



# CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

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DREAMIAS



## INTERNATIONAL

### AFTER TWO DOWNINGS, U.S. JET SHOOTS DOWN NEW MYSTERY 'OBJECT' OVER CANADA

A U.S. fighter jet shot down an unidentified object over Canada on Saturday, the second such incident in North American skies since the dramatic downing of a suspected Chinese spy balloon a week ago. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said a joint U.S.-Canadian military operation led to the takedown of the object, the latest in a series of mysterious air intrusions.

In a sign of jitters over possible intrusions, the Northern Command said the U.S. fighter jets took to the skies but “did not identify any object to correlate to the radar hits.” Skies were then reopened to commercial air traffic.

#### 'Cylindrical object'

The object shot down in the Yukon was “small, cylindrical” in shape, said Canada’s Defence Minister, Anita Anand. “The object was flying at an altitude of approximately 40,000 feet, had unlawfully entered Canadian airspace, and posed a reasonable threat to the safety of civilian flight,” Ms. Anand told reporters.

Mr. Trudeau said Canadian forces in the Yukon “will now recover and analyse the wreckage of the object.” He said he spoke with U.S. President Joe Biden over the latest incursion, while Ms. Anand also said she spoke with U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin.

The new incursions into Alaska and the Yukon came after the United States said on Wednesday that suspected Chinese spy balloons like the one it shot down on February 4 were part of a “fleet” that has spanned five continents. NATO also voiced concern. Ms. Anand, however, said “it would not be prudent for me to speculate on the origins of the object at this time.”

### US, CHINA TRADE SPYING CHARGES: WHY ARE BALLOONS USUALLY SENT INTO AIR, CAN THEY BE USED FOR SURVEILLANCE?

The United States and China are currently involved in an extraordinary standoff over allegations of espionage through high-altitude balloons. Last week, the US downed three unidentified ‘objects’ flying over its airspace and that of Canada. The downed objects have not yet been recovered, so it is not clear whether these were balloons.

But the first incident, on February 4, involved a Chinese balloon that Beijing claimed was meant for research purposes and was accidentally blown off course by wind. The US has also claimed that Chinese balloons entered its airspace on at least four earlier occasions, remaining undetected at that time. China, in turn, has accused the US of sending surveillance balloons over its airspace at least 10 times since last year.

#### High-altitude balloons

Balloons have been in frequent use for several decades now, though the first uses go back at least 200 years. They are used mainly for scientific purposes but increasingly for tourism and joy rides, surveillance, and disaster relief and rescue.

The bigger balloons can be as large as a football stadium, go up to 40-50 km from the ground, and carry a few thousand kilograms of payloads. Most of these are built of thin sheets of polyethylene,



like the common plastic bags, and are filled mostly with helium gas. Balloons can stay in flight from anywhere between a few hours to a couple of months. Those that are meant to remain in air for long and go higher up in the atmosphere are made of more advanced materials for increased sturdiness.

Balloons typically have a basket attached to them, called gondolas, that carry instruments or human beings. In unmanned flights, the gondolas are also attached to a parachute. Once the job of the balloon is done, a device in the gondola is triggered to snap its ties with the balloon as well as create a rupture in the fabric of the balloon. With the help of the parachute, the gondola then glides down to the earth, followed by the ruptured balloon. The possible landing zone is calculated ahead of the flight based on weather conditions.

### Scientific missions

The most common use of balloons is in scientific research. In a way, balloons equipped with instruments were able to perform the functions of a satellite before the space age dawned. Even in the times of advanced satellites, there are situations in which balloons are considered more suitable. Weather agencies routinely use balloons to make measurements – of air temperature, pressure, wind speed and direction, aerosol concentrations.

Because of the high altitudes that today's giant balloons can attain, they are considered useful for astrophysicists and even space agencies. These are relatively clear spaces, much above the heights at which airplanes fly and far below the nearest orbits, about 200 km from earth, where satellites are placed. Very often, they offer better opportunities to observe specific parts of the earth, and are also thousands of times cheaper than satellites. Moreover, because the balloons are brought down after their job is done, the instruments used are recoverable and reusable.

NASA has a full-fledged balloon programme that does four-five launches every year. Several universities and research institutions also use balloons for research work.

Balloon-based experiments have resulted in at least two Nobel prizes for Physics, in 1936 and 2006.

### Surveillance

High-altitude balloons are tempting vehicles for espionage operations, though their use is not known to be very common. Drones and satellites are used more frequently, and spy planes have been in use since World War I. But here again, balloons have certain advantages. They can hover over an area for a prolonged time. Big balloons can carry a few thousand kilograms of payload, which means they can be packed with spying instruments.

The biggest advantage is the greater prospect of their remaining undetected. Because of their relatively slow movement, balloons are mostly flagged as birds by defence radars, thus escaping attention. In fact, the US has now said it will recalibrate its radar systems to detect slow-moving objects.

Balloons lack sophisticated navigation systems of an aircraft, drone or satellite, being largely on the mercy of wind speed and direction. But the balloon that was downed on February 4 seemed to have a solar panel attached to it, which has given rise to the possibility of it powering an onboard propulsion device.



## Ballooning in India

Scientific balloons have been used in India for more than 70 years, the first one having been sent in 1948 by Homi Bhabha for cosmic ray research. The Mumbai-based Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) started balloon fabrication work in the 1950s, and several balloon flights were launched from Mumbai and Hyderabad.

Sometimes later, in 1969, the TIFR opened a full-fledged Balloon Facility in Hyderabad, which remains India's largest such facility today. Scientists from different research institutions have used it to launch more than 500 flights till now. It is regularly used by the space institutions under ISRO, and weather research institutions like the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology in Pune.

Institutions like the Bengaluru-based Indian Institute of Astrophysics and Hyderabad's Osmania University, as well as some private educational institutions, also have balloon programmes.

## THOUSANDS OF ISRAELIS PROTEST PROPOSED JUDICIAL REFORMS: WHAT DOES THE GOVT WANT TO CHANGE, AND WHY?

Around 100,000 Israelis from across the country took to the streets outside their Parliament in Jerusalem on Monday (February 13), to protest against the sweeping judicial reform plans introduced by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government, according to The New York Times.

The protestors, who were carrying Israeli flags, megaphones and homemade banners, reached the spot by train and in convoys of buses and cars. They raised slogans in support of democracy, freedom and judicial independence. Monday's protests came just a day after President Isaac Herzog gave a televised speech warning that the country was "on the brink of constitutional and social collapse". He urged the lawmakers to reach a compromise regarding the issue.

### What triggered the protests in Israel?

According to The Guardian, protests in Israel have been a weekly fixture on Saturday evenings ever since Netanyahu and his far-right allies came to power in December 2022. However, they intensified after Justice Minister Yariv Levin, a close confidant of Netanyahu, unveiled the ruling coalition's proposal to overhaul the country's legal system in the first week of January.

The plan includes four major changes. First, the government wants to enable the 120-member parliament, or Knesset, to override any Supreme Court judgement by a simple majority of 61 votes unless those rulings are unanimous. Second, it also seeks to scrap the test of "reasonability" the apex court has previously used to strike out executive practices.

Apart from this, Levin proposed a law that would give a greater role to lawmakers in the appointment of Supreme Court judges. As of now, a committee comprising professionals, justices and lawmakers elevate judges to the top court. The new change would provide "lawmakers a majority in the committee, with most coming from the right-wing and religiously conservative ruling coalition", as per a report by Associated Press.

Also, Levin wants to allow ministers to choose their own legal advisors instead of using independent professionals.

On Monday, even as tens of thousands of protestors gathered on the streets, chaos ensued inside the Israeli Parliament after a government-controlled committee voted to advance part of the

**3<sup>RD</sup> FLOOR AND 4<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR**



proposed legislation. According to the NYT report, opposition leaders chanted slogans against the decision and “some of them clambered over tables to confront the committee chair, Simcha Rothman, a government lawmaker.”

It also added that Monday’s committee vote would be followed by intense debates on the floor of Parliament, which is one of the first steps towards turning the proposal into law in the coming months.

#### **Why do Netanyahu and his allies want to change the working of the judiciary?**

Conservatives and the right wing in Israel have for a long time seen the judiciary as a left-leaning impediment to its legislative agenda. Moreover, Netanyahu’s coalition government has claimed that Israelis have lost faith in the legal system and that its reform plans would restore power to elected representatives instead of “interventionist judges”.

Apart from this, the government seeks to use the power to override the Supreme Court judgements in order to get rid of the court’s “rulings outlawing Israeli outposts on private Palestinian land” and curtail social reforms, including those that would impact the LGBTQ community”, according to AP.

Experts also suggest that the proposed reforms in the judiciary might be used by the ruling parties to influence Netanyahu’s corruption trial, which is currently being overseen by Israel’s Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara. Although the changes wouldn’t directly impact the ongoing court case, many fear it is just the beginning and the government would later alter the laws to exonerate Netanyahu.

These concerns aren’t unfounded as last year, during the election campaigning, Netanyahu’s allies floated the idea of restricting the attorney general’s power by dividing the post into three separate jobs while ensuring that at least two of the positions are political appointments.

As of now, the attorney general is nominated by the government and must get approval from a professional committee that comprises former justice officials and others. Notably, Baharav-Miara was appointed during the tenure of the previous government, led by current Opposition leader Yair Lapid.

#### **Why are so many leaders warning of violence?**

President Herzog isn’t the only one to indicate the possibility of violence over the proposed reforms. On Monday, Lapid at a press conference warned that the legislature “threatens to destroy the country at breakneck speed”, The Times of Israel reported. “If this legislation passes, the democratic chapter in the life of the state will end,” he said. Former defence minister Benny Gantz has also warned of civil war.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu has accused his critics of “taking the country toward anarchy.” He said, “Most citizens of Israel don’t want anarchy. They want discourse that is focused, and, in the end, they want unity.”

Several other political leaders have also raised concerns regarding the brewing tension within the country. Opinion polls have suggested that Israeli society is deeply divided about the proposed reforms in the judiciary. The NYT said, “Roughly 44 per cent of Israelis support the judicial overhaul and 41 per cent oppose it, according to a recent poll by the Jewish People Policy Institute, a Jerusalem-based research group.”



Experts suggest that the protests coupled with the uptick in violence in Jerusalem and the West Bank — 47 Palestinians and 10 Israelis have been killed so far this year — might lead to further deterioration of law and order in the country.

With a ruling government that includes far-right parties, ultra-orthodox Jewish leaders and controversial figures like Itamar Ben-Gvir — he was recently criticised for visiting the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, a disputed holy site, in Jerusalem — human rights activists point out that tensions between the Palestinian minority, which forms about 20 per cent of the wider population, and Israeli nationalists might escalate.

According to a report by NYT, in almost two months of the tenure of the new government, “Israeli and Palestinians have already experienced one of their region’s most violent phases, outside a full-scale war, in years”.

## WHY WERE THE TURKEY EARTHQUAKES SO DEADLY?

### **The story so far:**

Two large earthquakes, one of magnitude 7.8 and closely followed by a magnitude 7.5, hit south-eastern Turkey, claiming at least 17,000 lives and counting, wreaking considerable damage in Turkey as well as Syria. Nearly 200 aftershocks have followed with earthquakes of magnitude 6 being reported in the region three days after the first tremblor.

### **What causes earthquakes?**

The earth’s crust is made up of roughly 15 massive segmented chunky slabs called tectonic plates which are constantly in motion. The land on which buildings are built rests on these plates. The plates continually collide, push and grate against each other and the meeting points of these plates are made up of a series of ‘faults.’

The pent up energy from the nestling plates, along faultlines, is often released when an imbalance in pressure causes rocks on either side of the fault to re-adjust. One set of rocks rising up relative to the other is a ‘normal’ fault, one sliding down relative to the other is a ‘reverse’ fault.

When they grate, or move past one another, it’s a ‘strike-slip.’ The energy released travels as waves that cause the ground to shake.

### **What kind of earthquake occurred in Turkey and Syria?**

Turkey and Syria lie at the confluence of three plates — the Arabian Plate, the Anatolian Plate and the Eurasian Plate, making the region an extremely seismically active zone. The Arabian Plate is inching north into Europe, causing the Anatolian Plate (which Turkey sits on) to be pushed out west. The bulk of Turkey sits on the Anatolian Plate between two major faults: the North Anatolian Fault and the East Anatolian Fault.

Geologists say that the earthquakes were from a ‘strike-slip’ which is typical of the earthquakes in the region.

### **Why were these earthquakes so devastating and deadly?**

As this region hosts many fault systems, there are many earthquakes being recorded in the region. Only those that result in a release of energy above a certain threshold are captured by



seismological instruments. At magnitude 7.8, the February 6 event is much bigger than the ones the area has experienced before. The fault system runs along nearly 190 km which is why the impact of the earthquakes was so far-ranging.

The second earthquake, of 7.5 magnitude, occurred further to the north on a different but adjacent fault system called the Sürgü Fault. The magnitudes of these earthquakes suggest that there will be several aftershocks that can be registered in a wide radius and reports of shakes from as far away as Cairo (950 km) and Istanbul (815 km) away have been reported.

#### **Are there similarities to earthquakes in India? Can energy from latent pressure be built up over the years?**

The Indian Plate, colliding into the Eurasian plate and tilting upwards, created the Himalayas. The most common type of earthquake in the Himalayan region is due to reverse faults because of the compressive forces between the two plates, says Suvrat Kher, a Pune-based geologist. "However, whether it's strike-slip or a thrust, the waves generated can be as powerful." Scientists have longed warned of a massive, overdue earthquake in the Garhwal-Kumaon range here because of what is known about the pattern of quakes in the region.

Based on the amount of 'slip' (or movement) that is observed in an earthquake and measurements of the amount of 'strain' that accumulates every year, scientists can deduce the latent pressure that's building up along a fault has been released. "We don't have very accurate records that date back, say a thousand years, on 7+ magnitude earthquakes. The records of the last 300 or so years suggest that those that have occurred haven't released all the pent-up energy and that's why we think a major one — maybe even an 8 magnitude one — is overdue. However predicting the day it will occur is beyond our ken now," said V.K. Gahlaut, seismologist and professor at the National Geophysical Research Institute (NGRI), Hyderabad.

In the Turkey-Syria earthquakes, energy from nearly 300 years of accumulated strain was released, he added.

#### **How much does the magnitude of earthquakes correlate to the damage they inflict?**

It is only broadly true that the magnitude of earthquakes corresponds to death and devastation. Chile, a country with a long history of devastating earthquakes (over 9), is considered to be a model for earthquake preparedness.

Despite experiencing earthquakes with magnitudes over 8 in 2014 and 2015 casualties are extremely minimal due to years of strictly enforcing building codes. This despite being a much poorer country than Japan, also known for its experience in earthquake-proofing structures.

The 9-magnitude earthquake that caused a tsunami and a radiation leak in the nuclear power plant in the country's Fukushima prefecture in 2011, didn't damage the stability of the structure, said Mr. Gahlaut. "Just as the energy released exponentially rises in a single step of the scale (Moment Magnitude), the cost of earthquake-proofing too rises exponentially. On the other hand, if structures are built on a fault line, then no amount of engineering can save them."

A lack of enforcement of building codes in Turkey and the timing of the earthquake in the early morning are believed to be major factors for the death and devastation inflicted. "It's a bit like India where we have lots of rules (on building codes) but there is limited enforcement. The 1993 Latur earthquake for instance was a little over 6 magnitude but caused enormous damage because building codes are not enforceable there," said Mr. Kher.



## TURKEY, INDIA AND JULIE, THE RESCUE DOG

Amidst the heartbreak of loss and death, sudden miracles keep hope alive in the search and rescue teams currently engaged in earthquake-hit Turkey. One such miracle was the discovery of a six-year-old girl, alive, in Noordagi, Turkey, 80 hours after a series of earthquakes, beginning with a massive one on February 6 which measured 7.8 on the Richter Scale, devastated the region last week. For the India's National Disaster Response Force team that was deployed in the city as part of Operation Dost, the girl's successful rescue was the "crowning moment" of their efforts, made possible by Julie, a six-year-old labrador.

Julie is one of the four dogs accompanying the 151 NDRF personnel of Operation Dost in Turkey. It was her bark that alerted the team to the presence of six-year-old Beren under the rubble. Dogs like her are specially trained to sniff out live human presence under massive piles of rubble as well as find the dead. NDRF's dogs have been instrumental in several rescues around the country, when buildings or other structures have collapsed and in fires, and were also used in Nepal after it was hit by a massive earthquake in 2015. In Turkey, dog teams from around the world have been flown in to help, including from Mexico, whose specialised canine response team, used for operations in the central American earthquake-prone zone, shot to international fame thanks to its work after the 2017 Puebla earthquake.

Dogs are key to the success of rescue operations such as the one going on in Turkey, especially as the hours pass and hopes of finding people alive in the rubble grow dimmer. As a tweet by NDRF put it, having a dog "will bless you with many of the happiest days of your life" — and it will also be a blessing on "one of the worst".

## CYCLICAL TROUBLES

After 10 days of talks with the Pakistan government, an IMF delegation left Islamabad on February 9 without a concluding statement either on its review of an existing \$7 billion loan programme or on a fresh tranche of loans to help the distressed economy. The Shehbaz Sharif-led government insisted that this was standard process and that the country would expect a loan tranche after the IMF's completed its internal process were complete but the desperation was also evident in the government reportedly agreeing to fresh taxes, reducing subsidies and increasing levies on fuel consumption to meet the IMF's expectations. Economic distress is deepening — power blackouts persist even in urban areas, annual inflation was at 27.5% in January (its highest since 1975), the Pakistani rupee has fallen to nearly 270 a dollar and forex reserves have fallen below \$3 billion, the lowest since February 2014, threatening a balance of payments crisis. The effect of last year's debilitating floods continues to weigh on the economy with thousands still homeless, agricultural land destroyed and many people without adequate food. The perilous state of the economy explains the desperation for yet another IMF bailout, which would be the sixth such facility the agency extended since 2000, and which seems inevitable as this would stave off the balance of payments issues, with complementary support from traditional allies in West Asia and also China.

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the floods notwithstanding, the cyclical nature of the economic issues and the country's repeated reliance on IMF packages during crises point to a failure of governance. While import dependency, low export competitiveness and poor fiscal management are proximate reasons for the recurring crisis in a shock vulnerable economy, it must also be said that this is an indirect outcome of the absence of an unrestrained run of power for civilian democracy in a country where the military has a preponderant role. With elections due





later this year, little trust remaining between the key political parties and the military seeking to meddle in the political process, things do not forebode too well for the country. Unless the governance structures refocus themselves to addressing long-term structural weaknesses in the economy and find ways to improve relations with neighbours such as India, the cyclicity of the economic problems will remain. But for that to happen, the military establishment has to take a back seat: a bleak prospect in the medium term.

## HOW LTTE CHIEF PRABHAKARAN DIED: STORY OF THE FINAL DAYS OF THE SRI LANKAN CIVIL WAR

On February 13, Tamil nationalist leader P Nedumaran claimed that Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of the Sri Lankan Tamil separatist group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was still alive, and would “announce his next plan (to liberate) Tamil Eelam very soon, himself”.

The Sri Lankan army had announced Prabhakaran’s death on May 18, 2009, as the three-decade Sri Lankan civil war ended in an orgy of violence in the rebel-held territories in the north and east of the island.

The LTTE had put up a final stand in Mullaitivu, a small fishing settlement in Sri Lanka’s Northern Province. The death of Prabhakaran brought the war to an end, and also effectively signalled the end of the LTTE, which had been militarily annihilated and left leaderless.

### **What happened in the final days of the Sri Lankan civil war, ending with Prabhakaran’s death?**

#### **The beginning of the end**

In February 2002, the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE entered into a ceasefire brokered by Norway. However, by 2006, the truce was dead, with each side accusing the other of not sticking to the terms of the ceasefire.

While the LTTE carried out repeated guerilla attacks and suicide missions, the Sri Lankan army pushed deeper into the rebels’ eastern territories and then to the north.

In January 2008, the government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa formally announced the annulment of the ceasefire agreement after a bus carrying government soldiers to a military hospital in Colombo was targeted in a claymore mine attack.

Over the following year, the Sri Lankan forces pushed northwards, finally capturing Kilinochchi, the de facto administrative capital of the Tigers, in January 2009. Except for limited counter-attacks in Jaffna, the LTTE was not able to mount a counter-offensive.

Prabhakaran is believed to have told his Intelligence Chief Pottu Amman at the time that “75 per cent of the LTTE’s strength had gone downstream and they would have to hold on till the international community could stop the war”, defence analyst Ashok K Mehta wrote in a 2010 paper (Sri Lanka’s Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won).

#### **Last stand at Mullaitivu**

By April 2009, the Tigers were boxed into an 8-km sliver of the coast, along with some civilians, in Mullaitivu. Under international pressure, specifically from India which at the time was in the middle of a Lok Sabha election, the Sri Lankan government announced the end to the use of heavy weapons, including aircraft and aerial weapons. The area was designated as the ‘No Fire Zone’.



But this provided little relief to the LTTE. The Sri Lankan forces had blockaded the rebels from land and sea. “By May 11, the conflict zone was redesignated as the New Safety Zone (NSZ) and shrunk to 1.5 sq km with 700 Tigers and 50,000 civilians”, Mehta wrote. For the army, this was an internal hostage crisis – the Tigers were forcibly holding thousands of civilians with themselves, using them as human shields.

The LTTE was out of options. While the Sri Lankan government believed that the LTTE fighters might “resort to mass suicide”, Prabhakaran himself hoped to negotiate a ceasefire. When the government rejected offers of a negotiated truce, a daring escape plan was formulated.

According to Mehta, “The impossible escape plan had three phases: in the first phase, a group led by Prabhakaran would cross the Nanthikadal lagoon, and disperse in three groups in the east; in the second phase, a group led by B Nadesan was to negotiate a surrender for the sick and wounded; and in the third, a rearguard action was to be led by Prabhakaran’s son Charles Antony.”

However, less than 24 hours after the rebels launched their final salvo, the government forces had secured a swift and complete victory: not a single Tiger was left alive, even those waving white flags from the beach in which they were cornered. In the aftermath of the massacre, the Sri Lankan government came under heavy criticism for human rights abuses and for using heavy artillery in the NSZ.

#### **The death of Prabhakaran**

With the international media kept out of the conflict zone, several versions emerged of Prabhakaran’s death. The army claimed that he was killed as he tried to escape with a band of followers in an armour-plated van, with more rebel commanders accompanying them in a bus. After a two-hour exchange of fire, the Sri Lankan troops fired a rocket that hit the van, killing the rebel leader. Some versions of this story state that he was in an ambulance instead of a van.

Another version claimed that Prabhakaran was killed as he tried to break the blockade of the Lankan forces – and died fighting with his men. One version also claimed that Prabhakaran died by suicide. Sri Lankan Tamil journalist DBS Jeyaraj wrote in 2021, “Prabhakaran’s body was discovered before dawn on Tuesday. The bodies of six bodyguards were found nearby. All indications were that Prabhakaran had committed suicide by placing a gun inside his mouth and firing upwards.”

Yet another version claims that Prabhakaran was captured by the army and then executed, with the single bullet injury to his temple cited as evidence. The University Teachers for Human Rights-Jaffna (UTHR-J), a Jaffna-based human rights group wrote in a special report that “Prabhakaran was tortured probably at Division 53 HQ in the presence of a Tamil government politician and a general”, before being executed, The Indian Express reported in 2009. The Sri Lankan government denied this account.

P Nedumaran’s recent claims have renewed speculation surrounding the circumstances of Prabhakaran’s death. The Sri Lankan forces had at the time released a picture of the dead rebel leader, and had claimed to have confirmed his identity with a DNA test.



## NATION

### THE PROTEST TEST IN INDIA-IRAN TIES

The cancellation of Iran foreign minister's visit to Delhi, where he was scheduled to speak at a flagship foreign policy event organised by a private think-tank, as reported by The Indian Express, shows that there is no shortage of thin-skinned leaders in the world. The more authoritarian, thinner the skin, it would seem. Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, who was to participate in the Ministry of External Affairs partnered Raisina Dialogue, scrapped his visit because of a two-second video included in promotional material for the event that showed Iranian women cutting their hair during a non-violent protest that began last September. When he accepted the invitation for what is an annual free exchange of ideas between government leaders, and foreign and security policy wonks from across the world, Abdollahian would have surely factored in the likelihood of being questioned about this unprecedented feminist mobilisation that continues to roil Iran to this day despite extreme steps by Tehran to suppress it.

