CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

5th to 11th March 2022

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INTERNATIONAL

STOPPING THE BOATS

The UN refugee agency, the UNHCR, has come down strongly on the U.K. Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak's plan to pass a new "Illegal Migration Law" that effectively stops the granting of asylum to migrants who reach the U.K. illegally. Mr. Sunak, while standing at a dais marked "Stop the Boats", said the government is worried about the numbers of those attempting to travel to the U.K. and applying for asylum while on British soil, at considerable cost to the exchequer. Instead, as Home Secretary Suella Braverman explained while introducing the Bill this week, asylum seekers who try to enter illegally would either be returned to their own countries or a "third country", presumably Rwanda, that has entered into an agreement to provide processing facilities for them. They also face a lifetime ban on citizenship and re-entry to the U.K. According to the UNHCR, the law would contravene international laws, including the 1951 Refugee Convention that Britain is a signatory to. To start with, those who flee their homes and countries often do so without proper paperwork, as they are forced to leave to save their lives. Many of the estimated 45,000 who came to the U.K. on "small boats" last year would have been economic refugees rather than political asylum seekers, and it is problematic that the British government does not make a distinction between the two. The Bill makes exceptions for those arriving directly from the countries they are fleeing, but those would be a small proportion given the short distances "small boats" could travel. The British government, much like the U.S.'s Trump administration that latched on to the equally catchy "Build That Wall" slogan, is long on political rhetoric, but short on the actual mechanics of making such a plan work, if it fails to be a deterrent to small boats bringing in migrants. In addition, the plan to transport asylum seekers to a third country, apart from sounding neo-colonial, will also come at considerable cost, one that the hapless migrants are unlikely to be able to afford.

The British move is meant to stop the small boats, but must be seen in the larger political context of anti-immigrant and xenophobic beliefs gaining salience in other democracies. While western countries have long quoted international law and convention to India on its plan to forcibly deport Rohingya refugees to Myanmar, or to discriminate on the basis of religion in the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, they must also introspect on their message to the world by enacting such laws themselves. By rejecting asylum seekers and illegal immigrants, nearly all of whom are coming to their shores by braving unsafe routes in search of a better life, they also belittle the real contributions immigrants have made to their societies, including those like the parents of Mr. Sunak and Ms. Braverman, who made their journey from Africa during more welcoming times.

UN NUCLEAR HEAD MEETS WITH IRANIANS AMID ENRICHMENT CONCERNS

The head of the UN nuclear watchdog was meeting with officials in Iran on Saturday, days after it was revealed that the country had enriched particles of uranium to near weapons-grade. The reports had raised fresh alarm over its long-disputed nuclear programme.

Rafael Mariano Grossi, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, declined to comment on his discussions during a press conference with the head of Iran's nuclear programme, saying the delegation's work was still ongoing.

"It's an atmosphere of work, of honesty and cooperation," Mr. Grossi said. He later met with Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi and was expected to speak with reporters upon his return to Vienna.

Earlier this week, the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), through a report, had said that uranium particles enriched up to 83.7% — just short of weapons-grade — were found in Iran's underground Fordo nuclear site.

WIDENING RIFT

The downward slide in relations between the world's two biggest powers fast appears to be reaching a point of no return. That was certainly the message from Beijing, where, during the on-going annual session of the National People's Congress or Parliament, Chinese leaders took aim at Washington's recent approach to ties. Xi Jinping, now reappointed for a third five year-term as President, told a parliamentary delegation on March 6 that China was facing "unprecedented severe challenges to the country's development" because "Western countries, led by the U.S., have implemented all-round containment and suppression of China". That Mr. Xi chose to directly name the U.S. underlined starkly how relations have deteriorated. China's new Foreign Minister Qin Gang said the U.S. was seeking "to encircle China". He also rejected the Biden administration's claim that "it seeks to out-compete China but does not seek conflict," saying it "... means to contain and suppress China in all respects". He added that "if the U.S. does not hit the brake... there will surely be confrontation".

If the hope was to "responsibly manage" competition, as the two leaders put it at their G-20 Indonesia meet in November 2022, recent events do not inspire confidence. A scheduled visit early last month by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was cancelled after the sighting of a Chinese balloon over the U.S. Washington saw the "spy balloon" as a grave provocation on the eve of a visit aimed to restart engagement. Beijing slammed the U.S. decision to shoot down a "civilian meteorological airship" as reflecting a sense of "hysteria" in Washington when it comes to China. For the rest of the world, recent events suggest the rift is here to stay. Beijing, which is increasingly looking at the rest of the world through the prism of its all-encompassing U.S. rivalry, appears to be mending fences with Europe, while courting its neighbours. Beijing is planning a major Central Asia summit this year, while its strained relations with Japan are warming. The U.S., meanwhile, is shoring up alliances and partnerships in the region. While India has so far adeptly managed the fallout from the Ukraine war by adhering to its self-interest, China poses a unique challenge given the Line of Actual Control crisis. After Beijing's increasingly vocal objections to the Quad, India will have to remain prepared for continued pressure along the land borders, even as it assesses whether the worsening China-U.S. rift may alter Beijing's calculus as it grapples with two fronts, though Taiwan remains its primary concern. India must be nimble enough to exploit the opportunities in an increasingly divided world full of uncertainty and difficult challenges.

CHINA INCREASES DEFENCE SPENDING BY 7.2%

China's government on Sunday announced a hike in defence spending by 7.2% to $225 billion in 2023, saying the rise was needed to deal with "complex security challenges".

Beijing also announced a lower than expected growth target of "around 5%" for the year, as the National People's Congress (NPC), or Parliament, convened for its annual session in the capital.

Outgoing Premier Li Keqiang delivered his last report to the NPC on Sunday morning. The session will conclude on March 12, with Mr. Li set to be replaced by a close ally of President Xi Jinping, Li Qiang, who was promoted as the second-ranked leader of the Politburo at the ruling Communist Party's once-in-five-year congress in October 2022.

The NPC is a largely ceremonial legislature that endorses party policies as well as approves government appointments. This year's session, which marks the end of Mr. Li's second five-year term, will see sweeping changes across government ministries with officials set to be appointed for the next five years.

Mr. Li, in his last work report to the NPC, announced an economic growth target of "around 5%" for 2023. Last year, the economy failed to meet its 5.5% target, growing by 3% as it struggled with the impact of the "zero-COVID" policy, which was finally withdrawn in December.

Mr. Li said the country would add "around 12 million new urban jobs" this year as well as continue to boost strategic, high-tech industries while "defusing major economic and financial risks", which included local government debt as well as financial problems continuing to plague real estate enterprises.

On Sunday, a draft Budget presented to the NPC, which will be approved during this session, proposed a 7.2% hike to take defence spending to 1.55 trillion Yuan ($225 billion), up from 1.45 trillion Yuan in 2022. In dollar terms, the Budget actually declined from $230 billion in 2022 given the depreciation in the Yuan.

China's still sizeable Budget remains around three times that of India's. NPC spokesperson Wang Chao told reporters the increase in defence spending, which was only a slight rise from last year's 7.1% hike, was "needed for meeting complex security challenges and for China to fulfil its responsibilities as a major country."

Upcoming goals

Mr. Li's work report, which outlined goals for the coming year, said the military "should work to carry out military operations, boost combat preparedness, and enhance military capabilities so as to accomplish the tasks entrusted to them by the Party and the people."

"The armed forces should intensify military training and preparedness across the board, develop new military strategic guidance, devote greater energy to training under combat conditions, and make well-coordinated efforts to strengthen military work in all directions and domains," he said, adding that in the past year, the Army "carried out operations in a firm and flexible way; and they effectively conducted major missions relating to border defence, maritime rights protection, counterterrorism and stability maintenance, disaster rescue and relief, COVID-19 response, peacekeeping, and merchant ship escorting."

THE ELUSIVE POLITICAL SOLUTION IN SRI LANKA

Early February, a group of saffron-clad Buddhist monks gathered near the Sri Lankan Parliament and burnt a copy of the 13th Amendment. They were registering their rage and protest after President Ranil Wickremesinghe vowed to implement the law in full. He had told an all-party conference that it was his "responsibility" as the Executive to carry out the current law.

"For approximately 37 years, the 13th Amendment has been a part of the Constitution. I must implement or someone has to abolish it...," he said. The monks resisted it, despite Mr. Wickremesinghe stressing he was "not ready to divide the country at all" and would not "betray the Sinhalese nation".

An unfulfilled promise

Neither the pledge made by President Wickremesinghe nor the monks' reaction is new to Sri Lankans. Past presidents, including Mahinda Rajapaksa, have made the same promise more than once. Monks and other reactionary groups similarly agitated then too. At the same time, Sri Lankan Tamils, who continue to demand equality, dignity, and the right to self-determination, do not know what it might look like, when the promise is indeed kept. Despite power devolution being enshrined in the Constitution for nearly four decades — it was an outcome of the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987 — they have never seen the piece of legislation being implemented in letter and spirit till date.

The 13th Amendment is, and has always been, contentious. For those Sinhalese opposing it, the legislation is an "Indian imposition", symbolising "too much power" to the Tamils at the provincial level and a threat to the central government in Colombo. The position disregards the fact that the Amendment guarantees the same measure of devolved power to all nine provinces, seven of which are in the Sinhala-majority areas of the island nation. The Tamils, on the other hand, have maintained that the legislation, under Sri Lanka's unitary Constitution, entails very limited powers that don't amount to meaningful devolution. All the same, some see it as a "starting point" in negotiating a more wholesome and durable political settlement, for the 13th Amendment is currently the only legislative guarantee of some power sharing, even if widely considered inadequate. Although the Amendment gave provinces legislative power over agriculture, education, health, housing, local government, planning, road transport and social services, the Centre is all-powerful, because of an ambiguous concurrent list and certain overriding clauses in the Constitution.

Tamils' engagement

Months into his unexpected Presidency, Mr. Wickremesinghe announced that he would ensure that the country's long-pending ethnic question is resolved by February 4, 2023, the day Sri Lanka marked 75 years of its Independence from colonial rule. His unambiguous announcement and the imminent deadline had a "now or never" ring to it.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main grouping of Tamil legislators from the north and east, agreed to engage, although its MPs were sceptical of Mr. Wickremesinghe's outreach. The Alliance's rival Tamil National People's Front (TNPF) took a clear position that there was no point in participating in talks, unless the President openly agreed to discuss a solution based on a federal Constitution. The TNA went in for talks with a proposal that instead of reinventing the wheel, the government should take some immediate steps in regard to five actionable points, such as establishing a national land commission and provincial police forces; amending or reversing certain acts to restore power to the provincial councils; and giving provincial councils the necessary administrative powers to run schools and hospitals. With no tangible action on any of the areas, the TNA said it was "pointless" to continue discussions.

In a parliamentary speech in July 2019, TNA Leader and veteran Tamil politician R. Sampanthan elaborated on the many attempts in the past, by different governments, to solve the pending national question, going well past what was envisaged in the 13th Amendment of 1987. He pointed to the proposals of the Mangala Moonasinghe Select Committee set up in 1991, during President Ranasinghe Premadasa's term; the new constitutional proposals that were tabled in Parliament in 2000, when President Chandrika Kumaratunga Bandaranaike was in power; the proposals of the Prof. Tissa Vitharana-led All Party Representative Committee (APRC) — set up in 2006 —

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when President Mahinda Rajapaksa was in power, and efforts taken during the Maithripala Sirisena – Wickremesinghe administration's term to draft a new Constitution.

In an impassioned account of the Tamil community's long political pursuit Mr. Sampanthan said: "The Tamils are a distinct people with a distinct linguistic and cultural identity. We have historically inhabited the north and the east. We cannot live as second-class citizens. We must live with self-respect and dignity. Maximum possible power-sharing must be effected, power must be devolved within a united, undivided, indivisible Sri Lanka. We must be able to determine our destiny"

"The earlier you do it, the better. If you do not do it and abstain from doing the right thing, I do not think the Tamil people will take it lying down for too long," he roared in the House.

Regardless, the outcome of each of these exercises remains on paper, or as yet another promise in the long list of upkept ones. The ruling Sinhalese establishment did not follow through on any of the pledges made. The end of the civil war in 2009, which came with enormous human cost and suffering to Tamil civilians, was seen as offering a chance for genuine reconciliation through, among other things, a just political solution.

According to the Tamils, the many missed opportunities make one thing amply clear – that there was, and is, no political will yet, they contend. The bogey of separatism, an idea that the Tamils have given up for years now, is lazily invoked by some Sinhalese politicians even before a conversation on power sharing begins. Or, economic development in the war-battered region is pitched as an alternative, as if it can compensate for the lack of actual decision-making powers, including on the type of developmental activity.

Indian involvement

The deadline that President Wickremesinghe set for himself, to solve the national question, expired a month ago. The government held elaborate celebrations to observe its 75th year of Independence, although some Sri Lankans still feel they are treated as "second class" citizens. The President's promise to implement the 13th Amendment is already fading into oblivion.

The dominant headlines in Sri Lanka today are about the International Monetary Fund's "bailout package", that has now come within touching distance after China agreed to restructure Sri Lanka's loans; and about the new wave of protests from sections who are reeling under the lingering impact of last year's economic crisis. With supporters of the government adopting an "economic recovery before everything" approach, there is little indication that the country's unresolved ethnic conflict may be addressed soon.

While India has historically been an arbiter on Sri Lanka's Tamil national question, many in Tamil polity and community say both New Delhi's interest in — and influence — on the issue are waning. Critics argue that India, pre-occupied with countering Chinese influence in Sri Lanka, does little more than make customary statements on the need to implement the 13th Amendment.

Where does that leave Sri Lanka's war-affected Tamil community in the north and east? After decades of relentless agitations, and an armed struggle, they are still demanding justice, equality, and dignity. And the long-pending political solution remains elusive.

This is the second part of a series of articles looking at Sri Lanka's economic recovery and political course

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SRI LANKA FISHERMEN 'FIERCELY OPPOSE' PROPOSAL TO ISSUE LICENCE TO INDIAN FISHERMEN

On February 22, Foreign Minister Ali Sabry told Parliament that authorities were looking into possibly issuing licences to Indian fishermen, as part of Sri Lanka's efforts to find a solution to the long-persisting fisheries conflict, through "cordial" bilateral talks. "This was discussed this with Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar…Sri Lanka's priority is to safeguard fishermen's livelihoods, the country's marine resources, and find a long-term solution…India has proposed this licensing system as a solution, and we are holding discussions on it," he said, adding that such a system would help Indian authorities better regulate their fishermen, and will also bring in money that could be used for Sri Lankan fishermen's betterment. About "2,000 to 3,000 [Indian trawlers] come to our seas every day and our Navy is unable to control that," Mr. Sabry further noted.

The Minister's remarks have sparked serious concern among northern fishermen, said Annalingam Annarasa, who leads a Jaffna-based fishermen's association. "We are very worried, this will be a serious setback to our struggle for the last 15 years to stop Indian trawlers from entering our seas," he told The Hindu. "Moreover, some political actors are trying to turn fishermen of our two countries against each other, using this problem. We need an urgent solution to this."

Plea to Tamil MPs

Fisher leaders including him on Sunday put forward this view to Tamil MPs representing northern districts and sought their support to resist the government's proposal, and to urge Colombo to fully implement Sri Lankan laws that ban bottom trawling and illegal fishing.

Following the meeting, Jaffna MP M.A. Sumanthiran — whose Bill against bottom trawling was passed by Parliament in 2017 — said legislators across parties agreed that no permits should be issued to Indian trawlers. "Even without permits, Indian trawlers are already entering Sri Lankan waters and destroying marine resources. Issuing licenses will only aggravate the problem," he said.

The fisheries conflict affecting fishermen of Sri Lanka and India has remained a thorny issue in Indo-Lanka bilateral ties. From the time Sri Lanka's civil war ended in 2009, Tamil fishermen living in Sri Lanka's northern districts have consistently protested Indian trawlers — originating from Tamil Nadu — fishing along their coastline, citing the destruction they cause to marine biodiversity and their livelihoods that are closely tied to it. Sri Lankan fishermen also frequently report serious damage to their fishing nets and gear, and huge losses, owing to the bottom trawlers.

Left in the lurch

Despite bilateral talks and discussions among fishermen's representatives from either side of the Palk Strait, the problem is yet to be resolved, leaving the northern Sri Lankan fisher folk, who are struggling to resurrect their war-battered livelihoods, in a precarious situation.

The proposed licensing system will "undermine fishing as a way of life" for the next generations of Sri Lankan fishermen, according to Ahilan Kadirgamar, a senior lecturer at the University of Jaffna, who researches northern livelihoods. "They feel both the Sri Lankan and Indian governments have betrayed them," he said.

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EXPRESS VIEW ON NEPAL'S NEW PRESIDENT

The election of Ram Chandra Paudel, a leader of Nepali Congress, as the third President of Nepal comes at a time when the country is staring at another round of political uncertainty. In fact, it started with Paudel's candidature, which set off a chain of events that nearly forced a change of government in Kathmandu. Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal survived that phase and managed to retain office with the help of Nepali Congress. However, the Supreme Court's decision on Friday to issue show cause notice to Prime Minister Dahal on writ petitions that seek his prosecution for murders allegedly committed by the Maoists during the civil war years (1996-2006) has introduced a new element of unpredictability. As of now, the only person assured of a five-year term in office is Paudel — which makes him the person to watch. His predecessors served their tenure in similar chaotic circumstances.

Stability in government has eluded Nepal ever since it became a republic. Parties have split, merged and split again while building coalitions and forming governments after often ignoring the mandate. The promise of the republic is yet to be realised and many of the commitments in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that was signed at the end of the civil war have not been implemented. A key promise in the CPA was a truth and reconciliation commission to ensure justice and closure in cases of mass killings and disappearances. This has now come to haunt Dahal, who led the Maoists during the insurgency. Dahal has cleverly managed the contradictions of electoral politics and concerns of international actors to occupy high office several times. However, the ghosts of the civil war pose a more complex problem.

Dahal's CPN-Maoist Centre had finished third in the November elections. However, he split with the pre-poll ally, Nepali Congress, that had finished first in a hung parliament and became prime minister with the support of KP Oli's CPN-UML. But in the presidential poll, he backed Paudel, the nominee of Nepali Congress, which in turn, has led to a realignment of parties at the Centre. Oli is seen as close to Beijing and the international community had apprehensions regarding the two main communist parties coming together, just months after their merger unravelled. While the NC may be a moderating influence in the current government, Dahal will need to balance multiple interests, including the ambitions of the NC leadership as well as Oli. Paudel's support could be handy for Dahal in the coming days if the SC decides to probe the civil war killings.

NATION

INDIAN MAN URINATES ON CO-TRAVELLER ON NEW YORK-DELHI FLIGHT

American Airlines handed over Aryan Vohra, 21, to the Central Industrial Security Force after he allegedly urinated on a male passenger on a flight from New York to Delhi on Saturday. The Delhi police said they had filed a case against him.

The airline cancelled his bookings, including his return flight, and is conducting an inquiry that could even result in a lifetime ban. Mr. Vohra was heavily intoxicated and allegedly misbehaved with a woman co-passenger who complained that he was leaning on her; he nearly sat on an infant on a different seat before the mother pushed him away, according to the official complaint filed by the airline with the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, viewed by The Hindu. He then urinated on a U.S. national, who was asleep on seat 15G.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (IGI Airport) Devesh Kumar Mahla said the accused, a resident of Defence Colony here, was released after interrogation.

He has not been arrested since the inquiry has just begun.

The police registered a case under Sections 510 and 294 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Sections 22 and 23 of the Aircraft Rules.

MULTILATERAL REFORMS AS A PRIORITY IN THE G-20

The story so far:

While assuming the G-20 presidency in December 2022, India stated that its agenda would be inclusive, ambitious, action-oriented, and decisive. New Delhi also said that its primary objectives are to build global consensus over critical development and security issues and deliver global goods. This resulted in placing multilateral reform as one of the top presidential priorities for India. Accordingly, the G-20 idea bank, Think 20, also placed multilateral reforms as one of its priorities. The T20 Task Force on 'Towards Reformed Multilateralism' (TF7) aims to construct a roadmap for 'Multilateralism 2.0'.

