevention and awareness.

What are the proposals?

Broadly, the measures aim to curb consumption as well as the accessibility of tobacco products. The report cites the National Health Policy's (2017) endeavour for a relative reduction in current tobacco use by 30% by 2025 and says it is imperative that the government take effective measures to contain the sale of tobacco products. To this effect, it recommends that the government prohibit



the sale of single sticks of cigarettes and suggests the abolition of all designated smoking areas in airports, hotels, and restaurants in addition to encouraging a smoke-free policy in organisations. The Committee also found that India has the lowest prices for tobacco products and thus, it must look to increase taxes on them.

These measures flow from the observation that oral cancer accounts for the highest proportion of cancer cases in the country.

Additionally, the committee also sought a ban on gutka and pan masala alongside a prohibition on their direct and indirect advertisement. This is based on the observation that, in India, more than 80% of tobacco consumption is in the form of chewing tobacco, aggressively marketed as a mouth freshener.

Why focus on single-stick cigarettes?

Single sticks are more economical to acquire than a full pack of cigarettes. This may particularly appeal to adolescents and youth who may have limited money in hand. Single sticks are also preferred by people who may want to take them up for experimentation and have not started smoking on a regular basis.

A ban on single-stick sales would compel a potential consumer to buy the entire pack which may not be particularly economical, thus curbing potential experimentation and the scope for regular intake. Moreover, a potential ban would also mean that the consumer would have to carry around the packet.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has observed that all forms of tobacco are harmful, and there is no safe level of exposure to tobacco. It also states that smoking cigarettes is the most common way of tobacco use worldwide. Moreover, the medical journal *The Lancet* noted in an editorial in June 2020, that by 2030, 7 million annual deaths from smoking are expected to be from low and middle-income countries.

Single-stick sales, owing to their easier accessibility and affordability, can also work as a disincentive to quit smoking. Nicotine in tobacco products is highly addictive and without cessation support only 4% of users who attempt to quit tobacco consumption will succeed, according to the WHO.

How effective can the ban be?

Cyril Alexander, State Convenor of the Tamil Nadu People's Forum for Tobacco Control (TNPFTC) told *The Hindu* that notwithstanding that the proposed move would reduce consumption and sales, the government must also consider instituting vendor licensing.

According to Mr. Alexander, in the absence of a vendor licensing regime, the ban on single sticks might not be very effective. "If you allow lakhs and lakhs of shops to sell tobacco and then implement the ban on the sale of single sticks of cigarettes, how would you enforce (the ban)?" he asks.

PRECIPICE OF SHAME

December 2021 and December 2022 could not have been more contrasting for India's pharmaceutical industry. Last year, it was hailed for developing vaccines that inoculated billions against the coronavirus and underlined its moniker as the 'pharmacy of the world'. This year, two



Indian drug-manufacturing firms stand accused by two countries of producing toxic cough syrup linked to the deaths of children — at least 66 in The Gambia and 18 in Uzbekistan. While The Gambia case was highlighted by the World Health Organization (WHO), the second case has been flagged by the Uzbek Health Ministry. In both cases, it is not conclusively established that consuming the syrup directly led to the deaths. What is of concern is that in both countries, batches were spiked with ethylene glycol or diethylene glycol, i.e., industrial chemicals that have no business being inside bottles of cough syrup. The Indian government adopted a truculent stance after the scandal in The Gambia. While the export licence of the Haryana-based Maiden Pharmaceuticals Ltd., which supplied the syrup to The Gambia, was revoked, Indian authorities, rather than investigating how the cough syrup was spiked, chose to question WHO's assessment that it was the cough syrup that caused the acute kidney injury linked to the deaths. The Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) brazened it out with WHO in a letter suggesting that its own tests of 'control samples' of the Maiden Pharma-product showed them to be free of contaminants. It did not address how The Gambian panel's own tests found the contaminants, or how 'control samples' have nothing to do with the actual spiked samples. The DCGI, and subsequently the Health Ministry, chose to thereafter take the line that The Gambian scandal was part of a conspiracy to "malign" India's reputation as a supplier of pharmaceutical goods.

In the case of the Noida-based Marion Biotech, which made the Dok-1 Max cough syrup associated with the deaths in Uzbekistan, the Government has again revoked the export licence and, reportedly, ordered a freeze on its production facilities. Because it is early days and there is no WHO-verdict on the causes of contamination here, the Indian government has sought to adopt a wait-and-watch position. It is high time that India takes a serious look at the core issue of why batches of exported cough syrup have been found to be laced with banned chemicals rather than play victim. While mistakes happen, not taking corrective measures is what threatens India's image and undermines trust in Indian industry.

STAYING PREPARED

Three years after strict enforcement of its Zero-COVID strategy, China abandoned it abruptly, leading to a jump in cases each day — an estimated 250 million people were infected in 20 days in December, according to the media, overwhelming hospitals and crematoria. Based on 30 genome sequences deposited between October and December and 14 genome sequences in December alone from China, the BF.7 appears to be the dominant variant. Though this variant was found in many countries, including India, months ago, there is fear that the uncontrolled spread of the virus in China may result in newer variants with an even higher transmissibility. For instance, the BF.7 sub-lineage with three additional immune escape mutations already seen in other variants has been found in some people arriving from China; these mutations may increase transmissibility further but will not increase disease severity. With a case surge in a few more countries, India has taken the right and proactive measures to be ready for any eventuality. With over 90% of the adult population already fully vaccinated by July this year, over one-fourth of adults also boosted, and a large percentage of the population also naturally infected, the chances of India witnessing large-scale deaths as seen during the second wave last year from existing variants are slim. In fact, given that a large percentage of the population enjoys hybrid immunity from vaccination and natural infection leading to all Omicron sub-lineages causing only a mild disease, the focus in India should not be on daily new infections but only on any increase in hospitalisations, particularly ICU admissions.



It is, therefore, not surprising that the Health Ministry has urged States to only ramp up genome sequencing (and not increase testing) to track new variants as the virus evolves by accumulating mutations. The pace of genome sequencing in India has to be scaled up soon after a dramatic slowdown this year. The Government in an effort to minimise the chances of the spread of new variants has introduced 2% random post-arrival sampling of international passengers and mandatory RT-PCR tests for arrivals from China and four other countries. The Ministry has also advised States to ensure uninterrupted supply of medical oxygen and conduct a drill in health facilities to ensure operational readiness. With seven COVID-19 vaccines, including the intranasal vaccine, manufactured using different vaccine platforms approved for use, India is vaccine self-sufficient. Besides homologous boosters, a couple of vaccines have got approval as a heterologous booster dose too. On the antiviral front, a Hyderabad-based company recently received WHO's prequalification for a generic version of Pfizer's COVID-19 oral antiviral drug, Paxlovid.

INDIA'S BID TO BEAT CERVICAL CANCER

The story so far:

The government has announced that it will roll out vaccines for the prevention of cervical cancer to girls aged between 9 and 14 years through schools. The National Technical Advisory Group for Immunisation (NTAGI) had recommended the introduction of the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine in the Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP). The UIP is one of the largest public health programmes which offers free vaccines for at least 12 diseases, and has successfully eradicated diseases like polio and maternal and neonatal tetanus.

Why is it important to launch the HPV vaccine?