Delhi has been quiet about the protests so far. But at the UN Human Rights Council session last November, India was one of 16 countries that abstained from voting on a resolution for a fact-finding mission on human rights violations committed by the Iranian regime as it tried to suppress the protests. An abstention can be interpreted in many ways, but the diplomatic bottomline is that India did not vote against the resolution — it was eventually adopted — the first sign that Delhi and Tehran were not on the same page on this issue. The refusal by the event organisers to pull the video as demanded by the Iranian foreign ministry is yet another push back by Delhi.

Diplomacy works in different ways. Despite their strategic partnership, India-Iran relations have had their share of difficulties, including the 2019 reimposition of sanctions against Tehran by the Trump administration, that saw Delhi end a long standing energy relationship with the country, unlike how it is continuing to do business with Russia despite the sanctions on Moscow in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine. India's proximity to the US and Iran's increasing proximity to China have also been a challenge to ties. Last summer, Tehran was among the Islamic capitals that reacted strongly during the Nupur Sharma blasphemy row. Delhi was relieved that Abdollahian did not cancel a scheduled visit at the time. But Iran's read out of his meeting with National Security Adviser A K Doval caused some red faces in the government. In spite of all this, the strategic convergence between the two on issues such as connectivity through Chabahar, terrorism in the region and Afghanistan, not to speak of a "millennial" bond, has helped the two sides focus on the big picture, and move past their differences, as they will surely do this time too.

### EXPRESS VIEW ON KING CHARLES-CAMILLA CORONATION: THE KOHINOOR DISTRACTION

There is a phrase in Hindi that perhaps best describes the mild hypocrisy around Queen Consort Camilla's decision not to wear the Kohinoor diamond at her coronation on May 6. "Aankh ki sharam" means, in essence, both parties in a given situation choose to ignore what's right in front of them for the sake of propriety. Now, like a 40-year-old who pretends he doesn't smoke in front of his elders, or the adult woman who tells her grandmother that wine is grape juice (and the latter plays along, of course), British royalty will pretend the symbol of its imperial power doesn't exist.

Among the reported reasons for the reticence by unemployed people who live in palaces — for which, presumably, no inheritance tax was paid — is the desire to avoid controversy and perhaps even a diplomatic row. For members of the South Asian diaspora and even in political and



government circles in India, the Kohinoor is a symbol of colonial loot and plunder. Like all virtue signalling, the decision to keep the \$400-million Kohinoor hidden from view has little substance. But then, neither does the brouhaha over the diamond in the first place.

Like so many symbols, the idea of the Kohinoor can serve as a distraction — hiding more than it reveals. It articulates the systemic — and sophisticated — economic exploitation of the “jewel of the Raj” with a crass idea of plunder. Imperialism robbed the Global South of industries, crafts, systems of trade. Its impact was so great that it is difficult today to imagine social and state formations, politics and identity, without referring to the colonial rupture. And, yes, it robbed some elites of a few jewels. It is easier, of course, to focus on things that glitter. A better argument, though, would be this: Wear the diamond, give back the rest.

## GEORGE SOROS: THE MAN, HIS ACTIVITIES

No stranger to controversial statements, George Soros, midway through a speech ahead of the Munich Security Conference, touched upon the debate over Gautam Adani’s business empire and the market selloff in Adani group stocks in the wake of the Hindenburg Research revelations.

The 92-year-old hedge fund manager-turned-philanthropist went on to say that he saw the impact of “the affair” on India as an “investment opportunity” that “may open the door to a democratic revival” in the country.

### **What George Soros said**

The over-40-minute speech, which the Hungarian-born businessman read out from a prepared text, covered issues including climate change, the Russia-Ukraine war, social tensions in the US, the earthquake in Turkey, and the Communist Party downturn in China. He mentioned India after a brief reference to open and closed societies early in his speech.

“India is an interesting case,” Soros said. “It’s a democracy, but its leader, Narendra Modi, is no democrat. Inciting violence against Muslims was an important factor in his meteoric rise. Modi maintains close relations with both open and closed societies. India is a member of the Quad, which includes Australia, the US and Japan but it buys a lot of Russian oil at a steep discount and makes a lot of money out of it,” he said.

Soros then said that “Modi and business tycoon Adani are close allies”, “their fate is intertwined”, “Adani is accused of stock manipulation”, and “Modi is silent on the subject, but he will have to answer questions from foreign investors and in Parliament”.

This, he said, “will significantly weaken Modi’s stranglehold on India’s federal government and open the door to push for much-needed institutional reforms. I may be naive, but I expect a democratic revival in India”.

### **George Soros, the businessman**

Born in Budapest in 1930 to Jewish parents, Soros lived through the Nazi occupation of his country during 1944-45 and his own Jewish family survived “by securing false identity papers” and “concealing their backgrounds”, according to testimonials. The part about concealing identity earned criticism for Soros after he confirmed in a 1998 interview that he had helped in the confiscation of Jewish property when he accompanied a Christian official as godson with his concealed identity.



After the war, when the communists wrested power in Hungary, Soros left Budapest for London in 1947. He worked part-time as a railway porter and as a night-club waiter to support his studies at the London School of Economics. In 1956, he emigrated to the US, where he started off initially as an analyst of European securities. In 1973, he launched his own hedge fund and came to be known for his successful currency trades, particularly his bet against the British pound in 1992.

Critics have pointed out that he “broke” the Bank of England with the shorting of the pound, resulting in Britain leaving the European Exchange Rate Mechanism — and his fund made an estimated profit of over \$1 billion. He was also alleged to have taken position through Quantum Fund against a basket of Asian currencies, especially those of Thailand and Malaysia, before the 1997 Asian financial crises, which could have been seen as a sign of overvaluation of the Thai baht.

Soros is credited with fostering the modern hedge fund industry and popularising the concept of short-selling. In December 2022, after a 14-year investigation, a French court convicted him of insider trading and fined him 2.2 million euros, the amount prosecutors said he had profited from the trading. He called the verdict unfounded.

### **Open Society Foundations**

Soros came to be known for his philanthropic efforts, consistently donating money for causes such as human rights, education, and public health. He was one of the early prominent voices to criticise the war on drugs as “arguably more harmful than the drug problem itself,” and he helped foster America’s medical marijuana movement. In the early 2000s, he became a vocal backer of same-sex marriage efforts.

Soros leveraged his fortune (according to Bloomberg, has a net worth of \$8.5 billion) to create the Open Society Foundations — a network of foundations, partners, and projects that have a presence in over 100 countries. He established these foundations after the Cold War in Eastern European countries including Poland, Russia, and the former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia.

The foundations have an annual budget of over \$1 billion, and Soros is ranked as one of the world’s largest private funders of groups supporting human rights, justice, and accountable government through them.

Open Society began working in India in 1999, initially offering scholarships and fellowships for students to pursue studies and research at Indian institutions. In 2014, it launched an India-specific grant-making programme, supporting local organisations that work in areas such as extending access to medicine; promoting justice system reforms; and strengthening and establishing rights, public services, and community living for people with psychosocial disabilities.

Soros has supported pro-democracy movements in countries such as Hungary, Turkey, Serbia, and Myanmar. He has endorsed and funded the presidential campaigns of Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Joe Biden; and he has been critical of the growing income inequality in the United States, having called for policy interventions to tackle it.

Soros has spoken out against China’s President Xi Jinping, former US President Donald Trump, and Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In January 2020, he hit out at then President Trump at his annual dinner at the World Economic Forum (WEF) summit in Davos, saying that President Xi was “trying to exploit Trump’s weaknesses”. He also accused Xi of using “artificial



intelligence to have total control of his people". The criticism of Trump and Xi came after their two countries had agreed to a potential "trade deal".

Soros has commented on the Modi government earlier too. In Davos in January 2020, he mentioned the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and Kashmir, and termed these actions as the "biggest and most frightening setback" to open societies. The "democratically elected Narendra Modi is creating a Hindu nationalist state, imposing punitive measures on Kashmir, a semi-autonomous Muslim region, and threatening to deprive millions of Muslims of their citizenship", he had said.

#### CHINA PLANNING AKSAI CHIN RAILWAY LINE TO CONNECT TIBET AND XINJIANG

China will soon begin construction on an ambitious new railway line connecting Xinjiang and Tibet that will run close to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and through the disputed Aksai Chin region, according to a new railway plan released by the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) government.

The "medium to long term railway plan" for Tibet, made public last week, envisages expanding the TAR rail network to reach 4,000 km by 2025 up from the current 1,400 km, including new routes that will run up to China's borders with India and Nepal.

The most ambitious of the new plans is the Xinjiang-Tibet railway, which will broadly follow the course of the G219 national highway. The construction of the Xinjiang-Tibet highway through Aksai Chin had triggered tensions between India and China in the lead up to the 1962 war.

The proposed railway will begin in Shigatse in Tibet, and run northwest along the Nepal border, before cutting north through Aksai Chin and ending in Hotan in Xinjiang. The planned route will pass through Rutog and around Pangong Lake on the Chinese side of the LAC. The first section, from Shigatse to Pakhuktsa, will be completed by 2025, with the rest of the line, up to Hotan, expected to be finished by 2035.

Under the plan, border railway lines will be built up to Gyirong, the land port on the Nepal-Tibet border, and to Yadong county in the Chumbi valley, which borders India's Sikkim as well as Bhutan.

#### Twin purposes

The railway construction is being seen as serving two purposes: boosting border security by enabling China to more closely integrate border areas as well as mobilise quickly to the frontier when needed; and secondly, accelerating Tibet's economic integration with the hinterland. While Qinghai province has a rail link to Tibet, the plan will now extend railway links for the first time to the three other neighbouring provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu.

#### HOW IS GOVT. RAMPING UP BORDER INFRASTRUCTURE?

##### The story so far:

At an unscheduled briefing during Parliament session this week, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar released details of the government's projects on border infrastructure and connectivity. It focused on initiatives in the north and east along India's 3,488 km border with China (Line of Actual Control or LAC), including ramping up infrastructure on the Indian side in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, as well as projects



connecting India to “friendly” neighbouring states such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar.

**What was the purpose of the briefing?**

Speaking to journalists, Mr. Jaishankar said the Modi government has “focused on rapid development of infrastructure along Northern Borders with China for obvious strategic reasons”. This was a reference to successive skirmishes with the Chinese People’s Liberation Army in Chumar in 2014, Doklam in 2017 and the ongoing standoff along the entire LAC since April 2020 when the Chinese army amassed troops along the border, which resulted in the Galwan clashes, the first such violent incident in 45 years. “Behind the debate that we often witness on the India-China border, including that of questions asked by the Opposition, one needs to look at what goes into our border preparedness. It’s the quality of our structures, the technology involved and its maintenance,” he added, indicating that the purpose of the briefing was to counter the Opposition’s questions on the India-China situation during the parliamentary session.

**What initiatives did the briefing outline?**

An official document released, highlighted a multi-pronged approach — improving connectivity to the LAC through roads, bridges and tunnels, improving cross-border connectivity to neighbouring countries via highways, bridges, inland waterways, railroads, electricity lines and fuel pipelines, modernising and constructing integrated check posts (ICPs) at all the border crossings to smooth trade, and funding and constructing infrastructure projects in neighbouring countries.

While many of these projects have commenced or been in the pipeline for several decades, the government claimed that it has accelerated them and completed execution. For example, the government said that the length of roads constructed in the China border areas in the period from 2014 to 2022 (6,806 km) “is almost double the length” constructed from 2008-2014 (3,610 km), and cited a similar case for bridges built.

**What about neighbourhood projects?**

The report lists dozens of projects in the neighbourhood that have been planned, financed or constructed — some involve major outlays like the railway links to Nepal and Bangladesh, the Mahakali motorable bridge and the Maitri Setu between Tripura and Bangladesh, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) which includes a 158 km waterway, the Sittwe port project and road to Mizoram. It also speaks of “South Asia’s first cross-border petroleum products pipeline” between Motihari in India and Amlekhgunj in Nepal, another High Speed Diesel pipeline with Bangladesh that will reduce petrol prices and road congestion, and a Bhutanese dry port in Pasakha bordering West Bengal being developed under an Indian government grant.

**Is there a significance to the timing of the report?**

The report was released in the wake of an official Security Conference report that said Indian forces have lost access to 26 of 65 patrolling points along the LAC since 2020. According to the analysis, that The Hindu had first reported in December 2022, some of the points have been encroached upon by PLA troops and infrastructure, while at some, patrolling has been suspended by mutual agreement in talks with Chinese border commanders to avoid conflict and “to play safe”. Former Minister and Congress MP Manish Tewari has given notice for an adjournment motion every day of the current session to bring attention to what he calls “land grab” by Chinese forces.



The government may have also sought to allay concerns in neighbouring countries in the light of the recent drop in share value and credit ratings of the Adani Group that has been highlighted internationally. The Adani Group has been involved closely with the Modi government's foreign policy forays, especially in the neighbourhood, and is in talks for a number of projects, including electricity with Bangladesh and Nepal, ports in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, as well as renewable energy projects in the region, particularly as the government has been concerned about Chinese infrastructure outlays in the neighbourhood. Officials in neighbouring countries will watch closely to see if financing for those projects is impacted by the Adani controversy.

The timing is particularly significant as it comes a few weeks before the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang to Delhi for the G-20 Foreign Minister's Meeting on March 1-2. Mr. Qin is due to return in early May for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Foreign Ministers meeting in Goa, and Chinese President Xi Jinping is being invited to India twice, for the SCO summit expected in June and the G-20 summit in September.

## HONOUR OF OFFICE

A former judge of the Supreme Court of India and a former Indian Army commander are among the new Governors of States appointed by the Centre on Sunday. The Governors of several States and the Lieutenant-Governor of a Union Territory were also shuffled. In recent years, Governors have sought to play a political role in States such as Jharkhand, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, creating a train of controversies. For good reasons, the roles of the military and the judiciary too are topics of interest, particularly with regard to their relationship with the political executive. The executive government's eagerness to control judicial appointments, besides the debate on the collegium system of judges appointing judges, is evident. It has selectively delayed and accelerated appointments recommended by the collegium, effectively exercising powers that it does not have in appointing judges. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has also faced charges of using the armed forces to further its political narratives. Earlier too, retired police and intelligence officers went on to occupy Raj Bhavans, but it was the appointment of a retired Chief Justice of India (CJI) as a Governor in 2014 that created a new precedent. Another retired CJI was nominated to the Rajya Sabha, in 2020, raising eyebrows.

The institution of the Governor is a legacy of the British imperial governance structure. The legitimacy of a nominated Governor in a democracy was the topic of a heated debate in the Constituent Assembly, but it was carried on into the new republic nevertheless. The Governor was to act as a dynamic link between the Centre and the State, but the makers of the Constitution were clear that the posts must remain ornamental, except in very narrowly defined situations in which they were allowed discretion in decision-making. Over the decades, the overreach of Governors has become a serious question in Centre-State relations and democracy in general. The dominance of the BJP at the Centre since 2014 has added fresh tensions with the States. The BJP has a vision of national unity that causes anxiety among regional interest groups. The office of the Governor was to be embellished by the personalities of those who would occupy it. Opening it as a post-retirement possibility for those who are required to stay aloof from partisan politics in their current roles, lowers the dignity of the offices that they leave behind and what they go on to occupy.





## JUDGES AND THE LURE OF 'POLITICAL' JOBS

Within a month of retiring from the Supreme Court of India, Justice S. Abdul Nazeer has been appointed Governor of Andhra Pradesh. Like many others, I believe it is no coincidence that he was a part of the Constitution Bench that decided the Ayodhya Ram Mandir land issue. In the tenure of the Narendra Modi-led government since 2014, he is the third Supreme Court judge who has received a high-profile political appointment soon after retirement, the other two being Justice P. Sathasivam (who was appointed Governor of Kerala), and Justice Ranjan P. Gogoi (who was appointed member of the Rajya Sabha).

These appointments are all signalling on the part of the government, letting the members of the higher judiciary know that they will be suitably rewarded if they issue favourable decisions. Dangling such a proverbial carrot is akin to corrupting the judges, and encouraging a culture of sycophancy even, as we are seeing among some judges in the apex court. Worse, this also makes the public have less faith in the judiciary itself. In 1980, Justice V. D. Tulzapurkar had said that "if judges start sending bouquets or congratulatory letters to a political leader on his political victory, eulogising him on assumption of high office in adulatory terms, the people's confidence in the judiciary will be shaken."

### Chipping away at judiciary

While a Governor's position may seem largely ceremonial, it is in fact a squarely political appointment. In any event, this appears to be a part of the ruling party's strategic mission — a long game, if you will — to destabilise the judiciary, chipping away in small and big ways at various aspects of its functioning. If you step back and observe, the judiciary is slowly but surely being subtly weakened.

To be fair, this is not the first government that has ventured so far as to corrupt the judges in this fashion. Congress-led governments, notably under Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, have done it too. But it is a cowardly defence that the Opposition party was equally guilty, and past precedent does not justify present transgressions. The larger objective, for any reasonable executive, should be to ensure the independence of the other arms of the governing mechanism, and that democratic values are preserved. However, a conclusively majoritarian mandate can make one heady with power, and compel the exploration of creative ways in which that power can be maintained and consolidated further. This is entirely the case with the Indian government today.

### Hypocritical behaviour

The government's behaviour is also hypocritical for it is deliberately paying no heed to its own manifesto articulated by its late leader, Arun Jaitley, that such post-retirement judicial appointments should be avoided. In fact, 'inducing the judges' by such appointments was a specific allegation directed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) against the Congress-led coalition.

The judiciary is no less culpable in this situation. Ideally, I would like to believe that Indian judges are made of stronger stuff, and not ones to be seduced thus. Judges should show moral responsibility and character, as Justice Akil Kureishi most recently did. After being unceremoniously disregarded for elevation, and shoved across the country to various High Courts, upon retirement, he said that the government's stated 'negative perceptions' about him were a 'certificate of independence', and he was leaving the judiciary with 'his pride intact'.



Judges must recognise that handouts from the government, in the form of such political appointments, are not one-way: there is a giver and there is a receiver. The Indian judiciary must distinguish between political favours and other post-retirement employment opportunities.

#### Demarcation of roles

There needs to be a demarcation between roles where the presence of a judicial authority is clearly valuable and even necessary, such as in a tribunal or a commission, and where it is not. Justice Gogoi, upon his appointment to the Rajya Sabha, had famously proclaimed that he intended to bridge the gap between the judiciary and the legislature, but his attendance record and public participation in parliamentary affairs suggest nothing of the sort. Similarly, Justice Sathasivam had said he had wanted to serve the people in his role as Governor, but surely, he could have achieved the same objective through other appointments, that would be more befitting of someone who had held the office of the Chief Justice of India.

Ideally, the judicial community should take a concerted decision on this, say, in the Chief Justices' conference. The plenary should agree that judges should not take up any appointments upon retirement stemming from political patronage (with the nature of such appointments being clearly defined). Additionally, a cooling period of about two years should be considered a mandatory minimum before a judge agrees to take on any post-retirement adjudicatory role, in any case.

Justice Y.V. Chandrachud had said that the greatest danger to the judiciary lies within. Members of the judiciary cannot compromise independence by trading it for a plum post-retirement sinecure. When one becomes a judge, one signs up to fulfil a promise of ensuring a fair and independent judiciary; this promise cannot be compromised at any cost. Our judges need to be gently reminded of this unwritten contract they have with the Indian people.

#### HC QUESTIONS USE OF POCSO ACT IN ASSAM CHILD MARRIAGE CASES

The Gauhati High Court has questioned the application of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act in child marriage cases in Assam, while granting anticipatory bail to nine people booked under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) on February 14.

The Assam Police began a crackdown on child marriages across the State on February 3. More than 3,000 people allegedly linked with such cases have been booked under relevant sections of the PCMA read with punitive sections of the POCSO Act.

"If marriage is taking place in violation of the law, the law will take its own course. These cases have been happening since time. We will only consider if immediate custodial interrogation is required or not. At this moment, this court thinks that these are not matters for custodial interrogation. We will ask them to appear and record their statements. These are not NDPS, smuggling, stolen property cases," Justice Suman Shyam said.

Calling the allegations "weird", the court sought to know if there was any allegation of rape.

"This (crackdown) is causing a havoc in the private life of people... Obviously, it (child marriage) is a bad idea. We will give our views but at the moment the issue is whether they should be all arrested and put in jail," it added.



## EDUCATION, MORE THAN WEALTH, DETERMINES WOMEN'S MARITAL AGE

The Assam government is cracking down on child marriage and has registered over 4,000 cases just this year alone. While some people have supported this approach, social activists point out that the root of the problem — limited access to education among women — is still not being addressed.

Data from NFHS-5 show that the more educated a woman, the higher her negotiating power about when she wants to get married. Interestingly, this is not a recent phenomenon. Data suggest that for decades now, better-educated women have had more of a say on when they should get married.

In the survey, women who completed over 11 years of schooling (row K) and currently aged 25-29 and 45-49 were asked their age when they were first married. The median marriage age in the 25-29 age-group was 23 and in the 45-49 age-group was 22.5. The negligible difference shows that education has long been a controlling factor in deciding a woman's marital age.

However, the same is not true when it comes to the wealth of a household. Women who belonged to the richest 20% households and currently aged 25-29 and 45-49, were asked their age when they were first married. The median age at first marriage in the 25-29 age group was 22.8 and in the 45-49 age-group was 19.7. The difference shows that wealth has only recently gained relevance as a controlling factor in deciding a woman's marital age. Among older generations, even wealthier families married women at a younger age.

Though wealth has recently gained relevance, education continues to be the dominant controlling factor of the two. The median marriage age of women from the wealthiest households was still lower than that of women who completed over 11 years of schooling. Also, the median marriage age of women from the poorest households was still higher than that of women who have had no schooling.

Caste and location also play a major role. Women from SC, ST, OBC and other communities and currently aged 25-29 and 45-49 were asked their age when they were first married. The median marriage age among SC/ST/OBC women was below 20 even among younger generations, while that of non-SC/ST/OBC women crossed 20. Women from urban and rural areas and currently aged 25-29 and 45-49 were asked their age when they were first married. The difference in the median age between rural and urban women was wider among younger generations. So, the negotiating power of urban women has improved at a higher pace than that of rural women.

A similar analysis for men shows that education was not as dominant a factor in pushing up their median marriage age as it was in the case of women. Also, the median age of marriage among men was above the legal age of 21 across all background characteristics, whereas the median marriage age was below 18 among women across categories.

There were other interesting patterns among men. In recent times, men belonging to poorer households and with fewer years of schooling have been marrying at an earlier age than before.



## SWARA BHASKER GETS MARRIED UNDER SPECIAL MARRIAGE ACT: WHAT IS THE ACT, HOW DOES IT WORK, WHAT IS THE NOTICE PERIOD?

For several interfaith couples including actress Swara Bhasker and her partner Farhad Zirkar Ahmad, the choice to marry under a secular personal law is through the Special Marriage Act, 1954.

Announcing her marriage, the actress hailed the legislation that provides an alternate route to religious laws for marriage. “Three cheers for the #SpecialMarriageAct (despite notice period, etc.) At least it exists and gives love a chance. The right to love, the right to choose your life partner, the right to marry, the right to agency should not be a privilege”, she tweeted.

### **What is the Special Marriage Act and how is it different from religious codes of marriage?**

The Special Marriage Act of 1954 (SMA) was passed by the Parliament on October 9, 1954. It governs a civil marriage where the state sanctions the marriage rather than the religion.

Issues of personal law such as marriage, divorce, adoption are governed by religious laws that are codified. These laws, such as the Muslim Marriage Act, 1954, and the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, require either spouse to convert to the religion of the other before marriage.

However, the SMA enables marriage between inter-faith or inter-caste couples without them giving up their religious identity or resorting to conversion.

The Indian system, where both civil and religious marriages are recognised, is similar to the laws in the UK’s Marriage Act of 1949. An earlier version of the SMA was enacted in 1872 and was later re-enacted in 1954 with provisions for divorce etc.

### **Who can get married under the Special Marriage Act?**

The applicability of the Act extends to the people of all faiths, including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists, across India. Some customary restrictions such as parties not being within degrees of a prohibited relationship still apply to couples under SMA.

In 1952, when the Bill was proposed, the requirement of monogamy was considered radical. Section 4 of the SMA requires that at the time of marriage, “neither party has a spouse living” or is “incapable of giving a valid consent to it in consequence of unsoundness of mind”. Even if both parties are capable of giving valid consent, it requires that they do not suffer from “recurrent attacks of insanity” or any mental disorder that renders them “unfit for marriage and the procreation of children”. The minimum age to get married under the SMA is 21 years for males and 18 years for females.