Why is multilateralism important?

Multilateral cooperation today, is confronting multiple crises. First, due to persistent deadlocks, multilateralism has lost the majority's trust. Second, multilateralism is facing a utility crisis, where powerful member-states think it is no longer useful for them. Moreover, increasing great-power tensions, de-globalisation, populist nationalism, the pandemic, and climate emergencies added to the hardships. This impasse led states to seek other arenas, including bilateral, plurilateral and minilateral groupings, which subsequently contributed to further polarisation of global politics. However, cooperation and multilateral reform is the need of the hour. Most of the challenges nations face today are global in nature and require global solutions. Pressing global issues such as conflicts, climate change, migration, macroeconomic instability, and cybersecurity can indeed only be solved collectively. Furthermore, disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic have reversed the social and economic progress that the global society made in the past couple of decades.

Why is reform difficult?

Reforming multilateralism is a difficult task for various reasons. First, multilateralism is deeply entrenched in global power politics. As a result, any action in reforming multilateral institutions and frameworks automatically transforms into a move that seeks changes in the current distribution of power. Modifications in the distribution of power in the global order are neither easy nor normal. Moreover, it may have adverse implications if not done cautiously.

Second, the status quo powers see multilateral reforms as a zero-sum game. For instance, in the context of the Bretton Woods system, the U.S. and Europe believed reform would reduce their influence and dominance. This makes decisions about reform in these institutions, by consensus or voting, hard. Third, multilateralism appears at odds with the realities of the emerging multiplex global order. The emerging order seems more multipolar and multi-centred. Such a situation facilitates the formation of new clubs, concerts and coalitions of the like-minded, which makes the reform of older institutions and frameworks more challenging.

What can G-20 and India do?

To fix the malaise within multilateralism, G-20 needs to devise multiple solutions. Currently, the multilateralism reform narrative lives only in elite circles and some national capitals, particularly the emerging powers. Therefore, G-20 should first focus on setting proper narratives of multilateral reform. G-20 may constitute an engagement group dedicated to bring the narrative to the forefront of global discourse. India should also urge the upcoming chairs of the grouping, Brazil and South Africa, to place multilateral reforms as their presidential priorities. Since both have global high-table ambitions, it would be an easier task for India.

Many of today's problems need global solutions and global cooperation. However, we should also acknowledge the limitations of multilateral cooperation. Competing interests and the dominance of powerful states are there to stay in multilateral platforms. Therefore, while supporting multilateral cooperation, G-20 should continue encouraging minilateral groupings as a new form of multilateralism and try to transform them into multi-stakeholder partnerships. Creating networks of issue-based minilaterals, particularly in areas related to the governance of the global commons will be helpful in preventing competitive coalitions where other actors play the same game to their advantage, leading to a more fragmented world order. Multilateral reforms also require mobilising the political will, subsequently giving concessions and conciliations. However, most reform bids have yet to take this issue seriously.

To overcome the trust, legitimacy and utility crises of multilateralism, the world requires a model, and the G-20 can be one. However, to fit the purpose, the group needs to be more inclusive without sacrificing efficiency. For example, including the African Union as a permanent member and the UN Secretary-General and General Assembly President as permanent invitees would be helpful to enhance its legitimacy.

Similarly, to address the crisis of trust and utility, G-20 should put all its efforts into solving one or two pressing global issues and showcase it as the model of new multilateralism. Food, fuel and fertilizer security can be one such issue. On the one hand, it falls under the 'low politics' of world politics, so cooperation is more achievable. On the other, it is a global cause of concern, since it can trigger stagflation and recession across the globe. More significantly, this issue spreads across the overall priorities of India within and beyond the G-20.

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ABUSING SOMEONE WITH CASTE NAME DURING ARGUMENT WON'T LEAD TO SC/ST ACT CASE: HC

Abusing someone with the name of their caste or uttering the caste name suddenly during an exchange, by itself, will not be sufficient to establish an offence under the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs) Prevention of Atrocities (PoA) Act, unless there is intent to humiliate the victims specifically for their caste or tribal identity, the Orissa High Court (HC) held in a recent judgment.

The March 1 order was passed by a single-judge Bench of Justice R.K. Pattanaik, which essentially quashed charges framed under the SC/ST Act, as prayed by the accused among other things, while also holding that other charges framed against the two accused needed to be tested at trial.

The case pertained to a 2017 incident, where the accused had got involved in an altercation with some other people.

The prosecution's case noted that the complainant was returning home, when he was abused, assaulted and terrorised by the accused persons.

Eventually, passers-by intervened, at which point the accused used the caste slur against one of them. The High Court noted that the alleged victim was himself not the complainant in the case. Under these circumstances, the High Court ruled, "If someone is abused with the name of his caste or the caste is uttered suddenly in course of events and during the incident, in the humble view of the court, by itself would not be sufficient to hold that any offence under the SC and ST (PoA) Act is made out unless the intention is to insult or humiliate the victim for the reason that he belongs to Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) is prima facie established."

The court thus noted that it would be too much of a stretch and "unjustified" to assume that the accused persons had used the slur with the intention to humiliate the victim in question because of his SC identity. Justice Pattanaik, ruling thus, also cited the precedent set by the Supreme Court of India in the Hitesh Verma vs State of Uttarakhand and another, where it was held that intent to humiliate someone because of their caste was a prerequisite for bringing charges under the relevant sections of the SC/ST Act.

ROLE AND REMIT

It is difficult to welcome unequivocally the Supreme Court order forming a committee to look into possible regulatory failure in dealing with the allegations that the Adani Group companies flouted norms in the securities market. The Court has done well to make it clear that the committee's constitution will not divest the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) of its powers and responsibilities in continuing with its probe. In addition, it has said SEBI should also investigate the charge that the companies failed to maintain the minimum public shareholding or disclose transactions involving related parties. To the extent that it holds the regulator to its claim that it is already seized of the matter, as well as expands its remit to address squarely the allegation that funds controlled by related parties were used to manipulate stock prices, the order is quite welcome. However, a relevant question is whether a committee headed by a former Supreme Court judge is needed at all. SEBI has been asked to share its findings with the panel, but it is doubtful if the committee can avoid going into the charges on its own before it can confirm or rule out regulatory failure. The cause may have been better served if the Court had chosen to monitor SEBI's inquiry by seeking progress reports. And it may have taken the help of experts, if necessary,

to assess the final outcome. The other aspect of the panel's work — suggesting measures to strengthen the regulatory framework — could have been left to the legislature. Also, that the Court has asked for the panel's report in a sealed cover is disappointing. The fate of similar committees, the one on Pegasus, for instance, does not inspire confidence about the outcome.

The order also asks the committee to ascertain the causal factors that led to volatility in the market. The severe losses suffered by retail investors following the Hindenburg revelations should not become a red herring to divert attention from the conduct of the companies. Investor protection is one of SEBI's functions, but it is equally true that no measure can be a guarantee against market forces reacting sensitively to developments. There is an inherent and perpetual risk in stock market investments, and it is addressed from a regulatory viewpoint by various means — prescribing norms and mandating disclosures to setting upper and lower limits on daily price movement. It may be expedient for the Adani Group — and the government, which also wants this controversy to blow over soon — to highlight investor losses so that a quick exoneration is ensured by putting the blame on an alleged plot against the country and its corporate champions by an inimical short-seller; but the Court's focus should be on SEBI's conduct and independent functioning, preserving which alone can protect investors from market manipulators.

WITH SUPREME COURT ORDER ON EC APPOINTMENTS, A HISTORY OF FUTILE OPP DISSENT ON PICKS FOR TOP POSTS

The Supreme Court on March 2 gave a say to the Opposition in the selection of the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners, ruling that these officials would be appointed by the President based on the recommendation of a committee comprising the Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha, and Chief Justice of India (CJI).

Similar high-power panels already pick the CBI Director, Central Vigilance Commissioner (CVC) and Vigilance Commissioners, NHRC chairperson, Chief Information Commissioner (CIC) and Information Commissioners, Chairperson and members of Lokpal. The choices have almost always been dictated by the government, ignoring Opposition objections.

CBI Director

The CBI Director is appointed by a Committee consisting of the Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha or leader of the single largest Opposition party, and the CJI or his nominee. The process of appointment was established by the Supreme Court's Vineet Narain judgment (1997), and the changes made to The Delhi Special Police Establishment (DSPE) Act, 1946 by The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013.

*In January 2017, the government and Opposition faced off over the appointment of then Delhi Police Commissioner Alok Kumar Verma as CBI Director. In a meeting chaired by PM Narendra Modi, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, who was his party's leader in Lok Sabha at the time, objected to Verma's selection citing his lack of experience in the CBI.

*Kharge recorded his dissent in writing, but Verma was still appointed to the position, in which he served until January 2019.

*In October 2018, after the government sent Verma and his deputy Rakesh Asthana — who were at loggerheads then — on leave and made M Nageshwar Rao interim Director, Kharge wrote to the PM arguing that the move was "illegal" as "no one — neither you nor the CVC — enjoys

the…authority to interfere with the Terms of Service vested in the Director". He said that the DSPE Act gave the Director a two-year tenure, and he "shall not be transferred except with the previous consent of the Committee" [that selected him].

*In January 2019, the SC reinstated Verma — but two days later, the PM-headed high-power committee removed him on charges of corruption and dereliction of duty by a 2:1 decision. Kharge objected again; the third member, Justice A K Sikri (standing in for then CJI Ranjan Gogoi), took a position against Verma based on an unfavourable report by the CVC, given on a complaint by Asthana.

*A month later, Kharge again dissented when the government chose Rishi Kumar Shukla as the new Director, saying the selection criteria had been diluted in violation of the law and Supreme Court judgments.

*In May 2021, Kharge's successor as Congress leader in Lok Sabha Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury dissented at the high-power meeting to pick the CBI chief. Chowdhury objected to the Department of Personnel and Training pruning — on its own — the original list of 109 names sent to the panel to just 16.

The CVC and CIC

The Central Vigilance Commission Act, 2003, states the CVC and Vigilance Commissioners shall be appointed on the recommendation of a panel of the PM, Home Minister, and Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha.

The Right to Information Act, 2005, states that CIC and Information Commissioners shall be appointed by the President on the recommendation of a committee consisting of the PM, Lok Sabha Leader of Opposition, and a Union Cabinet Minister nominated by the PM.

*In February 2020, the government overrode Chowdhury's dissent to choose Sanjay Kothari as CVC and Bimal Julka as CIC. Chowdhury pointed to "glaring and fatal infirmities with the (search) committee itself" — a member, Rajiv Kumar, "also turned out to be an applicant for the CVC and was finally shortlisted for the post…by the search committee".

On appointment of the CIC, Chowdhury said the government had reduced the process to "an empty paper formality" by not providing any material particulars for the selection.

*In October 2020, Chowdhury strongly objected to the appointments of Information Commissioner Yashvardhan Kumar Sinha as the new CIC and journalist Uday Mahurkar as Information Commissioner.

NHRC chief, members

The Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993, states that the chairperson and members shall be appointed by the President on the recommendation of a Committee consisting of the PM, Lok Sabha Speaker, Home Minister, Leaders of Opposition in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, and Deputy Chairman of Rajya Sabha.

In June 2021, Kharge, Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha, objected to the appointment of Justice Arun Mishra as NHRC chief, instead seeking a member of the SCs or STs in the post.

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Controversy under UPA

In September 2010, the late Sushma Swaraj, then Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha, recorded her dissent to the appointment of then Telecom Secretary P J Thomas as CVC, who was favoured by then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and then Home Minister P Chidambaram. In March 2011, in a major embarrassment to the UPA government, the Supreme Court struck down Thomas's appointment.

WHY IS THE TRIBAL PANEL UPSET WITH ENVIRONMENT MINISTRY OVER FOREST RIGHTS?

The story so far:

After the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) invoked its constitutional power to requisition detailed Forest Rights Act implementation reports from the Supreme Court, the Registrar has ordered the release of documents to the NCST. The ST Commission is caught in a row with the Union Environment Ministry over the Forest Conservation Rules (FCR), 2022. The row is over the potential violation of provisions enshrined in the Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 dubbed the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

What is the Act and the rules?

The Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change in June 2022, notified the Forest (Conservation) Rules, 2022, which prescribed the mechanism for the diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes. These amended rules have omitted a clause (present in 2014 and 2017 Rules) that explicitly required any proposal to mandatorily have the consent of local tribespeople and other traditional forest dwellers (OTFDs) of the area, before proceeding for Stage 1 clearance. The FCR, 2022 has allowed entities to go for the consent of locals, after Stage 1 or even after Stage 2 clearance. According to the FRA, 2006, in case of a dispute over forest land, precedence has to be given to the rights of STs and OTFDs, over any other party.

What is the NCST demanding?

In September, 2022, NCST Chairperson Harsh Chouhan shot off a letter to Environment Minister Bhupendra Yadav, highlighting the potential consequences of FCR, 2022, recommending that they be put on hold and the previous Rules, which provided for the consent clause, be strengthened. The ST panel argued that the previous versions of the Rules provided a legal space for "ensuring completion of the processes for recognition and vesting of rights under the FRA in areas where forests are being diverted."

The ST Commission noted that it made little sense to take the consent of tribals and forest dwellers after an applicant had got Stage 1 clearance. By then, the applicant would be invested in the project and would then have the incentive to "pursue the State Governments or Union Territories" to divert the land at the earliest, it said. Further, the NCST found that even under the old rules, FRA compliance was in trouble. It said currently, nearly 25,000- 30,000 hectares of forest land was being diverted every year. It cited a study by the Centre for Environment and Development, ATREE to note: "Out of 128 applications for forest diversion for mining, over 100 had been processed between 2009 and 2018." It added that 74 proposals had Stage 2 approval, 46 had Stage 1 approval (in-principle), with just five rejected and four closed for other reasons. None of the rejections was for non-compliance of FRA. The study also found that 14 of these cases had been cleared with an FRA compliance report, despite this being far from the "ground reality".

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Mr. Yadav wrote back to the NCST chief insisting that FCR, 2022 does not violate any provisions granting land rights to STs and OTFDs.

BRUS BECOME VISIBLE, BUT THEIR FIGHT FOR IDENTITY CONTINUES

A large majority of voters in Tripura were eagerly waiting for the election results to see which party will form the government. However, the concern for the people belonging to the Bru tribal community — who exercised their franchise in Tripura for the first time — was related to their identity. It was not that they were uninterested in the verdict, but, one gets the sense that the aspiration for a separate identity looms heavily on their minds.

The Lokniti-CSDS study on the Bru settlements site at Haduklau found that a majority of the families have received most of what was guaranteed in the agreement with the government, but what they are still fighting for is their own identity — for their settlement to be named as Bruhapara (area of Brus).

The process of settling

A large number of people from this community have been living in camps on the boundary of Mizoram and Tripura due to the reluctance of both State governments to allow them to settle in their territory. They were denied many things, voting rights being one of them. But many Brus who were earlier living in Mizoram were enrolled as voters there. They had been living in camps in North Tripura for years and were voting in temporary polling booths managed by the Mizoram government. But this practice was not welcomed by the Mizos. During the subsequent revision in the electoral rolls, names of most of the Brus were deleted from the electoral rolls in Mizoram.

The problem did not end here as the people of Tripura were also reluctant to allow Brus to be enrolled as voters in Tripura. They were also denied rations and other State-sponsored facilities.

Clearly, they were neither welcomed by the people of Mizoram nor by the people of Tripura. They were ultimately left to the mercy of the Union government. Finally, the Bru-Reang agreement was signed between the Government of India, the Governments of Tripura and Mizoram and Bru-Reang representatives on January 17, 2020. Of the many promises, one was that the Bru tribe would get all the rights that normal residents of the State receive and be able to enjoy the benefits of social welfare schemes of both the Union government and the State government.

The Lokniti-CSDS study in the Bru resettlement village in Haduklau in Dhalai district, a few days after election, did indicate a very high enrolment (90%) and an even higher voting (more than 96%) among the Bru tribe.

Most of the voters seemed extremely enthusiastic about having voted in these elections. They also stated that they were getting support from the government for other livelihood issues, besides their voting rights.

The families are entitled to free ration for two years; until the land and jobs that were promised to them are provided by the government.

Most of the families have received the land, the ₹1.5 lakh to build a house alongside and the ₹4 lakh as fixed deposit per family. However, what many of them were still waiting for was the monthly payment of ₹5,000 per family as promised by the government and the land for cultivation

which would be their main source of livelihood. At the moment, most of them depend on payment from manual labour, though some have started their own small shops within the settlement.

The voting experience

Talking about their experience of participating in the electoral process, they said they had to walk for more than two kilometres (on average) to cast their vote, as the school (polling station) was at a considerable distance.

It is worth mentioning that though they did mention walking this distance to cast their vote, it was without any sense of complaint or hardship. They were happy that they were voting for the first time after having settled in the new village. Moreover, this issue will be soon resolved as the construction of a government school was ongoing in the village and would be ready within a month or so.

Besides schools, a temple and a church were being constructed with the help of the government. Many voters mentioned that there was financial support for building the temple from other groups as well.

Within the Bru community in the settlement, 80% were Hindus and 20% Christians. The houses of Hindus were clearly numbered and marked with the symbol of a Trishul on the front wall. This was clearly done to identify themselves as Hindus, though there was no segregation. The houses of Hindus and Christians were in mixed settlement and not segmented.

The government has seemingly done remarkable work regarding their settlement, providing them basic facilities and livelihood.

One hardly comes across such a high enrolment ratio of voters. It is true that the overall turnout in Tripura had been high (88%) — it was higher at 91% in the previous Assembly election — but the turnout among the Bru community in village was extremely high.

THE EXPRESS VIEW ON TAMIL NADU MIGRANT SCARE: A THIN LINE BETWEEN NATIVISM AND CHAUVINISM

Captains of industry in Tamil Nadu are worried that migrant workers, spooked by the spectre of physical violence, may not return to work after Holi. Their concern stems from a spreading scare among the migrant workers — over 10 lakh, according to the state labour department — following videos that recently surfaced on social media purportedly showing mobs attacking Hindi-speakers in the state. The panic among families of the workers, especially in Bihar, apparently compelled Chief Minister Nitish Kumar to send a police team to Tamil Nadu. The videos turned out to be entirely fake or speeches and visuals edited out of context. On Sunday, the DMK government in Chennai booked the state BJP chief, K Annamalai, on charges of inciting violence and spreading enmity between groups for a tweet in which he accused ruling party leaders of slandering north Indians. The episode has sobering lessons for all parties — DMK, BJP and JD(U).

First, migrant workers are the backbone of the Indian economy: No region or sector is immune to dependency on them. Tamil Nadu, an industrial powerhouse, offers a competitive environment for manufacturing especially because of the availability of cheap labour. Workers from relatively poorer states in the country's north and east have migrated to the southern state because it offers relatively better work conditions. Textile and hosiery hubs like Tiruppur have flourished because of migrant labour which has also contributed to the efforts of the government in Chennai towards

building a welfare state. In this context, any attempts to frame migrations in nativist categories, and depict migrants as "outsiders", can potentially upset the economic equilibrium in the state. As the party in government, the DMK must keep political chauvinism at bay. The BJP must desist from harping on linguistic and ethnic fault lines to further its political goals in the south. Stoking fear and intolerance that can wreak long-standing damage to the social and economic fabric is a short-sighted approach to expanding the party's footprint in the region. Nitish Kumar's response has also shown an unbecoming alarmism. The JD-U government should have reached out to its counterpart in Chennai and worked with it to reassure the workers, instead of giving credence to rumours.

The nativist agenda has long held appeal for political parties — the Shiv Sena, Telugu Desam Party and Asom Gana Parishad built much of their political fortunes on it. It was a major strand of the Dravidian Movement, too, though the anti-Hindi politics it nurtured has focussed more on Tamil pride than the targeting of non-Tamils. A thin line separates nativism and chauvinism, which can be breached at any time. All three parties — BJP, DMK and JD(U) — need to ensure that this doesn't happen. Because if it does, all three, and the nation, stand to lose.