Cervical cancer is preventable and curable if it is detected early and managed effectively. It is the second most common cancer in women in India, and the cause of a large number of deaths annually. It is caused by infection with the human papillomavirus, and there are vaccines to protect against cancerous HPV. A recent study in *The Lancet* shows that 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%). According to the paper, globally, there were an estimated 6,04,127 cervical cancer cases in 2020, with an incidence rate of 13.3 new cases per 1,00,000 women a year. In India, the incidence rate is 18 per 1,00,000 women. The WHO has specified that countries must maintain an incidence rate of fewer than 4 new cases per 1,00,000 women a year by 2030. To achieve that goal, one of the most important things required is that 90% of girls will have to be vaccinated with the HPV vaccine by the age of 15.

When will it be rolled out?

The indigenous HPV vaccine, called CERVAVAC, is likely to be rolled out by mid-2023. The vaccine has got the approval of the Drugs Controller General of India and was cleared by the government advisory panel, NTAGI, for use in the UIP programme. A one-time catch-up vaccine will be given to 9-14 year old adolescent girls, before it is introduced at nine years. States and Union Territories have been asked to issue directives to appropriate authorities for organising HPV vaccination centres in schools.

What happens to girls who don't go to school?

The government has clarified that girls who do not attend schools will be given the vaccines by community outreach and mobile health teams. Together with vaccination, screening programmes



need to be conducted regularly to detect early signs of the disease that will allow time for treatment. The Ayushman Bharat Health and Wellness centres, announced in 2018, are already screening for common cancers like oral, breast and cervical, with over 5 crore women being screened for cervical cancer till November 2022. Screening has to be increased exponentially, say doctors.

What are the challenges?

According to The Lancet study, the burden of cervical cancer remains high in Asia and Africa. The study identified substantial geographical and socioeconomic inequalities in cervical cancer globally, with a clear gradient of increasing rates for countries with lower levels of human development. In 2022, India ranked 132 out of 191 countries on the Human Development Index. However, health experts say the fact that India's fertility rate is declining due to a variety of factors, including improved literacy rate, increase in the age of marriage and so forth, should prompt everyone in the ecosystem, from the government, doctors to ground level health workers to launch campaigns on cervical cancer awareness, push vaccinations and screening for all girls.

What lies ahead?

Once the vaccine is launched through the UIP, which is a well-oiled network in India, it should reach the maximum number of the targeted population. The surveillance systems and infrastructure used for COVID-19 vaccinations may also be customised to improve HPV vaccination, monitor national cervical screening programmes and improve health system capacity to deliver more efficient preventive services, says The Lancet study.

PURSE SEINES COME WITH A DIVISIVE CATCH

An ongoing case in the Supreme Court, to decide whether the ban that several States have imposed on purse seine fishing is justified or not, has revealed the fault lines between small, marginal and large fishers, with the Centre and States also taking different sides on the issue.

Purse seine fishing, popular on India's western coasts, uses a large vertical net to surround dense shoals of pelagic or midwater fish in the open ocean, and then draws in the edges like tightening the cords of a drawstring purse. In some States, it is linked to concerns about the decreasing stock of small, pelagic shoaling fish such as sardines, mackerel, anchovies and trevally on the western coasts.

The scientific community argues that climatic conditions, including the El Nino phenomenon, are responsible for the declining catch of such fish in the last 10 years. However, fishermen using traditional methods have placed the blame squarely on the rise in purse seine fishing, and fear a further fall in the availability of these small fish if the ban is lifted. They have also demanded that, as the Centre has supported the lifting of the ban, it publish the expert committee report it has based its stance on.

A major concern is the dwindling availability of oil sardines, a favourite of Kerala fish eaters. In 2021, Kerala recorded a catch of just 3,297 tonne of sardines, a sharp decrease from the 3.9 lakh tonne in 2012. While traditional fish workers blame purse seines for this decrease, those using big boats with purse seines claim that it is simply a more scientific way to catch fish.

"It is the best and most efficient gear to catch small, shoaling, sea fish. The controversy against using this gear is due to jealousy in certain quarters," said Sunil Mohamed, former principal



scientist of the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI). “On the eastern coast, this method was not used earlier. A boat which uses purse seine gear will be full of fish and this may have created some jealousy and concern among others that if this continues, the fish stock availability will end very soon.” Mr. Mohamed said the advantage of the purse seine method is that it does not exploit other species, since it focuses on shoaling fishes only.

However, he added a note of caution, warning that without regulation, the concerns of traditional fish workers would not be addressed. “Of course, there should be regulation and it is up to the government to manage the fishing boats and equipment. Automatic identification systems can be established to identify the boats engaged in fishing. Purse seine gear can create concern only if it is used without any control. The number of boats sent for fishing should be decided based on the availability of fish,” he said. Asked about the declining sardine population, he insisted that it had nothing to do with a specific fishing gear. “It came down between 2014 and 2021. But in 2022, it has been revived. Fishing methods are similar worldwide, but regulation is important,” Mr. Mohamed added.

HOW TO IMPROVE HISTORICAL THINKING

A common claim by activists is that the ‘other side’ of the political spectrum is distorting history. At the 400th birth anniversary celebration of Ahom Army General Lachit Borphukan, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said, “I often hear that our history has been distorted... Maybe it’s true. But who has stopped us now from presenting a glorious history to the world?”

Reforms in textbooks

Along the lines of what Mr. Shah said, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports, headed by Vinay P. Sahasrabudhe, presented the ‘Reforms in Content and Design of School Textbooks’ to both Houses of Parliament on November 30, 2021. The circular by the Committee stated three objectives: removing references to unhistorical facts and distortions about our national heroes from textbooks; ensuring equal or proportionate references to all periods of Indian history; and highlighting the role of great historic women heroes. Post consultations, the Committee brought out 25 suggestions that related to improvement of engagement of children for learning, content of the textbooks, representation of women in history during the Indian freedom struggle along with changing the way women are traditionally represented in textbooks, use of EdTech in content delivery, promotion of scientific temper, innovation, communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. The report also focused on the need for textbooks to promote national integration, unity and constitutional values. While acknowledging the importance of the suggestions, it is equally important to observe the class and caste composition of the Committee and the fact that it did not have a single woman member.

On July 14, 2021, the Indian History Congress (IHC) released a scathing criticism of the circular. It said: “The critique of the existing textbooks implicit in the ‘Reforms’ being contemplated is not emerging from any expert body of nationally and internationally recognised historians but from a political position favoured by non-academic votaries of prejudice. The implicit critique is in fact the same as that argued in a Report brought out recently by the Public Policy Research Centre. This is reminiscent of the effort made in 2001-2002 to make deletions from existing NCERT textbooks and... replace them with books written by those with chauvinistic and communal bias. That effort too was preceded by a publication *The Enemies of Indianisation: The Children of Marx, Macaulay and Madrasa* edited by Dina Nath Batra, General Secretary of the RSS-run Vidya Bharati.”



The IHC release contested the three objectives of the circular by providing around 11 pages of tabular data detailing the distribution of content in existing history textbooks. The IHC continued, “School textbooks written for the NCERT by some of the tallest scholars in the country... were actually removed, and in their place books with a clear sectarian, majoritarian bias were introduced in 2002... The textbooks of the NCERT, with the brief exception of the books brought out in 2002, have always been authored by eminent scholars in the field of Indian history.... The books brought out in 2002 were severely critiqued in a publication of the IHC... Under widespread public criticism the books had to be withdrawn.”