However, once married as per the secular law, under Section 19 of the Act, any member of an undivided family who professes the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh or Jain religion shall be deemed to effect their severance from the family. This would affect rights, including the right to inheritance, of the persons choosing to marry under the SMA.

### **What is the procedure for a civil marriage?**

As per Section 5 of the Act, the parties to the marriage are required to give a notice, in writing, to a “Marriage Officer” of the district in which at least one of the parties has resided for at least 30 days immediately preceding the notice.



Before the marriage is solemnized, the parties and three witnesses are required to sign a declaration form before the Marriage Officer. Once the declaration is accepted, the parties will be given a “Certificate of marriage” which is essentially proof of the marriage or “conclusive evidence of the fact that a marriage under this Act has been solemnized and that all formalities respecting the signatures of witnesses have been complied with.”

#### **What is the “notice period” under the SMA?**

As per Section 6, a true copy of the notice given by the parties will be kept under the “Marriage Notice Book” which will be open for inspection at all reasonable times, without a fee. Upon receiving the notice, the marriage officer shall publish it in “some conspicuous place in his office” to invite any objections to the marriage within 30 days.

Section 7 deals with “Objection to marriage” and allows any person “before the expiration of thirty days from the date of the notice’s publication” to object to the marriage on the ground that it would contravene one or more of the conditions specified in Section 4 of the Act. If an objection has been made, the Marriage Officer cannot solemnize the marriage until he has inquired into the matter of the objection and is satisfied that will not prevent the marriage from taking place, unless the person making such an objection withdraws it.

These provisions are often criticised as they are commonly invoked to harass consenting couples. In 2009, the Delhi High Court, underlining the right to privacy, struck down the practice of posting the notice of intended marriage under the SMA to the residential addresses of both parties through the police station of concerned jurisdiction to verify their addresses. “The unwarranted disclosure of matrimonial plans by two adults entitled to solemnize it may, in certain situations, jeopardize the marriage itself. In certain instances, it may even endanger the life or limb of one at the other party due to parental interference,” the Court had said.

More recently, this requirement for a notice period has also been challenged. In January 2021, the Allahabad High Court ruled that couples seeking to solemnize their marriage under the Special Marriage Act, 1954 can choose not to publish the mandatory 30-day notice of their intention to marry.

#### **MOVEMENT TO GET HORIZONTAL QUOTA FOR TRANS PEOPLE GAINS MOMENTUM**

Nearly nine years after the historic National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) judgment of the Supreme Court, which recognised transgender persons as a third gender and issued directions to protect their rights and dignity, a movement to secure horizontal reservation for them in public education and employment is gaining momentum. It includes a legal battle that seeks to modify a part of the landmark 2014 judgment.

Though the judgment directed the Union and the State governments to provide transgender people “all kinds of reservation” in admissions to educational institutions and in employment, the transgender community in India continues to fight for its enforcement. But since the judgment also called for trans people to be treated as part of the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes, which ran the risk of clubbing them with OBCs, the community is seeking to ensure separate trans reservation across all categories.

However, with the Union government disclosing in a reply in Parliament that it was not considering any proposal to provide trans people with quotas, activists, scholars and lawyers told The Hindu that their movement for quota will only intensify now.



Grace Banu, a Chennai-based activist, is preparing to approach the Supreme Court for a clarification on the direction in the NALSA judgment that may run the risk of clubbing transgender people with OBCs on quotas. The Delhi-based activist Jane Kaushik's petition in the Delhi High Court for horizontal reservation is awaiting the government's reply.

#### 'Against judgment'

Bittu Kondaiah, an activist and Associate Professor of Biology and Psychology at Ashoka University, said the campaign for reservation would definitely intensify now. Jayna Kothari, one of the advocates who in the Karnataka High Court fought for and won 1% horizontal reservation for trans people, said, "The comment of the government [in Parliament] is actually going against the NALSA judgment."

The Social Justice Ministry had said that the law already prohibited all kinds of discrimination against transgender people.

"They can give reservation to EWS (Economically Weaker Sections) but not to us? For 70-plus years, we have been begging and doing sex work and we have nothing at all. They have created an Act, which sends a message but does not give us our rights," Ms. Banu, who founded and runs the Trans Rights Now Collective, said.

"It is inexplicable why the government is not considering it. For that matter, do you think OBCs are more discriminated against than transgender people," asked Ayesha, a 25-year-old Zoology (Honours) graduate from the Delhi University.

Professor Kondaiah explained that while there are general category trans people who might feel clubbing with OBCs will help, the trans community is slowly coming to a consensus that horizontal reservation is "more realisable and more likely to pass politically also."

#### OBC quota?

Before declaring in Parliament that it was not considering quotas for trans people, the Union Social Justice Ministry was until 2021 mulling a proposal to include them in the OBC category.

"My understanding of the direction is that while it is couched as though the Centre and the States are to only take steps, but the intent of the direction is that you will certainly provide reservation, treating them as part of OBC category," senior advocate Saurabh Kirpal said. But nothing in the NALSA judgment prevents a State or the Centre from bringing reservation within each category (Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and so on) as the Karnataka government did on the heels of a High Court order for a 1% across-the-board reservation, said Mr. Kirpal, the first openly gay lawyer to be cleared for a High Court judgeship by the SC Collegium.

### BEYOND LIMITS

The gulf between legality and political legitimacy can be quite substantial. The Supreme Court verdict upholding the constitution of a Delimitation Commission for Jammu and Kashmir and the subsequent delimitation exercise is indeed in line with the law, especially the constitutional provisions that empower Parliament to form new States, alter existing ones, and change their status and boundaries, as well as the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019. However, it will be wrong to see it as granting judicial imprimatur to the political import of the redrawing of constituencies in the Union Territory. Most political parties in J&K, which was downgraded to



Union Territory status in August 2019, have opposed the Commission's report that added six seats in Jammu division and one in Kashmir division to take the total number of seats to 90. The parties see in the exercise an attempt to weaken the Muslim majority region's political and electoral significance and boost the prospects of parties with a base in Jammu. They consider this as an extension of the project to strip J&K of its status and privileges and repurpose its politics to the advantage of the ruling party. This question of legitimacy can be answered by the outcome of an election, if and when one is held, to the territorial legislature. However, the readjustment of boundaries may by itself cast a shadow on that process too.

The petition that challenged the formation of the Delimitation Commission was a belated one, as it was filed after the panel published its draft order. The Court brushed aside its key contention that the delimitation has been frozen throughout the country until after the first Census held after 2026, noting that Article 170, which deals with this, applies only to States, and not Union Territories. It has also noted that J&K will be governed by its own reorganisation law, which allows the 2011 Census to be the basis for its delimitation, unlike the rest of the country, where the 2001 census was the basis for the last redrawing of constituency boundaries. It also rejected arguments rooted in the idea that some provisions of the Reorganisation Act were not consistent with the Constitution, noting that these provisions had not been specifically challenged. While the Court may be right in upholding the formation of the delimitation panel, the extensions given to it, and its decision based on laws currently assumed to be valid, the impression is inescapable that the people of J&K are being presented with a *fait accompli* on matters concerning their political destiny, as long as the core question — the validity of the withdrawal of its statehood and special status in 2019 — remains undecided.

#### WHAT IS 'OFFICE OF PROFIT' CASE AGAINST JHARKHAND CM HEMANT SOREN, IN WHICH GOVERNOR RAMESH BAIS REFUSED TO ACT?

Ramesh Bais, who was transferred as Governor of Maharashtra on Sunday, has left the Raj Bhavan in Ranchi without making public the Election Commission's opinion on whether Chief Minister Hemant Soren should be disqualified for allegedly allocating a mining lease to himself when he was the mining and forest minister of Jharkhand.

The Governor sat on the EC's opinion for more than five months from August last year, conduct that two former Chief Election Commissioners (CECs) of India described to The Indian Express as being unfair, unethical, and unprecedented.

It is widely believed that the EC had recommended Soren's disqualification which, if acted upon by the Governor, would have led to immediate political instability in Jharkhand. The EC's communication to the Governor is confidential.

It is now up to the new Governor of Jharkhand, C P Radhakrishnan, to act on the EC's opinion.

#### **What are the allegations against the Chief Minister?**

At a press conference held in February 2022, Soren's predecessor, Raghubar Das of the BJP, released documents based on which he accused the Chief Minister of "misusing his post" to get "in-principle approval" for a stone quarrying lease in his name.

Das alleged that Mining Department records showed that Soren, who held the mining portfolio at the time, approved the lease to himself in 2021 in violation of the provisions of The Representation of the People Act, 1951 and the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988.



As the opposition BJP mounted pressure on the Chief Minister, a PIL was filed in the Jharkhand High Court seeking his prosecution. After the court described the allegations as serious and asked for a response, the government admitted on April 8 that it had committed “a mistake”, and that the Chief Minister had “disassociated himself from it subsequently on 11.02.2022 by surrendering the lease”.

#### **Under what law was the matter referred to the EC?**

Articles 191 and 192 of the Constitution deal with “Disqualifications for membership” of a state Legislative Assembly or Council, and “Decision on questions as to disqualifications of members” respectively.

Article 191(1) says that “a person shall be disqualified for being chosen as, and for being, a member” of a state House “if he holds any office of profit under the Government of India or the Government of any State..., other than an office declared by the Legislature...not to disqualify its holder”.

Article 192(1) states that if “any question arises as to whether a member...has become subject to...disqualification..., the question shall be referred for the decision of the Governor and his decision shall be final”.

Under Article 192(2), “Before giving any decision on any such question, the Governor shall obtain the opinion of the Election Commission and shall act according to such opinion.”

Also, Section 9A (“Disqualification for Government contracts, etc.”) of The Representation of the People Act, 1951, states: “A person shall be disqualified if, and for so long as, there subsists a contract entered into by him in the course of his trade or business with the appropriate Government for the supply of goods to, or for the execution of any works undertaken by, that Government.”

Acting on petitions by BJP leaders, the Governor referred the matter to the EC on April 8. On May 2, the EC issued notice to Soren seeking his response to the complaint that he had prima facie violated Section 9A of the RP Act.

#### **What did the EC say in its opinion?**

The EC sent its opinion to the Governor in a sealed envelope on August 25. Its opinion is not in the public domain; the EC has said its communication with the Governor is “privileged”.

Sources have claimed that the EC “disqualified” Soren from membership of the Jharkhand House. However, despite repeated demands by the CM and his party, as well as by other parties in the state, the Governor declined to make the EC’s opinion public or to act on it.

Meanwhile, the Jharkhand High Court had ruled that the PIL seeking a probe against Soren for alleged money laundering through shell companies and obtaining the mining lease, was maintainable. Soren appealed — and on November 7, the SC set aside the order of the High Court, saying that “for a High Court to take cognizance of the matter on...generalized submissions which do not even make prima facie satisfaction of the Court, [was] nothing but an abuse of the process of the Court”.





Mukul Rohatgi, the former Attorney General for India who represented Soren had submitted before the HC that “even the son of the CM, or CM himself”, was “not debarred” from owning a mine.

#### **Is the Governor bound to act in accordance with the EC’s opinion?**

Article 192(2) says that the Governor “shall act” according to the EC’s opinion. However, it does not lay down a time frame for the Governor to act.

Governor Bais had told a news channel in Raipur in late October that he had sought a “second opinion” in the matter. Thereafter, Soren had written to the EC asking if this was true and, if so, to make the Governor’s request public. In response, the EC had clarified that it had received no such request.

Former CEC O P Rawat told The Indian Express on Sunday that “This (the delay in action by the Governor) does not have any precedent... The Governors have to sign off on the EC’s opinion, they cannot disagree.”

After the EC’s opinion reached Raj Bhavan, various delegations met with the Governor and urged him to “clear the air” and disclose the EC’s view on the CM’s eligibility to continue as MLA. One of the memorandums accused the Governor’s office of selectively leaking information to the media, which it said had created “a state of chaos, confusion and uncertainty, which vitiates the administration and the governance of the State”.

#### **What has the CM been doing in this period?**

After the EC gave its opinion, the CM and MLAs of the ruling JMM-Congress-RJD coalition boarded three buses and left for a day trip to Khunti. On August 30, 32 MLAs were flown to Congress-ruled Chhattisgarh amid fears that the BJP might try to poach lawmakers and topple the government.

On September 5, at a special session of the Assembly, the Chief Minister won a trust vote with 48 MLAs in the 82-member House, with the BJP and AJSU boycotting proceedings. Soren gave a speech accusing the BJP of trying to bring down his government, and attacked the Governor for not coming clean on the EC’s recommendation.

### **EXECUTIVE FIAT**

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has stood by his statements made during his speech in the Lok Sabha on February 7, in his response to a charge of breach of privilege of the House that was raised by a Bharatiya Janata Party member and a Union Minister. It is strange that a Member of Parliament, whose duty it is to hold the executive accountable to Parliament, is being accused of breach of privilege of the House for seeking answers on crucial issues. Portions of Mr. Gandhi’s speech, made during a discussion on the ‘Motion of Thanks on the President’s Address’, that referred to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s ties with industrialist Gautam Adani were expunged from the record of the House. When a member’s own rights are being curtailed in the name of parliamentary privilege, the very concept is being reduced to an instrument of executive fiat. Mr. Gandhi raised pertinent questions regarding the political patronage received by the Adani Group, which is in the eye of a storm after a short seller based in the United States brought to light dubious patterns in the group’s transactions and ownership. The government has not provided any answers. And, on top of it, the sword of privilege is being wielded against the Opposition leader. The expectations from the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha are to



protect the majesty of Parliament, particularly in its interactions with other branches of the state, rather than disciplining the members.

The parliamentary discussions on the Adani controversy, which were vitiated by the unreasonable restrictions on Opposition leaders, follow a devious trend of executive imperium over the legislative branch in some States too. Chief Ministers of many States command supreme powers — they control their parties, dominate over the Opposition, and take Assemblies for granted. Assembly sittings have become fewer and debates shallow. The argument that popular leaders now make is that they are answerable to the people directly — Mr. Modi also invoked the ‘blessing of 140 crore people,’ while speaking in Parliament on February 8, but the range of questions arising out of the Hindenburg report on the Adani Group remained unanswered. People seek accountability from the elected government through their elected representatives, and the legislature is mandated to mediate that interaction. Mr. Gandhi asked questions as he should. Asking him to adhere to parliamentary norms in doing so is par for the course. But more critically, the government should be required to respond to the allegations. It is a sign of erosion of parliamentary authority that it is not happening.

#### AN EXPERT EXPLAINS: SPEECH OF MPS, CHECKS & REPORTING, TECH-AGE DISCONNECT

On February 9, Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge wrote to Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar protesting the “directions...made by the Chair to authenticate six observations” he had made during his speech in the House the previous day. Kharge pointed out that Parliament is the “platform to fix the accountability of the Executive”, and criticism of the government amounts neither to an allegation against an individual Member nor to an attack on the dignity of the Council of States. Kharge also underlined that Article 105 of the Constitution “guarantees freedom of speech for the Members of Parliament”.

#### Background of free speech

Article 105 protects the words and votes of MPs from legal proceedings. This freedom is a fundamental requirement for the functioning of the parliamentary system. It traces its origin to the British Parliament that codified this freedom in a law made in 1688 called the Bill of Rights. One of its sections states “That the Freedom of Speech and Debates or Proceedings in Parlyament ought not to be impeached or questioned in any Court or Place out of Parlyament.”

In the Indian context, this principle found place in the Government of India Act of 1919 which set up modern legislatures in pre-Independence India. The rules made under this law regulated the work of these legislative institutions. For the Central Legislative Assembly, the rules specified that members in their speeches should not refer to matters pending before courts, make personal allegations against other members, comment on the conduct of high offices (like the King, Governor General) or use seditious, defamatory words.

#### ‘Tongawallas and tea sellers’

The debate in the central legislature was lively, and members adhered to these rules. A British observer writing about the Assembly in 1926 noted that it was “pathetically polished, humdrum, and in the observance of parliamentary form remarkably competent”. Non-official members of the central legislature used their free speech right to criticise the colonial government regularly. But if a member made a personal remark about another, the presiding officer would intervene and ask him to withdraw it.



For example, in 1938, at a particularly heated moment during the debate on a Bill, one member, referring to another, said, “My Honourable friend must remember that he is not talking on the streets of Peshawar to tongawallas and tea sellers. Here we have men who understand politics and statesmanship...”

The other member responded, “The tea-sellers of Peshawar are far more respectable than the Honourable Member.” Since it was a personal comment on a member, the chair promptly asked him to withdraw his remark.

### **RS rules different from LS**

The current Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha rule books follow the same principles that regulated the speeches of the members of the Central Legislative Assembly. The two Houses have identical rules, with one exception. In Rajya Sabha, MPs cannot make a personal charge against a Member. Lok Sabha had a similar provision till 1989. The Eighth Lok Sabha (1985-89), which witnessed acrimonious discussions on the purchase of Bofors field guns, did a comprehensive update of its rules towards the end of its tenure, and made amendments to the rule book.

One change has a bearing on how MPs debate in Lok Sabha. The rule book now states that MPs, while speaking, should not “make personal reference by way of making an allegation imputing a motive to or questioning the bona fides of any other member of the House unless it be imperatively necessary for the purpose of the debate being itself a matter in issue or relevant thereto”. Other than this change, the rules regulating the speeches of MPs have remained the same since Independence.

### **Presiding officers’ decision**

The implementation of the rule book is in the hands of the Chairman of Rajya Sabha and the Speaker of Lok Sabha. Their interpretation of the rules should encourage debate to further the constitutional mandate of Parliament for representing people, holding the government to account, making laws and passing the Budget. The two presiding officers decide on what goes on to the printed and digital records of the House.

The rules of procedure give them discretion in removing words from the recorded proceedings of the House which are “defamatory or indecent or unparliamentary or undignified”. This discretion is required because MPs have constitutional protection from legal proceedings for their speeches in Parliament. MPs need this protection to fulfil their constitutional mandate as public representatives and lawmakers.

### **An essential check**

The discretion to delete words or parts of speeches allows presiding officers to check MPs who might use their constitutional immunity to defame individuals who will have no recourse against the parliamentarian. In 1950, a United States Senator, during Senate proceedings, had referred to a professor at Johns Hopkins University as “the top Russian espionage agent in the United States”. The professor had no recourse other than to recount his ordeal after the Senator’s remarks in a book, ‘Ordeal by Slander’.

Presiding officers regularly delete words from the parliamentary record. In 2020, Vice President Venkaiah Naidu expunged a word from the Prime Minister’s reply to the motion of thanks to the President’s address. More recently, in the winter session of 2022, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla



deleted a section of remarks made by Jharkhand BJP MP Nishikant Dubey in which he had referred to the Chief Minister of Jharkhand.

### Reporting by the media

Linked to the free speech of MPs and the deletion of words/ parts of their speeches is their reporting by the media. In 1956, Parliament passed a private member Bill piloted by MP Feroze Gandhi that provided immunity from civil and criminal lawsuits for anyone publishing an accurate account of parliamentary proceedings. This law allowed newspapers to report on parliamentary proceedings. It was repealed during the Emergency and reinstated shortly after.

At the end of the day, presiding officers examine the day's proceedings and delete certain portions from the written and video record in conformity with the rules. Reportage based on the record of Parliament offers protection from legal proceedings.

### Present-day conundrum

When presiding officers delete words or sections of speech, they are no longer part of Parliament's record. In the present technological landscape, it creates a peculiar situation. When there is a live telecast of Parliament's proceedings, people watch, tweet, and record it. And by the time Parliament updates its record, the deleted parts have already been circulated and shared extensively on social media.

This creates a disconnect between the speeches in the parliamentary record and the publicly available version online. It also means that every individual (including MPs) who shared the speech as was delivered by an MP on the floor of the House is in breach of the privilege of Parliament. Both these outcomes have an impact on the institution's image.

## THE MISSING DEPUTY SPEAKER: WHAT IS THE POST, AND WHAT DOES THE CONSTITUTION SAY

The Supreme Court on Monday issued notices to the Centre and five states — Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand — over the failure to elect a Deputy Speaker.

A Bench led by Chief Justice of India (CJI) D Y Chandrachud sought responses on a PIL that contends that not electing a Deputy Speaker to the 17th (present) Lok Sabha, which was constituted on June 19, 2019, is “against the letter and spirit of the Constitution”.

The post has been lying vacant in the five state Assemblies as well, which were constituted between four years and almost one year ago, the plea states. (Shariq Ahmed v. Union of India And Ors)

### What does the Constitution say about the Deputy Speaker?

Article 93 says “The House of the People shall, as soon as may be, choose two members...to be...Speaker and Deputy Speaker...and, so often as the office of Speaker or Deputy Speaker becomes vacant, the House shall choose another member...”

Article 178 contains the corresponding position for Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of a state.



### **Is it mandatory to have a Deputy Speaker?**

Constitutional experts point out that both Articles 93 and 178 use the word “shall”, indicating that the election of Speaker and Deputy Speaker is mandatory under the Constitution.

### **How soon must the Deputy Speaker be elected?**

“As soon as may be”, say Articles 93 and 178. But they do not lay down a specific time frame.

In general, the practice in both Lok Sabha and the state Assemblies has been to elect the Speaker during the (mostly short) first session of the new House — usually on the third day after the oath-taking and affirmations over the first two days.

The election of the Deputy Speaker usually takes place in the second session — and is generally not delayed further in the absence of genuine and unavoidable constraints.

Rule 8 of The Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha says the election of Deputy Speaker “shall be held on such date as the Speaker may fix”. The Deputy Speaker is elected once a motion proposing his name is carried in the House.

Once elected, the Deputy Speaker usually continues in office for the entire duration of the House. Under Article 94 (Article 179 for state legislatures), the Speaker or Deputy Speaker “shall vacate his office if he ceases to be a member of the House...”. They may also resign to each other, or “may be removed from...office by a resolution of the House of the People passed by a majority of all the then members of the House”.

### **How was the post of Deputy Speaker envisaged?**

On May 19, 1941, H V Kamath argued in the Constituent Assembly that if the Speaker resigns, “it will be far better if he addresses his resignation to the President and not to the Deputy Speaker, because the Deputy Speaker holds an office subordinate to him”.

Dr B R Ambedkar disagreed — and pointed out that a person normally tenders his resignation to the person who has appointed him. “...The Speaker and the Deputy Speaker are...appointed or chosen or elected by the House. Consequently these two people, if they want to resign, must tender their resignations to the House which is the appointing authority. Of course, the House being a collective body of people, a resignation could not be addressed to each member of the House separately. Consequently, the provision is made that the resignation should be addressed either to the Speaker or to the Deputy Speaker, because it is they who represent the House,” he said.

When Neelam Sanjiva Reddy resigned as Speaker of the 4th Lok Sabha on July 19, 1969, he addressed his resignation to the Deputy Speaker.

But what happens if the post of Deputy Speaker is vacant? “The House is informed of the resignation of the Speaker by the Deputy Speaker and if the office of the Deputy Speaker is vacant, by the Secretary-General who receives the letter of resignation in that House. The resignation is notified in the Gazette and the Bulletin,” say the Rules for Presiding Officers of Lok Sabha.

### **Do the powers of the Speaker extend to the Deputy Speaker as well?**

Article 95(1) says: “While the office of Speaker is vacant, the duties of the office shall be performed by the Deputy Speaker”.



In general, the Deputy Speaker has the same powers as the Speaker when presiding over a sitting of the House. All references to the Speaker in the Rules are deemed to be references to the Deputy Speaker when he presides.

It has been repeatedly held that no appeal lies to the Speaker against a ruling given by the Deputy Speaker or any person presiding over the House in the absence of the Speaker.

#### **What is the position of the Union government on the current vacancy in the post of Deputy Speaker?**

The Treasury benches have maintained there is no “immediate requirement” for a Deputy Speaker as “bills are being passed and discussions are being held” as normal in the House. A Minister argued that “there is a panel of nine members — senior, experienced, and selected from different parties — who can act as chairpersons to assist the Speaker to run the House”.

This panel of nine has Rama Devi, Kirit P Solanki, and Rajendra Agrawal of the BJP; Kodikunnil Suresh of the Congress; A Raja of the DMK; P V Midhun Reddy (YSRCP); Bhartruhari Mahtab (BJD); N K Premachandran (RSP); and Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar (TMC).

It has been usual practice to offer the post of Deputy Speaker to the Opposition — Charanjit Singh Atwal (SAD, then a constituent of NDA) was Deputy Speaker during 2004-09 when UPA-I was in power, Kariya Munda (BJP) occupied the post during 2009-14 (UPA-2), and M Thambidurai (AIADMK) was Deputy Speaker during the first Narendra Modi government (2014-19).