LOGICAL FORMATION

The term "fractured mandate" aptly describes the results of the Meghalaya Assembly election. While the incumbent National People's Party led by Conrad Sangma emerged as the single largest with 26 seats (gaining seven since 2018) in the 60-member Assembly, the fact that there were seven other parties with at least two seats besides two independents presented a mandate which necessitated a deft post-election coalition. Former Chief Minister Mukul Sangma of the Trinamool Congress tried to orchestrate a new coalition without the NPP and the BJP (two seats), but his party had won only five seats, thus making such an alliance improbable. Any coalition stitched together with smaller parties would have been unstable. The BJP had come out of its alliance with the NPP and fought all 60 seats, seeking to garner votes by highlighting the corruption in the NPP-led regime, but the party promptly fell in line after the election to support the NPP. It is easy to see why the NPP prefers to align with the BJP — governments in the north-east are dependent upon central fund transfers and keeping the Union government in good humour is seen as an imperative. But for the BJP to promptly join the government after accusing it of corruption also suggests a desperation to utilise the loaves of power to expand its base. After some intrigue, the United Democratic Party, with 11 seats, and the People's Democratic Front, with two seats, offered support to the NPP, which was also bolstered by the endorsement of two independents and the two MLAs of the Hill State People's Democratic Party, giving the coalition a comfortable majority.

While the NPP did not win an absolute majority, it managed to expand its base beyond the Garo Hills with eight victories in the Jaintia Hills and the Khasi Hills regions as well. This has allowed it to supplant the Congress as the only force with a pan-State appeal. With such a mandate, the party must focus on addressing chronic development issues in the State, which still suffers from a high poverty rate — a NITI-Aayog report listed Meghalaya as India's fifth poorest with 32.67% of the population below the poverty line. Corruption, a bane, has hampered infrastructure development; there is much illegal mining in the mineral-rich State. A renewed and expanded mandate for Conrad Sangma, but one that is dependent upon the support of other parties, should ideally keep the government on its toes as long as the coalition partners are more interested in raising policy issues rather than seeking to partake in patronage.

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KARNATAKA BJP MLA AND SON'S BRIBERY SCANDAL: HISTORY, POWERS OF THE STATE'S LOKAYUKTA

Ahead of the Assembly Elections in Karnataka, the Lokayukta has seized over Rs 8 crore of unaccounted cash from the residence and office of Channagiri BJP MLA Madal Virupakshappa, who was also serving as the chairman of the Public Sector Undertaking (PSU) Karnataka Soaps and Detergents Ltd (KS&DL).

The absconding MLA and five others, including his son, Prashanth Madal, the financial advisor of the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB), are now accused in a bribery case filed under Section 7 (a) (b) (public servant taking gratification other than legal remuneration in respect of an official act) of the Prevention of Corruption Act. The amount was recovered subsequent to searches conducted at Prashant's residence after he was caught accepting a bribe of Rs 41 lakh at his father's office.

After the episode, Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai on Friday said, "The incumbent government re-established the Lokayukta (the Anti Corruption Bureau looked at such cases during the previous Congress regime) to check corruption. In the absence of the anti-corruption institution during the Congress regime, so many incidents were hushed up." He also said, "The Lokayukta is an autonomous institution" while adding that "those who have made the mistake will be punished".

What is the Lokayukta?

Lokayuktas are the state equivalents of the central Lokpal. Section 63 of the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013 says, "Every state shall establish a body to be known as the Lokayukta for the State, if not so established, constituted or appointed, by a law made by the State Legislature, to deal with complaints relating to corruption against certain public functionaries, within a period of one year from the date of commencement of this Act."

Originally, the central legislation, that is the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013, wanted to make a Lokayukta in each state mandatory. However, regional parties and the BJP, which was in opposition then, argued that this would be against the spirit of federalism. Thereafter, the law created a broad framework, leaving it to the states to decide the specifics.

What is the central Lokpal Act of 2013?

The central Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013 received the final presidential assent on January 1, 2014, following which it came into effect on January 16, 2014. The law was a culmination of decades of demands for more stringent anti-corruption laws, including the anti-corruption movement led by Anna Hazare.

The Act provides for the creation of a 'Lokpal' headed by a Chairperson, who is or has been a Chief Justice of India, a judge of the Supreme Court, or an eminent person fulfilling the specified eligibility criteria. The Lokpal should consist of a maximum of 8 members, of which 50% shall be judicial members, provided that at least 50% belong to the SCs, STs, OBCs, minorities, or women.

When the 2013 Act was passed, Lokayuktas were already functioning in some states — including in Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka, where they were very active. Following the Act and the intervention of the Supreme Court, most states have now set up a Lokayukta.

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Karnataka's history of "Lokayukta"

The Karnataka Lokayukta Act, 1984 came into force on January 15, 1986, and was passed with the objective of improving the standards of public administration, by looking into complaints against the administrative actions, including cases of corruption, favoritism and official indiscipline in the administrative machinery.

It was given the powers of investigation and issuing search warrants and also conferred with all the powers of a civil court while trying a suit under the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908.

However, the arrest of several top leaders on charges of corruption, and the public protests for a strong Lokpal Bill, made politicians in Karnataka increasingly uncomfortable with the Lokayukta Act of 1984. Coming to power in 2013, the Congress government made attempts to amend the Act to make the Lokayukta more amenable to influence.

One such attempt was the government order of March 14, 2016, wherein the Congress government created an Anti Corruption Bureau (ACB) and also issued subsequent notifications transferring the power to probe corruption cases under the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, from Karnataka Lokayukta police to the ACB.

However, when the BJP government came to power, in August 2022, a division bench of the Karnataka High Court in "Chidananda Urs B.G vs The State Of Karnataka" ordered the abolishing of ACB and the revival of an anti-corruption police unit attached to the Karnataka Lokayukta, a quasi-judicial institution that works independent of the state. Since then, the Karnataka Lokayukta's powers have been restored.

What kind of cases can be investigated under Karnataka's Lokayukta Act?

Earlier, the Lokayukta could investigate any action which is taken by or with the general or specific approval of,- (i) the Chief Minister; (ii) a Minister or a Secretary; (iii) a member of the State Legislature; or (iv) any other public servant of a class notified by the State Government in consultation with the Lokayukta, in any case where a complaint involving a grievance or an allegation was made.

In 1988, the Act was amended to exclude from its ambit of investigation "any action in respect of which a formal and public inquiry has been ordered with the prior concurrence of the Lokayukta or a Upalokayukta" or any action referred for an inquiry, under the Commission of Inquiry Act, 1952 or any complaint made after a lapse of six months from the date on which the action complained was known to the complainant. It also excludes "any complaint involving an allegation made after the expiry of five years from the date on which the action complained against is alleged to have taken place" among others.

BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING

Breaking a barrier to gender equality, Hekani Jakhalu (in picture) and Salhoutuonuo Kruse became the first women to be elected to the 60-member Nagaland Assembly since the State came into being in 1963. Soon after her victory from the Dimapur III seat on Thursday, albeit by a slim margin, Ms. Jakhalu spoke to the local media, breaking into Nagamese, often the preferred lingua franca in a region which speaks different languages across tribes and villages.

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"I want to tell all Naga women this is our win... I know that things will get better for our women, and when things get better for women, things will get better for the State," she said. The 48-year-old, representing the ruling Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP), an ally of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), also congratulated fellow party woman Ms. Kruse, 56, who won her Western Angami seat by the narrowest of margins.

INDIA'S FIRST WOMAN ROHINGYA GRADUATE: NAME TO NATION, SHE ACCEPTED ALL CHANGES TO LEARN HER LESSONS, EARN HER 'FREEDOM'

In December 2022, Tasmida became the first woman Rohingya graduate in India. Armed with a B.A. (P) degree through open university under Delhi University, Tasmida is now awaiting a confirmation letter from Wilfrid Laurier University, Toronto. She is likely to leave for Canada this August.

She had to change her name; her 'home'; her age; her country — twice, with a third likely later this year; learn new languages; and assimilate into new cultures. All because of her circumstances.

And the two constants of life Tasmida Johar, 26 — a Rohingya refugee from Myanmar who fled to neighbouring Bangladesh Cox's Bazar, which houses the world's largest refugee camp to escape persecution in her country, and then on to India to pursue her dream of education — keeps closest to her heart are her family's circumstances, and the belief that education is a one-way ticket to "freedom".

"I am actually 24, but my UNHCR card says 26. In Myanmar, Rohingya parents usually increase our (girls') age by two years so that we can be married off early. It's tough to get married after 18," said Tasmida, which, in fact, is not her birth name.

"My name is Tasmeen Fatima. But you can't have a Rohingya name to study in Myanmar; you need to have a Buddhist name, so I had to change mine," she told The Indian Express.

"For people of Myanmar, the Rohingya simply shouldn't exist. In school, there would be separate classrooms for us. In examination halls, we sit in the furthest benches. Up to class X, even if you top, your name would not appear in the merit list. If a Rohingya wants to go to college, then you have to travel to Yangon (the country's former capital), so students seldom graduate.

"But even if you do graduate, you wouldn't get a job because we are not employed in government offices, which is the primary source of employment (in Myanmar)."

And, she added matter-of-factly, "you can't vote".

Rohingya girls, she said, drop out of school in Myanmar after class V for many reasons: "We weren't allowed to wear a headscarf in school, or even on roads or public spaces. Within the community, educating girls beyond this (class V) would be frowned upon — people would say: what if your daughter is kidnapped, why is she going to school, how will she get married, why does she go out?"

Over the years, however, Tasmida said her parents were determined to get her educated — "because they knew this was the only way to escape our circumstances".

Tasmida is the fifth of seven siblings, and the only daughter. Her elder brother is the only Rohingya postgraduate in India and works as a health liaison for the UNHCR in New Delhi and a translator for the community. The other siblings work as daily-wage earners with their father in Delhi.

Tasmida's family fled Myanmar in 2005, when she was seven, after her father was picked up several times by the Myanmar police and sent to jail — the family lived in Cox's Bazar. "My father did not get UNHCR cards made there — he always hopes the situation in Myanmar will improve and we will go home."

While many Rohingya children were schooled within Kutupalong camp — said to be the world's largest refugee camp — living outside it gave Tasmida the opportunity to enroll at a local school. "But they didn't accept the education (up to class III) I had received in Myanmar. I had to restart from class I."

She studied till class VI in Bangladesh. In 2012, the family fled once more — this time to India, and this time with no visible prospect of returning "home". And this time they applied for, and received, their refugee cards. Initially, the Johars were sent to Haryana and lived in a refugee camp. In 2014, Tasmida came to Delhi with two of her brothers and stayed at a relative's home and continued school. The others joined her soon after.

In 2016, she enrolled in class X at a school in Delhi's Jamia, run by a non-profit.

Once more, Tasmida had to re-educate herself, learning a new language, a new culture. She is now fluent in Hindi, Bengali and Urdu, and has been taught English.

While she aspired to be a lawyer, "when I applied for graduation at Jamia, they said since I was a Rohingya, I would need permission from the Home Ministry". Despite repeated attempts, she was unable to get it. So, Tasmida said, she did the next best thing — she studied political science, history and sociology through open school.

She received the DAFI fellowship for refugee women, granted by UNHCR in collaboration with the German government, to finish her studies in India.

Last year, Tasmida was one of 10 refugee students selected under a programme run jointly by UNHCR and the education app Duolingo to study abroad. The programme will aid 10 refugee students from India – seven Afghans and three Rohingya. Once she reaches Canada, Tasmida will have to re-school once more. "I will have to do my graduation again, but I don't mind. All I want is to go abroad so our circumstances can improve," she said.

Her story has been an inspiration in the Rohingya camp in Delhi. Tasmida herself coaches several Rohingya girls. In the camp, she made sure that most women now at least know how to sign their name and tell their mobile phone numbers.

ATTACK ON KNOWLEDGE

The decision of the Government of India to suspend the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) licence of the country's premier think tank, the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) is bad in optics and substance. The reasons that are being cited by the authorities include lapses in the income-tax paperwork of CPR's staff, lack of due process in the accounting process, and diversion of funds to publication of books, which the authorities allege is not part of the CPR's objectives. An eagerness to drag the prestigious institution into a quagmire of legal processes is writ large over this entire exercise. The CPR has been working on improving governance and enhancing state capacity among other things, in collaboration with governments, and the public and private sectors. There are many advocacy and campaign groups that have been facing the wrath of the government in the recent past, but the action against the CPR lowers the bar of tolerance for the

political establishment to an abysmal level. This betrays an inexplicable hostility towards knowledge creation of all kinds. The FCRA is a regulatory mechanism to ensure that foreign vested interests are not unduly influencing the domestic politics of India, but sweeping application of the law in a manner that clearly disables the non-governmental sector suggests a thoughtless approach bordering on vindictiveness.

India's New Education Policy envisages academic exchanges and cooperation between Indian and global institutions to raise the standard of higher education and research in the country. India also wants to emerge as a centre of technological excellence and manufacturing. Recently, two Australian universities announced their plans to have campuses in India. However, India's global ambitions are clashing with the insecure and reactionary state actions such as the restrictions on the CPR. Collaboration with the world requires the flow of information, personnel and funds in both directions. Restrictions on all these for national security reasons are part of the rule everywhere, and are acceptable. But these are to be exercised sparingly. To assume that Indian thinking should be insulated from foreign ones, while seeking international technology and capital inflow at the same time is a paradox. At any rate, for a country growing as fast as India, a massive expansion in capacity for research is the need of the hour. Along with public funding, private and philanthropic funding are essential for India to continuously expand its knowledge horizons in all fields. The government should not merely tolerate, but facilitate the emergence of several more institutions such as the CPR.

POLICE'S KNOCK AT ASIANET OFFICE AND MR VIJAYAN'S STRONG ARM

A police team knocked on the Kozhikode office of Asianet, a popular Malayalam news channel, ostensibly to investigate an FIR registered against the channel staff on Sunday. The police "search" followed a complaint filed by a CPM-backed independent legislator, P V Anwar, over a report concerning an alleged child abuse case in November last year. The MLA, who has had several run-ins with the media in the past over his business operations that are seen to be controversial, accused the channel of misleading viewers and demanded that its staff be booked under the juvenile justice and POCSO Acts. Activists of the SFI, the student wing of the CPM, barged into the Kochi office of Asianet a few days before the police action and threatened the channel staff over the same news report — eight SFI workers have been booked for vandalism since. On Monday, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who holds the home portfolio, accused Asianet of peddling "fake news"; the channel has denied the allegations. The way the channel has reportedly used a prior interview of a minor in another story without context or disclosure is dodgy journalism. The police action of "searching" the newsroom smacks of unconscionable intimidation and overreach.

Relations between the CPM-led Left Front government in Kerala, especially Chief Minister Vijayan, and the local media, have looked fraught for several years now. Vijayan gives the impression of perceiving the media more as an adversary rather than an institution the executive needs to engage with, and be answerable to. CPM cadres appear to have taken the cue from their leader. Asianet, linked to BJP leader and Union Minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar, has been a favoured target. In April last year, a senior CPM MP and CITU leader had filed a police complaint against an Asianet News anchor for allegedly instigating mob violence against him by asking questions during a panel discussion on the Bharat Bandh.

The ruling CPM's attempt to intimidate a media organisation in Kerala undermines its, and the national Opposition's, criticisms of the BJP-led Centre's attempts to constrict spaces for free expression by weaponising the law and central agencies selectively against political opponents, individuals and institutions. Only recently, the Left was in the forefront of questioning the

Narendra Modi government's decision to ban the BBC documentary on Gujarat riots — India: The Modi Question — and the subsequent "survey" of BBC premises by income tax officials. By showing a thin skin to criticism, by following a playbook that, despite differences of scale, seems similar to the BJP's, the CPM hurts its own case against the ruling dispensation at the Centre — apart from inviting question marks against its own claims to good governance in the state.

REEL CHANGE: HINDUTVA'S WIDENING FILM CATALOGUE

Senior Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leader Indresh Kumar's security detail was in for a surprise last week when actor Annu Kapoor, along with the producer and the director of the upcoming film Main Deendayal Hoon, reached his house in Delhi's Paharganj to seek his blessings.

He says the new generation should know about Pandit Upadhyaya as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's policies are mostly rooted in his ideas.

The film, Main Deendayal Hoon, is among several productions in the works that align with the ruling dispensation's narrative of Hindutva nationalism. SwatantryaVeer Savarkar, a biopic on Hindutva ideologue V.D. Savarkar, which marks the directorial debut of actor Randeep Hooda, also playing the titular role, is in the production stage, while Main Atal Hoon, starring Pankaj Tripathi as the BJP stalwart and former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, will be released in December.

Dr. Hedgewar, a biopic on RSS founder K.B. Hedgewar, whose muhurat clap was given by Union Minister Nitin Gadkari, is scheduled to hit theatres this Dasara and then screened in villages to prepare the ground for the beginning of the centenary celebrations of the RSS in 2024.

Among the most talked about projects is Bhagwa Dhwaj, a big-budget period drama tracing the roots of the RSS, penned by director S.S. Rajamouli's father and screenwriter V. Vijayendra Prasad, who has worked on blockbusters such as Baahubali and Oscar-nominated RRR, and was nominated to the Rajya Sabha by the current BJP regime.

Filmmakers are no longer pursuing straightforward propaganda movies such as PM Narendra Modi (2019), but are looking for a more nuanced narrative as witnessed in director Rajkumar Santoshi's recent film, Gandhi Godse – Ek Yudh, which explored an imagined reality in which Mahatma Gandhi survives the assassination attempt by Nathuram Godse and engages in a discussion with him in jail.

Sunny Mandavarra, director of Dr. Hedgewar, says the film will answer the oft-asked question: what was the role of the RSS and Dr. Hedgewar in the freedom movement? "The film will capture Dr. Hedgewar's days in the Anushilan Samiti [an early 20th-century underground revolutionary organisation], his tryst with the Congress, disillusionment with the party after the Khilafat Movement and the formation of the RSS."

'Drawing a bigger line'

Big production houses are also creating space for films that suit the Hindutva narrative. While Yash Raj Films produced the Akshay Kumar-starrer Samrat Prithviraj, which sought to revive cultural nationalism, Karan Johar's Dharma Productions is researching for Takht,which will showcase Dara Shikoh — the eldest son of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan.

RSS leaders are not against using cinema as a tool of communication as long as it promotes the country's cultural ethos, says Atul Gangwar, secretary of the Bharatiya Chitra Sadhna (BCS). The

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independent body draws its inspiration from Sanskar Bharti, an ancillary unit of the RSS that works to promote Indian art, fine arts, and culture.

Sandeep Singh, who is co-producing SwatantryaVeer Savarkar, told The Hindu at the time of the poster launch that "Savarkar was a misunderstood freedom fighter who could have stopped Partition and was kept out of the cultural narrative by a political party."

Some of the latest projects on Hindutva icons are driven by the success of The Kashmir Files, one of the highest-grossing films in the country last year.

The BJP leadership has come out in support of films such as Samrat Prithviraj, which was offered tax exemptions by two BJP-ruled States, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, and The Kashmir Files, which was made tax-free in six BJP-ruled States.

Author and film historian Ajay Brahmatamaj says there is no doubt that there was a Leftist influence on Indian cinema for decades after Independence.

"Now the BJP and the RSS want to use this soft power of the cinema to their advantage in a more direct fashion by creating narratives around their icons before the 2024 poll," he says.

RSS spokesperson Sunil Ambekar downplayed the organisation's role behind the rising number of movies based on Hindutva icons. "Creative people move amid the general public and pick their stories from society. They must be sensing some change, which is being reflected in their stories. There is no need to see politics in everything."

THE EXPRESS VIEW | NAAC'S TOP OFFICIAL'S RESIGNATION SHINES A LIGHT ON FLAWS IN THE SYSTEM TO GRADE COLLEGES, UNIVERSITIES

All is not well with the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), the UGC-affiliated autonomous body that grades colleges and universities in the country. On Sunday, its executive committee chairperson, Bhushan Patwardhan, resigned to "safeguard the sanctity" of the post to which he was appointed a little over a year earlier. Patwardhan had been flagging irregularities in the Bengaluru-based agency's functioning in the days leading to his resignation. In a letter to UGC Chairman M Jagadesh Kumar on February 26, Patwardhan suggested that "vested interests and malpractices" were instrumental in some educational institutions obtaining "questionable grades". A panel constituted by Patwardhan to review the Council's working, last year, had raised similar concerns. Its report, submitted to the UGC in September 2022, pointed out that "nearly 70 per cent of experts from the pool of assessors did not appear to have received any opportunity to conduct site visits while some others have had multiple such visits". A thorough investigation was required to remove the panel's misgivings about "conflict of interest" in the assessment process. But the higher education regulator did not act on this report.