In December 2019, at the IHC conference at Kannur University, there was an alleged altercation between Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan and historian Irfan Habib. The 81st session of the Indian History Congress will take place at Madras Christian College, Chennai (December 27-29, 2022). This will be closely watched.

WHAT DID INDIANS SEARCH FOR IN 2022

According to Google Trends, the most searched topic in India in 2022 was the Indian Premier League (IPL). This was also the most searched term in 2021 and 2020 in India. Globally, the IPL was the 10th most searched term this year. In fact, globally, four of the top 10 searched topics involved cricket. Three of these were bilateral series involving India — India versus England, India versus South Africa and India versus West Indies.

This is not surprising given India’s population advantage. The only other country with a comparable population — China — was out of the equation as Google is blocked in that country. Trends are measured at the country level, as places with the most search volume would always rank highest otherwise. Still, as global trends consider all Google users, data from India are bound to skew the data, as is evident from the results. For instance, in the U.S., neither the IPL nor any other cricket-related news featured in the top 10; Wordle was the most searched term in 2022. Incidentally, Wordle was the most searched item globally this year, given the huge interest it garnered in India too.

Along with the IPL, other sporting events such as the Asia Cup, the FIFA World Cup, the ICC T20 World Cup, the Commonwealth Games, and the Indian Super League (ISL) were also part of the top 10 searched items in India. These sport-related searches were confined to the days when the event was on. The IPL and the ISL had longer shelf lives compared to other sport events, given their relatively longer schedules.

Two other terms most searched in India in the first two months of 2022 were CoWIN and e-SHRAM card. CoWIN trended then as people were searching for places where they could get their COVID-19 booster doses and where their teenage children could get shots after vaccination began for 15-18-year-olds. E-SHRAM cards are issued for any unorganised worker aged between 16 and 59 years and are used to identify beneficiaries for insurance schemes and other related assistance.

The films Brahmastra: Part One — Shiva and K.G.F: Chapter 2 — were the other two terms most searched in India. The other movies which were not part of the top 10 overall searches but featured in the top 10 movie-related searches were The Kashmir Files, RRR, Kantara, Pushpa: The Rise, Vikram, Laal Singh Chaddha, Drishyam 2 and Thor: Love and Thunder.

Nupur Sharma, a former national spokesperson of the BJP; Droupadi Murmu, President; and Rishi Sunak, the U.K. Prime Minister were the most searched personalities. Lalit Modi and Sushmita Sen were also part of the list.

'What is Agneepath Scheme', 'what is NATO' and 'what is NFT' were the top searches under the 'what is' category. 'How to download vaccination certificate' and 'how to download Professional Tax Enrolment Certificates' were the top searches under the 'how to' category. Paneer pasanda, modak and chicken soup were the most searched recipes this year. 'Covid vaccines near me', 'swimming pool near me', 'water park near me' were top searches under the 'near me' category.



DreamIAS



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

IN INVERSION OF US TREASURY YIELDS, A RECESSION IS FORETOLD

As the new year approaches, there are fears of recession in many of the world's top economies, including the United States, the biggest and most consequential of all. The US does look headed for a recession — a key pointer is the inversion of US treasury yields.

What is a recession, to begin with?

A recession typically involves the overall output in an economy contracting for at least two consecutive quarters, along with job losses and reduction in overall demand. The US National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) decides whether the economy is in a recession based on its assessment of the depth, diffusion, and duration of the impact on the economy.

Sometimes, the duration may not be long but the decline could be very severe — as it happened in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Or, the depth and diffusion may be relatively less but the downturn may last long — as is expected in the United Kingdom in the wake of the economic crisis triggered by the Liz Truss-Kwasi Kwarteng mini-Budget of September 2022.

What are US treasuries?

In any economy, the safest loans are those that are given to governments — entities that will always be there, and which typically do not default on their debt. Governments need to borrow money because their tax revenues more often than not aren't enough to finance all their spending.

The instrument by which the government borrows from the market is called a government bond. In India they are called G-secs, in the UK they are called gilts, and in the US, they are called treasuries.

And what is the yield of a treasury?

Unlike a bank loan, on which the interest rate varies with time, a government bond comes with pre-determined "coupon" payment. So, the US government may "float" a 10-year bond with a face value of \$100 and coupon payment of \$5. This means, if you lend \$100 to the US government by buying this bond, you would get \$5 each year for the next 10 years plus the whole sum of \$100 at the end of 10 years. This would imply a yield of 5%.

But if for some reason one sold this bond to another investor, the yield will change depending on the price at which the bond is sold. If the price increases — say, the bond is sold for \$110 — the yield will fall because the annual return (\$5) remains the same. And if the price falls, the yield will rise.

What is the yield curve?

Governments borrow for durations ranging from 1 month to 30 years. Typically, yields are higher for longer tenures because one is lending money for longer. If the yields for different tenures of bonds are mapped, it will give an upward-sloping curve ("Normal" in the chart above).

The curves can be flat or steep depending on the money available in the market and the expected overall economic activity. When investors feel buoyant about the economy, they pull money out



of long-term bonds and put it into short-term riskier assets such as stock markets. As prices of long-term bonds fall, their yields rise — and the yield curve steepens.

What is yield inversion?

Yield inversion happens when yields for shorter duration bonds are higher than the yields on longer duration bonds. If investors suspect that the economy is heading for trouble, they will pull out money from short-term risky assets (such as stock markets) and put it in long-term bonds. This causes the prices of the long-term bonds to rise and their yields to fall.

This process first leads to flattening and eventually the inversion of the yield curve. Yield inversion has long been a reliable predictor of recession in the US — and US treasuries have been witnessing yield inversion for a while now. The spread between the yields of 10-year and 3-month treasuries has turned negative.

Is all of this unexpected?

Not entirely. In its bid to contain historically high inflation levels, the US Federal Reserve has been raising short-term interest rates to curb overall demand and economic activity. Historically, every time the Fed has tried to bring down inflation by more than two percentage points, the US has witnessed a recession.

The Fed appears determined to bring down inflation to the 2% level, but despite rapid interest rate hikes — around 425 basis points — inflation has only moderated from around 9% in July to 7% in November.

Moreover, the economy grew by over 3% in the July-September quarter and continued to create hundreds of thousands of jobs, pushing up wages and keeping unemployment at historic lows. As such, even though the Fed has now started raising rates at a slower pace, it is expected that it will keep raising rates and stay at those higher levels for longer.

The more the Fed tightens its monetary stance, the more likely it is for the US economy to fall into a recession. That is what the yield inversion is showing.

Why does this matter to India?

It matters in several ways. Rising interest rates are likely to make the US dollar even more strong against the rupee. Indian imports will become costlier as a result, and could fuel domestic inflation. Higher returns in the US may also lead to some rebalancing of the investments coming to India.

Indian exports may benefit due to a weaker rupee but a recession will dampen the demand for Indian exports. A slowdown or recession may, however, come with the silver lining of lower crude oil prices for India.

WHY THE GOVERNMENT MUST PUSH AHEAD ON FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS

After initially questioning the benefits accruing from free trade agreements India had signed over the years, the Narendra Modi government appears to have rethought its position on trade pacts. Over the course of the last year or so, the government has been actively pursuing pacts with a wide range of countries. Trade pacts have been signed with Australia and the UAE, while negotiations are ongoing with the UK and the European Union, among others. But as these talks



enter a critical phase, non-tariff issues ranging from carbon emission norms and climate action to labour and gender balance standards are increasingly coming into focus. Indian negotiators are concerned that their inclusion could provide partner countries with instruments to impose non-tariff protectionist measures, not allowing India to fully take advantage of the trade pacts.