#### **Can the courts intervene in cases of a delay in electing the Deputy Speaker?**

In September 2021, a petition was filed before the Delhi High Court, which argued that delay in the election of the Deputy Speaker violated Article 93 (Pawan Reley v. Speaker, Lok Sabha & Ors). However, there is no precedent of a court forcing the legislature to elect the Deputy Speaker.

Courts usually don't intervene in the procedural conduct of Parliament. Article 122(1) says: “The validity of any proceedings in Parliament shall not be called in question on the ground of any alleged irregularity of procedure.”

However, experts said that the courts do have jurisdiction to at least inquire into why there has been no election to the post of Deputy Speaker since the Constitution does envisage an election “as soon as may be”.

### **SUPREME COURT TO HEAR SHIV SENA DISPUTE ON MERITS FROM FEB 21: WHAT'S THE BACKGROUND OF THE CASE?**

A Bench of Chief Justice of India (CJI) D Y Chandrachud and Justices M R Shah, Krishna Murari, Hima Kohli, and P S Narasimha fixed February 21 to hear on merits the batch of petitions related to the political fallout in Maharashtra due to the split in the Shiv Sena between groups owing allegiance to Chief Minister Eknath Shinde and his predecessor Uddhav Thackeray.

In ‘Nabam Rebia & Bamang Felix v. Deputy Speaker, Arunachal Legislative Assembly’ (2016), the Supreme Court had ruled that it would be “constitutionally impermissible for a Speaker of the House to adjudicate upon disqualification petitions under the anti-defection law as per Tenth Schedule while a motion of resolution for his/her own removal from Office of Speaker is pending”.



### **What is the background of petitions before the Supreme Court and claims made by rival parties?**

From June 2022, the Supreme Court has been hearing a batch of petitions filed by leaders from the Thackeray and Shinde factions of the Shiv Sena. The Shinde camp leaders challenged the June 21 decision of the Assembly Deputy Speaker Narhari Zirwal recognising Ajay Choudhari as leader of the Shiv Sena Legislature Party (SSLP) in place of Shinde, calling it “illegal, unconstitutional”, and taken with “bias”.

They said Zirwal had taken the decision because his party, the NCP, was supporting the “minority faction” of the Sena led by Thackeray. The plea also challenged the disqualification notices served on Shinde and 15 MLAs supporting him on June 25 for not attending a party meeting convened by then Chief Minister Thackeray.

Relying on ‘Nabam Rebia’, the petition argued that Zirwal could not act on the disqualification petition against the 16 MLAs while a notice for a resolution seeking his removal was pending. In response, Zirwal told the court that the no-confidence motion against him was rejected as the genuineness or veracity of the notice could not be ascertained.

On June 27, a Bench of Justices Surya Kant and J B Pardiwala extended until July 12, 2022 the 48-hour window given by Zirwal to the 16 Shinde camp MLAs to reply to the disqualification notices served on them. The court, however, refused to restrain the holding of the floor test in the Assembly until July 11.

### **How did events unfold in Maharashtra thereafter?**

Then Governor Bhagat Singh Koshiyari asked then CM Thackeray to face a floor test on June 30 to prove his majority. After the SC refused to stay the floor test, Thackeray resigned at night on June 29. On June 30, Shinde was sworn in as the new CM of Maharashtra, with BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis as the Deputy Chief Minister.

On July 3, BJP MLA Rahul Narwekar was elected Speaker of the Assembly. The government led by Shinde won a trust vote on July 4. The rival factions then accused each other of defying the party whip on July 3 and July 4, and sought the disqualification of legislators from both sides.

The Thackeray camp, through its general secretary Subhash Desai, then moved the Supreme Court challenging the Governor’s appointment of Shinde as CM, and Narwekar’s decision to recognise the Shinde group’s nominee as the party’s Chief Whip.

### **Why was the issue referred to the five-judge Constitution Bench?**

On August 23, a three-judge SC bench led by then CJI N V Ramana referred the questions arising out of petitions filed by rival camps to a five-judge Constitution Bench, saying the Nabam Rebia verdict “requires gap filling to uphold constitutional morality”. Former CJI Ramana framed 10 issues for the consideration of the Constitution Bench.

The first of these was to ascertain whether the notice for removal of the Speaker restricted him/her from continuing with disqualification proceedings under the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, as held in ‘Nabam Rabia’.

The Constitution Bench was also asked to consider a situation in which the Speaker disqualifies members from the date of the complaint — what would be the status of the proceedings that took place during the pendency of the disqualification petition?



The scope of the Speaker's powers related to the Whip and Leader of the House, extent of judicial review in intra-party decisions, and the extent of the Governor's power to invite a person to form a government and its judicial review were the other issues that were sought to be addressed.

The five-judge Constitution Bench was also asked to address the issue of scope and powers of the Election Commission of India (ECI) to take a decision on the split within a party.

On September 27, a five-judge Bench led by (present CJI) D Y Chandrachud rejected the Thackeray camp's plea to stay the proceedings pending before the ECI on the Shinde camp's request to recognise his faction as the real Shiv Sena and allot it the party's 'bow and arrow' election symbol.

#### **What did the ECI say on the rival claims to the symbol and the party name?**

On February 17, the ECI ordered that the party name "Shiv Sena" and bow and arrow symbol should be retained by the Eknath Shinde faction, and recognised it as the original Shiv Sena.

Earlier in October last year, the ECI in an interim order had frozen the bow and arrow symbol, and had allotted 'flaming torch' to the Thackeray faction and 'two swords and shield' to the Shinde faction. The two factions were called "Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray)" and "Balasahebanchi Shiv Sena" respectively.

Then, in December, the Delhi High Court, while disposing of Thackeray's appeal against an order of the single judge of the HC that had dismissed his plea challenging the ECI's freeze on the 'Shiv Sena' party name and 'bow and arrow' symbol, said that the poll body is "free to proceed with the adjudication of the dispute".

#### **What were the arguments before the Constitution Bench on the plea seeking reconsideration of 'Nabam Rebia' by a larger Bench?**

The Shinde group had cited the 2016 judgment when the crisis unfolded in June last year. The Thackeray camp, which sought reference to the seven-judge Bench, argued that by invoking 'Nabam Rebia', MLAs who want to defect can pre-empt and stall disqualification proceedings against them by seeking the Speaker's removal through a notice.

However, the Shinde faction said that the matter had become academic and there was no reason to refer it to a larger Bench. It said that Thackeray had resigned even before the floor test, as he realised that he did not have the requisite number.

The Thackeray side contended that the matter had ramifications for the country's democratic future. It argued that the court must not distinguish the Rebia from the Shiv Sena matter, or else the same would generate future litigation. The CJI had remarked during the hearing that the matter raises "tough constitutional questions to answer on both counts".

#### **How will the Constitution Bench proceed from February 21 onward?**

The five-judge Bench on Friday noted that "whether the principle in Nabam Rebia case has an impact upon the facts in the present case needed deliberation", and the issue of "whether the reference of the decision in Nabam Rebia is warranted would be determined together with merits of the case".





## BRAZEN INTIMIDATION

It is difficult not to see the Income Tax (I-T) department's two-day survey of the BBC's offices in New Delhi and Mumbai as an attempt to produce a chilling effect on Britain's well regarded public broadcaster and also media institutions willing to hold the current regime to account for past actions. The survey's officials said they were investigating charges related to "transfer pricing" and "diversion of profits". However, the fact that the action came in the wake of the release of the two-part documentary, India: the Modi Question, raises significant questions. That journalists were also subjected to what is essentially an accounting/financial survey can only be interpreted as an act of intimidation of media personnel. Besides, this also follows actions by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, which had, not too long ago, issued overzealous orders to online media platforms to disable links to the first part of the documentary by invoking emergency powers under the IT Rules, 2021 and Section 69A of the IT Act, 2000, and later blocking tweets with links to it. The reactions by BJP spokespersons — one called the BBC a "corrupt" corporation — only adds to the impression that this is an effort at de-legitimising the work done by critical media outlets. The survey of the BBC is not an exception if similar exercises in the past are considered: at the digital news organisation Newsland in 2021, the CBI's raid of NDTV in 2017, and the Enforcement Directorate's searches of digital portal Newslick and I-T searches of the Dainik Bhaskar group, both in 2021. Last year, the digital media-funding Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation and the think tank, Centre for Policy Research, had such "surveys". The unmistakable and common link is that the media organisations have published content critical of the Union government.

India's claim as a developing nation and a growing economy in a globalised world is that it is a flourishing democracy with constitutionally guaranteed institutional freedoms and separation of powers and is unlike authoritarian regimes that have promoted economic prosperity but do not play by institutional rules and values. Core to this is the idea of the freedom of the press in holding those in power to account. Even if media organisations raise uncomfortable questions, the response has to be factual, reasonable and measured. The reaction to the BBC's documentary has been anything but that. In trying to block access to the documentary, the government came across as ham-fisted and now, with this survey at the BBC offices, it comes across as intimidating. This does not augur well for India's global image, but worse, it is a clear threat to existing freedoms of the country's citizens.

## GOVT PLANS FACT-CHECK BODY, SOUNDS OUT SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

The government is planning to set up a network of fact-checkers for online content, and has asked several social media giants to submit inputs on building one, The Indian Express has learnt. The government has also asked the companies to provide suggestions on a criteria that should be followed to determine who a "trusted" fact-checker can be.

This network will function as a self-regulatory body and flag "misinformation" on the internet that is not related to the government. The companies were asked to submit their inputs in the next few days during a closed-door meeting at the Ministry of Electronics and IT. The meeting was called to discuss the ministry's recent proposal on regulating fake news on the internet.

Representatives from companies such as Meta, Alphabet, Snap, Sharechat and Telegram were present at the meeting chaired by the Minister of State for Electronics and IT Rajeev Chandrasekhar.



“Today’s Digital India Dialogues – Around furthering safe & trusted Internet with focus on trusted fact checkers to deal with deepfakes, misinformation, false information etc.” Chandrasekhar tweeted after the meeting.

A stakeholder at the meeting suggested that the fact-checking network should collate a list of all the links that they deem to be fake news and share that with the government on a periodic basis, which will then issue orders to block those links. The government, it is learnt, is receptive to this idea.

Sources present at the meeting said stakeholders requested the government that when a network of fact-checkers is decided upon, it is best for them to publicly release their methodology on how they classify a piece of content as misinformation.

The ministry, Alphabet and Meta did not respond to a request for comment.

It is worth noting that when this network is established, it will only have the agency to flag misinformation that is not related to the government. It’s the Press Information Bureau’s fact-checking unit that will flag “misinformation” related to the Centre, as per the proposal made last month in the draft amendments to the Information Technology Rules, 2021.

The Electronics and IT Ministry has proposed that any piece of news identified as “fake” by PIB — the Centre’s nodal agency to share news updates — should not be allowed on online intermediaries, including social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter.

The proposal on “fake” news says that content that has been marked as misleading by “any other agency authorised by the government for fact-checking” or “in respect of any business of the Centre” will not be allowed on online intermediaries.

The requirement has been added under due diligence requirements that intermediaries need to follow to enjoy safe harbour, which is legal immunity from third-party content they host. Intermediaries essentially allow users to access services on the internet, and the proposed changes to the rules mean that not just social media platforms but internet service providers and web hosting providers — who are all classified as intermediaries currently — will have to follow the rules if notified with this provision.

The proposal has drawn criticism from a wide range of stakeholders including civil society organisations and media bodies like the Editors Guild of India which has said that the “determination of fake news cannot be in the sole hands of the government and will result in censorship of the press”.

Last month, The Indian Express reported on instances where the PIB flagged “fake news” but turned out to be mistaken.

## MHA DESIGNATES TWO OUTFITS AS TERRORIST ORGANISATIONS

The Ministry of Home Affairs on Friday designated the Khalistan Tiger Force and the Jammu and Kashmir Ghaznavi Force as terrorist organisations under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967.

A Punjab resident, Harwinder Singh Sandhu alias Rinda, who is presently based in Pakistan’s Lahore, was also designated as an “individual terrorist” under the anti-terror law.



The Ministry's notification said that the Jammu and Kashmir Ghaznavi Force (JKGF) surfaced in the year 2020 as a terrorist outfit.

It draws its cadre from various proscribed terrorist organisations, such as the Lashker-E-Taiba, Jaish-E-Mohammed, Tehreek-ul-Mujahideen and Harkat-ul-Jehad-E-Islami, and is involved in infiltration bids, narcotics and weapon smuggling, and carrying out terror attacks in Jammu and Kashmir.

The Khalistan Tiger Force (KTF) came into existence in 2011 as an offshoot of the Babbar Khalsa International (BKI), a banned terrorist organisation, the notification said. It added that the KTF was a militant outfit that aimed to revive terrorism in Punjab with a view to achieving its agenda of forming a separate State — Khalistan — and thus challenged the territorial integrity, unity, national security and sovereignty of India.

The Ministry said that Harwinder Singh Sandhu, a resident of Sarhali village in Punjab's Tarn Taran district, is associated with the BKI and is presently based in Lahore, Pakistan under the patronage of cross border agencies.

#### CONTROVERSY ERUPTS OVER JAMIAT CHIEF'S REMARK AT CONCLAVE

Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind's president Arshad Madani stirred up a controversy on Sunday with a speech which seemed to equate Om, Allah and God, prompting some religious leaders to walk off the stage on the final day of the organisation's three-day conclave. "What Hindus worship as Om, Muslims worship as Allah," Mr. Madani said. "Whom we call Adam, Hindus call Manu. Adam's progeny is called aadmi (mankind). Manu's progeny is manushya (mankind). When there was no Ram, Brahma, Shiva, whom did Manu worship? Few people tell us, they used to worship Om who had no image. I say, we call Om as Allah, those who speak Persian say Khuda, the English-speaking call God," he added.

Jain religious leader Acharya Lokesh Muni left the stage, stating, "We only agree with living in harmony, but all the story regarding Om, Allah, and Manu is all rubbish."

Mr. Madani's presidential address had an audience of over two lakh people. "For 1,400 years Hindus and Muslims have lived here together as brothers. We have never forced anybody to convert to Islam. We believe religion is a personal matter and acceptance comes from the heart," said the Jamiat president. "Since Independence we had not heard of Ghar Wapasi [referring to reconversion to Hinduism] till the BJP assumed power," he added.

Later, the Muslim body issued a statement, expressing disappointment with the judiciary and raising concerns about rising increasing communalism in the country.

Meanwhile, hitting out at Mr. Madani, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) said his remarks on "Om and Allah" have exposed his real mindset. "Was it a 'Sadbhavna Sammelan' or a gathering of Jamiat's poisonous group?" VHP national spokesperson Vinod Bansal asked, criticising Mr. Madani for trying to assert "his supremacy and that of Islam".

#### THE GHOST OF TIPU SULTAN

The political discourse in Karnataka is getting coarser by the day. A senior minister of the BJP government in Bengaluru recently said at a public rally that the leader of Opposition and former chief minister, Siddaramaiah, should be "finished off" just like Tipu Sultan was. Higher Education



Minister C N Ashwath Narayan has since regretted his remarks in the legislative assembly. Unfortunately, Narayan's remark is representative of the polarising rhetoric deployed by many senior BJP functionaries to mobilise voters. Narayan spoke soon after state BJP chief Nalin Kumar Kateel, and before him, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, invoked Tipu as a symbol of anti-Hindu politics. Siddaramaiah, in particular, has been their target as he had attacked the BJP campaign in the state as communal. The divisive speeches may or may not win the BJP votes, but in the long run it can do a great deal of harm to the state's record in privileging liberal, secular values.

The framing of Tipu Sultan in terms of his faith and as a divisive monarch is troubling and ahistorical, considering his record as a ruler of Mysore. BJP chief ministers such as B S Yediyurappa and Jagadish Shettar too have in the past, celebrated Tipu Jayanthi for Mysore had emerged as a major kingdom during the sultan's reign. The 18th century ruler, who died fighting the East India Company, is now pitted against Rani Chennamma and others, in a bid to create a fault line. This follows a pattern. The Karnataka BJP in recent times has sought to shift the emphasis of its politics from Hindu communitarianism that focused on patronising influential mutts, seers and religious groups to hardline Hindutva agendas. Since 2021, when Yediyurappa was shifted from the state leadership, the Karnataka BJP has campaigned aggressively on issues such as hijab and halal meat. The focus on furthering the religious fault line seems to have badly affected governance in the state. The monsoon, for instance, exposed the crumbling infrastructure in Bengaluru, the state capital and the main driver of the state's economy, whereas corruption charges have dented the Bommai government's image. On Friday, the chief minister presented the state budget, which had a Rs 10,000 crore grant component for the "comprehensive development" of Bengaluru including steps to end congestion and flooding in the city. This is welcome but how effective it will be depends on how seriously this will be implemented.

With elections due in April, political parties must rein in their leaders from pursuing the path of polarisation. Mandates ought to be sought on the present government's record not on real and imagined history. For a state and its people who want a better future.

## THE DEMAND FOR A GREATER TIPRALAND BY THE TIPRA MOTHA

### The story so far:

The newest political party in Tripura, the Tipraha Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance (TIPRA) Motha, floated in 2019 by Pradyot Bikram Manikya Debbarma, the son of Tripura's last king, has created a flutter with its demand for a Greater Tipraland. With this core demand, the party has brought other indigenous political parties under its fold. Its first foray into electoral politics in the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) elections in 2021 was marked by a sharp victory where it secured 18 of the 28 seats.

### What is Greater Tipraland?

Greater Tipraland is the core ideological demand of the TIPRA Motha. The party released what it called a Vision Document last week, where it said that it was committed to seeking a permanent solution upholding the rights of the indigenous people of Tripura as per the Constitution of India. The objective is to carve out a new State for the 19 indigenous tribes of Tripura under Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution. In its current form, the contours of the new State would go beyond the TTAADC areas to include several other villages where the Tiprasa (indigenous people of Tripura) reside in large numbers. In addition, the Motha would set up task forces to connect with the Tiprasa living in other regions of the country and the world to help them with their linguistic,



cultural, social, and economic development, according to Jagadish Debbarma, a TIPRA Motha leader and the Chairperson of the TTAADC. While the core ideology of the new party brinks on ethnic nationalism, the leadership of the Motha has been careful not to project itself as an “of the tribals, by the tribals and for the tribals only” party. Pradyot Manikya, has stated clearly in his media interactions that his party was inclusive and would also take the non-tribal population along.

#### **What is the genesis of this demand?**

On the face of it, the demand for Greater Tripaland appears to be a rehash of the demand for Tripaland put forth by the Indigenous People’s Front of Tripura (IPFT) in 2009 after it broke away from the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura (INPT). But Motha leader Jagadish Debbarma disagrees. The earlier Tripaland demand was to carve out a separate State for the tribal population of Tripura from the TTAADC areas, he explains. The present demand goes beyond the TTAADC areas and includes at least 36 more villages where the tribal population is in the range of 20 to 36%. This, in no way, would exclude the nine per cent Muslim population and the majority Hindu population coming within these limits, he hastens to add. According to the 1941 Census, the ratio of population of tribals and non-tribals in Tripura was almost 50:50. However, by the next Census, the tribal population was reduced to a little over 37% due to the huge influx of refugees from East Pakistan. Between 1950 and 1952, nearly 1.5 lakh refugees had entered Tripura for shelter. The flood of refugees led to bitter differences and, eventually, conflict between the tribals and the non-tribals escalated in 1980 and took the shape of armed insurgency. The demand for autonomous regions or separate statehood during this time metamorphosed to sovereignty and independence. However, after a political truce was reached between the State and the rebel groups, the demand for statehood was revived.

#### **How has this affected Tripura?**

It seems to have considerably polarised an already uneasy relationship between the tribals and the non-tribals since the State emerged from the days of armed insurgency. The TIPRA Motha put up a massive roadshow in November which is being hailed as one of the largest political mobilisation of tribals in the State.

### **PM MODI MENTIONS ‘BIMARU’ TAG IN UTTAR PRADESH, RAJASTHAN: WHAT DOES THIS TERM MEAN?**

On February 10, on the inaugural day of the Uttar Pradesh government’s two-day Investors’ Summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi recalled the tag of ‘BIMARU’, used to describe the state. He again used the term in Rajasthan two days later, at the inauguration of the New Delhi-Mumbai expressway’s first phase.

“For decades, some people have teased Rajasthan by calling it a BIMARU state. But BJP is making Rajasthan the strongest base of developed India,” he said, outlining benefits – like job creation – envisaged through the expressway that passes through the state. Rajasthan will have its Assembly elections later this year.

The BIMARU acronym has often been used in the past few decades to refer to the states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, usually to imply they have lagged in terms of economic growth, healthcare, education, and more. Its usage has also drawn criticism. But where did it come from?



### **What do BIMARU states mean, who coined the term?**

Ashish Bose, the late demographer (someone who studies a population and changes within it), coined this term in a paper presented to then-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. At this point in time, the states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand were not separate states and were part of the grouping. BIMARU means “sickly” in Hindi.

In an Economic and Political Weekly article in 2007, Bose explained, “I had coined the term...to pinpoint India’s demographic malady as far back as 1985 when I was asked to brief the then prime minister on India’s family planning programme. It is unfortunate that the BIMARU states continue to be BIMARU even today and what is worse, these states will continue to be BIMARU even after 25 years, as per the registrar general’s projections.”

Bose mainly argued that from a family planning and population control perspective, these four states – with their high population growth rates – were likely to offset the gains made elsewhere in the country. The national goal of reaching a “stabilising population”, meaning where the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 2.1 was achieved, was more difficult to achieve, therefore. TFR estimates the number of children each woman bears in her lifetime, on average.

“The good progress in family planning in the southern states cannot compensate for the slow progress of family planning in the northern states in bringing about population stabilisation. This will considerably delay the target date for population stabilisation,” Bose wrote. He cited provisional data from the 3rd round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) conducted in 2005-06.

### **What is the role of BIMARU states in population growth?**

“Erstwhile BIMARU states, which accounted for 41 per cent of India’s total population in 2001, will account for 43.5 per cent in 2026. This has tremendous political implications. It also shows that the share of BIMARU states in the absolute increase in India’s population during 2001-26 will be of the order of 50.4 per cent while the share of the south will be only 12.6 per cent,” Bose said.

A 2020 report of the National Commission on Population of the Union Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, titled ‘Report of the Technical Group on Population Projection’, said BIMARU states (excluding the three newly carved out states) will contribute to 49.1% of the population increase in India between 2011 and 2036.

Projected population growth of Indian states, as per a 2020 report of the National Commission on Population of the Union Ministry of Health & Family Welfare.

Population in Indian states also dictates the delimitation process or the number of seats allotted to them in Parliament. Currently, the seats are proportional to the Indian population as of the 1971 census. It was frozen until 2001 (and has now further been extended to 2026) to give states time to meet family planning goals.

Time and again, Southern states have stressed that the division of seats and devolution of funds to states on the basis of population is unfair to them. DMK member Kanimozhi NVN Somu said in Rajya Sabha in December 2022, “Tamil Nadu is the only state which sincerely and successfully implemented the family planning programme proposed by the Union government.”

“In North Indian states, family planning was not implemented with sincerity and due respect...It is absolutely ridiculous and very unfair that states which successfully implemented family



planning are penalised, and states that are reckless are being incentivised,” she said. Bose also pointed to how these states fare poorly in terms of indicators like women’s literacy, lower institutional childbirths (in a medical institution), etc.

However, there was a dip of 4 per cent in the population growth rate of these states — from 24.99 per cent in 1991-2001 to 20.92 per cent in 2001-11 — and it helped pulled down the country’s decadal growth rate.

#### **How has BIMARU been used over time?**

The BIMARU tag has been used to criticise the parties in power in these states, and also to showcase success in achieving some progress.

In 2012, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh remarked, “States that used to grow slowly in earlier periods have done much better. The average growth rate of the five poorest states exceeds the national average for the first time in any Plan period. I think we may be reaching the stage when the term “BIMARU States” can be relegated to history.”

There have also been studies on whether the categorisation continues to apply. According to a 2015 IIM Ahmedabad study on medical facilities in these states, it was noticed there were gaps. “All these states including Bihar (17.83), MP (7.53) and UP (3.91), except Rajasthan (61.19) are below the national average (20.74) in terms of total and rural government hospitals per million people,” it said.

NITI Aayog’s 2019-20 Health Index Round IV also ranked Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (in highest to lowest order) at the last four positions out of 19 large states.