The NAAC relies heavily on self-assessment by applicant institutions. An applicant institution submits a self-evaluation report, which is then validated by NAAC expert teams, followed by peer team visits to the institutions. The last step has sparked controversy in the past. In September last year, this newspaper reported that the accreditation agency had withheld the grading of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda after receiving a tip-off that its peer review team had been bribed. The NAAC dismissed the allegations and released MS University's scores. The controversy had surfaced at a time when the Council was holding internal conversations on the peer review system. A White Paper published by the agency on July 13, 2022, noted that, "The

process of peer team visits adds substantial effort on the part of both NAAC and the higher educational institutions (HEI)".

Less than half of the country's public universities and a little more than a fourth of the colleges were NAAC accredited, as of January 30. It's evident that a large number of colleges and universities see the accreditation process as a burden. This is not unexpected in a country with a well-documented resource crunch in the majority of its HEIs. There surely is a case for the peer-review process "to be facilitatory" as suggested by the NAAC's White Paper. The agency has also initiated conversations on other possibilities "to help the colleges improve the quality of education". But these will remain mere suggestions unless the UGC lends an ear to its autonomous body.

BLINKERED GLASSES

Why is it that we like some people instantly and warm to them, but with some others, we hesitate to strike a rapport and distance ourselves from them as certain warning bells ring somewhere in our subconscious mind? These responses are the result of implicit or unconscious bias.

Implicit bias refers to a belief or an attitude perceived in a stereotyped pattern which may be incorrect, far from truth and at times, dangerously unjust. Unconscious bias is so subtle that we are hardly aware of it. Most of us do not even know that we are so biased.

Implicit bias begins as early as childhood when the human brain is busy wiring up a maze of neuronal circuits and trains itself to the visual, auditory and even olfactory cues presented to it and starts to classify them in set patterns. The known or the familiar is recognised as good and friendly, and the unknown or the alien is treated as bad and harmful.

Despite formal and experiential learning, and increasing ability to reason, some elements of implicit bias continue through into adult life. And all of us are a "little bit biased "irrespective of our social, cultural and educational standing". Implicit or unconscious bias is important to recognise and to understand because of its potential to affect individuals and society — for instance, on a milder scale, a person with authority can blight the career prospects of an individual because of an unfounded prejudice, and at a larger scale, a similar psychology leads to "honour" killings, massacres and even genocides. History is replete with such anecdotes.

Hate speech

The roots of most social maladies of today can be traced to unconscious bias exhibited by individuals in isolation or collective groups. Social behaviour is largely influenced by unconscious associations and judgments, starting from subtle bodily cues to hate speeches and writings to outright violence, all manifest behaviour of implicit bias.

A serious byproduct of bias is stigma. A recent disturbing news about three women of a family who suffered serious health issues on using a concocted fairness cream is a grim reminder of the attitudes of society to skin tone, driven by social bias against people of colour.

Racial discrimination is the most exercised of all unconscious biases. One cannot forget the visuals of #BlackLivesMatters.

Implicit bias has its influence in all walks of life — colour discrimination, sexual discrimination, in teaching, in healthcare delivery, and more widely in law enforcement. There is a significant body

of evidence of this, and there is a strong link between inherent bias and behaviour, which manifests not only in face-to-face situations but also in paper-based analysis or assessments. That is why the practice of dummy numbers being assigned to answer scripts and double-blind control trials in research came into practice.

Why do we have bias? Oversimplifying and fast thinking to arrive at a conclusion is, according to social psychologists, the main reason. In decision making, we look to short cuts, given the magnitude and plethora of inputs and stimuli the human brain receives in this complicated and complex environment. As a quick fix to the problem, unconscious biases step in rather than the more time-consuming, analytical and slow cognitive processes. Gut feeling, intuitive insight, educated guesses and so on are terms so often used, and we incorrectly rely on these for accuracy. Upbringing, culture and influence of family go a long way in inculcation of bias. Most important, repetitive stimuli from TV channels and social media reinforce the stereotyped thought process, and this is where marketing strategists find their niche.

How to reduce the impact of implicit bias? Given its sinister implications, it is important to learn to remove them. Cognitive behavioural therapy, meditation on being mindful, empathetic perspective and regular reinforcement of training at the workplace and educational institutions will help. Slowing down the decision process, and taking time to consciously revisit the decisions will help to make this world not just better also a bias-free place.

PATTERNS OF VIOLENCE IN THE KASHMIR VALLEY

Targeted killings against Kashmiri Pandits and minorities in the Kashmir Valley have been on the rise. The death of Kashmiri Pandit and bank guard Sanjay Sharma in Pulwama, late last month, was the latest in a series of attacks against the minority community. These attacks have increased fear in the community and raised concerns about the lack of security. Sharma's killing was the second such incident against Kashmiri Pandits in Pulwama, the first being Janki Nath's death in 1990 at the peak of militancy. Sharma's attacker was killed in a follow-up operation. However, this has done little to allay the fears of the community. All the major political parties in the Valley have condemned the attacks.

In 2022, terrorist attacks left 29 civilians dead, including three local Pandits, three other Hindus and eight non-local labourers in Jammu and Kashmir. The unrest led to 5,500 Pandit employees moving out from the Valley. Since 2022, India has witnessed 315 incidents involving violent murders. Of these, Jammu and Kashmir accounts for 160 incidents followed by the Maoist insurgency which was responsible for 126 incidents.

Data from the South Asia Terrorism portal show that violence has been on the rise in the Valley, following a period of relative calm between 2011 and 2016 when a total of 562 incidents related to killings took place. In the last six years, however, there have been 948 incidents, close to a 70% rise. A killing-related incident is a terrorism-related event which results in at least one death.

After 2016, there has been a spike in the deaths of both civilians and security forces in comparison to the early 2010s. However, deaths among both these sections declined since 2018. SATP records show 30 civilian deaths in 2022. A bulk of them were killings of Kashmiri Pandits and migrants, revealing a dangerous pattern of terrorists seeking to target religious minorities in the Union Territory.

These attacks have continued despite the administration claiming to provide adequate security to the residents. Casualties among security forces have also occurred during operations against the perpetrators. For instance, an Army jawan died in the operation to flush out the killers of Sharma.

Until 2007, civilian deaths formed a greater proportion of fatalities. In 2008, deaths among security personnel rose and were higher than civilian deaths.

South Kashmir, in particular, has become a hotbed for terror-related civilian deaths. The district-wise share of civilian deaths since 2000 reveals that more such fatalities are taking place in South Kashmir, and Budgam and Srinagar in central Kashmir. For example, in 2022, 27% of all civilian deaths occurred in Shopian district of South Kashmir, where the share was zero until 2006.

In the 2000s, civilian deaths were concentrated in Anantnag, Baramulla, Doda and Srinagar. During the calmer period in the early to mid-2010s, Baramulla continued to see a high number of civilian deaths. These peaked in 2017 at 37% of the total deaths. This was also the time when South Kashmir began to see a rise in civilian deaths, particularly in Pulwama.

From 2017 onwards, attacks on civilians were mostly restricted to South Kashmir. Kulgam and Shopian districts experienced the most civilian deaths, accounting for 20% and 27%, respectively. Chart 3 shows the district-wise share of civilian deaths in Kashmir between 2000 and 2022.

PROPERTY TAX IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR: WHY IT HAS BEEN PROPOSED, AND HOW IT WILL WORK

The Jammu and Kashmir administration last month notified rules for the levy of property tax in towns and cities of the Union Territory with the declared intention of making urban local bodies self-reliant in development works. It said the tax is levied everywhere except J&K, where urban local bodies remain entirely dependent on government funds.

Opposition parties and social and trade organisations have threatened protests unless the government withdraws the decision.

Jammu and Srinagar have municipal corporations. There are 19 municipal councils and 57 municipal committees in the UT.

Has property tax been introduced in J&K for the first time?

No. Until 2002, the Sales Tax Department of the erstwhile state of J&K levied a tax on the income of landlords — such as rent — in urban areas. However, it did not share the proceeds with the urban local bodies.

This property tax was levied under the Jammu and Kashmir Urban Immovable Property Tax Rules, 1962. The tax was calculated on the basis of surveys that were carried out by the assessing authority every five years. In 1997, the last year that the survey was done, tax was levied on individual property owners with a minimum rental income of Rs 500 per month. The tax was payable every quarter, and a penalty was levied for delays in payment.

So why did the government stop collecting this tax?

It was unviable — according to officials, the cost of collecting the tax was more than the revenue that was generated. Also, most property owners challenged the assessment, and the process was bogged down by endless litigation, the officials said.

Who will pay the tax now, and from when?

The UT administration has notified rules for the proposed property tax in the exercise of powers under Section 71A of the Jammu and Kashmir Municipal Act, 2000, read with Sections 65(1) and 73(1) of the Act. In October 2020, the Union Home Ministry had authorised the administration to levy the tax.

The tax is proposed to be levied on people having property within the territorial jurisdiction of urban local bodies across J&K with effect from April 1. However, not every property owner will pay.

According to the administration, houses with area smaller than 1,000 sq ft — which make up 40 per cent of the total — will be exempt. Of the remaining houses, almost 80 per cent will pay less than Rs 600 a year — according to the administration, people in Shimla, Ambala, and Dehradun pay 10 times this amount.

Also, almost 46,000 of the 1.01 lakh shops in urban areas are smaller than 100 sq ft in area. Eighty per cent of these shops will pay a meagre Rs 600 a year — or Rs 50 per month. The rest will pay up to Rs 700 a year.

According to the administration, around 30,000 shops will pay less than Rs 2,000 in annual property tax, and 20,000 of these shops will pay less than Rs 1,500 — which again, is a tenth of what shop owners in Shimla, Ambala, and Dehradun pay.

What is the formula for calculating tax?

The property tax will amount to 5 per cent of the Taxable Annual Value (TAV) in case of a residential property, and 6 per cent of TAV in case of a non-residential property.

The TAV will be decided based on factors like the type of municipality, the land value rate notified by the government, floor, area, usage, age of property, slab, other usage type, and occupancy.

What is the history of urban local bodies in J&K?

In the late nineteenth century, the Dogra ruler of the erstwhile princely state established a municipal committee each for the cities of Srinagar and Jammu, to look after their civic affairs under the J&K Municipal Act No. 16 of 1886.

The municipal committees were upgraded to municipal councils in 1956. Then, in 2003, the legislature of the erstwhile state passed a law to upgrade them to municipal corporations. Today's municipal committees and municipal councils were set up as town area committees and notified area committees in the erstwhile state from time to time.

The municipal committees of Jammu and Srinagar cities levied octroi on goods entering their areas, while the town and notified areas committees collected dharat. To remove the inconvenience caused to the public by the collection centres at various places, the state government abolished octroi and dharat in the mid-1980s. Instead, a toll tax was collected at Lakhanpur in Kathua district on the border with Punjab. The proceeds were to be distributed among the urban local bodies in proportion to their income from octroi and dharat, but this decision was never implemented on the ground.

Even though the GST regime was introduced in 2017, the state government continued to collect the toll tax from goods carriers at Lakhanpur in view of J&K's special status under Article 370. The practice came to an end in January 2020 following the constitutional changes of August 5, 2019, including the abrogation of Article 370.

TARDY POLICE VERIFICATION NIPS KASHMIRI ASPIRATIONS

There is a new source of anxiety in the Valley after the Centre ended Jammu and Kashmir's special status under Article 370 of the Constitution on August 5, 2019. Delayed or no police verification or adverse police reports have left hundreds without jobs and passports. According to top official sources, these have reached a five-digit mark in Kashmir, the highest in the past decade.

Several J&K politicians, including former Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti and her daughter Iltija Mufti, alleged they were being denied passports. The Muftis have approached the court.

Journalists have been facing an even stiffer police verification regime for their passports. Since 2019, several Kashmiri journalists have been stopped at airports after finding themselves on the 'No fly list'. Kashmiri photojournalist Sana Irshad Mattoo from Srinagar was disallowed from boarding a flight in Delhi on her way to receive the Pulitzer Prize for her COVID-19 coverage in 2022. No reason was, however, given.

IN FAKE ENCOUNTER CASE AT AMSHIPORA, A WELCOME DEVELOPMENT

The recommendation of a life sentence by an Army court to a captain serving in the Rashtriya Rifles in Jammu & Kashmir for staging a fake encounter of three men in Rajouri in Amshipora, a village in Shopian, is a welcome development. It is a step towards reining in impunity in the armed forces deployed in civilian areas in the country's trouble spots. The Army must accept the recommendation, and furthermore, ensure that it does not drop the ball as the case moves on to the next stage in the armed forces tribunal or the civil court. This is not the first time, of course, that an Army court has sentenced its own personnel for involvement in an extra-judicial killing. In the infamous Machil case, the Army court's conviction and life sentence to six personnel was suspended by the Armed Forces Tribunal in 2017. In 2018, seven army personnel given a life sentence for a 1994 fake encounter in Assam were let off because the Army did not accept the recommendation of its court. In the Rajouri case — all three victims were from the same family, the youngest only 16 — and the motive was apparently to claim a Rs 20 lakh reward given by the security forces for information leading to the capture or killing of terrorists. The three men had trekked from their village in the Jammu region to Kashmir in mid-2020 looking for work. They were picked up from their rented home in Amshipora, and shot in cold blood. As part of the plan, weapons were planted on the victims; and police and CRPF reinforcements were called in to throw a real cordon around the encounter site. The first sign of something amiss was the police distancing itself from the encounter. It was only after family members reported the victims missing, and their photos matched with those of "militants" in the staged encounter that the story began to unravel, with DNA tests confirming the worst fears.

In Kashmir or in the North-east, the soldier is up against ardous challenges on a daily basis. But it is precisely when the Army is posted in such areas, where its job can sometimes range it against sections of the civilian population, that it needs to be on guard and act with utmost responsibility and sensitivity. In many cases, though, armed forces personnel seem to take for granted the immunity provided under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. The immunity provision is meant to cover actions committed in the course of duty, but all too often it is used to cover up misdeeds.

It is commendable that in this case, the army, prodded by civilian authorities, acted promptly after prima facie evidence of wrongdoing emerged, including through a police investigation. A formal court of inquiry followed. A summary of evidence proceedings paved the way for a court martial. However, other controversial encounters have taken place in Kashmir since then. In Amshipora and elsewhere, the larger message has to go home — that there is zero tolerance for such crime.

GOVT PUTTING IN PLACE PROTOCOLS TO TACKLE THREAT OF SPY BALLOONS AFTER ANDAMANS INCIDENT

FROM DETECTION using drones and aircraft to targeting and analysis of remnants, the Indian military has drafted a set of basic protocols to tackle newer threats like surveillance balloons or other unidentified objects in the sky after a similar entity was spotted a year ago over the strategic Andaman and Nicobar Islands, top officials told The Indian Express.

The protocols detail the sequence of action in case an unidentified slow-moving aerial object is spotted. This includes detection, positive identification, verification and targeting using a suitable platform and weapon system, followed by detailed photography of the target, a comprehensive report on it and analysis of remnants, if recovered.

Drafted by one of the military commands, the set of tri-service protocols being put in place will be open to upgradation, the officials said. Already, they said, several radars are being upgraded at key military installations.

Last month, the United States shot down a giant Chinese balloon, which it accused of spying on its crucial military sites, with an AIM-9X Sidewinder missile fired from an F-22 fighter jet. China denied the allegations and said it was a civilian aircraft meant to research weather-related aspects. Days later, the US shot down a cylindrical-shaped object over Canada and another unidentified aerial object in its own airspace.

According to officials, India's protocols were drafted after an aerial object was spotted over the Andamans, even though its origin could not be ascertained at that time. According to a Bloomberg report, the object had drifted away over the ocean before military authorities could take a decision on action to be taken.

"As per the standard operating procedure, positive identification of the aerial object and subsequent verification to rule out the possibility of it being a civil asset will be the first steps when such a flying object is spotted," an official said, adding that this can be done with aircraft or drones.

"Once identified and verified, a decision will be taken to destroy the target. The weapon systems, such as missiles or a ground-based air defence system, and the aircraft deployed will be selected based on the altitude of the target," the official said.

The aircraft would be launched from the nearest bases. The possibility of deploying an aircraft from an aircraft carrier, if that is in the vicinity, is also there, the official said, adding that the SOP states that the entire operation from the launch of the weapon system to destroying the target will be photographed and recorded in detail.

"A detailed report will be prepared including the sighting time, size of target, its description recorded on the radars on ground and this will be intimated through the chain of command," the official said, adding that the wreckage of the target will be recovered for analysis.

Another official said the primary challenge in such a sighting is the detection and identification of the object.

"Even the US, which possesses the most sophisticated military equipment, had earlier failed to detect the slow-moving Chinese balloons, which have little or no radar signature as against fighter jets or missiles," the official said.

"Firstly, the satellites or radars cannot detect balloons as they are slow-moving. As of now, several radars at key military sites are being upgraded to detect such aerial objects," the official added.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands house the tri-service Andaman and Nicobar military command. What makes these islands strategically important is their proximity to the Indo-Pacific as well as to major choke-points or sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the Bay of Bengal — the Malacca Strait, Sunda Strait, Lombok Strait and the Ombai-Wetar straits.

Most of the world's shipping trade passes through these choke-points. And, the islands offer India the potential to play a critical role towards enhancing its influence in the Indian Ocean region and support its military operations in the area.

Last month, when asked about China's use of surveillance balloons in the US and Canada, and the possibility of such tactics being deployed against India, Army Chief General Manoj Pande responded that the country must remain alert and "be ahead of the learning curve".

ISRO TO UNDERTAKE CONTROLLED RE-ENTRY OF SATELLITE TOMORROW

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) will be undertaking a challenging experiment of a controlled re-entry of the decommissioned Megha-Tropiques-1 (MT1) satellite on Tuesday. The Megha-Tropiques-1 (MT1) is a joint Indo-French satellite launched in 2011 for tropical weather and climate studies, which was providing data services, supporting regional and global climate models till 2021. The space agency on Sunday said that as a responsible space agency committed to safe and sustainable operations in the outer space, it was gearing up for this challenging experiment.

RAILWAYS TIES UP WITH ISRO FOR TRAIN TRACKING

The Indian Railways is harnessing the power of data analytics for integrated transportation. It has commenced a project which will now enable real time tracking of train movements with the assistance of satellite imagery under the Real Time Train Information System (RTIS) project.

D.K. Singh, Managing Director, Centre for Railway Information Systems (CRIS), said that the CRIS has collaborated with the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) for live tracking to help Railways run trains efficiently.

Mr. Singh, and the Union Minister for Railways Ashwini Vaishnaw, spoke on the sidelines of a conference on 'Reimagining Indian Railways: Harnessing the Power of Data Analytics for Integrated Transportation' here on March 3.

Mr. Singh said that ISRO has developed its own regional navigation satellite system called Navigation with Indian Constellation (NavIC) and Bhuvan, a web-based utility which allows users to explore a set of map-based content being deployed for tracking.

"We have taken bandwidth from ISRO and integrated our systems with NavIC and Bhuvan. Every locomotive is fitted with a device and a SIM, which communicates the train's real position to the satellite and feedback is received. The movement is updated every three seconds," Mr. Singh added.

Real-time tracking of trains is also useful during accidents, floods and landslips, when there is a need to pin down the train's exact location for rendering help. "Until now, 4,000 locomotives have been installed with the technology, and new locomotives that are being manufactured come pre-installed with the tracking devices," Mr. Singh said.