Take, for instance, the issue of carbon emissions, which is gaining traction. Recently, the European Union reached an agreement on a carbon border adjustment mechanism which is meant to target carbon intensive products such as iron and steel, cement, aluminium and fertilisers. This is applicable from October 2023. Under the framework, levies would be imposed on imported goods on the basis of the emissions during their production process. As per the European Commission, the adjustment mechanism will “equalise the price of carbon between domestic products and imports”, and thus ensure that the EU’s climate objectives “are not undermined by production relocating to countries with less ambitious policies.” This will impose costs on Indian exporters, act as a barrier. On similar lines, manufacturers of steel in India will be at a disadvantage when compared to those in the US where the process results in lower carbon emissions.

As reported in this paper, policy makers in Delhi have raised these concerns, arguing for the need to examine these issues “cautiously”. While negotiations must surely proceed with care, they must not be derailed over these issues. The government must push ahead with these trade agreements. In fact, the domestic reform agenda must be aligned with ensuring that the benefits from these trade pacts can be maximised. A recent report that the government plans to raise import duties on “non-essential items” runs counter to its embrace of trade agreements. Moves such as these will only expose the government to the charge of being protectionist. The first two decades after 1991-92 saw a steep decline in tariff rates. The trend, however, has been reversed under the Modi government with the average applied import tariff actually rising. At a time when firms are looking to diversify away from China, pursuing a China plus one strategy, India must lower barriers to trade, seek actively to be a part of global value chains.

IS THE ECONOMY DRIVING WITH THE BRAKES ON?

The story so far:

At this time last December, India’s economy was on the cusp of a fledgling recovery from COVID-19, though the Omicron variant posed fresh speed bumps for the rebound. With oil prices escalating, commodity prices volatile and shipping disruptions hitting supply chains, the U.S. had recorded a 40-year high inflation rate in November 2021 and ripple effects were expected to flare up around the world. That Russia’s brewing tensions with Ukraine could come to a head, was a worry too. Broadly, however, economists and the government were hopeful that Indian households’ consumption spending would return to pre-pandemic normalcy in 2022 and help fuel a virtuous private investment revival spurring job creation.

Why did 2022 turn out to be a rougher storm than most anticipated?

While the Omicron wave was less fatal than the pandemic’s preceding waves, it also didn’t take as much of a toll on the economy in 2022 as the previous two years. However, some of the other fear factors at the turn of the year did materialise and ended up manifesting themselves into more shocks across the globe. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman summed up the biggest dampener when she explained to the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday why the government had sought over ₹3.25 lakh crore more for this year than it had budgeted for. “As we were preparing for the 2022-23 Budget (presented on February 1), there was a clear understanding across the globe that the



pandemic is waning and recovery measures by different countries were all probably taking us to a good road to recovery. The IMF projected that the Indian economy will grow at a high rate of 9%... But then came in late February, the Russia-Ukraine war and the complete disruption in supply chains, particularly for food and energy," she said. Amounting to 8% over the Budget expenditure estimates, the supplementary funds were sought largely for food subsidies for the poor that were initiated in the pandemic and recently extended till December 31, and an escalation in the fertilizer subsidy bill due to higher global prices.

As JP Morgan managing director and India chief economist Sajjid Chinoy explained at a CII economic policy summit last week, 2022 was expected to see a pick-up in growth as well as inflation, but by the middle of the year, there was a real concern that the global economy would slip and slide into recession thanks to supply shocks. "I would venture to say that we are ending the year with another R word, which is resilience for the global economy. Just think of what's happened in the last 12 months — we've had the strongest global inflation in 50 years around the world, we've had the most aggressive and synchronised monetary tightening cycle in 40 years, we've had the strongest U.S. dollar in 20 years for much of this year. And we've had what's less appreciated — the weakest Chinese growth in about 46 years barring the pandemic. Now, in a normal year, two of these shocks would have been enough to tip the global economy into recession, we've had four such shocks, and we are still standing." One key reason for this resilience that helped ride out an almost perfect storm is that large corporate balance sheets have become stronger on the back of record profits in the last couple of years and were able to absorb these multiple shocks better, Mr. Chinoy said.

Are we out of the woods yet and what's the outlook for 2023?

Growth expectations have fluctuated through the year as have growth rates skewed by pandemic base effects (real GDP grew 4.1% in the January to March quarter, followed by 13.5% in April to June, before halving to 6.3% between July and September). However, the Indian economy has displayed a broad resilience amid strong external headwinds thanks to a consistently growing farm sector and consumers catching up on pent-up demand for contact-intensive services that have now recovered to pre-COVID levels. The World Bank recently scaled up its 2022-23 growth estimate to 6.9%. By all accounts, however, growth is expected to be slower in the coming year (2023-24) at around 6% or slightly under.

Most developed nations are expected to enter a recession, which will dent demand for India's exports. With the Ukraine conflict far from over, fresh fears of a new COVID-19 variant spreading its wings, little hope of an immediate pause in global monetary tightening and the RBI's warning of the next financial crisis emerging from private cryptocurrencies, the risks ahead remain as heady as they were last year.

TURNING TIDE

India's goods exports rebounded from a nearly 17% dip in October to a mild 0.6% uptick in November. While the value of exports recovered to \$32 billion from \$29.8 billion in October, it is still significantly below the \$39 billion averaged between April and September. Imports growth moderated to 5.4% with the value of shipments slipping to \$55.9 billion — a level last seen in February 2022, which was followed by seven months of import bills of around \$60 billion. The merchandise trade deficit eased below \$25 billion for the first time in five months. The easing of some commodities' prices may help curb the import bill and deficit to some extent, but this could cut both ways as the value of some exports that boomed because of global price trends earlier, will



also decline. A part of the import bill dip was triggered by lower non-oil cargo, signalling slowing domestic demand, but non-oil exports' performance is a greater worry. Their share in exports growth has been shrinking since June, with the contraction accelerating for many sectors from September to November — engineering goods that drove much of India's record \$422 billion goods exports in 2021-22, contracted 11.3% while textiles fell a steeper 25%.

December's pending festive orders may still lift export numbers month-on-month, but the onset of 2023 would spell greater pressures for India's trade story, with key markets heading into a recession. Having grown 11.1% in the first eight months of 2022-23, goods exports could still fall 2.3% over the full year, a CARE Ratings research paper cautioned on Tuesday. While the World Trade Organization expects global goods trade to grow just 1% in 2023, CARE reckons India's exports may rise a meagre 1.5% in 2023-24. Services exports and remittance inflows may cushion India's current account deficit from the goods trade imbalance and restrict the economy's external vulnerabilities, but policy makers need to focus on ensuring a soft landing for factories in export-intensive sectors that are also massive employers so that the global gloom does not hit domestic sentiment. In recent weeks, the Government belatedly scrapped the export duty on steel and iron ore, that was hurting engineering exports too, and brought them under a tax refund scheme with thus-far excluded sectors like drugs and chemicals. Keeping an eye on market realities to respond deftly to emerging challenges is vital for Indian exporters to sustain through the coming turmoil and perhaps, even expand their share in the global trade pie. Vietnam, Cambodia, Bangladesh and China saw their share rise even when global trade growth itself slowed in the years before COVID-19. India too, should aspire to emerge stronger from the brewing storm.