#### **What are the alternatives to ‘BIMARU’?**

At times Odisha is also included in the grouping, as BIMAROU, although it is not as big a state in terms of population. An Empowered Action Group (EAG) was set up to include these five states in 2001.

Shailaja Chandra, a former Chief Secretary of Delhi and Executive Director of the National Population Stabilisation Fund, wrote in an article for the OECD, that “the National Rural Health Mission, India’s largest-ever health programme, started pumping resources into these ‘high-focus states.’”

### **NOT A PIPE DREAM**

Among the marquee schemes that the government hopes to showcase ahead of the general election next year is the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM). The aim here is to provide piped water to every rural household by 2024. In the Budget address, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman apportioned ₹69,684 crore, a 27% increase, from the ₹54,808 crore from the revised estimates of financial year 2022. However, the outlay reflects the extent of the work that remains. Of the targeted 19.3 crore rural households, only 3.2 crore had piped water in August 2019. The JJM dashboard on the Jal Shakti Ministry website says that as of February 2023, over 11 crore households, or about 57% of the targeted, now have tap water. While that is an impressive jump in percentage points for three years, it will be difficult with only 12 months to go to ensure that the remaining 47% are connected. So far, only the States of Goa, Gujarat, Haryana and Telangana have reported 100% coverage of eligible households with piped water, with Punjab and Himachal



Pradesh nearly there at over 97%. Excluding these, only 10 other States or Union Territories have reported over 60% coverage. Large, populous States such as Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan have reported only 30% coverage, and Madhya Pradesh, around 47%.

A fully functional tap water connection is defined as a household getting at least 55 litres of potable water per capita per day all through the year; however, local reports suggest that despite having a tap connection, several village households revert to their local groundwater resources as the quality of supplied tap water is inadequate. Few independent assessments of the scheme exist. A sample survey of around 3,00,000 eligible households that was commissioned by the Ministry of Water Resources to assess the functioning of the scheme found only three-fourths of them reported water seven days a week, and, on average, households were getting water for only three hours a day. While over 90% of institutions such as anganwadis and schools reported access to tap water, several of them reported high levels of chlorine as well as problems with bacterial contamination. Moreover, the current numbers on the adoption in households are based on self-reporting by villages and are not certified by a third party. Some States such as Bihar have stated that most of their connections were provided for under State funds and not under the JJM. Functional, permanent tap water is a basic necessity and rather than aim to reach just a numerical target, the government should try to evaluate the extent of quality, consistent adoption of tap water in rural India. While planned as a bottom-up scheme, the Centre must ensure that States with the lowest adoption and largest population be assisted with improving numbers, rather than only facilitating States that are close to the finishing line.

#### FINE OF RS 10 CRORE, LIFE TERM: WHAT IS UTTARAKHAND'S NEW ANTI-CHEATING LAW

A day after a protest in Dehradun over paper leaks and scams in government recruitment tests turned violent, the Uttarakhand Governor Friday gave his assent to an ordinance brought by the Pushkar Singh Dhama-led BJP government to prevent the use of unfair means in exams.

The Uttarakhand Competitive Examination (Measures For Control and Prevention of Unfair Means in Recruitment) Ordinance, 2023, has provisions of fines up to Rs 10 crore and life imprisonment for the guilty. It was urgently approved by CM Dhama and forwarded to Raj Bhavan. With Governor Lt Gen (retd) Gurmit Singh's assent, it became law within 24 hours.

The protest by the Uttarakhand Berozgaar Union had seen stones being hurled and the police resorting to lathi-charge on the protesters. Dhama met representatives of the Union, assuring them of his government's commitment to conduct "unbiased, cheating-free and transparent exams".

#### Provisions of the anti-cheating law

The ordinance said that the main aim behind the law was to prevent offences related to obstructing the sanctity of examinations, use of unfair means, leakage of question papers, and other irregularities. It covers public examinations for recruitment to posts under the state government, autonomous bodies run by the government, and authorities, corporations, and institutions operated with grants of the state government.

According to the ordinance, if any examinee is caught cheating or causing another examinee to cheat in a competitive examination (online and offline) or to have indulged in unfair means, he shall be punishable with imprisonment for three years and with a minimum fine of Rs 5 lakh. If the fine is not paid, the examinee shall be jailed for another nine months.





A second-time offender will be punishable with a minimum jail term of 10 years and fine of Rs 10 lakh. In default of payment of fine, he will be jailed for another 30 months.

If any person, printing press, service provider contracted or ordered for examination, management for conducting an examination, or any person and organisation authorised to keep and transport the examination material, any employee of the examination authority, limited liability partnership, coaching centre or any other institution has indulged in conspiracy or other unfair means, they shall be punished with a jail term of not less than 10 years, which may extend to life imprisonment. They will also be punished with a minimum fine of Rs 1 crore, which can go up to Rs 10 crore. If they can't pay the fine, the convicts will serve another jail term of three years.

Also, an applicant found cheating will be debarred for two to five years from the date of the chargesheet, and in case of conviction, from all competitive exams for 10 years. All the properties earned using unfair means will be seized. The offences are cognizable, non-bailable and non-compoundable.

Earlier, Uttarakhand BJP media in-charge Manveer Chauhan had said that the law was in the works from last year, after allegations of irregularities in the Uttarakhand Subordinate Services Selection Commission (UKSSSC) exams.

"It [the ordinance] was supposed to be brought in a cabinet meeting on Friday, but the meeting was postponed to February 15. However, the protest happened and we decided to bring the law a few days earlier," Chauhan said.

#### **Recent scams in exams**

For the past few days, there have been continuous agitations against multiple paper leaks in Uttarakhand since 2016.

For instance, irregularities were found in the 2016 village panchayat development officer exam. The recent Uttarakhand Public Service Commission (UKPSC) exam was cancelled after it turned out that exam papers had been leaked and sold to candidates.

The biggest in the list is the case pertaining to a written exam conducted by the UKSSSC on December 4 and 5 in 2021, in which around 1.6 lakh candidates appeared and 916 were selected for different departments. After the results were announced, student organisations alleged that question papers were sold to the examinees before the test.

The latest trigger for the protests was the UKPSC patwari and accountant exam, held in January, in which 1.4 lakh candidates appeared for 563 vacancies. The exam was subsequently cancelled, and was conducted again on Sunday.

#### **UP's anti-cheating law of 1992**

In the late 1980s and early 90s, public examinations in Uttar Pradesh (from which Uttarakhand was carved out in 2000) frequently witnessed allegations of cheating, involving officials, teachers, students and even local gangsters.

In 1991, then Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Kalyan Singh appointed Rajnath Singh as the education minister. Both leaders planned to establish a system to curb cheating. Next year, in 1992, the Kalyan Singh government promulgated a stringent anti-cheating Act. The law aimed to end the



practice of mass copying in school and university examinations, and contained a provision that any student found copying would be handcuffed and sent to jail.

The Act made the use of unfair means in exams a non-bailable cognizable offence and allowed the police to enter examination centres to conduct checks and arrest the offenders.

During the UP-Board examinations of 1992, newspapers in the state published pictures of handcuffed students caught cheating in the exams, causing an uproar. Due to the strict implementation of the law, around 17 per cent of the students left the examination midway. As a result, only 14.70 per cent of intermediate and 30.30 per cent of high school candidates passed the board exams. The Mulayam Singh Yadav-led Samajwadi Party (SP) made this an election issue.

In the 1993 elections, the SP came to power in alliance with the Bahujan Samaj Party, and scrapped the anti-copying ordinance within hours of taking oath. The government also implemented the 'self-centre' rule, allowing schools and colleges to become examination centres for their own students.

Rajesh Tiwari, Vice-Principal at the Government Inter College in Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh), said there was an increase in cases of cheating and unfair means after this, though the pass percentage in government exams improved.

In 1997, with the return of the BJP and Kalyan Singh as the CM, the government reintroduced the Anti-Copying Act, but with the change that the offence was made bailable.

#### IAF'S ACQUISITION OF 114 FIGHTER JETS TO BE PART OF A MAJOR PROCUREMENT PLAN

The delayed process for the procurement of 114 multi-role fighter jets (MRFA) is set to take off soon and along with three different indigenous fighter development programmes, it will result in a mega 500-fighter aircraft acquisition process for the armed forces. This will arrest the dwindling fighter strength of the Indian Air Force and enable it to reach the sanctioned strength of 42 squadrons.

On the delay in the process, he said they were evaluating how much of "Make in India" could happen, as also localisation and capability to upgrade the aircraft locally rather than depend on the foreign manufacturer.

#### **Dwindling strength**

The IAF is currently down to 31 fighter squadrons as against the sanctioned strength of 42, which is set to dwindle further as the remaining three MiG-21 squadrons are phased out by 2025. By the end of the decade, phasing out of other aircraft would also begin. On this, Air Marshal Tiwari said reaching 42 squadrons would take time and the immediate effort was to arrest the drawdown in strength. The 83 Light Combat Aircraft (LCA)-Mk1A that would begin coming in from next year followed by the LCA-Mk2 and fifth-generation Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) in the near future, along with the MRFA, would arrest this, he added.

There is also a twin-engine deck-based fighter (TEDBF) on the drawing board for the Navy's aircraft carriers. Girish S. Deodhare, Director-General of the Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) under the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), said they were looking at six squadrons of the LCA-Mk2 (108 aircraft), seven squadrons of the AMCA (126 aircraft) and up to 100 TEDBF. Besides, the IAF would receive 83 LCA Mk1As and 114 MRFAs.



Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL) officials said that they expected an additional order for up to 50 LCA-Mk1A. In addition, a decision in 26 multi-role aircraft for the Navy was expected shortly, between Boeing F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet and the Dassault Aviation Rafale. Also, the final deal to procure 12 additional SU-30MKIs to replace the ones lost in accidents and 21 MIG-29s from Russia had been stuck, which both the IAF and Russian officials said has only been delayed but was on track.

### **Developing AMCA**

On the AMCA, which is awaiting government sanction, Air Marshal Tiwari said based on global trends it would take 10-12 years for its development and around three to five years after that to begin production. The HAL had said that they were on track to deliver the first LCA-Mk1A in February 2024. As reported by The Hindu, ADA officials had said the LCA-Mk2, which would be much more capable than the LCA-MK1A, was expected to be ready for production by 2027.

On the sidelines of Aero India, Navy chief Adm. R. Hari Kumar said they may get up to 45 TEDBFs by 2040. Dr. Deodhare said the TEDBF is expected to take first flight by 2026 and to be ready for production by 2031.

## **4G IN NAME ONLY: DATA NEEDLES STUTTER IN 'GREY SPOTS' IN INDIA**

Parvez Ahmed Qureshi has been complaining to his telecom provider, Vodafone Idea, that his mobile Internet speeds are unusably low, not even reaching the 512 kbps (kilobits per second) previously promised to broadband consumers. But the operator's representatives have visited the 25-year-old's home in the Songadh taluka of Gujarat's Tapi district and concluded that the speeds are within acceptable limits, blaming network congestion for slow Internet.

### **Weak connectivity**

Between the villages without any 4G network coverage whatsoever and the large cities where high speeds are taken for granted, lie the oft-ignored smaller urban settlements struggling with weak connectivity. These towns do have 4G network towers, but telecom users such as Mr. Qureshi struggle to get usable Internet, typically because there aren't enough towers, and those that are installed are overloaded with traffic from a high number of users.

Places without cellular connectivity are called "white spots". But harder to map are the "grey spots", areas which show "connected" but may not let users get enough of their access. Such towns, which lose out in the digital divide in a less-documented way, may start getting more attention, now that the definition of "broadband", which 4G networks are typically classified under in India, has been upgraded from 512 kbps to a minimum of 2 mbps.

According to data published by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) from September 2022, the three main telecom providers classify the majority of their subscriber base — almost 95% — as "broadband" customers, which now means that they should be able to access Internet speeds of at least 2 mbps.

Mr. Qureshi would ideally like to get a fixed line broadband connection but the only operator in Songadh is the state-owned RailTel that would charge over ₹4,000 to fix a connection, a fee that he says he can't afford. Like him, the vast majority of Indian Internet users — over 96% — primarily use wireless connections offered by Vodafone Idea, Bharti Airtel and Reliance Jio.



Speeds below 2 mbps are not sufficient for video calls, streaming video and other such uses to which the better connected subscribers in cities have become accustomed. In fact, the connectivity in these cities is so much better that the condition of barely connected towns is less visible. This can be inferred from the difference between the median and mean Internet speeds that are recorded by users. The gap is yawning: December 2022 data by Ookla show that the mean wireless Internet speed in India was 108.86 mbps, while the median was just 25.29 mbps. The difference between mean and median measures is that the former shows what an average user is likely to get as an Internet speed, whereas the median speed is just the midpoint of the fastest and slowest connections. A high deviation between the two is an indicator of high inequality in the quality of access.

Fixed line broadband and public WiFi hotspots aren't faring too well either. TRAI data from November 2022 show that there are only 3.18 crore fixed line broadband subscribers in India, and only 10.8 lakh "fixed wireless" or WiFi hotspot subscribers. "A large number of rural areas, smaller towns and remote areas are not particularly lucrative to telecom operators," telecom analyst Mahesh Uppal said. "So even though they have connectivity in many of those places, they don't prioritise that connectivity."

## LEVERAGING J&K'S LITHIUM RESERVES

### The story so far:

News of the discovery of "5.9 million tonnes inferred resources of lithium" in the Salal-Haimana area of Reasi district, Jammu & Kashmir, by the Geological Survey of India has been received as a game-changer in India's impending transition to a green economy. The term 'inferred' refers to the 'preliminary exploration stage', the second of a four-step process, according to the Mines and Minerals (Development and Exploration) Act 1957.

### Why is this significant?

Lithium-ion batteries are used in wind turbines, solar panels, and electric vehicles, all of which are crucial in a green economy.

A World Bank study suggests that the demand for critical metals such as lithium (Li) and cobalt is expected to rise by nearly 500% by 2050. While "the global electric vehicle market is projected to reach \$823.75 billion by 2030, registering a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 18.2% from 2021 to 2030," India's market is projected to register a CAGR of 23.76% by 2028. India is seeking to secure its critical mineral supplies and build self-sufficiency in this sector.

As India currently imports all of its Li from Australia and Argentina and 70% of its Li-ion cell requirement from China and Hong Kong, the lithium reserves in J&K could boost the domestic battery-manufacturing industry. If the perceived size of the mineral reserves in J&K is borne out by further exploration, India could jump ahead of China vis-à-vis its Li stockpile.

The J&K reserves will also help advance the Indian government's ambitious plan of "30% EV penetration in private cars, 70% for commercial vehicles, and 80% for two and three-wheelers by 2030 for the automobile industry." They will strengthen India's National Mission on Transformative Mobility and Battery Storage as well.



### **What are the geostrategic concerns?**

Critical mineral dependencies constitute a major geostrategic concern in the transition to net-zero carbon energy systems. In the present scenario, as countries seek to avoid dependencies and vulnerabilities related to critical minerals, the latter are likely to be at least as important as oil and gas in the near future. A high level of dependence on China for Li and other crucial metals and their derivatives are also perceived to be sources of energy security risks.

China currently controls 77% of the global lithium-ion battery manufacturing capacity and is home to six of the world's 10 manufacturing companies. As a result, the EU, the U.S., Canada, India, and other major economies have been trying to leverage alternative supplies that can challenge China's geopolitical dominance in this area. For example, responding to perceived national security concerns, the Canadian government has asked Chinese companies to divest from Canadian lithium-mining companies.

The growing geopolitical rivalry with China makes India's security considerations more immediate as well, especially also in light of the longstanding, and recently escalating, territorial and border disputes. To reduce dependence on China, the Indian government and industry are pushing for a 'Rare Earths Mission' to exploit the country's critical mineral reserves, which account for 6% of the world's rare-earths' reserves prior to the discovery of Li in J&K.

The new discovery has more geostrategic implications considering the geopolitical sensitivity of its wider location. Although Reasi is in the relatively more stable Jammu region, the Union territory of J&K has been the site of historical cross-border tensions between India and Pakistan, domestic insurgency, and terrorism. If the local populace isn't meaningfully engaged in the impending Li extraction project, the resulting tension could introduce new frontiers of socio-environmental conflict.

### **What are the environmental effects?**

The applications of Li in renewable energy infrastructure often obscures its significant environmental consequences. Extracting Li from hard rock mines, similar to what has already been proposed in J&K, entails open-pit-mining followed by roasting the ore using fossil fuels. Industry estimates suggest that this process consumes 170 cubic metres of water and releases 15 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> for every tonne of Li extracted.

Open-pit-mining, refining, and waste disposal from these processes substantially degrade the environment, including depleting and contaminating waterways and groundwater, diminishing biodiversity, and releasing considerable air pollution. This said, the geological context of mining in J&K differs from Australia, which has the largest Li stock in hard rock mines, in one major way.

In Australia, Li-bearing pegmatite deposits are found in the ancient geological regions of Pilbara and Yilgarn cratons, whose continental rocks have been stable for over a billion years. The Himalaya on the other hand is the youngest mountain range in the world and is much more unstable (as evidenced by the ongoing tragedy in Joshimath). Incidents of land sinking have also been reported from a village in Doda district in Chenab valley, which extends to some parts of Reasi.

In the densely populated context of India, the socio-environmental effects of mining are likely to be far worse than they have been in Australia and likely comparable to lithium extraction in South America.



### **What can we learn from South America?**

As India embarks on this new journey, it could learn from the experiences of South American countries, especially the 'lithium triangle' of Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina, which contain roughly half the world's known Li. In Bolivia and Chile, Li extraction has been either in the hands of the state or requires mining companies to enter into a contract with state-owned companies.

Indigenous resistance and increased awareness of the environmental impact of Li-mining has prompted global carmakers, including Mercedes-Benz and Volkswagen, to look for Li mined with the lowest socio-ecological impact. Other corporations are making similar amends. Battery Mineral Resources Corp. recently signed an agreement with the Comunidad Agricola Potrerillos Alto and the Comunidad Agricola Punitaqui. Another mining giant, Monumental Minerals, signed an agreement with the Ayquina-Turi Indigenous Community in Chile for 40 exploration concessions totaling 8,500 hectares at the Salar de Turi Li project.

While such comparisons must account for inter-regional differences, these developments point to the importance of a strong regulatory apparatus that can address both the environmental and the social consequences of Li mining.

### **What safeguards does India's mining sector have?**

State government officials in J&K have said plans for Li exploration will involve local communities, who will also be prioritised for jobs in exploration and mine development. Yet employment in mining may not fully offset the consequences on local agriculture, animal husbandry, and tourism.

In recognition of the local effects of mining, in 2015, the Lok Sabha amended the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act 1957 to establish the 'District Mineral Foundation' (DMF). The DMF is a non-profit statutory 'trust' for every Indian district affected by mining-related operations that should "work for the interest and benefit of persons, and areas affected by mining-related operations". In practice, the DMFs have become sites of centralised bureaucratic control, without meaningful public participation or accountability.

For example, a CAG audit in May 2022 noted that the District Collectors of Bokaro, Dhanbad, and Ranchi incurred an expense of ₹1,568.04 crore from DMF funds, without identifying the areas affected by mining or a list of affected people. Ironically, the auditors were denied access to documents related to the functioning of the State-Level Monitoring Committee.

The general failure of DMFs adds to concerns expressed by environmentalists and concerned citizens about the recent history of weakening of the environmental impact assessment framework.

The geostrategic importance of Li exploration and extraction makes it even more important that the exploration and extraction of resources should be done in the public interest, and must pre-empt any serious environmental and social problems. Equally importantly, the most effective use of Li reserves should be for the most important parts of the renewable-energy transition, which would also aid the goals of addressing energy poverty and sustainable development.

To these ends, reducing luxury consumption and promoting public transport should also be an important part of the agenda of a just transition.



## NOW, NO AGE BAR TO REGISTER FOR CADAVER ORGAN TRANSPLANT

In a major tweak to the organ donation policy, the Union Health Ministry on Tuesday said the clause that people aged beyond 65 could not receive cadaver organ transplants had been removed.

“The government has decided to do away with the ceiling. Now, people beyond 65 in need of an organ donation will also be eligible to get one,” an official source in the Health Ministry said.

The government has decided to do away with the clause in the National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organisation (NOTTO) guidelines as it violates the right to life, the source added. “Now an individual of any age can register for organ transplant.”

Also, earlier, an organ recipient could register for a prospective transplant only in the domicile State. The States such as Gujarat had made it mandatory for registered patients to furnish a domicile certificate to be eligible for a transplant. Last November, the Gujarat High Court quashed the discriminatory policy of the State government.

“In line with the judgment, the Indian government has decided to do away with the domicile policy and all States have been intimated about this decision. A patient irrespective of domicile State can register in any other State for a transplant. The patient will be allotted a unique ID by NOTTO on registering which will get carried forward even if the patient changes multiple hospitals in different States,” the source said.

### **No registration fee**

Apart from this, certain States such as Kerala and Maharashtra have been charging fees ranging from ₹5,000 to ₹10,000 for registering organ transplant patients. “The Health Ministry has intimated States to stop charging registration fees from patients,” said the source.

The Health Ministry is charting a “One Nation, One Policy” for organ donation and transplantation. “We are introducing a chapter in the school curriculum regarding organ donation awareness for students,” the source said.

According to Health Ministry data, the number of organ transplants has increased by over three times from 4,990 in 2013 to 15,561 in 2022.

## INDIA ACCOUNTS FOR 52% OF WORLD'S NEW LEPROSY PATIENTS, SAYS MANDAVIYA

With a renewed focus on tackling leprosy, the Union Health Ministry has devised a strategic road map for achieving zero cases of the infection by 2030.

Despite India being declared “Leprosy Eliminated” in 2005, the country still accounts for over half (52%) of the world’s new leprosy patients, Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya said in a written message of the National Strategic Plan and Roadmap for Leprosy 2023-2027. Leprosy is a chronic bacterial infection, which affects skin, nerves, lungs and eyes.

Health officials have noted that earlier gains made in the leprosy programme were reversed during COVID-19 as a sudden decline in case detection numbers was noted. Early detection of the infection in the affected person can save them from physical disability.

With the COVID pandemic in 2020, case detection dropped by 43% in 2020-21 and by 34% in 2021-22 in comparison to the pre-COVID year 2019-20. “Annual case detection rate has halved



from 8.13 cases per lakh population to 4.56 cases in 2020-21. In 2021-22, it has settled at 5.52 cases per lakh,” the plan document notes.

### **Grade 2 disabilities**

The Ministry noted that decline in detection has led to increase in patients with grade 2 disabilities. COVID-19 in India had its severe impact on leprosy case detection services, and resulted in hidden cases and a probable increase in grade 2 disabilities, which may delay attainment of the goal of zero leprosy, it has stated. In 2021-22, a total of 75,394 new cases were detected in India. A total of 1,863 grade 2 disabilities detected amongst the new leprosy cases during 2021-22, indicating a G2D rate of 1.36 per million population and 2.47% G2D among new cases. In 2022-23, for data available till August 2022, this rate has gone a notch up to 1.71 per million population.

Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Dadra Nagar Haveli and Daman Diu have either one or more districts (total 82 districts) which are yet to achieve leprosy elimination target and contributes to more than 90% cases in the country.

## **UNDERSTANDING INDIA'S MENTAL HEALTHCARE ACT, 2017**

### **The story so far:**

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in a report flagged the “inhuman and deplorable” condition of all 46 government-run mental healthcare institutions across the country. The report notes that the facilities are “illegally” keeping patients long after their recovery, in what is an “infringement of the human rights of mentally ill patients”. These observations were made after visits to all operational government facilities, to assess the implementation of the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 (MHA).

### **What does the MHA, 2017 say?**

The MHA, 2017 “centered the agency of individuals, acknowledged their right to live as part of a community [under Section 19], and focused on rehabilitation,” says Ms. Priti Sridhar, CEO of Mariwala Health Initiative (MHI). Under Section 19 of the Act, the government was made responsible for creating opportunities to access less restrictive options for community living — such as halfway homes, sheltered accommodations, rehab homes, and supported accommodation. The Act also discourages using physical restraints (such as chaining), unmodified electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), and pushes for the right to hygiene, sanitation, food, recreation, privacy, and infrastructure. More importantly, the Act recognised that “people have a capacity of their own — unless proven otherwise,” says Tanya Fernandes, a researcher with the Centre for Mental Health Law & Policy. Additionally, under Section 5, people are empowered to make “advance directives”. They can nominate a representative for themselves, thereby potentially helping to eliminate absolute forms of guardianship in favour of supported decision-making. This is barring cases where the person needs a higher degree of care and support. Experts note this was the first time a psychosocial approach to mental health was adopted. The Act acknowledged that external factors — such as income, social status, and education — impact mental well-being, and therefore, recovery needs a psychiatric as well as a social input.