Mr. Vaishnaw emphasised the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and quantum tech for the Indian Railways. Mr. Vaishnaw said that there was a pilot project underway between Sanchar Bhavan, which houses the Ministry of Electronics, Information and Technology, and Rail Bhavan, which houses the Ministry of Railways, to use quantum key encryption in order to exchange information in a way that is "non-hackable".

The Railways is tapping into data analytics to improve passenger experience, help chart out empty seats, and enable more passengers to receive confirmed tickets.

"Nearly 2.3 crore passengers travel on the Indian Railways every day, of which 30 lakh passengers travel on reserved tickets, while about two crore passengers travel via the unreserved ticketing system," Mr. Singh said.

The CRIS has now developed a hand-held device that can help reduce queues by providing tickets on platforms to unreserved passengers.

Mr. Singh said that the CRIS has identified 90 cases where AI can be used for improving Railways services, including seat allocation, prediction analysis on when freight trains will be emptied, and balancing stocks of medicines across the Railways health infrastructure.

MEETING INDIA'S 'CARBON SINK' TARGET

When India updated its international climate commitments — first made in 2015 in the run-up to the Paris climate conference — in August last year, it enhanced two of the three original targets it had promised to achieve by 2030.

It said it would reduce the emissions intensity of its economy — emissions per unit of GDP — by 45 per cent from 2005 levels instead of the 33 to 35 per cent promised earlier. And that it would ensure that renewables formed at least 50 per cent — up from the original 40 per cent — of its total installed electricity generation capacity.

The third target — a commitment to increase its carbon sink by 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent by 2030 through the creation of additional forest and tree cover — was left untouched. A year earlier too, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke about India's five-point "Panchamrit" action plan at the Glasgow climate meeting in 2021, there had been no mention of this third commitment.

The seeming silence over the third commitment gave rise to speculation that India was possibly lagging behind on this target — and that it might not be able to achieve it. Government figures in 2022 showed that in the six years since 2015, the carbon sink in the country — which is the total amount of carbon dioxide absorbed by and residing in forests and trees — had increased by 703

million tonnes of CO2 equivalent, or roughly by 120 million tonnes every year. At this pace, the target of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of CO2 equivalent was unlikely to be met by 2030.

The carbon sink target was clearly much more ambitious — and difficult — than the other two that had been achieved about eight years before deadline. But India was only hedging its bets.

The baseline year

The carbon sink target had not been defined precisely in 2015. India had committed "to create an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of CO2 equivalent through additional forest and tree cover by 2030", but it had made no mention of the baseline year. That is, it did not say which year this additional 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes CO2 equivalent of carbon sink would be measured against. By contrast, India's target on emissions intensity specified 2005 as the baseline year. And the commitment on renewable capacity did not require a baseline because it was an absolute target.

The climate targets had been announced in a hurry ahead of the 2015 climate change conference because these were considered crucial to the finalisation of the Paris Agreement. India's original targets on emissions intensity and renewable capacity were quite modest, and thus easy to define precisely. But the carbon sink target required a detailed study, which could not have happened in a short time.

There was another apparent ambiguity — other than the absence of the baseline year — as well. In an analysis published in 2019, the Dehradun-based Forest Survey of India (FSI) pointed out that even the word "additional" in the Indian commitment could be interpreted in different ways. So, "additional carbon sink" could mean (i) over and above the carbon sink that existed in the baseline year, or (ii) over and above what it would be in the target year of 2030 in the business-as-usual scenario.

India's forests and tree cover had a carbon sink of 29.38 billion tonnes of CO2 equivalent in 2015, and this was projected to increase in a business-as-usual scenario — that is, without the intervention of any fresh effort — to 31.87 billion tonnes in 2030, according to the FSI analysis.

The first interpretation of "additional" (over and above the baseline year) would mean India's target would be met if the carbon sink in 2030 was in the range of 31.88 to 32.38 billion tonnes of CO2 equivalent. In the second interpretation (over and above the target year), the target would be between 34.37 and 34.87 billion tonnes of CO2 equivalent.

Persisting ambiguity

Last year, the government appeared to remove the ambiguity regarding the baseline year for the carbon sink target by committing itself to the baseline of 2005. In a written reply to a Parliament question on July 25, 2022, Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav said, "India had already achieved 1.97 billion tonnes of additional carbon sink as compared to the base year of 2005."

He added that "the remaining target can be achieved by increasing forest and tree cover of the country through implementation of various central and state sponsored schemes".

This announcement of 2005 as the baseline suddenly brought the carbon sink target within easy reach. Of course, India was well within its right to select 2005 as the baseline year. Under the Paris Agreement, countries themselves are supposed to set their climate targets, and this includes the choice of baseline year.

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Additionally, as mentioned earlier, India's emissions intensity target also has 2005 as the base year. Several other countries, including the United States, use 2005 as the baseline year for their commitments.

The statement in Parliament also seemed to settle the question of additionality flagged by the FSI analysis. The promised addition to carbon sink would have to be measured against what existed in the baseline year (2005) and not what it was projected be in the target year (2030) in the business-as-usual scenario. This is not unusual. Additionality is measured in most cases from the baseline year.

Curiously though, just 10 days after the Parliament reply, when India formally made a submission of its updated international climate commitments to the UN climate body on August 4 last year, the forestry target — seemingly settled — was again left ambiguous. There was no mention of the baseline year in India's formal submission.

While statements in Parliament are considered the official government position, internationally, India can only be held accountable to what is contained in its official submission to the secretariat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

As of now, this seems to be a minor inconsistency, and does not appear to reflect any desire to change the baseline year in future. The Environment Ministry has reaffirmed the 2005 baseline in a written communication to The Indian Express as well.

Meanwhile, the rate of increase of carbon stock in India's forests and tree cover has been showing a rising trend, even though the total carbon stock in 2021 was slightly less than what the FSI had projected just two years ago.

THERE ARE PLANS TO RELAUNCH CAMPA COLA. IT WAS A TIME, NOT A TASTE

In a forgotten corner of YouTube, there is a video of the good life from the early Eighties. A young Salman Khan — his first on-camera appearance — is on a large boat (or, perhaps, a small yacht) with other good looking people. They laugh and swim, sing and dance — all while sipping Campa Cola. There is, of course, an irony to the advertisement. Campa Cola's success was a product of the Indian economy closing down and the exit of Coke and Pepsi — it had a captive market. The consumerist joy on display in the ad would be a long time coming. But scarcity had its own virtues. Now, Reliance is set to bring back Campa, "contemporised for a new-age India". But, does nostalgia also need to be new-age?

The 1980s — up to the early Nineties, really — were an analogue time. There were fewer brands and choices and in general, for most, less money. In retrospect, though, that simplicity has acquired the sepia-tinted halo of nostalgia. Few who were young then can recall the taste of Campa Cola — just that it was associated with economic nationalism, and, often, their youth. It is that association, an instant brand recall of a sort, that lends Campa its value.

But things won't be the same. The iconic glass bottle will likely be replaced by colourful cans and plastic bottles. Unlike in its first run, Campa isn't the only Cola around. Maybe all that won't matter. In their early middle age now, those who grew up with the brand may still buy it — perhaps as a novelty beverage at school reunions. Maybe it will be a runaway hit. Sometimes, it's nice to hope that while the past is another country, a carbonated beverage might provide a short-term visa to it.

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ON HOLI, A LOOK AT THE TRADITION OF CONSUMING BHANG IN INDIA

Bhang is a green-coloured paste made from seeds and leaves of the female cannabis plants — they have higher potency and Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) content than their male counterparts. It is said to have been in use for thousands of years, and finds mention in ancient Hindu texts.

For some, it's "God's gift", while others see it as "a source of happiness" or a "liberator". Whatever the sobriquet, bhang is intertwined with culture and religion in India.

According to some records, it has been in use for thousands of years and finds mention in ancient texts such as the Vedas. In Ayurveda, bhang is believed to cure not only physical ailments but also anxiety.

Its widespread consumption in India even took the Britishers by surprise when they colonised the country. As per the BBC, in the late 19th century, they commissioned a study of bhang's effects and cultural significance.

"To forbid or even seriously restrict the use of so holy and gracious an herb as the hemp would cause widespread suffering and annoyance," the report pointed out. "It would rob people of solace in discomfort, of a cure in sickness, of a guardian whose gracious protection saves them from attacks of evil influences."

Geographer Barney Warf, in his research paper 'High Points: An Historical Geography of Cannabis', writes that this intoxicant, prepared from parts of cannabis plants, for the longest time has been consumed in weddings and festivals in honour of the god Shiva.

As per Hindu mythology, cannabis came into existence after the gods churned an ocean of milk while looking for an elixir that would make them immortal and restore their strength. During the process of churning, a drop of amrita (sacred nectar) fell from the sky and at the place where it landed, the first cannabis plant sprouted. It's believed that Shiva, who had consumed the poison Halahala that emerged during the churning of the ocean, ate this plant to cool his throat.

Today, bhang is a staple at Holi and Maha Shivratri celebrations, where it is served most commonly with thandai — a cold beverage made from milk, sugar and an indulgent mix of nuts and species such as almonds, fennel seeds, watermelon kernels, rose petals, pepper, poppy seeds, cardamom and saffron.

What is bhang?

Bhang is essentially a green-coloured paste made from seeds and leaves of the female cannabis plants — they have higher potency and Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) content than their male counterparts. Prepared by soaking and then grinding the plant material together, the paste is, traditionally, rolled into smooth balls, known as bhang goli.

Apart from thandai, the ingredient is widely consumed after it is blended into lassi, which is a sweetened yoghurt drink. It's also mixed into snacks such as pakoras — small, spicy fritters that contain vegetables like onion, potatoes or cauliflower — or into chutneys and pickles.

Why is bhang consumed on Holi?

The tradition of having bhang on Holi is associated with another Hindu myth that also involves Shiva. People believe that after his wife Sati self-immolated, Shiva went into a deep meditative

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state to overcome the grief. Parvati, who sought to bring him back to reality and marry him, went to the god of love, Kamadeva, for help. Despite knowing the dire consequences of disturbing Shiva during meditation, Kamadeva, on the day of Holi, shot an arrow laced with bhang at him and broke his trance. Although Shiva was enraged by the act and reduced Kamadeva to ashes, he ended up marrying Parvati. Therefore, believers consume bhang on Holi to celebrate Shiva's return to the real world.

Is bhang legal in India?

Under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, which was enacted in 1985 and deals with drugs and their trafficking in India, cannabis has been defined as a narcotic drug and its cultivation, possession, consumption or transportation is prohibited. However, only certain parts of a cannabis plant, such as resin and "flowering or fruiting tops" come under this ban. The Act excludes from prohibition its leaves and seeds, which are used for preparing bhang.

Notably, although the cultivation of cannabis is punishable across the country, harvesting the leaves that grow by themselves is perfectly legal.

Over the years, states have also come up with their own laws regarding the sale and consumption of bhang. A handful of them like Uttar Pradesh even license and tax bhang sales, much like alcohol. Even if some states have banned the substance's consumption and sale, authorities rarely crack down on its sellers and customers on the occasion of Holi, a report by The Wall Street Journal said.

HOW A BUSY AIIMS OPD IS A TEST CASE OF MENTAL HEALTH: BURNOUT TOPS DEPRESSION

AIIMS, Psychiatry Department OPD, Thursday, 12 noon: It is mid-week, by which time the spillover rush from the weekend is expected to settle. But Professor Nand Kumar's patients mill around him, vying for attention, stretching well past lunch hour. A 30-year-old complains of burnout and wants to know how he can keep on doing the job he hates because he needs the money. Another restless young woman complains of insomnia that has made her irritable and socially disconnected. Yet another young man has issues dealing with road rage.

One would wonder why Dr Kumar spares so much time listening to mundane issues instead of more serious mental health concerns. "But this is just as serious. At least, people are honest enough to admit they have a problem and are coming forward to deal with it in the early stages. This could save them from slipping into depression and more complicated issues of mental health," says he, positing a counterpoint. That has helped him map mental health disorders of the city, burnout at work emerging at the top.

"A burnout is a scenario where you do not like doing the job you once loved. That's because you have been exposed to chronic interpersonal stressors over a long period of time which nobody has bothered to address. So, you feel exhausted, frustrated, overused and valued less, alienated, cynical and detached. Very few know that burnout and depression are not the same. The first is still a manageable problem, the last takes longer and needs a different treatment protocol. We suggest some lifestyle modifications, change the complainant's perception of the workplace, encourage social and emotional connectivity with peers and reduce digital addiction, all of which neutralises the feeling of victimhood and isolation," says Dr Kumar. The next big concern in exam season is performance anxiety in students, especially those preparing for competitive entrance examinations to institutions.

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He sees around 70 mental health patients a day, their unique experiences giving him an opportunity to understand mental health disruptors at a granular level. "People have started paying attention to issues like anxiety, depression, maladjustment and insomnia. Earlier we used to see a majority of patients with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). This means that people are reporting triggers before they degenerate into a full-fledged disorder, which makes it easier for us to bring them back on the rails. This OPD now has people trying to come to terms with a job loss, a divorce, family conflicts and other trauma," says he.

Does the trauma induced by COVID-19 have anything to do with it? Dr Kumar is not sure but admits that people have been exposed to the vulnerability and fragility of life for a prolonged period and do not want their lives to be broken down to pieces. So, they are more self-aware and not even averse to the medication that he advises in some cases.

AIIMS caters to a large cross-section of society, a fact that has made Dr Kumar sensitive to the varied needs of his patients. "Most underprivileged patients lack cognitive maturity and usually manifest their mental depression through physical discomfort like body ache, fatigue, sleeplessness and listlessness. So, when we prescribe medication to them, the acceptability is much more. But the psychological sophistication is higher in the privileged classes, especially those in their 20s and 30s. We manage this group with lifestyle modification — walking, yoga, balanced diet — and medication. We recommend breathing exercises because they reduce anxiety and modulate the autonomic nervous system," says Dr Kumar.

He has also analysed how men and women react differently to mental health disorders. "The bodily symptoms, like headache and fatigue, are much more in women than men, who are more prone to angry outbursts and mood swings," he adds. Dr Kumar introduced brain stimulation techniques at AIIMS but now learns much more from the stimulating conversations he has with his patients.

THE EXPRESS VIEW: A DOUBTFUL GREEN COVER

For the better part of the past four decades, the Forest Survey of India's State of Forest Reports have shown a steady increase in the country's forests. The report of the latest survey released last year, for instance, showed that the country added more than 1,500 sq km of forest between 2019 and 2021. But experts have maintained that these reports are not satisfactory indicators of ecological health. The area under plantations has gone up while the country has consistently lost good forests in the past three decades. Now, an investigation by this newspaper in association with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) has revealed that bungalows of ministers and senior officers, the Reserve Bank of India building and parts of the campuses of AIIMS and IIT in Delhi are classified as "forests" in official maps. It shines a light on the ambiguities and grey areas that could prevent the country's afforestation programme from achieving its potential.

Forest restoration is critical to India's climate goals. The country has committed to creating an additional sink of 2.5 billion to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent by increasing its forest cover. This would require it to increase its forest cover by about 25 million hectares in the next seven years. Plantations grow fast and on paper, they can help attain carbon targets more quickly. But trees in such green patches are also cut down more frequently. Moreover, plantations are mostly monocultures that are no substitute for biodiverse ecosystems. They are susceptible to fires, pests and epidemics and often act as a barrier to natural forest regeneration.

In the last 10 years, more than 1,600 square km of forest land has been cleared for infrastructure or industrial projects — nearly a third of this has been diverted in the past three years. But the government has also embarked on a number of afforestation programmes. In 2016, it made it incumbent on developers to offset the loss of forests due to developmental projects and initiated the Compensatory Afforestation Programme (CAP). The investigation shows that large sums of money deposited in the afforestation fund are lying unused. Funds are, however, just one part of CAP's problem. The programme's plantation-centred approach means that compensatory afforestation takes place in discontinuous patches — the new green tracts are a far cry from the dense forests they are meant to replace. The government's reluctance to reveal the granular data of the country's forest cover means that such anomalies rarely come to light. The key takeaway of the investigation is that the government needs to be more transparent in the way it maps the country's forests.

LANDSLIDE ATLAS OF INDIA: WHICH STATES, REGIONS ARE MOST VULNERABLE

In 2022, heavy rain, floods and landslides claimed 835 lives in the country, according to the Statement of Climate of India 2022 released by the India Meteorological Department. With a steady rise in the number of extreme weather events, especially heavy rainfall capable of triggering landslides and floods, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) recently released the Landslide Atlas of India, a detailed guide identifying landslide hotspots in the country.

What causes landslides?

Landslides are natural disasters occurring mainly in mountainous terrains where there are conducive conditions of soil, rock, geology and slope. A sudden movement of rock, boulders, earth or debris down a slope is termed as a landslide. Natural causes that trigger it include heavy rainfall, earthquakes, snowmelting and undercutting of slopes due to flooding. Landslides can also be caused by anthropogenic activities such as excavation, cutting of hills and trees, excessive infrastructure development, and overgrazing by cattle.

Considered among the most frequent natural disasters, landslides are extremely hazardous, posing a threat to human and animal lives, damaging property, roads and bridges, disrupting communication lines and snapping power lines.

Some of the main factors that influence landslides are lithology, geological structures like faults, hill slopes, drainage, geomorphology, land use and land cover, soil texture and depth, and weathering of rocks. All these are factored in when a landslide susceptibility zone is earmarked for planning and making predictions.

In India, rainfall-induced landslide events are more common.

How are landslides classified and mapped?

Landslides are broadly classified based on the type of materials involved (rock, debris, soil, loose mud), type of movement of the material (fall, topple, slide, rotational slide or translational slide), and type of flow of the material. Another category is of landslides that spread laterally. Landslides mapped in the ISRO atlas are mainly event-based and season-based.

ISRO's National Remote Sensing Centre (NRSC), Hyderabad, has created a database of landslide-prone regions of India based on events during 1998 – 2022, primarily along the Himalayas and the Western Ghats. In addition to aerial images, high resolution satellite images captured using

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cameras Indian Remote Sensing (IRS-1D) PAN + LISS-III, satellites ResourceSat-1 and 2, etc., were used to study the landslides over the past 25 years. The pan-India landslide database classifies landslides into – seasonal (2014, 2017 monsoon seasons), event-based and route-based (2000 – 2017).

How prone is India to landslides?

India is considered among the top five landslide-prone countries globally, where at least one death per 100 sq km is reported in a year due to a landslide event. Rainfall variability pattern is the single biggest cause for landslides in the country, with the Himalayas and the Western Ghats remaining highly vulnerable.

Excluding snow covered areas, approximately 12.6 per cent of the country's geographical land area (0.42 million sq km) is prone to landslides. As many as 66.5 per cent of the landslides are reported from the North-western Himalayas, about 18.8 per cent from the North-eastern Himalayas, and about 14.7 per cent from the Western Ghats.

Nearly half of the country's landslide-prone area (0.18 sq km) is located in the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and Nagaland. Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir cover 0.14 million sq km of the total landslide-prone areas, whereas Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu account for 0.09 million sq km. A relatively small area (0.01 million sq km) of the Araku region in Andhra Pradesh along the Eastern Ghats, too, reports landslide events.

In the Western Ghats, despite fewer events, landslides were found to be making inhabitants significantly vulnerable to fatalities, especially in Kerala.

What does the landslide atlas suggest?

Uttakarkhand, Kerala, Jammu and Kashmir, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh reported the highest number of landslides during 1998 – 2022.

Mizoram topped the list, recording 12,385 landslide events in the past 25 years, of which 8,926 were recorded in 2017 alone. Likewise, 2,071 events of the total 2,132 landslides reported in Nagaland during this period occurred during the 2017 monsoon season. Manipur, too, showed a similar trend, wherein 4,559 out of 5,494 landslide events were experienced during the rainy season of 2017. Of the total 690, Tamil Nadu suffered 603 landslide events in 2018 alone.

Among all these states, an alarming situation is emerging from Uttarakhand and Kerala.

While Uttarakhand's fragility was recently exposed during the land subsidence events reported from Joshimath since January, this Himalayan state has experienced the second highest number (11,219) of landslides since 1998, all events since occurring post 2000. The year-wise number of landslide events in the state is: 2003 (32), 2010 (307), 2012 (473), 2013 (6,610), 2017 (1), 2021 (329) and 2022 (1).