CURRENT ACCOUNT DEFICIT WIDENS IN Q2 TO 9-YEAR HIGH OF 4.4% ON TRADE GAP

India's current account balance recorded a deficit of \$36.4 billion (or a nine-year high of 4.4% of GDP) in the quarter ended September, rising from \$18.2 billion (2.2%) in the previous quarter. Deficit for the year-earlier period came in at \$9.7 billion (1.3%), according to data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Thursday.

Underlying the current account deficit (CAD) in Q2 was the widening of the merchandise trade deficit to \$83.5 billion in Q2 from \$63 billion in April-June and an increase in net outgo under investment income, the RBI said. In the first six months to September, India recorded a CAD of 3.3% of GDP, again on the back of a sharp increase in goods trade deficit, compared with 0.2% a year earlier.

Net invisible receipts were higher in the first six months, year-on-year (y-o-y), due to higher net receipts of services and private transfers. Services exports in Q2 grew 30.2% y-o-y on rising software exports, business and travel services. Private transfer receipts, mainly representing remittances by Indians employed overseas, rose 29.7% to \$27.4 billion. Net foreign direct investment slid to \$6.4 billion from \$8.7 billion. Net foreign portfolio investment in Q2 saw higher inflows of \$6.5 billion compared with \$3.9 billion a year earlier.

'Q1 CAD revised down'

Net external commercial borrowings clocked an outflow of \$0.4 billion versus an inflow of \$4.3 billion. Non-resident deposits saw net inflow of \$2.5 billion versus net outflow of \$0.8 billion.

The CAD for the first quarter has been revised downwards from \$23.9 billion (2.8% of GDP) due to downward adjustment in Customs data, the Reserve Bank said.



A WELCOME MOVE

The Government has decided not to extend the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana, (PMGKY), a scheme that ran between April 2020 to December 2022 (except for a short period in between), and provided additional allocation of foodgrains, i.e., rice or wheat from the central pool at five kilograms a month free of cost to beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act (NFSA). PMGKY absorbed the shock of the pandemic for the extreme poor and also brought in political dividends for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in many States that had elections this year, including Uttar Pradesh in particular. While discontinuing the scheme, the Government has said that it will bear the expenses of food grains under the NFSA for 2023 and ensure free ration under the Act for the estimated 81.35 crore beneficiaries for that year. In other words, ration card holders can now avail 5 kg of wheat or rice per month for free rather than at a subsidised rate, while Antyodaya Anna Yojana cardholders will receive 35 kg of free foodgrains. As the estimated number of 81.35 crore beneficiaries is still based on Census 2011 numbers and Public Distribution System entitlements have been limited to ration card holders and quotas framed by the Union Government, some States have gone on to expand benefits to others through the NFSA and other schemes. By taking on the burden of the expenditure for this distribution, the Union government, which has estimated an additional amount of ₹2 lakh crore for the scheme, has provided limited but welcome relief in monetary terms for States.

While the expenditure numbers on food distribution and subsidy provisions seem fiscally expensive, the schemes have provided distress relief to the most needy, helped the Government control its food buffer stocks better, and also reduced wastage of procured food grains at a time when procurement figures for rice and wheat by the Food Corporation of India remain high. The PDS and the PMGKY have not only enabled basic food security but have also acted as income transfers for the poor by allowing them to buy other commodities that they could not have afforded if not for the benefits. There is, of course, the question of whether targeted distribution, including the identification of priority households and the “poorest of the poor”, has really helped the benefits reaching the deserving with concerns about diversion of foodgrains. But as rights activists have argued, the more robust solution could be a universalisation of the PDS, which has already worked well in a few States such as Tamil Nadu, as the scheme would be availed by anyone in need instead of a flawed targeting system.

LABOURED WAGES

A testy exchange in the Rajya Sabha between the Minister of State for Rural Development, Sadhvi Niranjana Jyoti, and the Trinamool Congress MP, Jawhar Sircar, on the withholding of funds for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in West Bengal laid bare a key implementation issue — wage delays. A report by the non-profit organisation LibTech India found that ₹2,744 crore was still due to workers for work done since December 26, 2021. The delay in the payment, which is contrary to what is stated in Section 3 of the NREG Act, has resulted in a drop in the number of households working under the scheme in the State — from 77 lakh during the pandemic years to 16 lakh in the current financial year. The current number falls short of the 49.25 lakh households which availed the scheme in the last pre-COVID-19 year as well. The Union Government in its response suggested that funds have been blocked only in West Bengal for “non-compliance with the directives of the Central government” and this pertains to prior fund misuse, but the Trinamool Congress government’s response is legitimate. The State has answered queries related to the misuse and the blocking of funds to workers; the fact that misuse



has reportedly covered only a fraction of the grants suggests that workers are being unduly punished.

Wage delays have been a chronic problem with MGNREGS, which, beyond being a form of insurance for the poorest rural households, was a boon during the pandemic years, giving succour not only to such households but also to migrant workers from urban areas as alternative employment. Earlier this year, the delays in funds disbursement to the States were on account of procedural delays and an overhauling of the Public Financial Management System (Finance Ministry). This should not be a problem if the Union government sets aside adequate funds at the beginning of the financial year. While an emphasis on reducing misuse is necessary — in particular, ensuring that the scheme is put into use by actually undertaking public works — the misplaced reliance on technocratic approaches has stymied its implementation. The Government has now made digital capture of MGNREGS attendance mandatory at work sites, despite issues such as the lack of technical support, the necessity to own a smartphone, and workable Internet connections at the sites not having been fully resolved. A scheme such as MGNREGS needs to evolve while keeping its core idea of a demand-driven work allocation intact. Treating it as a burden will only hurt genuine beneficiaries.

CENTRE MANDATES UNIVERSAL DIGITAL CAPTURING OF MGNREGS ATTENDANCE

The Union government, arguing for transparency and accountability in May 2021, had started a pilot project to capture attendance via a mobile application, the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS).

From May 16, 2022 capturing attendance via the app was made compulsory for all worksites with 20 or more workers. This required uploading two time-stamped and geotagged photographs of the workers.

The job fell on the mates/supervisors, who are paid only marginally more than the unskilled workers. There were widespread complaints over the lack of technical support, the necessity to own a smartphone, paying for an Internet connection, and issues with erratic Internet connectivity.

In the latest order, dated December 23, the Ministry has ordered that digitally capturing attendance is now mandatory for all worksites, regardless of the number of workers engaged, and will be applicable from January 1, 2023.

This directive comes even as many complaints and loopholes pointed out earlier by users have not been plugged yet. Siraj Dutta, who is associated with the NREGA Sangharsh Morcha in Jharkhand, points out three major problems with the new system. The app-based attendance system carries forward the problem with electronic muster rolls, which replaced the paper muster rolls and was in use before the NMMS was introduced. Here, the muster roll has to be generated based on demand and therefore, no worker can come and join at the worksite. And if out of the 10 workers on the electronic muster roll, only two turn up, usually the worksite is not opened, therefore, in a way, denying them work too.

“The second big problem is the two-time stamped photographs. Often, the workers may finish their work but are forced to return to the worksite for the second photograph,” Mr. Dutta said.