### What are the challenges?

While the MHA safeguards the rights of people in mental healthcare establishments, enforcement challenges remain. Almost 36.25% of residential service users at state psychiatric facilities were found to be living for one year or more in these facilities, according to a 2018 report by the Hans Foundation.

Under the MHA, all States are required to establish a State Mental Health Authority and Mental Health Review Boards (MHRBs) — bodies that can further draft standards for mental healthcare institutes, oversee their functioning and ensure they comply with the Act. Ms. Fernandes notes that in a majority of States, “these bodies are yet to be established or remain defunct...Further, many States have not notified minimum standards which are meant to ensure the quality of MHEs.” Ms. Sridhar further notes that the Act takes on a human rights lens by shifting the obligation of care onto different stakeholders — including caregivers, government institutions, police officials, and mental health practitioners. Poor budgetary allocation and utilisation of funds creates a scenario where shelter homes remain underequipped, establishments understaffed, and professionals and service providers not adequately trained to deliver proper healthcare, she added. While Section 19 recognises the right of people to “live in, be part of, and not be segregated from society,” there have been no concrete efforts towards implementation, according to Ms. Fernandes. The dearth of alternative community-based services further complicates access to rehabilitation.

### WORLD HINDI CONFERENCE IN FIJI TO HIGHLIGHT LINKS WITH PACIFIC OCEAN REGION: MEA

Announcing the 12th World Hindi Conference to be held in Fiji from February 15 to 17, Saurabh Kumar, Secretary (East) of the Ministry of External Affairs, said the efforts of the Government of India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on promoting Hindi had enhanced the stature of the language across the world.

“We have achieved limited progress at the United Nations regarding Hindi. The UN has made a provision to provide all the important messages and press releases in Hindi. This provision has been made also for Bangla and Urdu. We will make efforts to ensure rightful place for Hindi at the UN,” said Mr. Kumar, elaborating on the role of Hindi in India’s outreach to the world, especially in places that received Indian indentured labourers during the 19th century.

Mr. Kumar said the upcoming World Hindi Conference in Fiji would provide an opportunity for India to highlight the links between India and the Pacific Ocean region where Hindi-speaking people from the Gangetic belt and from other parts of India were taken during the 19th century. A delegation of 270 academics, experts and Hindi writers would be flown to Fiji to participate in the conference.

#### Indian heritage

“140 years ago, thousands of Indians were taken to Fiji during the colonial period as labourers and today their descendants residing in Fiji are proud of their Indian heritage and language,” said Mr. Kumar.

The World Hindi Conference was started to promote the language across the world and the first such event was held in 1975 in Nagpur. “This year’s World Hindi Conference is our humble tribute to those forefathers,” said Mr. Kumar.



The conference will be inaugurated by Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka and India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar. The gathering will be addressed by Deputy Prime Minister of Fiji Biman Prasad who was recently on a visit to India. Mr. Prasad described the World Hindi Conference as "historic and appropriate".

"Fiji is probably the only country outside India that has Hindi as an official language. Hindi is being taught from primary to secondary schools and offered as a language of study in university. The new coalition government has just announced that Hindi along with English and our indigenous language will also be spoken in Parliament," Mr. Prasad said.

#### OVER 1,000 PANGOLINS POACHED AND TRAFFICKED IN INDIA IN PAST FIVE YEARS

On the eve of World Pangolin Day observed on February 18, a not-for-profit organisation working on the international trade of animals and plants, has brought out a fact sheet reporting that 1,203 pangolins have been found in illegal wildlife trade in India from 2018 to 2022.

Up to 24 States and one Union Territory saw seizures of pangolins and their derivatives. Odisha reported the maximum number of incidents, with 154 pangolins in 74 seizures. It was followed by Maharashtra with 135 pangolins in 47 seizure incidents. The publication, titled 'India's Pangolins Buried in Illegal Wildlife Trade', has tracked 342 total incidents during this time period.

Merwyn Fernandes, coordinator of TRAFFIC's India office, said in the organisation's fact sheet that up to 50% of seizures included live pangolins and 40% involved pangolin scales. "India reports a significant number of pangolin trafficking incidents reflected by seizures across the country. They are poached mainly for international markets in China and southeast Asia for their scales, which are used as an ingredient in traditional medicines," he was quoted as saying.

India is home to two species: the Indian Pangolin, found across the subcontinent; and the Chinese Pangolin, found across a larger area in south Asia. Bihar, West Bengal, and Assam see the presence of both. Both species are included under India's Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act that could result in a jail term for those hunting animals listed here.

An analysis of illegal pangolin trade in India by TRAFFIC in 2018 reported poaching of 6,000 pangolins between 2009 and 2017.

#### FOSSIL AND TIME

Sporadically, but surely, palaeontologists report intriguing discoveries from India. In January, a team discovered 92 dinosaur nesting sites with 256 fossilised eggs of the titanosaurus — among the largest of its kind, from 100-66 million years ago, when 'India' was a continent and yet to merge into the Eurasian land mass. Similarly, the deserts of Kutch, Gujarat and the Deccan traps in Maharashtra bear witness to the forces that shaped the diverse geography, and tangentially history, of the most populous country. Unlike the quest to preserve cultural history and man-made artefacts from archaeology, there has been limited effort to preserve and communicate at large this natural 'geo-history' such as rock formations, sediment and fossils. For decades now, researchers have been warning that this neglect is leading to an erasure of this history from the public mind and a destruction as well as appropriation of this natural wealth. To that end, the draft Geo-heritage Sites and Geo-relics (Preservation and Maintenance) Bill, 2022, piloted by the Ministry of Mines, is seen as a step to give the process of such conservation firmer footing.



The Bill's provisions give the Director General of the Geological Survey of India (GSI), a subordinate body of the Ministry of Mines, the power to declare sites as having 'geo-heritage' value, take possession of relics (fossils, rocks) that rest in private hands, prohibit construction 100 metres around such a site, penalise — with fines of up to ₹5 lakh and possibly imprisonment — vandalism, defacement, and violations of directives by the Director General of the GSI. This has rankled experts who work outside the GSI-fold in central and State universities, institutes of national importance and private organisations who fear that such absolute vesting of powers in the GSI alone may impede palaeontological research. They demand a more inclusive body, on the lines of a National Geoheritage Authority, that can, more democratically, decide on declaring sites as being of 'geohistorical' importance and how best to preserve artefacts and finds. The government, it is learnt, is still far from introducing the Bill in Parliament and deliberating on several aspects. While there are merits and demerits to either approach on governance, it is important to keep in mind that legislation, while acting as a ring fence, ought not to become a tool for suppressing independent investigation. Given the premium for land and India's economic needs, there will be conflict over questions of preservation and livelihood, but any legislation must endeavour to balance these forces and enable consensus.

#### WOMEN'S PREMIER LEAGUE: AN AUCTION FOR THE BOOKS

There were Cinderella stories plenty on a busy, buzzing auction on Monday of the Women's Premier League (WPL). Except, these fairy tale protagonists wore cricket cleats not crystal sandals, and kept them on, not needing to be rescued by anybody else. The world's leading women cricketers notched hefty WPL contracts — India star Smriti Mandhana on top of the pile with Rs 3.4 crore — for themselves from the five bidding franchises based on their skill, and sowed dreams of earning big from cricket in young minds who will look up to them. Not quite 25 even, Siliguri's Richa Ghosh might become a home owner soon if her father's dream of buying her a house near Eden Gardens plays out after going for Rs 1.9 crore. With the BCCI coming good on its pledge to offer an equal platform to women cricketers, a whole bunch of aspiring athletes can dream of taking up that sport as a career, and play in front of large crowds, just like the men, if they can summon equally thrilling cricket.

The early figures are impressive. Only the women's NBA and England's Women's Super League in football reportedly have bigger broadcast deals. England cricket star Nat Scivers' Rs 3.2 crore earning is almost three times her national central contract and it is a staggering 10 times the highest sum paid out in the Hundred or Australia's women's Big Bash. Leading female rugby players in England earn a sixth of that figure, and Scivers will pocket a cool £100,000 more than what England's UEFA Euro captain and Arsenal star, Leah Williamson was believed to have been paid in the 2021-22 season. More importantly though, all the cricketers will now be able to avail the technical, financial and strategic coaching expertise of a pro league.

For the Indian team, the timing couldn't have been any better. Freshly minted U19 champions, the start of the WPL means franchises will begin to deploy scouting armies into the hinterland to unearth talent. India is yet to win an ICC World Cup for women and the WPL gives a fillip to women's domestic structure, as franchise expertise will likely extend to women's teams. The likes of Mahela Jayawardene will be available to pick brains of, while the best of analysts, physios, trainers and specialist coaches will become available. Expect the skills and big-hitting to upgrade several notches in coming years. The big test of course is if the five teams will be able to pull in the crowds to the bleachers like the men's game does and much curiosity centres around finding that answer.



## T BALARAM: A STRIKER FOR THE BOOKS

With the passing of the legendary Tulsidas Balaram, aged 86, Indian football has lost another key link to its glory years. Together with P K Banerjee and Chuni Goswami, who died in a space of a couple of months in 2020, Balaram propelled India to heights it can only dream of today. They were the fulcrum of the Indian team that was among the finest in Asia then and frequently punched above its weight in the world — a fourth-place finish at the 1956 Olympics, a gold medal at the 1962 Asian Games, runners-up at the prestigious Merdeka Cup were among the team's achievements.

To a generation of fans, who readily consumes international football but barely bothers about local players, it's hard not to overstate Balaram's achievements and the impact he, along with Goswami and Banerjee, had on the national team under the visionary coach Syed Abdul Rahim. Goswami was all flair, Banerjee was a combination of brawn and brain, and Balaram wowed the stands with his pace and inventiveness. From 1958 to 1962, India won 12 out of the 16 games in which they played together. In the same period, the Balaram-Banerjee-Goswami trio scored 20 out of India's 36 goals: During the triumphant Asian Games campaign in 1962, they were responsible for nine of the 11 goals India scored.

The golden era is a reminder of how far Indian football has fallen behind. The Balarams and the Banerjees did not play on lush fields, nor did they take home fat pay cheques. But they kept Indian football relevant on a global stage. The new All India Football Federation management has promised to revive some of the prominent domestic tournaments as well as take part in competitions like the Merdeka Cup. It might not lead to an immediate turn of fortunes but at least it will be a step in the right direction to protect the legacy of the true heroes of Indian football.



# DreamIAS



## BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

### FACTORS BEHIND MODERATING CAD, HOW IT WILL IMPACT MARKETS

While data released by the government on Wednesday shows that India's exports and imports declined by 6.59% and 3.63% respectively in January, there are indications that the current account deficit (CAD) – the difference between exports and imports of goods and services – will moderate despite the global slowdown triggered by the rising inflation and interest rates.

The moderation in CAD, expected to be aided by the fall in commodity prices, rising workers remittances and services exports, and abatement of selling pressure by foreign investors, is set to boost sentiment on the investment front, as it will also bring the pressure off the currency.

#### **What is the significance of CAD?**

When the value of the goods and services that a country imports exceeds the value of the products it exports, it is called the current account deficit. CAD and the fiscal deficit together make up the twin deficits – the enemies of the stock market and investors. If the current account – the country's trade and transactions with other countries – shows surplus, that indicates money is flowing into the country, boosting the foreign exchange reserves and the value of rupee against the dollar. These are factors that will have ramifications on the economy and the stock markets as well as on returns on investments by people.

According to the RBI, the CAD, which was at \$36.4 billion for the quarter ending September 2022, is expected to moderate in the second half of 2022-23 and remain eminently manageable and within the parameters of viability. "CAD for the first half of 2022-23 stood at 3.3% of GDP. The situation has shown improvement in Q3:2022-23 as imports moderated in the wake of lower commodity prices, resulting in narrowing of the merchandise trade deficit," RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das said while unveiling the monetary policy on February 8.

#### **Will capital flows improve?**

While there is a perception in the markets that capital flows could come under some pressure with China's reopening and any deviations in monetary policy expectations, inflows are expected to increase to the economy on the whole, as foreign investors are unlikely to keep away from India, which is expected to witness one of the highest growth rates among large economies. At a time when the economies of many developed markets are expected to take a hit, the RBI has projected the GDP growth for the next fiscal (FY2024) at 6.4% and the Union Budget has indicated a capital expenditure of Rs 10 lakh crore (over \$ 120 billion).

Moreover, with the rise in interest rates in India after the RBI hiked the repo rate by 250 basis points to 6.50%, non-resident Indian deposits, remittances, and FPI investment in debt are expected to rise further. NRI deposits had increased by \$3.62 billion to \$134.49 billion in the April-November period of 2022, according to RBI data.

Capital flow into India came under pressure in 2022 following the sharp rise in interest rates in the US. While FPIs pulled out Rs121,439 crore in 2022, even in the first six weeks of 2023, the FPI flow has been negative and the equity markets have witnessed a net outflow of Rs32,887 crore till February 16.

While the flow of capital will depend upon the interest rate movements and currency movements vis-a-vis the US dollar, there is optimism among global investors about India.

#### How will moderating CAD impact the market?

While rising CAD raises concerns among investors as it hurts the currency and thereby the inflow of funds into the markets, a notable decline in CAD in January has improved market sentiments. The benchmark Sensex at BSE rose 407 points intraday on Thursday before closing at 61,319 with a gain of 44 points or 0.07%.

Experts say that CAD is very important for the currency. The value of an economy hinges a lot on the value of its currency and thereby, it also supports the equity markets by keeping the fund flow intact.

While the numbers for January have come good, experts say this needs to be sustained. “The reduction in CAD, thanks to services exports, is a positive sign. However, we need to maintain this for many more months before we can say that the CAD worry is behind us,” said Nilesh Shah, MD, Kotak Mahindra Mutual Fund.

#### THE EXPRESS VIEW: PRICING IT RIGHT

India’s exports of farm produce are set to scale a new high in 2022-23, surpassing the \$50.2 billion achieved last fiscal. But so are imports, which have grown at nearly twice the rate as exports during April-December 2022 over April-December 2021. As a result, the overall agri-trade surplus is expected to further shrink from the \$20.2 billion and \$17.8 billion levels of 2020-21 and 2021-22 respectively. The surplus in agriculture trade matters because this is among the few sectors — software services being another — where India has some comparative advantage. The slowing down of exports, and imports rising faster, has largely to do with world commodity prices. These had peaked in March-June period following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but have since fallen: The benchmark FAO Food Price Index reading for January was at a 16-month-low.

Policymakers in India should not be oblivious to the above international price movements. The ban or restrictions clamped on wheat, sugar and rice exports over the last one year, coupled with allowing duty-free imports of crude edible oils, were in response to high domestic as well as global food inflation. While prices are still elevated and stocks not all that comfortable, the situation can change with bumper crops. The prospects of that in wheat, mustard, chickpea and red lentil look quite bright for now. Both export and import policies need to react dynamically in the event. The Narendra Modi government has, in the past, also imposed stocking limits on the pulses, oilseeds and edible oil trade, going against the grain of its own now-aborted farm reform laws. Such manifestly anti-producer measures aren’t in the long-term interest of consumers either. Tariffs, not quantitative restrictions, are the right instruments of trade policy.

The Modi government needs to also pay attention to India’s faltering cotton exports and spiraling vegetable oil imports. Both are manifestations of official dithering over technologies to boost crop yields. India’s cotton production peaked in 2013-14 and the output in 2021-22 plunged to a 12-year-low. Not surprising that the country has turned from a net exporter to a net importer of cotton today. The same goes for vegetable oils, where the import bill has more than doubled from \$9.7 billion to an estimated \$21.5-22 billion this year. A country that has a natural advantage in cultivating cotton and depends on imports to meet over 60 per cent of its edible oil consumption



requirement clearly does not have the luxury to say no to new cropping technologies, genetically modified or otherwise.

#### OFF-BUDGET BORROWINGS — A STATE-WISE LOOK

While tabling the Budget a week ago, Telangana Finance Minister T. Harish Rao accused the Centre of “creating hurdles after hurdles” in the development of the State. He said that the State had resorted to off-Budget borrowings to complete irrigation projects in the shortest time but the Centre had imposed borrowing limits. This cut in borrowing limit, he argued, was against the “spirit of federalism”.

Off-Budget borrowings are loans obtained by government entities, such as PSUs or special purpose vehicles, on behalf of the government to finance its expenditure. According to the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, these borrowings are not included while computing the debt and the fiscal deficit of the State governments. However, the State government is responsible for repaying the loan and servicing the debt from its Budget.

As extra-Budgetary borrowings find no mention in the Budget documents, one has to rely on the CAG reports to ascertain the figures. Five Southern States — Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka — accounted for ₹2.34 lakh crore, around 93%, of the total off-Budget liabilities of eleven major States analysed.

In almost all States, if the off-Budget loans were added to their declared debt, it can take their debt-to-GSDP ratio even further away from State targets.

Further, the guarantees given by the States to PSUs and SPVs to raise loans or borrowings from banks have also been witnessing a rising trend. According to the data from an RBI paper that evaluates State finances, the guarantees issued by States as a share of GSDP have been on a rising trend in all the States shown except West Bengal.

#### WHY DOES RBI'S HOUSEHOLD SURVEY SEE RETAIL INFLATION AS REMAINING ELEVATED?

On Monday (February 13), the government announced retail inflation has shot up to 6.52 per cent for January from 5.72 in December 2022 primarily due to the rise in food inflation. The Reserve Bank of India's household survey on inflation expectations, released after the monetary policy on February 8, shows that retail inflation is expected to remain elevated in the next one year with an all-round rise in prices across the board.

##### **What's the expectation on inflation?**

Inflation expectation of households has risen by 10 bps from 10.4 per cent in November to 10.5 per cent in January for the three-month ahead period, the RBI survey says. As many as 84.3 per cent of the people surveyed expected the prices to increase in the next three months and 60.8 per cent of people expected the prices to rise more than the current rate.

Further, 84.6 per cent of the people expect food prices to rise in the next three months. In short, households don't expect any respite from high prices in the next three months. They expect food, non-food, household durables and housing to rise in the next three months.

##### **One-year ahead inflation to stay high:**



Households' one-year ahead inflation expectations remained unchanged at 10.8 per cent from the November 2022 round of the survey. In this case, as many as 91.6 per cent of the people surveyed expected the prices to increase in the next three months and 70.8 per cent of people expected the prices to rise more than the current rate. Further, 88 per cent of the people expect food prices to rise in the next three months.

### **What is the RBI policy forecast?**

The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the RBI has projected retail inflation at 6.5 per cent in fiscal 2022-23. For FY2024, CPI inflation is projected at 5.3 per cent. After a peak of 7.8 per cent in April 2022, the CPI inflation moved below the upper tolerance level of 6 per cent during November-December 2022, driven by a strong decline in the prices of vegetables. The RBI has hiked the repo rate by 250 bps, including the 25 bps hike on February 8, in the current cycle to rein in inflation.

### **Inflation pinches:**

Among consumption categories, the proportion of respondents perceiving price rise was highest for the food group for both the horizons, as also witnessed in the previous two survey rounds, the RBI survey says.

Respondents expect higher price pressures for household durables and the cost of housing over the next three months, when compared to the previous survey round. City-wise, the range of inflation expectations was 7.4-12.8 per cent over the three-month horizon and 8.3-13.3 per cent over one-year horizon, according to the RBI survey.

### **What do experts say?**

Analysts say the inflation level of 6.52 per cent in January is higher than their expectations and is worrisome. Sequentially, inflation has snapped a two-month contractionary streak as food inflation and core inflation remained firm.

"Going forward, sticky core inflation will remain a concern. However, broadly we expect the average CPI inflation to moderate to 5.1 per cent in FY24 on the back of softening prices of cereals and pulses," said Rajani Sinha, Chief Economist, Care Ratings. The monetary policy tightening so far, and some fizzling of pent-up demand should also help ease CPI inflation.

"From the policy perspective, we believe that further rate hikes are unlikely. However, we need to be cautious as the RBI has left the window open for the possibility of another rate hike in case of a sustained rise in inflation," he said.

## **DISTURBING DILATION**

Just five days after Reserve Bank of India Governor Shaktikanta Das asserted that inflation 'has shown signs of moderation and the worst is behind us', Monday's release of Consumer Price Index (CPI) estimates for January revealed a disconcerting reversal in price gains trend. Headline retail inflation, which had steadily eased over the last quarter of 2022 from September's five-month high of 7.4%, quickened by 80 basis points last month to 6.5%. Propelling the acceleration was a 175 basis-points jump in food prices, with inflation measured by the Consumer Food Price Index, quickening to 5.94%, from December's 4.19%. Adding to the disquiet is the fact that inflation had already been at an elevated 6% in January 2022, implying that the year-on-year increase was sans





a favourable base effect and entirely due to an upsurge in the momentum of price gains. Food prices climbed across the board, with vegetables being the solitary item in the CPI's 12-member food and beverages sub-group to post a year-on-year deflation of 11.7% as winter supply outstripped demand. Cereals, which include rice and wheat and carries the heaviest weight of almost 10% in the sub-group, logged a 16.1% jump in prices, and milk and dairy products, the second-heaviest, saw prices gain by 8.79%. Policymakers must be particularly worried about the 2.6% month-on-month dilation in cereal prices, more so because this disproportionately impacts rural households, which spend a larger share of their income on food. With a 12.4% weight in the rural consumption basket, cereal prices fuelled January's overall rural headline inflation at an even quicker 6.85% pace.

The surprise reversal in price trends suggests inflationary expectations in the economy are nowhere near anchored and will necessitate further policy action both from the RBI and fiscal authorities. To be sure, Mr. Das last week not only announced a 25 basis-points interest rate increase but also committed the RBI to enacting policy that ensures a durable disinflation. With core inflation, or price gains that strip out the impact of food and fuel prices, remaining stubbornly stuck above 6% and in fact inching up last month to 6.23%, from December's 6.22%, policymakers face the challenge of targeting the components of the inflationary trend that can be addressed by raising credit costs and tamping down on demand. Given that inflation in several key services categories including health and personal care is running well above the RBI's upper bound of 6%, with prices continuing to harden, the Centre and States must mull measures including rationalisation of GST rates to help ease the inflationary burden on the economy. With overseas demand set to stay weak this year, untamed inflation risks hurting domestic consumption and thereby overall economic growth.

#### RBI GIVES IN-PRINCIPLE APPROVAL TO 32 ENTITIES TO ACT AS PAYMENT AGGREGATORS

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Wednesday said it has given in-principle authorization to 32 existing payment aggregators (PAs) to operate as online payment aggregators.

The regulator said applications of 18 existing entities for online payment aggregators license are under process.

The entities who have received in-principle authorization include Amazon (Pay) India Pvt Ltd, Computer Age Management Services Ltd, Google India Digital Services Pvt Ltd, Innoviti Payment Solutions Pvt Ltd, NSDL Database Management Ltd, Reliance Payment Solutions Ltd, Worldline ePayments India Pvt Ltd and Zomato Payments Pvt Ltd, among others.

The applications of entities including PhonePe, Adyen India Technology Services, Bhartipay Services Pvt Ltd, Global Payments Asia-Pacific (India), Unimoni Enterprise Solutions and Instamojo Technologies Pvt Ltd are under process, RBI said.

"All stakeholders are advised to transact with only those existing PAs (a) who have been granted in-principle authorisation or (b) whose application is currently under process," RBI said in a release.

It said that stakeholders should transact with new PAs only after they have received 'authorisation'. The regulator will update the list on a fortnightly basis.

RBI further said applications of four existing entities including Freecharge Payment Technologies and PayTM Payments Services have been returned and they have been given time to reapply.



## G-20 TOURISTS CAN USE UPI AT SELECT INDIAN AIRPORTS: HOW?

On Friday, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) permitted all inbound travellers from the Group of Twenty (G-20) countries and non-resident Indians to access Unified Payment Interface (UPI) for their merchant payments (P2M) at select airports while they are in the country.

### What does it mean?

According to the RBI, banks and non-banks authorised to issue prepaid payment instruments (PPIs) can issue rupee-denominated full-KYC PPIs to foreign nationals and NRIs visiting India. Such PPIs can also be issued in co-branding arrangement with entities authorised to deal in foreign exchange under FEMA, it said.

The PPIs can be issued in the form of wallets linked to UPI — like Google Pay and PhonePe — and can be used for merchant payments (P2M) only. Loading and reloading of such PPIs will be against receipt of foreign exchange by cash or through any payment instrument, the RBI said.