The number of districts with the maximum landslide exposure are in Arunachal Pradesh (16), Kerala (14), Uttarakhand and Jammu and Kashmir (13 each), Himachal Pradesh, Assam and Maharashtra (11 each), Mizoram (8) and Nagaland (7).

Kerala has been consistently reporting massive landslides since it suffered the century's worst floods in 2018. The year-wise landslide events here are 2018 (5,191), 2019 (756), 2020 (9) and 2021 (29).

From the events and images obtained, the NRSC ranked Rudraprayag in Uttarakhand at the top of 147 vulnerable districts. It has the highest landslide density in the country, along with having the highest exposure to total population and number of houses.

IN A FIRST, GUJARAT TO RELEASE IN THE WILD 10 WOLVES BRED IN CAPTIVITY — AFTER TRAINING

Work is on in full swing to construct soft-release enclosures at one location each in north Gujarat and north Saurashtra, nearly 200 km apart. These regions boast of an existing population of wild wolves, but with their population dwindling, the relocation is a bid to boost their numbers.

Wolves in north Gujarat and north Saurashtra will soon be joined by their captive cousins from Junagadh once they finish a basic course in surviving the wild. In a first, the Gujarat Forest Department is set to shift 10 Indian grey wolves from a conservation breeding centre at Junagadh's Sakkarbaug Zoological Park (SZP) to forested areas in north Gujarat and north Saurashtra.

Officials said the release of the captive-bred predators, the Canis lupus pallipes or the Indian peninsular wolf, is an attempt to check the population of wild herbivores, including blue bulls (nilgais), wild boars, etc., which have been causing significant crop damage in these parts.

Work is on in full swing to construct soft-release enclosures at one location each in north Gujarat and north Saurashtra, nearly 200 km apart. These regions boast of an existing population of wild wolves, but with their population dwindling, the relocation is a bid to boost their numbers.

The facilities in north Gujarat and north Saurashtra will comprise a four-hectare fenced enclosure for 'rewilding' the predators and a two-hectare enclosure for the herbivores that will be used as prey to teach them to hunt, said forest officers.

Rana explained that with wolf numbers declining over the years, mostly due to the maldharis (pastoralists) hunting them down to protect their goats and sheep, the population of wild herbivores went up significantly. This, in turn, led to complaints from farmers about wild herbivores raiding their crops.

"There is no natural predator other than wolves for wild asses since jackals, the other comparable predator, can kill only newborn ungulates (large hoofed mammals)," Rana said.

A 2021 state government circular highlighted that the population of blue bulls was estimated to be 33,000 in a north Gujarat district where these wolves would be released.

According to the first comprehensive pan-India survey of wolves in 2018-19 led by Prof Yadvendradev Jhala, then dean of animal ecology and conservation biology department at Wildlife Institute of Indian (WII), the population of wolves in India was estimated to be 3,100 — Gujarat's wolf population was estimated to be 494, the third highest after Madhya Pradesh (772) and Rajasthan (532). The study underlined Saurashtra, Kutch and north Gujarat regions as prime wolf habitats.

Prof Jhala cautioned, "Captive-bred wolves habituated to humans can be a disaster in the wild if released without due care. The wolves should be able to hunt, kill and consume prey before they are released in the wild. If wolves are already used to humans, they need to be deconditioned against humans and livestock, and fed only wild prey."

While captive-bred wolves have been successfully released in the wild in the United States, Nityanand Srivastava, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife) and Chief Wildlife Warden of Gujarat, said it's a first for India.

The WII study estimated that the density of wolves was one individual per 100 sq km and an average pack comprised three wolves. It also found that the density of wolves was low in territories dominated by apex predators like lions and tigers, but high in semi-arid scrub, grasslands and open forest systems.

The CZA and the WII are also working on conservation breeding of endangered cat species (Asiatic lion, Bengal tiger, snow leopard and clouded leopard), canine species (Tibetan wolf) and bustard species (great Indian bustard, lesser florican).

INDIA TO LAUNCH GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR BIG CATS, INVEST $100 MILLION

The proposed International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) will work towards the protection and conservation of the seven major big cats — tiger, lion, leopard, snow leopard, puma, jaguar and cheetah. Membership to the alliance will be open to 97 "range" countries, which contain the natural habitat of these big cats, as well as other interested nations, international organisations, etc.

Last month, the Government reached out to potential IBCA member nations with its proposal, it is learnt. According to a proposed timeline, the alliance is expected to be launched next month in a "suitable office complex" in India.

According to sources in the Environment Ministry, the alliance was "inspired by the arrival of cheetahs" last year from Namibia.

Records show that the alliance's purpose is to provide a platform for "dissemination of information on benchmarked practices, capacity building, resources repository, research and development, awareness creation", etc., on the protection and conservation of big cats.

Its major activities will include "advocacy, partnership, knowledge e-portal, capacity building, eco-tourism, partnerships between expert groups and finance tapping".

The IBCA's governance structure will comprise a General Assembly consisting of all member countries, a council of at least seven but not more than 15 member countries elected by the General Assembly for a term of 5 years, and a Secretariat. Upon the recommendation of the Council, the General Assembly will appoint the IBCA Secretary General for a specific term.

After the first five years, which will be supported by India's "total grant assistance" of $100 million, the IBCA is expected to sustain itself through membership fees, and contributions from bilateral and multilateral institutions and the private sector. However, the proposed move has invited criticism, too.

"Without the political will to do what we know should be done, building yet another platform will not help conservation. The funding commitment (for IBCA) is more than what India can

apparently afford to spend for 22 species at the brink of extinction," said a conservationist who is aware of the proposal.

A big cat biologist, who has collaborated earlier with the Government, pointed out that "several key landscapes and species recovery programmes are languishing due to inadequate funding".

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a Government official said: "The funding is not unjustified since the IBCA will offer the vision required to overcome such limitations. This is a conservation alliance unprecedented in scale, purpose and activities."

WITH OVERFISHING, GREAT SEAHORSES BOLT FROM COROMANDEL

Fishing is less intense in the Bay of Bengal off the Odisha coastline. However, the shallow coastal ecosystem of the eastern Indian State may not be the new comfort zone for the fish with a horse-like head, a study published in the latest issue of the Journal of Threatened Taxa said.

The study was based on a specimen of a juvenile great seahorse, or Hippocampus kelloggi, caught in a ring net and collected from the Ariyapalli fish landing centre in Odisha's Ganjam district. The authors of the study are Anil Kumar Behera and Biswajit Mahari of Berhampur University's Department of Marine Sciences, and Amrit Kumar Mishra of Bombay Natural History Society's Department of Marine Conservation.

Vulnerable species

There are 46 species of seahorses reported worldwide. The coastal ecosystems of India house nine out of 12 species found in the Indo-Pacific, one of the hotspots of seahorse populations that are distributed across diverse ecosystems such as seagrass, mangroves, macroalgal beds, and coral reefs.

These nine species are distributed along the coasts of eight States and five Union Territories from Gujarat to Odisha, apart from Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The population of the great seahorse, which is among the eight species tagged 'vulnerable', is declining due to its overexploitation for traditional Chinese medicines and as an ornamental fish, combined with general destructive fishing and fisheries bycatch, the study said.

"Despite the ban on fishing and trading activities on seahorses from 2001, clandestine fishing and trading still take place in India. This creates immense pressure on the seahorse populations that have a high dependence on local habitats to maintain their extensive and long-life history traits," it said.

Long migration

Seahorses are poor swimmers but migrate by rafting — clinging to floating substrata such as macroalgae or plastic debris for dispersal by ocean currents — to new habitats for successful maintenance of their population.

However, the 1,300-km northward migration of the great seahorse from the Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar to Odisha is likely a response to extensive fishing activities around the southern coast of India.

The species is abundant off the Coromandel coast (Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu), but is under extensive fishing pressure, with 13 million individuals caught a year, the study said.

Need for conservation

"This calls for increased monitoring of the coastal ecosystems of India on the east coast for better conservation and management of the remaining seahorse populations," it advised. However, the great seahorse is not migrating in large numbers, as the Odisha coast does not have coral reefs or seagrass meadows that the species can call home, except within the Chilika region, Mr. Mishra said.

"The intensity of fishing is much lower compared to the Gulf of Mannar and the Palk Bay region. So, even if they migrate northwards, they would not have a suitable habitat, unless the fishing nets that catch them are banned or the fishing practices such as trawling are stopped," he told The Hindu.

'REGULATOR'S PROPOSAL ON RAJASTHAN POWER LINES FLOUTS SC ORDERS, THREATENS BUSTARD'

In a move that helps solar power projects in Rajasthan but may hinder efforts to make the region safe for the endangered Great Indian Bustard, the Central Electricity Authority (CEA) has proposed that only power lines below 33kV need to go underground and the rest be fitted with bird-diverters.

Conservationists have objected to the move as they say it could lead to the "extinction" of the bird.

The proposal was part of draft regulations issued on February 1 and open to public comment until March 3. It came against the background of an ongoing case involving the threat to the bustard and other birds from power lines. High-tension power lines in Rajasthan and Gujarat from solar plants often lie on the flight path of the birds. The matter is of particular concern to the future of the bustard as fewer than 150 of them remain, and existing conservation methods fall short of replenishing their numbers.

In 2019, environmentalists approached the Supreme Court, which in 2021 directed all 'low-voltage' power lines, in areas demarcated as "priority and potential habitats of the Great Indian Bustard" in Thar and Kutch deserts, be pushed underground.

Solar projects

A majority of the power lines from Rajasthan's solar projects have a rating above 33kV and several such proposed ones are expected to pass through the 'priority' areas. The court order would have required several existing and proposed lines to move underground, hiking the cost of supplying solar power.

"These draft regulations appear to be a way to circumvent the orders of the Supreme Court," said M.K. Ranjitsingh, lead petitioner and conservationist.

"The 11kV lines are relatively low [in height] and have already been exempted. It was the high-tension lines that were the problem and with these regulations, virtually all high-power lines get the pass-through," he said.

"If the regulations come into effect, this would lead to the extinction of a critically endangered species, which is the State Bird of Rajasthan. If this happens, it would be the second major species after the [Asiatic] cheetah to go extinct in post-Independent India," the petitioners noted.

ARRIBADA AHOY

Olive Ridley turtles have trusted the Gahirmatha and Rushikulya beaches of Odisha for a long time now. Every year, they come ashore from the Bay of Bengal for a mass nesting season, also known as arribada, which in Spanish means arrival from the sea. This year, much to the delight of wildlife officials and activists, the scale of nesting has been bigger than usual.

Odisha has made sustained efforts to conserve the habitat of the Olive Ridley turtles, which have been classified as vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

The journey to the rookeries of Gahirmath and Rushikulya is a precarious one for the turtles that must swim thousands of kilometres in an annual quest for the right conditions for nesting. Once ashore, the turtles make nests in the sand, lay the eggs, cover them with sand and return to the ocean. This year, many of them could be spotted even during daytime.

According to estimates, only one turtle reaches adulthood from a batch of 1,000 eggs because of the many hurdles along the way. Hatchlings emerge 40-45 days after the eggs are laid. Many eggs are damaged during high tide and due to beach erosion.

Wildlife experts said that the right conditions and clean beaches may have contributed to the early nesting this year. The numbers have already crossed last year's figure of 5.5 lakh Olive Ridley turtles nesting on Odisha beaches between March 28 and April 4. This year's final number will be calculated at the end of the nesting season.

ASSAM'S MOIDAMS FIT UNESCO REQUIREMENTS FOR HERITAGE SITE

Charaideo in eastern Assam has more than 90 moidams, the mound-burial system of the Ahoms who ruled large swathes of the present-day State and beyond for some 600 years until the advent of the British in the 1820s.

"With great pride, happy to share a landmark achievement in our endeavour to get World Heritage Site status for Charaideo Maidams. The maidams have met all technical requirements of the UNESCO Secretariat. My gratitude once again to Hon PM Shri @narendramodi ji for the nomination," Mr. Sarma tweeted on the night of Friday.

He attached a letter from Lazare Eloundou Assamo, Director of the World Heritage Centre's cultural sector, to Vishal V. Sharma, the Permanent Delegate of India to UNESCO.

"The nomination of Moidams – the mound-burial system of the Ahom Dynasty met all of the technical requirements outlined in the Operational Guidelines concerning completeness check of nominations to the World Heritage List. It is important to recall that the technical completeness of a nomination does not imply that the site concerned is of Outstanding Universal Value and would necessarily be inscribed on the World Heritage List," Mr. Assamo's letter announced.

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'900-YEAR-OLD PARROT LADY' RELIVES JOURNEY FROM CANADA

"I am the Parrot Lady," announces a female voice, as the hologram of sandstone sculpture from Khajuraho comes alive in a dark room, on a silken screen. "I was in a faraway land for many years, missing my people, and so happy to be back," the voice announces, going on to narrate its journey of 900 years — from Khajuraho, where it was installed in one of the main temples, to being smuggled abroad, and its return to India in 2015.

With the Parrot Lady as the chief narrator, the five-minute immersive experience at Maharaja Chhatrasal Convention Centre has been organised on the sidelines of an exhibition titled 'Re(ad)dress: Return of Treasures', comprising 26 artefacts that have returned to the country after being stolen from India and smuggled abroad.

While all other artefacts have travelled from Delhi for the exhibition, the Parrot Lady has been housed at the Archaeological Survey of India's museum in Khajuraho, and gets a pride of place at the exhibition on her home turf.

The sculpture, which depicts a lady with a parrot near her right ear (symbolising love), was seized from a person in Canada a few years ago and handed over by former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper to Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the latter's visit to Canada in April 2015.

According to the ASI, the sculpture must have been taken away from one of the unprotected monuments in the Khajuraho region, even as there is no official record of when exactly it went missing.

The Parrot Lady talks about her love for her homeland and her longing to be back, while also introducing her other friends who have had a similar fate — the 12th-century Dancing Ganesha, a stone sculpture from central India that went missing but was repatriated from the US in 2021; the 11th-century marble sculpture of Brahma and Brahmani from Gujarat, repatriated from the UK in 2017; and the Yaksha, Amin Pillar from 2nd century BC, which went missing from Haryana, but was later discovered in the UK and repatriated in 1979-80.

Through the exhibition, India will not only present the story of these 26 repatriated objects and their cultural biographies but also create awareness about restitution laws and conventions and highlight successful case studies, officials said. The exhibition is part of the first G20 Culture Working Group (CWG) meeting, which kicked off in Khajuraho on Wednesday. The meet, being attended by 50 delegates from more than 20 countries, is themed around the protection and restitution of cultural property.

The objective of the meet is to achieve a reduction in illicit trafficking of cultural property by 2030, strengthen regulation of online trading platforms, and raise awareness among the general public through educational and social media campaigns, officials said, adding that the delegates will also discuss the loss of cultural property due to armed conflicts, colonialism, looting and illicit trafficking.

The exhibition is conceptualised in six thematic sections: cultural heritage, repatriation of cultural property, historical precedents, conventions and guiding principles, global cooperation and glimpses of the return. These antiques, once victims of illicit trafficking, are now being displayed as cultural ambassadors and advocates of Repatriation of Cultural Heritage, officials said.

WITH BHARAT JODO YATRA ENDING IN KASHMIR, A REASON TO REMEMBER SHEIKH ABDULLAH

The Bharat Jodo Yatra ended ironically with a divisive public rant against "outsiders" doing business in J&K. This lack of understanding of India's Constitution (there are no outsiders within our borders) and lack of appreciation for the hard-fought recent gains to integrate J&K — India's Constitution fully applies there only since 2019 — makes us nostalgic for the time when President Giani Zail Singh openly wept at Srinagar in 1982 after Sheikh Abdullah's death. "I have lost my leader," he said. Gianiji was referring to Sheikh Sahib's presidentship of the All India State Peoples' Conference that agitated against the undemocratic royalty allied with the undemocratic British. Since Sheikh Sahib's considerable legacy is being diminished by his party let's take a closer look at his nationalism, pragmatism, and imperfections, as we imagine a Naya Kashmir.

Sheikh Abdullah's nationalistic and political consciousness sparked at the University at Aligarh in the 1920s but synthesised in the Muslim Conference formed after Maharaja Hari Singh's forces fired on peaceful protesters in 1931. In 1938, he renamed the party National Conference to broaden support. M A Jinnah thought the Sheikh was a "rotten egg" with secular ideas who would oppose integration with Pakistan — this probably drove his attempt to forcefully annex Kashmir in 1947. The Maharaja jailed Sheikh often but ironically handed him leadership as "Emergency Administrator" after terrorists enforced the Maharaja's hasty retreat from Srinagar to Jammu. Sheikh often said "Hamne to Hukumat Lal Chowk mein pari pai" (we found the government lying in Lal Chowk) and ably assisted the Indian army in hunting down retreating the disguised Pakistani terrorists. His 1948 speech to the United Nations was clear: Kashmir was a part of India. Later, the Sheikh privately told US ambassador Loy Henderson that if independence was impossible, Kashmir preferred India over Pakistan.

Sheikh Abdullah was a pragmatic politician. He abandoned the most radically communist provisions of his 1942 Naya Kashmir memorandum once in power. He believed the LOC should be India's national boundary because the people in the territory occupied by Pakistan were not Kashmiri. Nehru arrested him in 1953, but he accepted Nehru's offer to visit Pakistan in 1964 and seek peace. In 1975, he sidelined party hardliners like Fakhr-e-Kashmir Mirza Afzal Baig and dissolved the Plebiscite Front to sign an accord with Indira Gandhi. In 1975, despite being Chief Minister with Congress support, Sheikh Sahib didn't implement the Emergency provisions or jail any Jana Sangh or RSS leaders. He threatened to counter Islamic fundamentalism by becoming a "mullah" but banned a proposed international conference of the Jamaat–e-Tulba in Srinagar. Abdullah supported the RSS candidate Vaid Vaishno Dutt in the Jammu Municipal elections and his continued defiance led Indira Gandhi to fly 175 income tax officials to raid his associates, which he considered "a raid on me." But the Sheikh reconciled with Mrs Gandhi just before his death — Sher-i-Kashmir knew that politics is the art of the possible.

Sheikh Abdullah, like all humans, was imperfect. He forced Nehru to banish Maharaja Hari Singh to Mumbai and replace him with Karan Singh. He made feeble attempts to win the people of Jammu and Ladakh. He often used religion in politics. In 1980, he led the Eid prayer at Idgah instead of the Mirwaiz to deliver a message to Indira Gandhi. As chief minister, he banned the entry of national civil servants into the state government to promote "committed" state officers. In his last years, Kashmiris began calling him kunba parast. He didn't make the National Conference a cadre-driven meritocracy but gifted the party to his family.

Sociologist Max Weber identified three sources of authority. The first was the authority of the eternal yesterday, that is, sanctified through past legitimacy. The second was the authority of extraordinary personal charisma. The third was the authority of the legality of the statute based on rationally created rules. Sheikh had all three sources and used them to deliver ambitious visions in healthcare (the Soura institute modelled on PGI Chandigarh), tourism (the convention centre modelled on Swiss infrastructure) and pride (Hazratbal modelled on Madina). But his successors have run out of authority because they haven't fought terrorism or considered it evil as Sheikh Abdullah did. Farooq Abdullah's suggestion that unemployment and poverty birthed terrorism got a sharp retort from then Home Minister P Chidambaram. "If that were true, then large parts of India would have been disturbed," he said.

ODISHA CM NAVEEN PATNAIK UNVEILS FATHER BIJU'S ICONIC DAKOTA AIRCRAFT FOR PUBLIC DISPLAY

Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik unveiled the renovated Dakota DC-3 aircraft of former chief minister Biju Patnaik for public viewing at the Bhubaneswar airport Sunday.

On Biju Patnaik's 107th birth anniversary, Naveen Patnaik paid tribute to his father and described him as the architect of modern Odisha and a freedom fighter. Naveen said Biju's legacy would guide him to fulfil his dream of a prosperous Odisha.