The endless conditions placed on MGNREGS workers themselves, many activists feel, is enough to dissuade them from relying on the scheme, thus failing its basic purpose. “Every time they [the



government] have brought in a technology-based solution, they claim it will remove corruption. Are they saying now that they are capturing attendance via a mobile application, there will be no corruption? These are blatant methods to reduce the spread and effectiveness of the programme,” Nikhil Dey, founder member of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, said.

CREDIT CHALLENGES

The RBI's 'Report on Trend and Progress of Banking in India', paints a picture of credit growth having rebounded smartly, with the consolidated balance sheets of Indian commercial banks showing double-digit expansion after a seven-year gap. While at first flush this would be reason for cheer, this growth came on the back of the pandemic-hit year, when economic activity including demand for loans was depressed. However, credit momentum seems to be sustaining in the current fiscal year too with loan growth logging a decade high in the first half. And in the fortnight to December 2, credit expanded 17.5% from a year earlier. Still, disappointingly, deposit growth lagged behind, increasing by only 9.9% in the period. With retail inflation and concerns about price stability eroding savers' real returns as well as confidence to save, banks have found themselves needing to redouble efforts to shore up deposits to help fund credit demand. Lenders would want to avoid finding themselves relatively short of lower-cost capital to lend, especially when the economy is facing the headwinds of a global slowdown.

With the quickening of credit growth, the RBI also urged banks to guard against loan slippages. Bank balance sheets have become healthier over the past few years thanks to the central bank's asset quality reviews, mandates for stressed assets recognition and write-offs by commercial banks, as well as loan recoveries under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code. The bank's caution is salutary as the sector cannot afford to take its eye off the bad-loans status, especially after gross non-performing assets (NPAs) — which impinge on banks' ability to lend — saw a decline from the “peak in 2017-18” to 5% in September 2022. Banks' due diligence on borrowers and solid credit appraisal will help keep NPAs under control even while credit growth helps fund capital expenditure (capex). The Chief Economic Adviser had noted this month that private capex had touched ₹3 lakh crore in the first half of the year and if the same pace were maintained, full-year figures would be the highest in the last few years. Worryingly, he had also hinted that government capex need not continue to maintain the pace so as to allow private players the space to borrow and invest. However, even given the constraints of fiscal discipline, the Government should keep the tempo up on capex as it may take a while for private capex growth to find consistency. With industrial production still on a bumpy ride, having contracted in two of the seven months, policymakers must ensure credit flow and all-round capital spending stay supportive.

LEVERAGING VOICE TECHNOLOGY TO COMBAT CYBER-FRAUD

Bank and cyber frauds in India are on the rise. According to data by the Reserve Bank of India, frauds have cost the country an estimated ₹100 crore a day over the last seven years. The frauds reported in 2021-22 were 23.69% higher than in the previous year (9,103 cases reported compared to 7,359 in 2020-21), although there was a decline in the amount involved. The main reasons for the rise in fraud include greater use of digital payments, telephone banking, and online banking services. Growing fraud also means rising losses for financial institutions and increasing cases for law enforcement to solve.

An emerging technology

One way to reduce losses is by adopting Voice Technology (VT), which encompasses voice biometrics or voice/speech recognition technology. The global adoption of smartphones has led



to a dramatic increase in biometrics for security. However, these methods are cumbersome, not entirely secure, and vulnerable to deep fakes. With banks and establishments looking for ways to reduce fraud and identity theft risks, one of the best ways to do this is through the use of voice biometrics.

An emerging technology, it uses the unique characteristics of a person's voice as identification. The technology creates a digital voiceprint and compares it to a caller's voice. Voice authentication can significantly improve security over knowledge-based authentication methods, which fraudsters have exploited to scam people. Compared to other biometrics, voice use is the cheapest technology, and does not require a reader or special device. It is also non-invasive, portable and affords remote identification. Although banks have traditionally relied on the use of passwords, passwords are the weakest link in security (81% of hacking-related breaches involve weak passwords). Unlike a password, a customer's voice is impossible to spoof or copy, and is far more challenging to hack. VT verifies a caller swiftly in seconds by analysing the caller's voice and flags suspicious calls. VT allows privacy because it does not require users to reveal personal information.

Voice biometrics can help financial institutions to ensure higher levels of protection for customers and employees. In February 2019, HSBC became the first bank to take the revolutionary leap in introducing voice recognition for mobile banking customers — telephone banking fraud cases fell by over 50%. The voice biometrics industry is growing exponentially now. Experts expect the market to reach a market size of \$3.9 billion by 2026, with a compound annual growth rate of 22.8%.

Growing applications

VT is an essential tool for forensics and law enforcement. By adopting VT, police in India can stand to gain tremendously, especially with the recent introduction of 5G. The police can leverage voice to improve investigation efficiency, identify criminals, track criminals, and better respond to and prevent crimes.

Not surprisingly, voice is finding use from criminal background checks to airport security. Face recognition technology has a high error rate and works best when the person is looking directly at the camera. Voice has a much lower error rate, and requires no eye contact. Besides, in the context of fraud, the Government needs to develop a mechanism for proper coordination between financial institutions and the police to investigate and prosecute fraudsters, as a fraud deterrent, and to maintain an extensive database of such criminals. VT has the advantage of improving user experience, reducing call handle times and call centre costs, besides ensuring high-accuracy authentication in seconds. It also has the ability to resist playback attacks. The technology is sensitive enough to detect if someone is impersonating the user or playing a recording. It can identify even if the user has a cold or a sore throat. On the downside, the technology may not be 100% fool-proof, may give false positives, and has an accuracy between 90% and 99%. But some recent systems which come with voice analytics of gender and age identification, claim 100% verification accuracy.

Voice could be an excellent tool for the Government to disburse money for various schemes and verify the proof of life of pensioners from their homes.

Voice biometrics tech is making waves in the world of fraud protection by providing an extra layer of protection for data. Although the technology is not yet perfect, the potential benefits are



significant. Once it is in place, user establishments can reap the benefits from a substantial reduction in fraud, making the technology an essential feature in the security toolkit of the future.

WHAT IS THE VIDEOCON-CHANDA KOCHHAR CASE ALL ABOUT?

The story so far:

On December 23, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) arrested private lender ICICI Bank's former Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer (MD & CEO) Chanda Kochhar along with her husband, Deepak Kochhar. This was in a case pertaining to fraudulent disbursement of loans amounting to ₹1,875 crore between 2009-11 to the Videocon group of companies, during her tenure at the helm of the private lender. The CBI also arrested Videocon promoter Venugopal Dhoot.

What is the case about?

Ms. Kochhar is accused of conspiring with her husband to abuse her powers at the helm of the private lender for extending loans to the Videocon Group. Between June 2009 and October 2011, ICICI Bank had sanctioned six high value loans to varied companies owned by Videocon. The financial transactions resulted in wrongful loss to the private lender. Further, they were in violation of the credit (extending) policy and were later deemed to be non-performing assets (NPAs) for the lender.

On August 26, 2009, the private lender sanctioned Rupee Term Loan (RTL) of ₹300 crore (of which ₹283.45 crore was eventually disbursed) to Videocon. The loan was disbursed on September 7. It was on the very next day that Mr. Dhoot transferred ₹64 crore to NuPower Renewables Ltd (NRL) managed by Mr. Kochhar.