### Who can utilise this system?

To start with, this facility will be extended to travellers from the G-20 countries, arriving at select international airports. Going forward, this facility will be enabled across all other entry points in the country, the RBI said. The G-20 comprises Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, EU, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, the UK and the US.

### How are PPIs issued?

The PPIs can be issued after physical verification of Passport and Visa of the customers at the point of issuance. The PPI issuers should ensure that such information and record thereof are maintained with them, the RBI said.

The conversion to Indian rupee can be carried out only by entities authorised to deal in foreign exchange under FEMA. The amount outstanding at any point of time in such PPIs should not exceed the limit applicable on full-KYC PPIs, it said.

The unutilised balances in such PPIs can be encashed in foreign currency or transferred 'back to source' (payment source from where the PPI was loaded), in compliance with foreign exchange regulations, the RBI said.

### What's UPI?

UPI, managed by the National Payment Corporation of India (NPCI), is a system that powers multiple bank accounts into a single mobile application (of any participating bank), merging several banking features, seamless fund routing & merchant payments into one hood. Immediate money transfer through mobile devices round the clock and 365 days is possible through UPI wallets. It involves a single mobile application for accessing different bank accounts.

## GOING OFF-COURSE

A key to the success of any welfare programme is the conviction in its implementation. In the 17 years since the MGNREGS has been implemented, studies have asserted its net positive impact in the rural areas. From reducing penury through providing off-season employment, and thereby



improving household consumption among the invariably poor citizens who avail the scheme, to acting as insurance during monsoon deficient seasons, besides allowing for greater food security through increased productivity helped by the works generated, the scheme continues to be a robust welfare tool. This was even clearer during the pandemic, when thousands of migrant workers who left urban areas due to the lockdowns took up work under the MGNREGS in rural areas where demand for the menial but arduous work peaked. There is of course the case that the scheme has still not transcended into creating more useful assets beyond roads and irrigation canals and requires broadbasing and better implementation. But it must be said that the Union government's treatment of the scheme has graduated from a case of lukewarm acceptance of its need because of its popular impact to treating it as a fiscal burden.

Such a reading can be justifiably made if the reduced allocation for the scheme in the Union Budget, from 2.14% of overall outlay in FY23 to 1.33% in FY24, is considered. This was despite implementation in recent years experiencing wage delays and underfunding. This has also depressed demand, with formal requests for work only being a portion of the actual demand. Also, there is much evidence that Aadhaar-based payments have neither reduced corruption nor reduced wage payment delays while creating hurdles for officials and workers during implementation. Union Rural Development Minister Giriraj Singh has now said that the Act should be amended to change the contribution of funds from 100% by the government to a 60-40 split between the Centre and the States in order to make States "more vigilant regarding corruption". But this will only lead to further complications in funding. There has been a shrinking in the States' share of taxes following GST and the financial stresses during the pandemic. States taking up 40% of the funding burden would affect the payment of wages even further. Besides, MGNREGS is a demand-driven programme and salient especially in poorer States and it is incumbent upon the Centre to ensure its robust funding instead of putting the onus on individual States to do so. The government must change its approach towards the MGNREGS by recognising its potential in catering to the poor's right to work.

#### GLOBAL INVESTORS' SUMMIT 2023: GROWING WITH UP

Addressing the UP Global Investors' Summit in Lucknow last week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said Uttar Pradesh is driving the growth of "New India". He told the investors: "Don't forget that the state where you are today has a population of nearly 25 crore... More than any country in the world, there is more power in Uttar Pradesh alone. Just like India, a very important, aspirational society is waiting for you in Uttar Pradesh." He argued that India's most populous state, which in the past has been viewed as a laggard in growth and categorised among the "BIMARU" states, has been witnessing "holistic development" over the past five years. The PM buttressed his argument by citing a boost to infrastructure such as roads, availability of electricity, improved law and order, better governance reflected in improved ease of doing business ranking etc. among other metrics. In essence, both the PM and UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath are making a concerted effort to not only improve UP's growth trajectory but also leverage the state's massive, albeit untapped, potential as an engine of growth for India.

This is a welcome move. Despite being the most populous state in the country by a huge margin, UP's net state domestic product (in nominal terms) as of 2020-21 pegged it as the fifth-largest economy within India. The story becomes considerably much worse in per capita income levels where UP has been sliding down, as its population increased without commensurate increase in economic growth. Since the early 1990s when India embraced economic reforms, several states, which were smaller in terms of overall economic size such as Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka



have overtaken UP. This happened for two reasons. One, each of these states improved their governance and focussed on their own growth models. Two, UP struggled to enunciate a clear road map and remained plagued by inefficient and often corrupt administration. For instance, UP has several centres of excellence in handicrafts and small-scale manufacturing. But lack of proper branding and correct incentives have meant that many centres that could have become leading industrial hubs never did.

The BJP government in UP has not only built on the push towards infrastructure that was started by the Samajwadi Party (2012-2017) but also unveiled a plan to market local produce. The One District One Product scheme, which was unveiled in 2018, is an example. However, these are still early days to say whether the new strategy is working or not. Structural transformation of the sort that UP is hoping to achieve requires much more than announcements and plans. The key lies in efficient and effective implementation and that too over decades.

## TAXING WINDFALL PROFITS OF OIL COMPANIES

### The story so far:

On February 3, the Union government hiked the windfall profit tax levied on domestically-produced crude oil as well as on the export of diesel and aviation turbine fuel (ATF). Just three days before this, the Chairman of the Central Board of Indirect Taxes & Customs Vivek Johri, told PTI that prices of crude were on the rise again and thus, “for the time being windfall tax will continue.” He added that it would be difficult to predict for how long the taxation will continue.

### Why tax windfall profits?

‘Windfall profits’ refer to an unanticipated spike in earnings of an entity resulting from an exogenous event (which could be one-off and/or prolonged) and not resulting from a business decision. The B.K. Chaturvedi committee’s report on the Financial Position of Oil Companies (2008) had stated that taxing of these windfall gains has been seen as a prerogative of governments, in part to meet fiscal needs and in part to pursue redistributive justice. The central idea here is for sovereigns to capitalise on the lofty profits made by the entities and use it for specific domestic pursuits, for example, spur collections (of taxes) to guard against the consequences of a larger geopolitical event or redistribute them for it to be used for domestic social service schemes, among other reasons. As per the government, the collection of Special Additional Excise Duty (SAED) for the ongoing financial year is estimated to be ₹25,000 crore from production of crude oil, export of petrol, diesel and ATF. Windfall taxes are reviewed on a fortnightly basis and are subject to factors such as international oil prices, exchange rate and quantity of exports. India had first imposed SAED in July 2022.

## WHAT MADE MSCI ACT ON ADANI STOCKS?

### The story so far:

Morgan Stanley Capital International (MSCI), a global index provider for financial markets, announced on Friday that it will reduce the free float designations for four Adani Group companies in multiple indices. These companies had a combined 0.4% weighting in the MSCI Emerging Markets Index as of January 30. The decision follows MSCI’s decision to review the free float status of companies belonging to the Adani Group following investor concerns. Apart from Adani



Enterprises, the MSCI will cut the free floats assigned to Adani Total Gas, Adani Transmission, and ACC. These changes will come into effect from March 1.

#### **What is free float?**

Free float refers to the proportion of the total outstanding shares of a publicly listed company that is readily available for trading in the market. Generally speaking, shares held by promoters and large institutional investors are normally not freely traded in the market. The free float of a company can sometimes give investors a rough idea about the likely liquidity of the company's shares in the public market. It should be noted that the weightage given to a company's stock in certain indices is based on the company's market capitalisation.

A company's market capitalisation is calculated based on the free float of the company and also the market price of the company's stock. So, a drop in the number of freely floating shares of a company can cause a drop in its market capitalisation and reduce its weightage in indices.

#### **What led to the MSCI's decision?**

The decision to reduce the free float assigned to the Adani stocks comes in the wake of a report released last month by Hindenburg Research, a U.S.-based investment research firm and short seller. Hindenburg had alleged that more than 75% of the outstanding shares of various companies of the Adani Group were owned by their promoters. Indian market regulations stipulate that non-promoter public shareholders should own at least 25% of the total outstanding shares of a company. This rule hopes to prevent manipulation of stock prices by promoters who could influence the price of the stock by trading among themselves when they hold an outsized portion of the outstanding shares. In particular, Hindenburg alleged that the Adani Group used offshore shell entities to hide holdings by members of Chairman Gautam Adani's family. If true, this would reduce the float or the proportion of outstanding shares readily available for trade in the market.

The MSCI first stated that the "characteristics of certain investors" in the Adani Group suggested that they should not be considered part of the company's free float. Nathan Anderson, the founder of Hindenburg Research, had in a tweet noted that MSCI's decision to review the free float status of the Adani Group companies validated his firm's findings against the conglomerate.

MSCI's decision to cut the weights assigned to the Adani stocks in its indices going forward, however, may not be solely due to concerns over the free float of these stocks. Shares of the Adani Group's companies have fallen steeply over the last few weeks, thus affecting the market cap of these companies. In fact, the Adani Group has lost about \$110 billion of its market cap since the release of the Hindenburg report last month. Since many indices are constructed based on the size of the market cap of securities, the crash in the Adani stocks has also likely affected the weightage of these stocks in the MSCI index.

#### **What will be the impact?**

MSCI's decision will adversely affect the amount of capital flowing into the Adani stocks. Many passive investors invest in the indices that are constructed by bodies such as the MSCI. So, a cut in the weightage of the four Adani stocks in the Emerging Markets Index, which stood at 0.4% as of January 30, will likely reduce the amount of money flowing into these stocks. In fact, Goldman Sachs believes that India's weight in the MSCI's emerging markets index itself could drop by 20-30 basis points following the resultant reduction in weight of Adani stocks.

Being part of an international index allows companies to readily avail capital from foreign investors. Even the Indian government has tried to get its bonds listed on the global indices. Due to MSCI's decision, some estimates by analysts say that there could be an outflow of about \$500 million from Adani stocks. All this can adversely affect the group's efforts to raise capital from investors, whether it is in the form of equity or debt offerings. Notably, on Friday, Moody's downgraded its credit rating outlook on four Adani issuer entities from 'stable' to 'negative'.



# DreamIAS



## LIFE & SCIENCE

### RING AROUND A DWARF PLANET LIES WHERE IT ISN'T SUPPOSED TO EXIST: WHAT IT MEANS, WHY IT MATTERS

Astronomers have found a ring around a dwarf planet, located in the Kuiper Belt at the solar system's edge, called Quaoar, according to a new study. The ring, however, is positioned much further away from the planet than is usual and defies theoretical explanations. Published in the journal *Nature*, the study, 'A dense ring of the trans-Neptunian object Quaoar outside its Roche limit', has been done by Bruno Morgado of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Bruno Sicardy of the Paris Observatory, and others.

Speaking to the media, Morgado described the findings as "very strange", saying they might force astronomers to rethink the laws governing planetary rings. According to the study, the ring lies far away from the Roche limit — a mathematically determined distance beyond which rings aren't supposed to exist.

With an estimated radius of 555 km, Quaoar is roughly half the size of Pluto and orbits beyond Neptune. It also has a moon of its own, which is known as Weywot. As the dwarf planet is too small and too distant to be observed directly, the researchers detected the ring with the help of a phenomenon called stellar occultation.

#### How was the ring discovered?

A stellar occultation occurs when, as seen from Earth, a bright star passes behind a planet. This allows astronomers or anybody on Earth to observe the sharp silhouette of the planet for a brief period of time. The phenomenon, which rarely occurs, is used by researchers to analyse a planet's atmosphere and determine if it has a ring around it — in 1977, scientists discovered the Uranian ring system with the help of stellar occultation.

The team involved in the latest study examined Quaoar for around three years, between 2018 and 2021, through Earth-based and space-based telescopes. During these years, the dwarf planet passed in front of four stars, helping researchers observe the shadow of the eclipses. "However, they also observed some dimming of the starlight before and after the star blinked out. That pointed to a ring obscuring part of the light," according to a report in *The New York Times*.

#### What is the Roche limit?

The most intriguing part of the findings is the distance between Quaoar and its ring. Located 2,500 miles away from the dwarf planet, the ring is around 1,400 miles further away from the Roche limit, as per the calculations of the scientists. They suggest that at such a distance, the particles of the ring should have come together to form a moon.

For a further understanding of the Roche limit, let's look at the Earth and the moon. The Earth's gravity pulls on the moon. However, one side of the moon is closer to the planet and hence, the pull is stronger on the side facing the Earth. The result is the so-called tidal force, which either stretches or compresses the moon from all sides. What helps the moon keep it together is its own gravity. It essentially counteracts the effect of the tidal force.

But if you bring the moon closer to the Earth, the tidal force will overcome the satellite's gravity and then disintegrate it, turning the moon into a ring. The minimum distance at which this



happens is known as the Roche limit. It is named after the French astronomer Édouard Roche, who discovered the limit in 1848.

The Roche limit doesn't just exist between just the Earth and the moon. It is applicable to any planet and the celestial bodies around it. For instance, Saturn. The beautiful rings that you see around the planet are within the Roche limit and therefore, there are no moons in that area. In 1992, comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 got too close to Jupiter, breaching the Roche limit, and was broken apart by the tidal force. Two years later, parts of it collided with the planet, providing the first direct observation of an extraterrestrial collision of solar system objects.

#### **What is the reason behind Quaoar's far-out ring?**

As of now, nobody exactly knows how Quaoar's ring has managed to remain stable at such a distance from the Roche limit. The researchers of the study have said that there can be a variety of possible explanations but they aren't sure about any one of them. It might be possible that Quaoar's moon, Weywot, or some other unseen moon contributes gravity that somehow holds the ring stable. Another potential explanation can be that the particles of the ring are colliding with each other in such a way that they are avoiding to coalesce into a moon.

No matter what the reason, astronomers believe the new study points to the possibility of discovering more rings around smaller planets like Quaoar in the outer solar system, which might expand our understanding of planetary ring systems.

### **SCIENTISTS REPORT FINDING A THIRD NATURAL SOURCE OF QUASICRYSTALS**

In a crystal, the atoms are arranged in a pattern that periodically repeats itself. A quasicrystal's atoms are arranged in a pattern that repeats itself at irregular intervals. Quasicrystals were discovered in the lab in 1982. In the late 1990s, scientists began looking for quasicrystals in nature. After a decade-long quest, Luca Bindi, Paul Steinhardt, and others reported finding the first natural quasicrystal in 2009 – as microscopic grains in a piece of the Khatyrka meteorite in the Koryak mountains of Russia. This meteorite was involved in several collisions in space over millions of years, heating and pressurising it to a great degree and creating the quasicrystals. The discovery inspired a series of experiments in which physicists used 'shock synthesis' to create new varieties of quasicrystals in the lab.

In 2021, Dr. Bindi, Dr. Steinhardt, and others reported finding a quasicrystal in the remains of the first nuclear weapon test, conducted on July 16, 1945, in New Mexico. They wrote that the material "was found in a sample of red trinitite, a combination of glass fused from natural sand and anthropogenic copper from transmission lines used during the test."

Recently, in a study published in PNAS in December 2022, Dr. Bindi, Dr. Steinhardt, and others reported that in the wind-blown dunes of northern Nebraska, they had uncovered a metallic fragment in a long, tube-shaped mass of sand heated and fused by a heavy electric current. They also noticed a power line nearby had fallen to the ground. That's where the metal could have come from, but they couldn't tell where the current had originated: in the power line or as a lightning strike on a stormy night. Whatever the source, it had melted the quartz at the site and formed a silicate glass – a process that needs to happen at at least 1,700° C. The metallic portion was a mass of aluminium, chromium, manganese, nickel, and silicon.

When Bindi et al. placed it under a powerful electron microscope, they spotted a dodecagonal quasicrystal, rare even for quasicrystals.





## CAN MICROSOFT SUCCEED IN CLAWING BACK THE SEARCH LEADERSHIP FROM GOOGLE?

Microsoft has thrown down the gauntlet to Google with its \$10 billion check to OpenAI, the artificial intelligence research firm behind ChatGPT and DALL-E. The investment is targeted at packing AI capabilities into Microsoft's search, software and cloud systems over the next few years. And, at the top of that list is making Bing search engine ChatGPT compatible.

Microsoft is clearly looking to disrupt Internet search as we know it, and in that process, plans to claw back the browser market share it lost to Google more than a decade ago. The announcement from the Windows software maker has certainly made the search giant anxious. And the Alphabet-owned company has reacted with Bard — a conversational AI powered by the search giant's language model. The company has made its search AI available to a select group of users before the general public gets a flavour of its capabilities.

Bard is powered by Language Model for Dialogue Applications (LaMDA), which is built on the Transformer architecture. The credit for this neural network-build goes to Google. In fact, this is the same architecture used by several other language models, including Open AI's ChatGPT and Meta's Blender Bot. The company based out of Mountain View, California, has been leading the industry on several innovative web tools, starting from its web search.

Google pioneered algorithmic search that transformed the way we use Internet. The Silicon Valley giant developed a new way to search the web with its eponymous search engine, enabling users to access information at the click of a button. Around the time when Apple unveiled its iPhone, Google launched its web browser that redefined browsing experience.

For people browsing with the unhip Microsoft Internet Explorer, Google Chrome was like a breath of fresh air. The two other prominent browsers, Apple's Safari and Mozilla's FireFox, ran on the same legacy code that powered Microsoft's web browser.

### A new perspective

Google looked at the browser in a totally new way, allowing Chrome users to run various web-based applications. Its sandboxing feature handled workload as a series of multiple processes instead of a single large process. This helped it keep its browser from crashing, which was common issue with other browsers of that time. Chrome was gradually deployed on Windows and Linux PCs.

By 2013, Google Chrome cornered roughly a third of the desktop browser market, and it was gaining more users. But it was still not an important player in the mobile browser market. That's when the Google veteran behind its browser push was named the head of Android, a move that made the search giant's ambition clear: mobile browsing is the next phase of growth.

The company gradually integrated the fragmented mobile software market with its Android OS and Play Store. That solidified Google's position in the smartphone market, and also paved the way for CEO Sundar Pichai to take the helm of affairs at Google's parent Alphabet Inc.

Fast forward to January 2023, Google leads the browser market with 65.4% market share, according to data analytics site Statcounter. Microsoft's Edge and Mozilla's Firefox have a combined share of less than 10%.



## Neural network

LaMDA, like BERT and GPT-3, is an LLM built on Transformer, a neural network architecture developed by Google and open-sourced in 2017. But Google's LaMDA was different from the rest of the LLMs available at that time. It was trained on dialogues as input. That made it notice nuances and distinguish open-ended conversations from other forms of language.

Google's Bard, launched to compete against OpenAI's ChatGPT, is anything but poetic. In the launch blog, CEO Sundar Pichai did not describe the bot for its poetic or programme-writing skills. Instead, Mr. Pichai claimed Bard to be an outlet for creativity, and a launchpad for curiosity, "helping you to explain new discoveries from NASA's James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) to a 9-year-old." To show what Bard can do, he attached a GIF video in the same blog that had three suggested answers to the JWST question.

But the GIF video had an inaccurate information. In one of its responses, Bard suggested that JWST was used to take the very first pictures of an exoplanet. However, those were taken by the European Southern Observatory's Very Large Telescope (VLT) in 2004. NASA has confirmed this information.

This gaffe was reported by Reuters just before Google started to live-stream its presentation from Paris on Wednesday. To make things worse, Prabhakar Raghavan, a senior vice president at Google, in-charge for Search, made an underwhelming presentation on what Bard can offer its users. He largely restated what was already known about the conversational AI service. His presentation also lacked any ground-breaking update that could intensify the competition between Bard and Microsoft-backed ChatGPT.

The incorrect answer on the promotional GIF and the underwhelming presentation in Paris had cost Google's parent dearly. Alphabet Inc.'s stock tumbled nearly 7% on Wednesday, wiping out \$100 billion from its market value, while Microsoft's shares rose 3% on the same day. And just a day earlier, the Windows software maker announced it had released a version of Bing search with ChatGPT functionality.

At the heart of Bard's unpoetic rendition is the LaMDA. Google's own Ethical AI researchers have raised questions about it. But a part of that large language model carved out to provide a specific service has failed to enthuse investors and users. The answer to what is Bard's true capability is somewhere between these two vantage points. And until Google makes the LLM publicly accessible, LaMDA and its carve-out Bard will remain an enigma.

## MEITY MAY SOON INTEGRATE CHATGPT WITH WHATSAPP FOR KEY GOVERNMENT SCHEMES

Even as the battle between Google and Microsoft over the future of Internet search intensifies, WhatsApp could soon become a major search engine on key government schemes for India's estimated 150 million farmers – powered by the hugely sensational AI chatbot ChatGPT and an ambitious national-level program that aims to build vast datasets containing samples of Indian voices in several local languages, through a crowdsourcing model.

Bhashini, a small team at the Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY), is currently building a WhatsApp-based chatbot that relies on information generated by ChatGPT to return appropriate responses to queries. And because people, especially farmers in rural areas, may not always want to type out their queries, questions can be asked on the chatbot through voice notes.

**3<sup>RD</sup> FLOOR AND 4<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR**



In essence, queries on the chatbot could be simply asked through voice notes, following which it would return a voice-based response generated by ChatGPT.

According to a senior government official, a model of this bot was shown to Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, who mentioned it earlier this year during the World Economic Forum at Davos. The Indian Express has also seen a demo of the chatbot in action, where it seamlessly responded to a query – made through a voice note – about the details of the PM Awas Yojana.

The chatbot, which is currently under testing, is being developed keeping in mind India's rural and agrarian population – the sections of society that most depend on government schemes and subsidies – and the various languages spoken by them. And in that context, it becomes important to build a language model that can successfully identify and understand local languages spoken by the country's rural population, said another senior government official associated with the project.

While responses generated by ChatGPT have so far impressed many with its ability to respond to complex queries in fascinating and eloquent ways, building a national digital public platform for Indian languages will be key for the WhatsApp chatbot that the Bhashini team is building to succeed. To build such a language model, the official said, it is pertinent to have large datasets of the various local languages spoken in India on which the model can be trained.

This is where an initiative called Bhasha Daan comes in, he explained. It is an ambitious project which aims to crowdsource voice datasets in multiple Indian languages. On the project's website, people can contribute in three key ways: by recording their voice samples in multiple Indian languages by reading out a piece of text, typing out a sentence being played, and translating text in one language into another.

"A majority of the people that will use this chatbot will not know English. So, for their voice inputs to work on the chatbot, it is important that we train our language processing models in as many Indian languages as possible. We have a decent-sized repository of voices in many Indian languages that people of the country have contributed to through the Bhasha Daan portal. We also have a vast database of all the languages that Doordarshan telecasts in. So we have used the language model on the chatbot using these datasets," the second official explained.

In the test phase, the model currently supports 12 languages, including English, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Bengali, Kannada, Odia, and Assamese. This means that if a user sends a voice note to the chatbot in any of these languages, the chatbot will successfully return with a response to it.

In a country where despite rising rural connectivity to the global Internet, there exists a stark digital divide, the official said that the choice of WhatsApp as the delivery platform was a deliberate one.

"WhatsApp has more than 500 million users, and even those with relatively low digital literacy know their way around the app," he added.

There are, however, some limitations currently. In its testing phase, the chatbot can only respond to simple queries about government schemes, among other things. This is primarily due to the current limitation of ChatGPT itself – the fact that it cannot access real-time information from the Internet. ChatGPT's language model was trained on a vast dataset to generate text based on the input, and the dataset, at the moment, only includes information until 2021.



However, that could soon change. On Wednesday, Microsoft announced a new version of its search engine Bing, powered by an upgraded version of the same AI technology that underpins ChatGPT. Microsoft said that the feature would be powered by an updated version of GPT 3.5, the AI language model created by OpenAI that powers ChatGPT. It called this the “Prometheus Model,” and said it was more powerful than GPT 3.5 and better able to answer search queries with more up-to-date information and annotated answers. The first official said that once ChatGPT can search the Internet and return with real-time results, the scope of the WhatsApp chatbot could go much beyond what is currently being tested. “People will not just be able to get information about various government schemes in a concise manner, but also enquire if they are eligible for some of those schemes,” the official said.

Even as both officials remained non-committal about the public release of the chatbot, they said that its demo had impressed Microsoft’s Nadella. It is worth noting, however, that Microsoft has invested a reported \$10 billion in OpenAI, which has developed ChatGPT.