The DC-3 aircraft bearing registration number VT-AUI belonged to the erstwhile Kalinga Airlines, founded by Biju Patnaik, who was known to be a daredevil pilot. The aircraft was lying in a remote corner of Kolkata's Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose International Airport. The Naveen Patnaik government brought it back to the city on January 18.

An official statement issued by the state's commerce and transport department said Biju Patnaik used this aircraft to rescue former Indonesian vice-president Md Hatta and former prime minister Sutan Sjahrir. Biju, for his effort, was given honorary citizenship of Indonesia and awarded the title of 'Bhumi Putra' by the Indonesian government, a recognition rarely granted to a foreigner.

Naveen Patnaik said an economic corridor had been set up along the Biju Expressway, benefitting ten districts in the region.

The chief minister also held two roadshows in Bargarh, Nuapada and Kalahandi districts. Hundreds of people along the way showered Patnaik with flower petals and chanted slogans in his support.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi also paid tribute to Biju Patnaik on his birth anniversary. "On his birth anniversary, I pay homage to Biju Babu, a remarkable leader and institution builder. He was a dynamic and multifaceted personality who made an unparalleled contribution towards Odisha's progress. His role in fighting the Emergency is also notable," tweeted the Prime Minister.

Odisha's ruling Biju Janata Dal, a party named after Biju Patnaik, also observed the day across the state.

THE EXPRESS VIEW ON SATISH KAUSHIK: A FUNNY MAN

In a movie like Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro, Kundan Shah's madcap satire with its huge cast of talented actors — including the redoubtable Naseeruddin Shah, Pankaj Kapur and Om Puri — it was no

easy task to stand out. But Satish Kaushik, who died Wednesday at the age of 66, managed to do just that as Ashok Namboodirippad, thanks to his impeccable comic timing and total commitment to the ludicrousness of the proceedings. One wonders, for example, how successful the phone call scene between Ashok and Vinod Chopra, one of the film's two "heroes", would have been without Kaushik playing the incompetent villainous sidekick to near perfection.

The man who cut his teeth in acting with the capital's Kirori Mal College's renowned theatre group, The Players, and the National School of Drama, was always more than an actor. Kaushik had, after all, begun his film career as an assistant director to Shekhar Kapur on Masoom and had written the dialogues for Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro. Even as he continued acting, Kaushik started directing films — the 2003 blockbuster Tere Naam among them — and producing.

Kaushik will, however, be best remembered for his comedic roles. That he had more to offer as an actor started to become evident much later — in Brick Lane (2007), for example. Unfortunately for Kaushik and his audiences, his peak years in comedy roles — Calendar in Mr India, Pappu Pager in Deewana Mastana, Panipuri Sharma in Andaz and German in Hum Aapke Dil Mein Rehte Hain — coincided with Hindi cinema's decade-long lapse into triteness and formula. That Kaushik managed to shine despite the material he was given, is a testament to his talent and the warmth and spontaneity with which he made even bit roles memorable.

BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

WHAT INDIA'S LABOUR FORCE AND NATIONAL INCOME DATA TELL US ABOUT JOBS SHIFTING FROM AGRICULTURE

Two recent sets of data released by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and the National Statistical Office (NSO) offer insights into the process of structural transformation in the Indian economy, especially in relation to the agriculture and manufacturing sectors.

Economists refer to structural transformation as basically a compositional shift that entails the transfer of surplus labour from agriculture to sectors where productivity (output per worker) and average incomes are higher — particularly manufacturing and modern services.

The NSSO's latest annual Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) report for 2021-22 (July-June) shows the farm sector's share in the country's employed labour force at 45.5%. That's down from 46.5% in 2020-21, but still higher than the 2018-19 low of 42.5%. Clearly, the effects of the pandemic-induced economic disruptions, which had forced a reverse migration to the farms, haven't fully subsided.

Stalled transformation

The share of agriculture in the total workforce fell from 64.6% in 1993-94 to 42.5% in 2018-19.

The biggest decline, from 58.5% to 48.9%, happened between 2004-05 and 2011-12. During this seven-year period, the workforce engaged in farming registered, for the first time in India's history, a fall even in absolute terms — from 268.6 million to 231.9 million. The share of the labour force employed in manufacturing too, peaked at 12.6% in 2011-12.

Since 2011-12, this structural transformation has slowed, with the share of agriculture in employment not falling fast enough and, in fact, rising after 2018-19. The share of manufacturing has dropped behind even that of construction and trade, hotels & restaurants. In 2017-18, the latter two sectors accounted for 11.7% and 12% of the total workforce respectively, as against manufacturing's 12.1%. But in 2021-22, manufacturing's share, at 11.6%, was below that of construction (12.4%) as well as trade, hotels & restaurants (12.1%).

In other words, structural transformation hasn't just slowed — it has stalled, if not reversed. There is not much labour transfer taking place from farms to factories. The jobs that are getting generated outside agriculture are mostly in construction and low-paid services, whose share has overtaken that of manufacturing. The construction sector has now become the second-largest employer after agriculture. Five years ago, it was at No. 4, after agriculture, manufacturing and trade, hotels & restaurants. Today, manufacturing has been relegated to the fourth spot.

WHY INDIA NEEDS A GREEN REVOLUTION 2.0

The Indian economy, especially agriculture, is a "gamble on the monsoon". That famous early-20th century statement by then viceroy, George Curzon, perhaps, needs rephrasing today. More than the monsoon, it is temperatures that are emerging as a greater source of uncertainty for farmers. Access to irrigation can, to some extent, compensate for a failed monsoon or two. The fact that the country produces more foodgrains now during the rabi (winter-spring) than in the kharif (post-monsoon) season is testimony to the role of irrigation in drought-proofing. But what can farmers

do with mercury spikes in February and March? These threaten rabi harvests, which were hitherto considered assured and immune from rainfall vagaries. While rabi crops were always vulnerable to spring thunderstorms and hail, the risks from them pale in comparison to that on account of shorter winters and advanced onset of summers.

The impact of temperature surge was seen in March 2022, when the wheat crop had just entered its final grain formation and filling stage. The heat stress led to early grain ripening and reduced yields. This year, February recorded the highest-ever maximum temperatures, thanks to the absence of active western disturbances that bring rain and snowfall over the Himalayas, whose cooling effect percolates into the plains. Currently, both minimum and maximum temperatures are ruling 3-5 degrees Celsius above normal in most wheat-growing areas. The next couple of weeks or more are going to be crucial. So long as the maximum remains within 35 degrees, there should be no danger of March 2022 repeating itself. But it only highlights how much of a "gamble on the mercury" agriculture has become.

Climate isn't the only risk farmers are confronting. Even as the prospects for wheat are uncertain, prices of onion and potato have crashed. Mustard, too, is trading below its minimum support price with the arrival of the new crop — a far cry from the situation a year ago when edible oil inflation had peaked following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The dual risks from climate and prices may not be new; the difference lies in their frequency, volatility and intensity. Farmers, scientists and policymakers have to adapt to this reality. Green Revolution 2.0 has to be about varieties that can withstand extreme temperature and rainfall variations, while yielding more, using less water and nutrients. This should be accompanied by better crop planning and market intelligence: Farmers must know what to plant, how to manage their crop at various stages under different stress scenarios, and when to sell. Agriculture for today and tomorrow cannot be the same as it was yesterday.

RBI INITIATES 75 DIGITAL VILLAGES PROGRAMME

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has launched a programme to adopt 75 villages and convert them into digital payment enabled villages. Under the initiative, payment system operators (PSOs) will adopt these villages across the country and conduct two camps in each of these villages with an aim to improve awareness and onboard merchants for digital payments, Das said.

He was speaking at the launch of 'Har Payment Digital' mission during the Digital Payments Awareness Week (DPAW) 2023. The Governor said India's payment systems have evolved over the years and there are now multiple systems available round the clock facilitating instant payments. The payment systems in the country have witnessed over 1000 crore transactions every month since December 2022.

Talking about the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), which was launched in 2016, Das said the volume of UPI transactions has increased multi fold from 0.45 crore in January 2017 to 804 crore in January 2023. Even in the value terms, UPI transactions have risen from just Rs 1,700 crore to Rs 12.98 lakh crore during the same period.

PAN CARD-AADHAAR LINKING: WHY IT IS MANDATORY; WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU DON'T

The Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) has asked all taxpayers to link their permanent account number (PAN) with their Aadhaar by March 31, 2023. Any non-compliance will mean that the PAN will become inoperative from April 1, 2023.

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

Capital markets regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) too on Wednesday directed investors to link their PAN with their Aadhaar by the end of this month to continue doing transactions in the securities market.

What is the rationale behind linking PAN with Aadhaar?

The Income-tax Department announced the linking of PAN with Aadhaar after it came across instances where multiple permanent account numbers (PANs) were allotted to one person, or where one PAN was allotted to more than one person. To have a robust way of de-duplication of the PAN database, it was made mandatory for a taxpayer who is eligible to obtain Aadhaar, to quote his Aadhaar in the application form for PAN and return of income.

Who needs to link PAN with Aadhaar?

As per a circular issued by CBDT in March 2022, the Income-tax Act makes it mandatory for every person who has been allotted a PAN as on July 1, 2017, to intimate his/her Aadhaar number so that Aadhaar and PAN can be linked. This is required to be done on or before March 31, 2023, failing which the PAN shall become inoperative.

Who is not required to link PAN with Aadhaar?

There are a few categories of individuals for whom this linkage is not compulsory.

- Any person of age 80 years and above;

- A non-resident as per the Income-tax Act;

- A person who is not a citizen of India.

What will happen if PAN is not linked with Aadhaar?

CBDT has said that in case a person fails to link his or her PAN with Aadhaar, the PAN will become inoperative. In such a case, the person will not be able to furnish, intimate, or quote his/ her PAN, and shall be liable to all the consequences under the Income-tax Act for such failure. Some of the major implications of non-compliance are:

- The person shall not be able to file the income tax return using the inoperative PAN.

- Pending returns will not be processed.

- Pending refunds cannot be issued to inoperative PANs.

- Pending proceedings as in the case of defective returns cannot be completed once the PAN is inoperative.

- Tax will be required to be deducted at a higher rate if PAN becomes inoperative. Besides these consequences, the person may find difficulties in doing other financial transactions much as with banks, as PAN is an important KYC criterion for these transactions.

And why has SEBI made it mandatory for investors to link PAN with Aadhaar?

Since PAN is the key identification number and part of KYC requirements for all transactions in the securities market, all SEBI-registered entities and Market Infrastructure Institutions (MIIs) are required to ensure valid KYC for all participants.

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All existing investors are required to ensure the linking of their PAN with their Aadhaar before March 31, 2023, for continual and smooth transactions in the securities market and to avoid consequences of non-compliance with the March 30, 2022, CBDT circular, as such accounts would be considered non-KYC compliant, and there could be restrictions on securities and other transactions until the PAN and Aadhaar are linked.

How to link PAN with Aadhaar?

One can link PAN and Aadhaar by clicking on the Link Aadhaar option available on the official website of the Income-tax Department.

WHY ARE INDEX MAKERS ATTRACTING ATTENTION FROM SEBI?

The story so far:

Following a report by U.S.-based Hindenburg Research levelling several allegations against the Adani group, global index providers like MSCI are reviewing some of these stocks' inclusion in its indices that are replicated by many foreign portfolio managers. India's National Stock Exchange (NSE), on the other hand, has announced that five Adani group firms' stocks will be added to 14 different indices administered by a subsidiary called NSE Indices, while retaining Adani Enterprises and Adani Ports and SEZ in the Nifty 50.

What are index funds?

With thousands of stocks traded in stock markets around the world and their prices often moving in different directions, most observers assess a market's general trajectory amid these individual price swings by looking at broader benchmark indices. For instance, the Sensex represents the 30 largest and most actively traded stocks on the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE). While economists and governments look at market indices' movements as a barometer of the confidence levels in the economy, individual investors and fund managers use them as a gauge to compare their own portfolios' performance. Mutual funds and portfolio managers often pitch to prospective investors that their investment strategies have outperformed the Sensex or other relevant benchmarks. For retail investors, selecting single stocks or mutual fund schemes has always been a challenge. In 1976, American fund industry veteran and Vanguard Group founder John Bogle sought to address this by launching the world's first index fund. His idea was simple: if you can't find the needle in a haystack, buy the whole haystack! And this could be achieved at much lower costs than those charged by fund managers actively trading portfolios, as it was a "passive" approach of buying the index and holding. Now, such low-cost passive index funds and similarly structured exchange traded funds (that can be traded intra-day like a stock) manage trillions of dollars globally.

How popular are such funds in India?

While index funds and exchange-traded funds (ETFs) have been an option for Indian investors for about two decades, they have seen an exponential growth in assets since 2015. From eight such funds in 2008, there are as many as 200 options now. About 16% of the roughly ₹41 lakh crore assets managed by India's mutual funds are parked in index funds and ETFs.

How are indices made?

Indices could be based on different industry sectors, size of companies (small-cap, mid-cap, etc) and quantitative parameters like liquidity and trading volumes and the weightage assigned to

each stock in an index may vary based on their market capitalisation or other gauges that index providers adopt. NSE Indices owns and manages over 350 indices, with 117 ETFs listed in India and 12 ETFs listed abroad using these products as benchmarks. Similarly, A BSE-S&P Dow Jones Indices joint venture called Asia Index Pvt Ltd, offers an array of indices used by global and domestic investors. Each index is reviewed periodically and follows a methodology to add or drop stocks based on periodic trading data and other defined parameters. MSCI and other global providers build indices that are used by international fund managers to earmark assets to stocks in different markets. The methodologies usually provide for a review of the index composition or cessation of specific indices owing to factors such as 'exceptional circumstances', 'market disruptions' or difficulty in replicating the indices. However, they are not regulated by the Securities Exchange Board of India (SEBI).

What has SEBI proposed?

Noting the "growing dominance of Index Providers due to proliferation" of passive funds that drive capital flows towards assets that are part of a particular market index, SEBI has proposed to bring them under its regulatory purview. While there is "an element of transparency" in their functioning, SEBI believes it is possible for index makers "to exercise discretion through changes in methodology resulting in exclusion or inclusion of a stock in the index or change in the weights of the constituent stocks". Their decisions not only impact volumes, liquidity and price of such stocks but also impact index funds' returns to investors. Concerned about possibilities of conflict of interest arising in the governance and administration of indices, SEBI has proposed to introduce an accountability mechanism for them. The plan, likely to be implemented soon, includes mandating SEBI registration for index providers and subjecting them to norms pertaining to eligibility criterion, compliance, disclosures and periodic audits. Penal action is envisaged by SEBI in case of non-compliance and incorrect disclosures, among other things.

HDFC SEC, ICICI SEC, ZERODHA ARE NOW QUALIFIED STOCK BROKERS: WHAT ARE QSBS, AND HOW CRUCIAL ARE THEY FOR MARKETS?

The National Stock Exchange (NSE) Friday issued a list of 15 designated Qualified Stock Brokers (QSBs), including Zerodha Broking, 5paisa Capital, HDFC Securities, ICICI Securities, Anand Rathi Share and Stock Brokers, Angel One, IIFL Securities, Kotak Securities, and Motilal Oswal Financial Services. This list was announced following a February 2023 direction by the capital markets regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi).

Who are Qualified Stock Brokers?

Sebi defines QSBs as entities who, because of their size and scale of operations, can likely impact investors and the securities market, as well as governance and service standards. These stock brokers cater to the needs of a large number of investors.

Why are QSBs important?

Due to their size, trading volumes, and amount of clients' funds handled by them, QSBs occupy a significant position in the Indian securities market. The stock market activity is concentrated to these designated stock brokers. The failure of such stock brokers has the potential to cause disruption in the services they provide to large numbers of investors, causing widespread impact in the securities market.

How are Qualified Stock Brokers designated?

A stock broker will be designated as QSB on the basis of four parameters — number of active clients, total available assets of clients, trading volumes. and end-of-day margin obligations. All stock brokers with a total score greater than or equal to five on these four parameters are identified as QSBs.

The capital markets regulator said it may include more stock brokers in its list of designated QSBs by considering additional parameters such as compliance, grievance redressal scores and proprietary trading volumes.

The scores are to be calculated on an annual basis (financial year) and the revised list of QSBs will be released jointly by stock exchanges, in consultation with Sebi.

What are additional regulatory requirements for QSBs?

A stock broker designated as a QSB is required to meet enhanced obligations and discharge responsibilities to ensure appropriate governance structure, appropriate risk management policy and processes, scalable infrastructure and appropriate technical capacity, framework for orderly winding down, robust cyber security framework, and investor services including online complaint redressal mechanism.

The risk management framework of QSBs should have measures for carrying out surveillance of client behaviour through analysing the pattern of trading done by them and detection of any unusual activity.

QSBs will have to red flag any unusual client behaviour to stock exchanges and take necessary measures to prevent fraudulent activity in the market.

OFFSHORE YOUR INVESTMENTS TO OFFSET A 'COUNTRY RISK'

If I recall correctly, it was in 1991-92 when India was about 23 weeks away from defaulting on the trade front. The country hardly had any foreign exchange to pay for its imports.

The Congress government was at the Centre, and under the leadership of P.V. Narasimha Rao, Dr. Manmohan Singh was the Finance Minister. To overcome the balance of payments crisis, the country's gold was utilised.

This is an example of country risk. If things had gone wrong, then investors in India from all over the world would have suffered.

The Brexit example

There are many such examples. The decision by Britain to exit the European Union had an impact on the valuation of the portfolios of investors whose securities had some connection to Britain.

A few years ago, some European countries suffered from an economic crisis. These were popularly known as the PIIGS countries – Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain.

During those times, not only were the direct investors adversely impacted, the ripple effects were witnessed across the globe.

The economic crisis in Sri Lanka and Pakistan in recent times is on our minds. The war in Ukraine following Russia's invasion has an impact on investments though the conflict involves two neighbouring countries.

Many a time, our investment in a particular security could be performing as per our expectations.

Balanced portfolio

The portfolio could be well balanced. Our asset allocation could be optimum and we may have invested at the best possible prices. Yet, the performance of our portfolio could suffer because of turbulence in the country. The turbulence could be economic, political or even a natural disaster.

Currency devaluation

Devaluation of the country's currency in a war or a war-like situation, civil unrest, are all examples of country risk. Apart from these, natural calamities might result in country risk.

When tsunamis or hurricanes hit a country, investments in that country could get adversely impacted. When there was unrest and uprisings in Yemen, Egypt and a few other West Asian countries, investors in those countries suffered.

RBI scheme

As investors, most of us Indians virtually have no investments outside India, though as per the Liberalised Remittance Scheme of RBI, every Indian can invest up to $2,25,000 outside the country every year. Since we do not have any investments outside India, all our investments are in an 'extremely high-risk category' as far as the country risk is concerned.

In the event of a natural calamity, or a war or a war-like situation or a major terror attack, all our investments will be adversely impacted.

Our house, bank accounts, jewellery, shares and stocks, bonds, PPF account, gold, etc., are all in a single country.

We do not have any kind of exposure outside India.

The usual argument is: since the returns in India are good, why should we invest outside India? This is also known as 'country bias'. As we live in India, we are not willing to look at options outside India and consider investments only in India.

Investments outside India should not be considered to generate higher returns, but to reduce the adverse impact of country risk. A well-balanced portfolio considers diversification across countries to reduce country risk.

We now also have mutual fund schemes that invest outside India. In such cases we invest in Indian currency, from India.

Tax implications are as per our prevailing laws and over a period of time, even succession planning will be as per our laws.

Currency risk

One major risk that is inherent in such an investment is the currency risk.

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There have been instances where investments have performed well, but due to currency variations there may be a favourable or an unfavourable outcome. However, there can never be a risk-free investment.

The next time your SEBI-approved registered investment adviser advises you to directly or indirectly invest outside India, do not dismiss the idea outright.

A BREAKDOWN OF THE HIGHER PENSION SCHEME

The story so far:

The long wait of subscribers of the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) and those who retired after September 1, 2014 to apply for higher PF pension under the Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS) of 1995 came to an end on February 27 with the Organisation providing a web link on its members' page. The prospective beneficiaries fall under two categories — those who retired after September 1, 2014, and those who were in service prior to the date and continue to be in service. The critical element is that in either of the cases, employers must have made PF contributions in excess of the mandatory ceiling of the pensionable salary. Till now, 8,897 persons have sent their applications through their employers. The last date for availing the option of higher pension is May 3, 2023.