The ₹64 crore in question, thus, is being alleged to be part of a reciprocal arrangement between Mr. Kochhar and Mr. Dhoot.

What have been the key developments?

The allegations first came to light in 2016. Back then, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) did not find anything concrete in the allegation. However, in June 2017, the accounts belonging to Videocon Industries Ltd (VIL) were deemed to be non-performing assets.

The allegations re-emerged in March 2018 following a whistle-blower complaint alleging that assets were not being correctly classified. The private lender's board initially denied any wrongdoing on part of Ms. Kochhar to shift its stance and initiate an independent probe under retired Justice B.N. Srikrishna. Ms. Kochhar was there by sent on leave pending the outcome of the investigation. She later stepped down from her position in October 2018. It was in November 2020 that the ED filed a chargesheet against the former MD and CEO. The CBI filed its FIR against Ms. Kochhar in May 2022.

What is their defence?

Arguing for his bail plea in the Bombay High Court, Mr. Kochhar's defence had stated that Videocon has been a client of the private lender since 1985. It had extended several loans and credit facilities to the group as part of their long-standing relationship. It also stated that Videocon's investment in NRL was in the nature of equity where the return "would be gathered by capital appreciation on the basis of growth of the company and valuation of its assets".

What were its broader implications?

Ratings agency Fitch stated in April 2018 that the development “raises questions over the bank’s governance and creates reputational risk”. In a separate development back then, the Serious Fraud Investigation Office (SFIO) had sought permission from the Ministry of Corporate Affairs to probe ICICI Bank about the ₹3,250 crore line of credit extended to the Videocon Group.

Fitch’s note had added the presence of the bank’s CEO on the credit committee had “created doubts over the strength of its corporate governance practices”.



DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

'DARK PATTERNS' ON THE INTERNET: HOW COMPANIES ARE TRICKING THEIR USERS

The story so far:

Some Internet-based firms have been tricking users into agreeing to certain conditions or clicking a few links. The unsuspecting users would not have accepted to such terms or clicked urls (uniform resource locator), but for the deceptive tactics deployed by tech firms. Such acceptances and clicks are flooding inboxes of the users with promotional emails they never wanted, making it hard to unsubscribe or request deletion. These are examples of “dark patterns,” also known as “deceptive patterns.”

What are dark patterns?

Such patterns are unethical user interface designs that deliberately make your Internet experience harder or even exploit you. In turn, they benefit the company or platform employing the designs.

By using dark patterns, digital platforms take away a user’s right to full information about the services they are using and their control over their browsing experience.

The term is credited to UI/UX (user interface/user experience) researcher and designer Harry Brignull, who has been working to catalogue such patterns and the companies using them since around 2010.

How do companies use dark patterns?

Social media companies and Big Tech firms such as Apple, Amazon, Skype, Facebook, LinkedIn, Microsoft, and Google use dark or deceptive patterns to downgrade the user experience to their advantage.

Amazon came under fire in the EU for its confusing, multi-step cancelling process in Amazon Prime subscription. After communicating with consumer regulators, Amazon this year made its cancellation process easier for online customers in European countries.

In social media, LinkedIn users often receive unsolicited, sponsored messages from influencers. Disabling this option is a difficult process with multiple steps that requires users to be familiar with the platform controls.

As Meta-owned Instagram pivots to video-based content to compete against TikTok, users have complained that they are being shown suggested posts they did not wish to see and that they were unable to permanently set preferences.

Another dark pattern on the application is sponsored video ads getting scattered between reels and stories users originally opted to view, tricking them for several seconds before they can see the small “sponsored” label.

Google-owned YouTube nags users to sign up for YouTube Premium with pop-ups, obscuring final seconds of a video with thumbnails of other videos— a way of disrupting what should have been an otherwise smooth user experience.



What do users stand to lose because of dark patterns?

Dark patterns endanger the experience of Internet users and make them more vulnerable to financial and data exploitation by Big Tech firms. Dark patterns confuse users, introduce online obstacles, make simple tasks time-consuming, have users sign up for unwanted services/products, and force them to pay more money or share more personal information than they intended.

In the U.S., the Federal Trade Commission [FTC] has taken note of dark patterns and the risks they pose. In a report released in September this year, the regulatory body listed over 30 dark patterns, many of which are considered standard practice across social media platforms and e-commerce sites.

These include “baseless” countdowns for online deals, conditions in fine print that add on to costs, making cancellation buttons hard to see or click, making ads appear as news reports or celebrity endorsements, auto-playing videos, forcing users to create accounts to finish a transaction, silently charging credit cards after free trials end, and using dull colours to hide information that users should know about.

In one instance, the FTC report outlined its legal action against Amazon in 2014, for a supposedly “free” children’s app that fooled its young users into making in-app purchases that their parents had to pay for.

“Once the account holder downloaded the app and children began playing the game, unbeknownst to the account holder, kids could rack up multiple charges, ranging from \$0.99 to \$99.99 each, by tapping buttons, with no account holder involvement. These purchases were disguised as play,” stated the release.

The case was settled after Amazon agreed to refund over \$70 million.

However, dark and deceptive patterns don’t just stop with laptops and smartphones. The FTC report has warned that as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) platforms and devices grow in usage, dark patterns will likely follow users to these new channels as well.

Internet users who are able to identify and recognise dark patterns in their daily lives can choose more user-friendly platforms that will respect their right to choose and privacy.

WHY THERE IS NO DIET PILL FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

Why do the hard work of overhauling an unhealthy lifestyle if one can simply pop a diet pill or, if you can afford it, get liposuction? With each year that passes, as nations, people and companies fail to implement the most obvious solution to the climate crisis — consume less, burn less and waste less — silver bullets, however unrealistic, start to look more and more attractive. Take the recent decision by the US government to research the possibilities in the controversial idea of solar geoengineering, so far seen only in science fiction works such as the Neal Stephenson novel Terminal Shock. The plan involves shooting reflective particles into the stratosphere to deflect the rays of the sun and help bring down terrestrial temperatures.

The last time such a thing happened was in 1991, when the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines brought about a “volcanic winter”, with global temperatures cooling by about 0.4 degree Celsius. That at least one government is seriously considering something that, so far, was



done by volcanoes is perhaps the clearest illustration of the desperate times the planet is in. It can only be hoped that the inevitable knock-on effects of tampering with the earth's system are seriously considered. These, as history shows, are likely to be considerable: The 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia led to the "year without summer" in Europe, worldwide harvest failures and food riots.

Perhaps it is possible for human intervention to stave off the disaster that, right now, seems inevitable. On the other hand, believing in such a possibility betrays a hubris of the kind that led to Icarus's fall. The fantasy of a planet-saving technological intervention is, no doubt, comforting, but the best solution may be to go on a consumption diet.

SCIENTISTS FREEZE GREAT BARRIER REEF CORAL IN WORLD-FIRST TRIAL

Scientists working on Australia's Great Barrier Reef have successfully trialled a new method for freezing and storing coral larvae they say could eventually help rewild reefs threatened by climate change.

Scientists are scrambling to protect coral reefs as rising ocean temperatures destabilise delicate ecosystems. The Great Barrier Reef has suffered four bleaching events in the last seven years, including the first ever bleach during a La Nina phenomenon, which typically brings cooler temperatures.