“A demo I saw was a rural Indian farmer trying to access some government program. He just expressed a complex thought in a speech in one of the local languages that got translated and interpreted by a bot, and a response came back saying, ‘go to a portal and here is how you will access the program’. He said, ‘I’m not going to go to the portal, I want you to do this for me’. The bot completed it, and the reason it was able to complete it was that a developer building it had taken GPT and trained it over all of the Government of India’s documents and then scaffolded it with the speech recognition software,” Nadella had said earlier this year.

## WHAT ARE MICROLED DISPLAYS, AND WHY IS APPLE SHIFTING TO IT?

### **The story so far:**

Apple’s shift to microLED display technology is reportedly under process. Considered as the next big transition in display technology, microLEDs are self-illuminating diodes that have brighter and better colour reproduction than Organic Light Emitting Diode (OLED) display technology. Apple is currently working on this new display technology and plans to implement the same on future watch models starting 2024, and gradually to its other devices including iPhones and Macs. However, the complications and challenges with the new technology might delay Apple’s plans.

### **What is microLED display technology?**

The basis of microLED technology are sapphires. A sapphire can shine on its own forever. A microLED screen is filled with such small but strong light. The picture in a microLED screen is generated by several individual light-emitting diodes.

Samsung, the pioneer in microLED technology explained in a video that a microLED is as small as cutting a centimetre of hair into 200 smaller pieces. Each of these microLEDs are semiconductors that receive electric signals. Once these microLEDs are gathered, they form a module. Several modules are then combined to form screens.

### **What are its benefits over other displays?**

MicroLED displays are brighter, have better colour reproduction and provide better viewing angles. They make images appear as if they painted on top of the device’s glass and are quite the technological feat, according to a report by Bloomberg.



MicroLEDs have limitless scalability, as they are resolution-free, bezel-free, ratio-free, and even size-free.

The screen can be freely resized in any form for practical usage. In addition to being self-emissive, MicroLEDs also individually produce red, green, and blue colours without needing the same backlighting or colour filters as conventional displays, according to Samsung. The electronics company is currently the world's most advanced manufacturer of displays, and has been producing its own version of microLED for TVs.

Samsung and LG Displays have evolved with brighter OLED panels over the last couple of years but microLED promises even greater luminance without panel degradation issues, The Verge reported.

Samsung has come up with MicroLED displays with up to 4,000 nits of peak brightness, roughly double of what the best OLED and LCD TVs are capable of right now.

#### **What does the new technology mean for Apple?**

MicroLED displays will be Apple's first screens designed and developed in-house. The tech company currently sources screens from Samsung, LG, Japan Display Inc., Sharp Corp. and BOE Technology Group Co.

Apple's transition to the new displays could reduce its reliance on technology partners like Samsung and LG and replace Apple supplies with homegrown parts. The Cupertino-based company currently makes its own M1 and M2 chips. It has dropped Intel's chips in its Mac computers to boost in-house designs and plans to do the same with key wireless components in its iPhones.

Now, by making the displays on its own, Apple could be in a better position to customise its devices and keep a stronger control on its supply chain, thus reducing delays in product availability.

### **WAS PABLO NERUDA POISONED? WHY THERE'S MYSTERY AROUND HIS DEATH, WHAT LATEST FINDINGS SAY**

On September 23, 1973, poet and Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda breathed his last at the Santa Maria Clinic in Santiago, the capital of Chile. He had been suffering from prostate cancer and the cause of death was said to be heart collapse.

Except, not everybody believed this. The timing seemed off — Neruda, who was a Leftist politician and diplomat, had died less than two weeks after a military coup led by Augusto Pinochet overthrew the socialist government of Neruda's friend and ally President Salvador Allende. Furthermore, Neruda's driver Manuel Araya had said that the poet had called him a few hours before his death, worried because he had been injected in the stomach while asleep.

This spurred multiple investigations over the years with Neruda's exhumed remains tested by experts in several countries. On Wednesday, a report on the study of his exhumed remains was presented.

#### **Search for meaning**

On February 14, Neruda's nephew Rodolfo Reyes told Spanish news agency EFE that the forensic tests had found that the poet had been poisoned. The Associated Press has reported that "Reyes



said forensic tests carried out in Danish and Canadian labs indicated a presence of a great quantity of *Cloristridium botulinum*, which is incompatible with human life. The powerful toxin can cause paralysis in the nervous system and death”.

The New York Times received a summary of the experts’ report on February 16 and found that it confirmed that the bacteria was in Neruda’s body when he died. What the experts have been unable to determine was whether the poet had the bacteria due to eating contaminated food or if he had been injected with it. Neither could they distinguish whether it was a toxic strain of the bacteria. “The findings once again leave open the question of whether Mr. Neruda was murdered,” says NYT.

#### THE EXPRESS VIEW ON CLIMATE REPORT: SHORE UP THE DEFENCES

On Tuesday, a World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) report occupied centre stage at the UN Security Council’s first-ever debate on the impact of sea-level rise on global peace. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres cited the document to warn of “a mass exodus of population on a biblical scale”. The report — whose release coincided with the landmark UNSC session — adds to the growing corpus of studies that underline the climate vulnerabilities of people living in low-lying areas. But it projects a crisis that’s frightful, even by the dire standards of climate reports. More than one in 10 people in the world, including those in megacities like Mumbai, New York, London, Dhaka, Shanghai and Buenos Aires, could face severe turmoil even if global warming is miraculously limited to 1.5 degrees — the Paris climate pact’s goal.

The task for policymakers then is to prepare for massive social and economic dislocation. This will require building resilience at several levels. For instance, investing in R&D, infrastructure and warning systems to mitigate the loss of lives and property. Protecting coasts could require engineering, technological and ecological interventions — creating physical barriers, permeable pavements, sopping waters or reviving mangroves. The jury is out on several innovations. Engineering solutions are often criticised because even the most robust protective structures deflect the energy of the waves to other areas. Armoured shorelines can also upset the delicate ecological balance of coastal habitats. In recent times, innovations to overcome such deficiencies by combining engineering and ecological approaches have been tried. But a lot of the state-of-the-art green know-how remains out of reach for a majority of the worst affected countries. Technology and fund transfer commitments at UN summits have rarely been in proportion to the gravity of the challenge at hand — in any case, follow-up on even the most sincere commitment has been far from being adequate.

As the WMO has warned, the rising seas are a “threat-multiplier”. The rushing salty waters can aggravate disparities by playing havoc with agrarian systems and ruining the livelihoods of fishing communities. International law may well have to engage with the requirements of people dislocated by the sea, many of them rendered stateless. At the same time, dealing with emergencies, mitigating hardship and preparing people to deal with the vagaries of climate will require political will and action at the level of local governments. In India, this could test the resolve of urban municipalities and civic bodies that have struggled to do justice to their mandate, even in normal times.



## BIRDS AND WINGS

Researchers at Nagoya University in Japan have developed an index to estimate how a bird uses its wings for flight or other locomotion by measuring the strength of the coracoid bone and the animal's body mass. The presence of a wing alone does not tell us whether an animal can fly. For example, penguins evolved wings to propel them through water whereas feathered dinosaurs may have used their wings for other purposes, such as thermoregulation and intraspecific display. Therefore, to better understand how animals evolved the ability to fly, an index must take into account both the presence of wings and the ability to perform powerful wing-beats, says a release. The strength of the coracoid in relation to body mass may reflect the force exerted by the flight muscles, which counteract the lifting force on the wings. This helps to estimate how a bird uses propulsion. Soaring birds had increased coracoid strength, while non-flapping birds had lower coracoid strength (Journal of Anatomy).

## ORCA MOMS MAY BE FEEDING THEIR SONS INTO EXTINCTION. HERE'S HOW

**The study took place over nearly half-a-century and followed the lives of 40 female orca whales. The researchers wanted to understand why the species was becoming increasingly endangered.**

Man-child, mama's boy, adult child — if you know the type, you know.

Cooking anything beyond an egg ends in disaster. And they still receive a steady allowance from their parents ... at age 35. Wholly dependent on their mothers, they are stuck in perpetual adolescence. They may have grown to rely on it or struggle to achieve independence — families can be complicated — but either way, such relationships can be bad for the whole community.

While humans are lucky this behavior is more the exception and less the rule, it's the other way around for male orca whales, who, according to a paper published in Current Biology on February 8, remain big babies their entire lives.

That occurs to the detriment of their mothers, who, by devoting all their time, resources and energy to their demanding sons, abstain from further reproduction.

It is a pattern that could explain the decreased reproductive output of the critically endangered species, the researchers write in the paper.

### **Orca moms fully invest themselves in male offspring**

The study took place over nearly half a century and followed the lives of 40 female orca whales. The researchers wanted to understand why the species was becoming increasingly endangered.

They found that when female orca whales had sons their chances of giving birth to future offspring reduced by 50%. This remained the case throughout the mother's lifetime and was not observed in orcas who gave birth to daughters.

"Killer whale mothers pay a high cost in terms of their future reproduction to keep their sons alive," said researcher and co-author of the study, Michael Weiss, in a statement.

Weiss is based at the Centre for Research in Animal Behaviour at the University of Exeter. He and his colleagues used data from a "southern resident" orca whale population, which generally live off the coasts of British Columbia and the US states of Washington and Oregon.



The southern resident species of orca whales has been endangered since 2005.

Unlike other types of killer whales, members of this population subsist almost entirely on Chinook salmon, many species of which are considered threatened or endangered themselves.

As such, there is a lack of food for the whales and that is contributing to the dwindling numbers of the southern resident orca population, which totals only 73 whales at time of writing.

#### **Close mother-son relationship**

It was along with these findings about the decreased reproduction rates that the researchers also noted how orca mothers continued a very close maternal relationship with their male offspring. The mothers gave their sons half the salmon they caught for themselves, for example.

That was not the case for the orca daughters, who were generally fed by their mothers until they reached their own reproductive age.

There is an idea that this behavior — to ensure the young male orcas are fed and fit — could be an attempt by their mothers to increase the overall reproductive output of their population. Healthy males mate with many females, and that ultimately could increase the number of future offspring.

But the researchers say that given the critical state of the orca population, the tactic looks like it is having the opposite effect.

“This strategy of indefinitely sacrificing future reproduction to keep their sons alive may have been beneficial in their evolutionary past, but it now potentially threatens the future viability of the southern resident killer whale population,” said Dan Franks, a professor of biology and computer science at the University of York in a statement.

### **DOES MORE EXERCISE MEAN GREATER BENEFITS TO THE HEART?**

In the last few months, I have been asked by many about the risks associated with gym and exercise. There has never been so much doubt about the benefits of exercise as in the last few months.

The fact is that the benefits of exercise have been proven for long. However, one of the common misconceptions about exercise is the belief that “More is always better.” That is not true. In a scientific statement by the American Heart Association, published in the journal ‘Circulation’ in March 2020, experts had said that exercise and health benefits follow an “inverse U” or reverse “J”-shaped dose-response curve. Exercise is beneficial to a certain volume; however, if you go beyond that level, it could be harmful.

Rueseggeret and Booth in their 2018 paper listed that exercise helps in preventing at least 40 conditions which are worsened by physical inactivity, ranging from diabetes, hypertension, depression, anxiety, obesity, osteoarthritis, and breast, colon and other cancers. In a 2016 paper in the journal ‘Cardiology,’ Steven Lewis and Charles Henneken argued that exercise is the new-age ‘Magische Kugel’ or the ‘Magic Bullet’, an epithet given by Nobel laureate Paul Ehrlich for medicinal pills. The life expectancy at the age of 50 is seven to eight years higher in those who exercise in comparison to those who do not.

Yet, more is not always better in exercise. The large exercise volumes and vigorous intensity physical training — specially when performed by unfit individuals, or erstwhile physically





inactive people — have the potential of accelerated coronary artery calcification, myocardial fibrosis and atrial fibrillation, which can precipitate as acute myocardial infarction and of sudden cardiac death.

People get surprised that some regular gym goers and physically fit people also develop cardiac health issues. The answer lies in the fact that exercise can reduce the modifiable risk factors, but cardiac outcomes are also dependent upon non-modifiable factors such as genetic make-up of an individual and the family history. Exercise reduces the risk of adverse cardiac outcomes but it is not a guarantee.

What are the different types of exercise? There are two main groups of aerobic or endurance, resistance or strengthening. In addition, balancing and flexibility are two more types of exercise. To get maximum benefit, an individual needs to have a blend of these in their routine.

The exercises which increase one's heart rate and breathing (such as brisk walking, swimming, cycling, jogging or dancing) are termed as aerobic or endurance exercise. These can and should be done by all adults. In addition to reducing body weight, aerobic exercise helps in relaxing blood vessels and lowering blood pressure; helps in burning calories, lowering blood sugar levels and reducing body fat. Cardio reduces inflammation and raises levels of good cholesterol. Understandably, aerobic exercises reduce the risk of heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and nearly three dozen health risks.

Another key type of exercise is strengthening or resistance. This is needed as with increasing age, there is loss of muscle mass. Therefore, strengthening exercise helps rebuild muscle mass and stimulates bone growth, in addition to other benefits.

So, what is the beneficial level of exercise? For healthy adults between 18 and 65 years, at least 30 minutes of "moderate intensity aerobic activity" in a day, and at least 150 minutes in a week is recommended. There should not be more than two days of break in between. For those with risk factors such as diabetes and hypertension, the recommended duration should be 60 minutes and 300 minutes per day and week, respectively. Those above 65 years should be involved in some exercise three or more times in a week. The strengthening exercise can be done alternate days or two to three times a week.

In India, one in every 10 adults is diabetic and one in five has hypertension, though half of them are unaware of them being diabetic or hypertensive. Indians have the unique characteristic of appearing slim but having a high body fat content which puts them at high risk for heart and liver diseases. The rising epidemic of being overweight and obesity is another challenge. In this backdrop, nearly all adults should be engaged in a combination of aerobic, resistance, flexibility and balance exercise beyond their routine physical activity. The exercise should be done to meet the ability and requirement of an individual. A majority of healthy adults can start with moderate intensity physical activity with no need to consult a physician before starting. However, those with pre-existing coronary artery disease, diabetes or other risk factors or those who have been physically inactive for long must consult a physician before getting involved in moderate and high intensity physical training.

Dr Lahariya is a consultant physician with specialist training in the management of diabetes, hypertension and acute coronary syndrome.



## TACKLING POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

The links between childbirth and mental disorders have been described for hundreds of years. Mental illness after childbirth isn't merely of historical interest. As illustrated by the findings of the U.K. Confidential Enquiries into Maternal Deaths, suicide is a leading cause of maternal death following childbirth.

In India itself, the prevalence of postpartum depression was around 22% in 2017. If a person develops psychotic depression or if the depression is severe, there is a high risk of dying by suicide. In such situations, healthcare workers advise more aggressive interventions.

Traditional classification systems don't include separate categories for episodes of mental illnesses that occur in the perinatal period, leading to confusion in clinical practice as well as in research. The ubiquitous use of the term 'postpartum depression' also erroneously refers to all forms of psychological distress following pregnancy – from mild mood changes to more severe psychotic conditions.

Postpartum depression is a significant form of depression that can begin after childbirth, with symptoms that vary from person to person, and has important differences from 'baby blues'. In clinical practice, this period can last anywhere between four to six weeks following delivery, but sometimes even up to a year.

Women can be affected by a range of mental health problems in pregnancy and the postpartum period, including depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, psychosis, and personality and eating disorders. Despite this, perinatal psychiatric disorders have not received the attention that they deserve.

Postpartum depression is a real medical illness that can affect any mother regardless of age, income or cultural and/or educational background. Women are not to be faulted for having postpartum depression.

A prior history of mood or anxiety disorders, stressful life events, poor social support, and domestic violence are established risk factors for depression in the postpartum period. Additional risk factors include poor social support, adverse life events, domestic violence, a history of prior psychiatric illness, unplanned or unwanted pregnancy, and present/past pregnancy complications.

### **Clinical presentation**

The clinical presentation doesn't vary much between depression in the postpartum period and depression that occurs at other times. The core symptoms of depression include low mood, loss of pleasure in activities, and easy fatigability. However, fatigue, loss of libido, appetite and weight change, and sleep disturbances are more common in the postpartum period. Thoughts of self-harm are also common in postpartum depression.

Women who present with psychiatric symptoms in the postpartum period are at higher risk of being diagnosed with a severe mental illness called bipolar disorder. In a 2012 Danish study, around 14% of women with first-time psychiatric symptoms within a month of childbirth were later diagnosed with bipolar disorder in a follow-up timeframe of 15 years. Another study, published in 2010, found that more than half the participants with bipolar disorder with



postpartum onset were initially misdiagnosed with unipolar depression. So it is prudent to keep an eye out for underlying bipolar diathesis in women presenting with postpartum depression.

### Screening and solutions

It is vital to sensitise obstetricians to screen women for postpartum depression. Awareness about this entity is abysmally low, contributing to its morbidity, loss of productivity, and in some cases loss of life.

The Whooley questions are recommended in the U.K. to screen women for postpartum depression. Globally, the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale, a self-reported measure, is also used to assess postpartum depression. The condition lasts between three and six months, and it is essential that healthcare professionals pay attention to a woman's mental health in addition to her physical well-being.

The affliction responds to the same treatments as depression at other times. Psychological interventions have been shown to be effective for mild postpartum depression in clinical trials. Given that many people don't wish to take medicines while breastfeeding, peer-support, counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and interpersonal therapy become important interventions.

CBT is a talking therapy that helps people by changing the way they think and behave. It is based on the premise that thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and actions are interconnected, and that negative thoughts and feelings can trap us in a vicious cycle. CBT attempts to restructure faulty patterns of thinking into more positive and logical ones.

Interventions are also directed at the mother-baby dyad, especially if there has been no response to treatment. Among those with moderate to severe depression, medication will be required. The use of safe, effective, evidenced-based medications for depression in pregnancy has increased considerably in recent decades, with rates varying from 3% to 13%.

Innovative and novel drug treatments are increasingly available for women with postpartum depression. One such involves a 60-hour hormonal infusion (brexanolone), which has shown promise in an early-stage trial. Before it can be adopted more widely, the results will need to be replicated in larger trials.

Decisions regarding medication for breastfeeding women must be made only after a risk-benefit analysis. Interventions such as special diets, exercise, yoga, and the use of oestrogens and progestins have limited evidence vis-à-vis postpartum depression as of today.

In severe depression characterised by suicidal ideas or when the person has thoughts of self-harm or of harming the baby, doctors perform electroconvulsive therapy. Here, a small electrical charge is applied to the person's temples while the person is under short anaesthesia. This results in a controlled seizure that helps to offset brain changes caused by depression.

It is one of the most effective interventions in the history of clinical medicine. Unfortunately, it has been portrayed negatively in films (notably 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest').

A range of safe, effective, and evidence-based treatment options exist for psychiatric disorders with onset in the postpartum period. Postpartum depression is a common but serious disorder that is amenable to bio-psycho-social interventions. Right treatment at the right time in fact leads



to rapid recovery and a better quality of life. Stigma, lack of awareness, and misconceptions shouldn't hinder a person from seeking help, particularly in this sensitive time.

No part of this article should be construed as medical advice. If you have any questions, please contact your physician.

## A MANIFESTO FOR TACKLING THE SILENT PANDEMIC OF AMR

While the world is emerging from the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, the very harmful but invisible pandemic of Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) is unfortunately here to stay. Most countries understood in 2020 the clear and present danger of COVID-19, forcing governments, including India's, to respond with speed and accuracy. The rapidly rising AMR rates also need an accelerated, multi-sectoral, global and national response.

In recent decades, while new drugs have revolutionised human health care, health experts have been struggling with disease-causing microbes that have become resistant to drugs. Global public health response has been threatened due to rising misuse and overuse of antibiotics in humans and animals.

Microbial resistance to antibiotics has made it harder to treat infections such as pneumonia, tuberculosis (TB), blood-poisoning (septicaemia) and several food-borne diseases. AMR also imposes a huge health cost on the patient in the form of longer hospitalisation, health complications and delayed recovery. It puts patients undergoing major surgeries and treatments, such as chemotherapy, at a greater risk. Many times, patients recover from advanced medical procedures but succumb to untreatable infections.

In 2019, AMR was associated with an estimated 4.95 million human deaths. A 2018 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) warned of a phenomenal increase, by 2030, of resistance to back-up antibiotics (second and third-line).

AMR adds to the burden of communicable diseases and strains the health systems of a country. An Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) study in 2022 showed that the resistance level increases from 5% to 10% every year for broad-spectrum antimicrobials. An Indian Network for Surveillance of Antimicrobial Resistance (INSAR) study indicated a high rate of resistance to commonly used drugs such as ciprofloxacin, gentamicin, co-trimoxazole, erythromycin and clindamycin.

### **India and the Muscat conference**

As the current G-20 president, and as a country vulnerable to this silent pandemic, India's role is critical in ensuring that AMR remains high on the global public health agenda.

India's commitment to the cause was evident at the Third Global High-Level Ministerial Conference on Antimicrobial Resistance (November 24-25, 2022) held in Muscat, where over 30 countries adopted the Muscat Ministerial Manifesto on AMR.

The Muscat Manifesto recognised the need to accelerate political commitments in the implementation of One Health action for controlling the spread of AMR. It also recognised the need to address the impact of AMR not only on humans but also on animals, and in areas of environmental health, food security and economic growth and development.



The conference focused on three health targets: reduce the total amount of antimicrobials used in the agri-food system at least by 30-50% by 2030; eliminate use in animals and food production of antimicrobials that are medically important for human health; and ensure that by 2030 at least 60% of overall antibiotic consumption in humans is from the WHO “Access” group of antibiotics.

In her address, India’s Union Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare, Dr. Bharati Pravin Pawar, said that AMR was a serious global health threat and could not be “overshadowed by other competing public health priorities”.

India has committed to strengthening surveillance and promoting research on newer drugs. It also plans to strengthen private sector engagement and the reporting of data to the WHO Global Antimicrobial Resistance and Use Surveillance System (GLASS) and other standardised systems.

### **High levels of resistance**

WHO has increasingly expressed concern about the dangerously high levels of antibiotic resistance among patients across countries. Take the example of ciprofloxacin, an antibiotic commonly used to treat urinary tract infections. According to WHO, resistance to ciprofloxacin varied from 8.4% to 92.9% for *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) and from 4.1% to 79.4% for *Klebsiella pneumoniae* (a bacteria that can cause life-threatening infections such as pneumonia and intensive care unit-related infections). The global epidemic of TB has been severely impacted by multidrug resistance — patients have less than a 60% chance of recovery.

The Muscat Manifesto appears to respond to the AMR crisis by setting these three ground-breaking targets. The manifesto encourages countries to prioritise their national action plans for AMR keeping the One Health approach. The One Health approach requires all stakeholders to work together towards an integrated programme linking challenges of humans, terrestrial and aquatic animal, plant health, food and feed production and the environment. This approach will enable the world to effectively prevent, predict and detect the health crisis induced by AMR. Tackling AMR requires constant monitoring of antibiotic consumption, identifying the types and quantities of antibiotics being used.

There is also an urgent need to reduce the usage of antimicrobials in the agri-food system. Scientific evidence suggests that the less antimicrobials are used, it is less likely that there will be an emergence of drug resistance. Countries such as the Netherlands and Thailand have decreased their usage by almost 50%. In China, the consumption of antibiotics in the agricultural sector has fallen substantially. The use of antibiotics in healthy animals to boost growth has also been reduced in the last decade in many countries.

### **From policy to the ground level**

The National Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance (2017-21) emphasised the effectiveness of the government’s initiatives for hand hygiene and sanitation programmes such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Kayakalp and Swachh Swasth Sarvatra. The government has also attempted to increase community awareness about healthier and better food production practices, especially in the animal food industry. The National Health Policy 2017 also offered specific guidelines regarding use of antibiotics, limiting the use of antibiotics as over-the-counter medications and banning or restricting the use of antibiotics for growth promotion in livestock. It also called for scrutiny of prescriptions to assess antibiotic usage in hospitals and among doctors. Everything in these policies now needs strong implementation on the ground.

The various G-20 health summits spread through 2023 offer an opportunity for India to ensure that all aspects of AMR are addressed and countries commit to progress. Some key areas for action are: surveillance — both phenotypic and genotypic — of priority pathogens and sharing of data, including through WHO's GLASS platform; regulatory and policy action to stop use of antibiotics that are important for human health in animals; no use of antibiotics for growth promotion in animals; more government investment in research and innovation for new antibiotics; explore use of vaccines to prevent certain infections due to AMR organisms in humans and animals; special focus on combating TB and drug-resistant TB.



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