Preserving corals

Cryogenically, frozen coral can be stored and later reintroduced to the wild but the current process requires sophisticated equipment including lasers. Scientists say a new lightweight "cryomesh" can be manufactured cheaply and better preserves coral.

In a December lab trial, the world's first with Great Barrier Reef coral, scientists used the cryomesh to freeze coral larvae at the Australian Institute of Marine Sciences (AIMS). The coral had been collected from the reef for the trial, which coincided with the brief annual spawning window. "If we can secure the biodiversity of coral... then we will have tools for the future to really help restore the reefs and this technology for coral reefs in the future is a real game-changer," said Mary Hagedorn, Senior Research Scientist at the Smithsonian National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute.

The cryomesh was previously trialled on smaller and larger varieties of the Hawaiian corals. A trial on the larger variety failed. Trials are continuing with larger varieties of Great Barrier Reef coral.

Mesh technology

The mesh technology, which will help store coral larvae at -196°C (-320.8°F), was devised by a team from the University of Minnesota's College of Science and Engineering, including Dr. Zongqi Guo, a postdoctoral associate, and Professor John C. Bischof.

DIABETES REMISSION THROUGH INTERMITTENT, CALORIE-RESTRICTED DIET

A small randomised, control trial with intermittent calorie-restricted diet carried out in people with type-2 diabetes was able to achieve remission in nearly 50% of the participants in the intervention group at the end of three months of follow-up after the trial. The trial lasted for three months. Even at 12 months of follow-up, remission was seen in 44% of the participants. All



participants who achieved remission had completely stopped taking any drug to control blood sugar, and the remission lasted at least one year.

Even with the more stringent criteria for complete remission, which describes a return to normal measures of glucose metabolism (HbA1c in the normal range, and fasting blood glucose of 100 mg/dL) of at least one year duration in the absence of any anti-diabetic drugs, 33.3% (12/36) of participants in the intervention group achieved complete remission.

While many studies have validated the effectiveness and benefits of intermittent fasting in people with type-2 diabetes, no clinical trials have so far investigated the effectiveness of intermittent fasting in achieving remission.

For the trial, remission was defined as stable HbA1c levels less than 6.5% (48 mmol/mol) after discontinuing anti-diabetic medications for at least three months. During the trial, dosage of anti-diabetic medications was adjusted depending on blood glucose levels.

The authors had found that participants who were prescribed fewer anti-diabetics drugs were more likely to achieve diabetes remission than those taking more drugs to control blood sugar. However, duration of type-2 diabetes did not influence diabetes remission in participants.

THE EMERGINGOMICRON SUBLINEAGES

The story so far:

Since the initial outbreak in 2019 in Wuhan, China, the world has seen multiple repeated waves of COVID-19 infections over the past few years, largely driven by the emerging variants of concern (VOCs) of the causative virus, SARS-CoV-2. However, until recently, China remained successful in containing the spread of the disease owing to its zealous “zero-COVID” policy, which included mass quarantines, lockdowns, and early vaccination programmes. As a result of the abrupt lifting of the policy, the country is now facing a surge of COVID-19 cases.

What are the SARS-CoV-2 lineages circulating in China?

Over the course of the pandemic, genome sequencing of the virus and rapid sharing of data has been key to tracking the evolution of SARS-CoV-2 and early identification of emerging variants. SARS-CoV-2 sequencing data previously submitted from China to GISAID, a globally accessible repository of SARS-CoV-2 genome sequences, shows that over the months, the country has seen isolated cases linked to multiple variants of the virus seen previously. These include Delta and its sublineages in 2021, and Omicron and its sublineages in 2022. Only 30 sequences of SARS-CoV-2 collected between October-December 2022 are available on GISAID from China. These belong to 14 different lineages of SARS-CoV-2, all of which are Omicron sublineages, including BA.5.2, BQ.1.1, BF.7, BF.5, BA.2.75 and the recombinant lineage XBB.

Of the 14 genomes from China available on GISAID for the month of December, two genomes each belong to the Omicron sublineages BF.7, BF.5 and BA.2.75, while one genome belongs to the recombinant lineage XBB. Lineages BF5 and BF.7 of SARS-CoV-2, while first detected in January 2022 in France, have also been previously detected in India in May and July 2022, respectively, while lineage BA.2.75 was first detected in India as early as December 2021. The recombinant lineage XBB has also been previously detected in early 2021 in multiple countries in Asia, including India and Singapore. With the limited number of genomes available corresponding to the ongoing outbreak, we are still in the dark about the variants driving the wave in China.



Which Omicron sublineages are under monitoring?

Owing to the large-scale spread of Omicron and its sublineages across the world, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has added another category of variants referred to as 'Omicron subvariants under monitoring'.

Currently, the Omicron subvariants being monitored under this category include BA.2.75, BA.4.6, XBB, BA.2.3.20 and sublineages of BA.5 including BF.7 and BQ.1. While the first sample belonging to lineage BA.4.6 dates back to December 2021, lineage BA.2.3.20 was detected in multiple countries recently in August 2022.

What is the XBB lineage?

The SARS-CoV-2 virus has the potential to evolve by exchanging large fragments of the genome, called recombination. First detected in January 2022, the XBB lineage of SARS-CoV-2 resulted from recombinant between Omicron sublineages BA.2.10.1 and BA.2.75. The lineage was largely detected in genomes from Singapore and India, with the largest number of genomes on GISAID belonging to the U.S. and India. Although detected in over 30 countries, there has been no observed association of the lineage with a sustained increase in new cases in India but has become now the dominant variant in many countries seeing an uptick in infections. Monitoring the prevalence of XBB and its sublineages will therefore be essential in the days to come.

With waning immunity to vaccination and prior Omicron waves leading to reinfections, genomic surveillance will be the key to understanding the continuing evolution of Omicron. Being immune-naive to Omicron, an overwhelming surge of cases in a populous country such as China will not only cause massive loss to life but will also allow the virus to mutate with the potential to create new variants. Wide-ranging efforts are thus urgently required to monitor the COVID-19 situation in China and other countries, including genomic surveillance and the use of time-tested methods with significant scientific evidence.

FOOTBALL'S GOD, PELE, NO MORE

It's unimaginable now, but Brazil were once underdogs in football — second best to Uruguay or Argentina. And it had taken the 17-year-old Pele's bursts of brilliance and dogged inspiration drawn from watching his father weep when Brazil lost the World Cup final, to yank his country out of a sulking sea of under-confidence. After 1958, Pele took Brazil and the blacks and the favela poor out of those miserable times forever. His beautiful game offered them a sense of pride that merely being an economic superpower could never bestow.

The pull of Pele — who died on Thursday at 82 — wasn't bound by geography. He once paused hostilities in the Nigerian Civil war by getting the federal troops' chief to open up a bridge so that rebel troops could come watch him play in Lagos. Maybe the greatest Pele legacy was his aura, in a world before not just social media, but even television and the PR machinery. Millions knew of his genius through radio commentary. Then in 1970 millions more bought new TV sets to see "with their own eyes" how magic could unfold. At that World Cup, Pele brought to Latin America an everlasting legacy of being beautiful and creative, which can never be shaken off.

Not everyone liked his politics, but even his detractors dug up reasons to adore his football. Brazil's president elect Lula da Silva who watched Pele play live at Pacaembu and Morumbi would correct himself saying that he didn't just watch Pele, but saw him give a show, even when Santos were thrashing Lula's beloved club, Corinthians.