Why is the EPFO doing this?

The present exercise of the EPFO has been necessitated by the judgment of the Supreme Court given on November 4, 2022 in the EPFO versus Sunil Kumar B case. The verdict, apart from upholding the 2014 amendment brought in by the Union government, had given an opportunity to all employees, as on September 1, 2014, who did not exercise the option under paragraph 11 (4) of the EPS Rules for higher pension but were entitled to do so but could not due to the interpretation on cut-off date by the authorities. It clearly stated that the time to exercise the option "shall stand extended by a further period of four months." In the light of the Court's directions, the EPFO issued a circular on February 20, laying down the broad contours of eligibility.

The 2014 amendment, which came into effect in September that year, raised the pensionable salary cap to ₹15,000 a month from ₹6,500 a month, and allowed employers to contribute 8.33% of the employees' actual pay (even if it exceeds the cap) towards EPS. Between November 16, 1995 (the date of commencement of the Pension Scheme) and May 31, 2001, the salary cap was ₹5,000. Even though employers, in many instances, had been making PF contributions over and above the ceiling for their employees, only 8.33% of the pensionable salary cap had got transferred to the Pension Fund. Another important feature of the amendment is that unlike in the past when new employees covered under the Provident Fund (PF) compulsorily became members of the EPS, only those with the monthly wage of not exceeding ₹15,000 can now be members of the Pension Scheme.

The February circular was the second substantive circular on the subject of higher pension, as the PF body, on December 29, 2022, came out with one that was meant for those who retired before September 1, 2014 and after exercising the option for higher pension. In respect of this category of pensioners, the EPFO gave an online facility (which is no longer available since March 4) for the submission of documents to the effect that they had given, while in service, the option along with their employers and received the communication from the PF authorities regarding rejection of

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their applications. This was in line with the Court's stipulation in the Sunil Kumar case that the directions of the Court's judgment given in 2016 in the R.C. Gupta versus Regional PF Commissioner, EPFO, case be implemented in eight weeks. As many as 91,258 persons submitted their applications as on March 4. However, those who retired before September 1, 2014 without exercising the option under paragraph 11(3) of the EPS Rules would not be eligible to apply for higher pension, as this was what the Court had laid down in its latest verdict.

How will the pension be calculated?

The pensionable salary, which represents the average of the last 60 months of salary, will have to be multiplied by the number of contributory years, the sum of which is to be divided by 70, which indicates the average longevity for an Indian. For the purpose of pension, an employee, on attaining the age of 58 years, is deemed to have retired from service and consequently, exited the Pension Scheme, regardless of the retirement policy of the employer.

Will there be any financial impact?

In the event of the authorities clearing the applications for higher pension, the pensioners and the subscriber will have to remit to them the amount that represents the difference between the portion of PF contributions transferred earlier to the Pension Fund and what would have to be paid based on actual salary. In the case of the subscribers, a certain portion of the amount lying with their individual PF accounts may even get transferred to the Pension Fund, after their applications for higher pension get approved. As all the pensioners would have received their terminal benefits, they will be required to make their payment separately. In any case, the payment will include interest too, the rate of which will be indicated by the authorities later. Going by what is available on the portal, the entire payment will have to be made in a single tranche.

Employers will be required to bear the administrative charges, which are expected to be nominal.

What are the documents required?

The applicants will have to upload payslips and the communication of permission obtained under paragraph 26(6) of the EPF Scheme Rules to establish that their pay exceeded the salary cap of ₹5,000 a month (up to May 31, 2001) and ₹6,500 a month (up to August 31, 2014) and they were entitled to get the benefit of higher pension. Besides, they will have to furnish pages of their passbooks/account slips as proof of PF balance. In cases where there is nil or insufficient balance in PF accounts, an undertaking has to be provided by such members regarding the payment along with interest through their employers.

Should one opt for a higher pension?

The answer to this question varies from person to person. Higher pension may provide a sense of economic security after retirement. But the amount that a pensioner gets during his/her lifetime will get halved on his/her death and paid to the spouse. However, the amount that is lying with an employee's PF account will be paid totally to the employee's spouse in the event of his/her death during service.

WHAT IS THE SWAMIH INVESTMENT FUND AND ITS AFFORDABLE HOUSING PUSH

The Special Window for Affordable and Mid-Income Housing (SWAMIH) Investment Fund I has raised Rs 15,530 crore so far to provide priority debt financing for the completion of stressed,

brownfield and Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA)-registered residential projects that fall in the affordable, mid-income housing category. SWAMIH has so far provided final approval to about 130 projects with sanctions worth over Rs 12,000 crore.

What is the SWAMIH investment fund?

The Special Window for Affordable and Mid-Income Housing (SWAMIH) Investment Fund I is a social impact fund specifically formed for completing stressed and stalled residential projects.

The Fund is sponsored by the Ministry of Finance, Government of India, and is managed by SBICAP Ventures Ltd., a State Bank Group company.

Since the Fund considers first-time developers, established developers with troubled projects, developers with a poor track record of stalled projects, customer complaints and NPA accounts, and even projects where there are litigation issues, it is considered as the lender of last resort for distressed projects. The Fund's presence in a project often acts as a catalyst for better collections and sales primarily in projects that were delayed for years.

According to the Finance Ministry, SWAMIH Fund has one of the largest domestic real estate private equity teams focused only on funding and monitoring the completion of stressed housing projects.

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LIFE & SCIENCE

THE MOON MAY GET ITS OWN TIME ZONE: HERE IS WHY

What time is it on the moon?

Since the dawn of the Space Age, the answer has been: It depends. For decades, lunar missions have operated on the time of the country that launched them. But with several lunar explorations heading for the launchpad, the European Space Agency has deemed the current system unsustainable. The solution, the agency said last week, is a lunar time zone.

"ESA is not taking the lead on this discussion; we're just putting a finger on a problem we need to tackle," said Brice Dellandrea, an engineer with the ESA. "But this is the kind of topic that needs international coordination and consensus."

Why do we need a time zone for the moon?

The main objective of establishing a universal timekeeping system for the moon, the ESA said, is to streamline contact among the various countries and entities, public and private, that are coordinating trips to and around the moon.

Which countries are planning lunar missions?

The discussion about how to do that is happening as things are starting to get busy on and above the lunar surface.

The M1 lunar lander built by the Japanese company Ispace is set to arrive on the moon in April, when it will try to deploy a rover built by the United Arab Emirates; a robot built by Japan's space agency, JAXA; and other payloads.

A six-legged cylindrical robot called the Nova-C lander, built by the Houston-based company Intuitive Machines, is expected to launch on SpaceX's Falcon 9 and land on the South Pole of the moon in June. Additional uncrewed missions will land by the end of the year, according to Jack Burns, director of the Network for Exploration and Space Science at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Those missions, among other possible lunar landings, are happening as NASA prepares to send four astronauts into orbit around the moon next year. That mission will pave the way for the first crewed moon landing since Apollo 17 in December 1972, currently planned for 2025.

The European Space Agency, meanwhile, is contributing to NASA's effort to build the Gateway lunar station, which will serve as a way station for future crews on their way to the lunar surface. Last year, China completed construction of its own space station and previously hinted that Chinese astronauts would be on the moon by 2030. South Korea launched its own lunar spacecraft, Danuri, on a SpaceX Falcon rocket from Florida in August. It joined India's Chandrayaan-2 mission, as well as spacecraft from NASA and China, in its orbit of the moon.

With increased exploration comes the potential for miscommunication.

"These missions will not only be on or around the moon at the same time, but they will often be interacting as well — potentially relaying communications for one another, performing joint observations or carrying out rendezvous operations," the ESA said in a statement.

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

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For all those interactions to happen smoothly, the missions will need to operate on a standardized time, the agency said.

"This idea of timekeeping on the moon is important because it shows the international development of the moon," Burns said. "Precision timekeeping was key to navigation on the Earth, and it's key to navigation between the Earth and the moon."

What could be the methods for establishing a 'moon time zone'?

The ESA said that a universal timekeeping system for the moon is needed, but that many details remain to be worked out. One of the questions that has yet to be settled, the agency said, was whether lunar time should be set on the moon or synchronized with Earth.

Time on Earth is precisely tracked by atomic clocks, but synchronizing time on the moon is tricky because clocks run faster there, gaining around 56 microseconds, or millionths of a second, per day.

Once a new lunar time zone is established, the methods used to create it will be useful for future space exploration, Burns said. Astronauts could go to Mars in the next two to three decades, he said, and will face similar logistical hurdles that a Martian time zone could address.

"We're going to be an exploration civilization in which we're going to be exploring beyond Earth's orbit," Burns said. "We're going to be going to the moon and then, after that, to Mars."

CHINA TAKES LEAD IN MAPPING THE DEEP

It is usually the sightings of the Chinese military's latest warships, and the occasional submarine, that attract the most attention in the crystal clear waters off this tropical island in the South China Sea.

Less noticed are the departures of the Explorer 2, a green-and-white vessel that might pass for an unremarkable trawler.

Departing from Sanya's Institute of Deep Sea Science and Engineering (IDSSE), the vessel has made increasingly frequent forays into some of the least explored parts of the world's oceans, carrying with it one of the most advanced deep-sea submersibles, as well as China's ambitions to dominate the still evolving, yet highly competitive, field of deep sea exploration.

So important is the IDSSE's mission to Beijing that when the manned submersible Fendouzhe, or Striver, plunged to a then record depth of more than 10,000 metres in 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping sent a letter to the institute, pointing out that "the success of the Fendouzhe marks China's ability to enter the world's deepest oceans to carry out scientific exploration and research, and reflects the nation's comprehensive strength in marine high technology fields".

Only the U.S., France and Russia have similar capabilities, say Chinese scientists.

Researchers at the IDSSE say their main mission is understanding what lies at the depths of little understood ocean trenches. The work of deep sea research does, however, also carry the promise of unlocking untold commercial riches, given the growing global interest into deep sea exploration of mineral resources. Copper, gold, minerals and rare earth elements remain untapped on the sea bed.

"How are organisms adapted to life in the extreme environment of the ocean, in this least understood and remote environment? That is what we are exploring," said Zhang Weijia, a deputy researcher at the IDSSE. Ms. Zhang said scientific research is also important in determining how resources can be exploited without damaging ocean environments. "From the ecological perspective, it will be helpful to monitor long-term changes to mining areas, how long it takes to recover, and so on."

In December 2021, the Striver explored the Mariana Trench, the world's deepest. At the Kermadec Trench in the Pacific Ocean, Ms. Zhang said, the submersible created several firsts, observing for the first time anemones at a depth of 8,880 metres and fish feeding on shark remains at 9,900 metres. "The biggest surprise is we observed a rich food supply at these depths," she said. In the Mariana Trench, new microbes were discovered. The research is at an early stage, but the potential for biotechnology, from new enzymes to treating anti-microbial resistance, is enormous.

China, along with the U.S., Russia, Germany, France, and to a lesser extent, India, are in a race for exploration contracts to search the vast areas under the jurisdiction of the International Seabed Authority (ISA), which includes all waters beyond 12 nautical mile territorial seas and 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zones. China has so far secured several exploration licences in vast areas in the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean.

WHAT ARE 'BIO-COMPUTERS' AND HOW DO THEY FUNCTION?

The story so far:

Scientists at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) recently outlined a plan for a potentially revolutionary new area of research called "organoid intelligence", which aims to create "bio-computers". Here, brain cultures grown in the lab are coupled to real-world sensors and input/output devices. The scientists expect the technology to harness the processing power of the brain and understand the biological basis of human cognition, learning, and various neurological disorders.

What is the premise of this tech?

Understanding how the human brain works has been a difficult challenge. Traditionally, researchers have used rat brains to investigate various human neurological disorders. Now, in a quest to develop systems that are more relevant to humans, scientists are building 3D cultures of brain tissue in the lab, called brain organoids. These "mini-brains" (with a size of up to 4 mm) are built using human stem cells and capture many structural and functional features of a developing human brain. However, the human brain also requires various sensory inputs (touch, smell, vision, etc) to develop into the complex organ it is, and brain organoids developed in the lab aren't sophisticated enough. They also do not have blood circulation, which limits how they can grow.

Then, how do we study the brain?

Recently, scientists transplanted these human brain organoid cultures into rat brains, where they formed connections with the rat brain, which in turn provided circulating blood. Since the organoids had been transplanted to the visual system, when the scientists showed the experimental rats a light flash, the human neurons were activated, too, indicating that the human brain organoids were also functionally active. Scientists have touted such a system as a way to study brain diseases in a human context. However, human brain organoids are still nested in the rat-brain microenvironment. The effects of drugs in this model will have to be interpreted through

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various behavioural tests in rats, which could be insufficiently representative. Therefore, we need to address the limitations of lab-grown organoids and develop a more human-relevant system.

What is the new 'bio-computer'?

The JHU researchers' scheme will combine brain organoids with modern computing methods to create "bio-computers". They have announced plans to couple the organoids with machine learning by growing the organoids inside flexible structures affixed with multiple electrodes (similar to the ones used to take EEG readings from the brain). These structures will be able to record the firing patterns of the neurons and also deliver electrical stimuli, to mimic sensory stimuli. The response pattern of the neurons and their effect on human behaviour or biology will then be analysed by machine-learning techniques. Recently, scientists were able to grow human neurons on top of a microelectrode array that could both record and stimulate these neurons. Brain organoids can also be developed using stem cells from individuals with neurodegenerative or cognitive disorders. Comparing the data on brain structure, connections, and signalling between 'healthy' and 'patient-derived' organoids can reveal the biological basis of human cognition, learning, and memory.

Are 'bio-computers' ready for commercial use?

Currently, brain organoids have a diameter of less than 1 mm and have fewer than 1,00,000 cells (both on average), which make it roughly three-millionth the size of an actual human brain. So scaling up the brain organoid is key to improving its computing capacity. Thomas Hartung, a professor of evidence-based toxicology at JHU who is leading this work, said that "the challenge is now to establish long-term memory. We hope to achieve this within 1-2 years. Applying this to patient cell-derived brain organoids, like autism and Alzheimer donors, is already on the way. We might see benefits for drug development in this decade."

IS THE INTERNET AS WE KNOW IT GOING TO CHANGE?

The story so far:

The Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) has begun hearing two pivotal lawsuits that will for the first time ask it to interpret Section 230 of the U.S. Communications Decency Act of 1996, the law that has shielded tech companies from liabilities over decades. The lawsuits pose a long-standing question — should digital companies be held liable for the content that users post on their platforms?

What are the two lawsuits?

Both lawsuits have been brought by families of those killed in Islamic State (ISIS) terror attacks. The first lawsuit, Gonzalez versus Google, has been filed by the family of Nohemi Gonzalez, a 23-year-old American killed while studying in Paris, in the ISIS terror attacks of 2015 that killed 129 people. The family is suing YouTube-parent Google for "affirmatively recommending ISIS videos to users" through its recommendations algorithm. The Court filings say that the video-sharing platform YouTube "aided and abetted" the Islamic State in carrying out acts actionable under U.S. anti-terrorism law.

The second case, Twitter, Inc versus Taamneh, pertains to a lawsuit filed by the family of a Jordanian citizen killed in an ISIS attack on a nightclub in Istanbul, Turkey, in 2017. The lawsuit relies on the Antiterrorism Act, which allows U.S. nationals to sue anyone who "aids and abets"

international terrorism "by knowingly providing substantial assistance." The family argues that despite knowing that their platforms played an important role in ISIS's terrorism efforts, Twitter and other tech companies failed to take action to keep ISIS content off those platforms. It also says that the platforms assisted the growth of ISIS by recommending extremist content through their algorithms.

What is Section 230?

If a person posts on Facebook that a certain individual is a fraud, according to Section 230 of the U.S Communications Decency Act, the individual cannot sue the platform, but only the person who posted it. It is essentially a "safe harbour" or "liability shield" for social media platforms or any website on the internet that hosts user-generated content, such as Reddit, Wikipedia, or Yelp.

"No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider"— these words, enshrined in Section 230, have been described by a recent book and by Lisa Blatt, Google's lawyer in the Gonzalez case, as the "26 words that created the internet". Another thing Section 230 does is allow interactive computer service providers to engage in content moderation, removing posts that violate their guidelines or are obscene. According to the statute, these platforms can remove content posted on them as long as it is done in "good faith".

What are tech companies saying?

In January this year, a group of tech companies, websites, academics, users of the internet, and rights groups filed amicus curiae briefs in the Supreme Court, urging it to not change Section 230, outlining the sweeping impact such a move could have on the Internet.

Twitter argued that Section 230 allows facilitated platforms to moderate huge volumes of content and present the "most relevant" information to users. It added that the company has frequently relied on the statute to protect it from "myriad lawsuits'. Digital rights and free speech activist Evan Greer also pointed out that holding platforms liable for what their recommendation algorithms present could lead to the suppression of legitimate third-party information of political or social importance, such as those created by minority rights groups.

WHAT DOES THE UNAVAILABILITY OF TWITTER'S SLACK SAY ABOUT THE COMPANY'S HEALTH?

The story so far:

While companies cannot function safely without enterprise-grade communication tools, a vast Big Tech company like Twitter whose offices and employees are scattered across the world are extra dependent on their messaging services and resource hubs. However, Slack, the communication solution used by Twitter employees has gone down, triggering chaos across departments.

What happened to Twitter's Slack?

In the penultimate week of February, Twitter's staff was reportedly told that their company's Slack instance was under "routine maintenance" and couldn't be used, according to tech outlet The Platformer. However, a Slack employee who spoke to the outlet denied this allegation. Slack was down on February 22 and 23, prompting some employees to even take time off as they couldn't complete their deliverables.

There were two major theories that could explain why Slack was down. First, some employees believed that Slack was inaccessible because it hadn't been paid for.

Twitter offices in Singapore, the U. K., and even the U.S. have faced alleged rent issues under CEO Elon Musk's leadership, so it is possible that Slack also went down due to non-payment of its outstanding bills.

Second, The Platformer reported that Slack may have been deliberately turned off to see if Twitter's remaining employees could handle daily operations using less expensive tools. The outlet reported that Tesla uses a solution called Mattermost, as well as Microsoft Outlook and Teams.

What could this mean for Twitter?

Slack is an enterprise-grade communication tool that allows employees all over the world to instantly communicate with others, take part in group chats, share media, create channels to streamline projects or teams, facilitate meetings, and easily locate resources through a secure and centralised portal.

As more and more Twitter workers across the world — such as employees in the now closed Delhi and Mumbai offices — were instructed to work from home, remote working tools like Slack are to likely become the workers' critical link to their teams. Losing it would not only affect their productivity, but also their confidence in a company that has been on a turbulent journey since the $44 billion takeover in October 2022. The interrupted functioning of communication services such as the company's Slack could also affect Twitter's ability to respond to emergencies, such as the then-ongoing earthquake relief efforts in Turkey and Syria.

Furthermore, news of Twitter's Slack going down came days before the New York Times announced over the weekend that the social media company was firing at least 200 employees — roughly 10% of its workforce — to possibly cut costs yet again. With more re-assigned work and employee departures, Slack and other company communications tools are needed for the remaining workers to coordinate their efforts.

The Platformer cited an employee anonymously venting about their job on the Blind app, who said that Slack histories helped them solve their queries after other employees resigned or were fired following Mr. Musk's takeover.

How does this disrupt their work?

Without Slack, some employees reportedly decided to take the day off while others tried resorting to email in order to reach their colleagues. Another Twitter tool, Jira, which helps staff manage the service, also stopped functioning for a day and this further added to employees' confusion and panic. However, Jira later began working again.

Slack came down around the time that Mr. Musk promised that Twitter would make its algorithm open source in the final week of February. On February 22, Mr. Musk tweeted that the algorithm would at first disappoint users but that it would improve rapidly. Naturally, the burden of delivering on this promise fell to Twitter's engineers — who were at the time probably struggling to figure out what was wrong with their Slack account.

In past weeks, Mr. Musk has also revealed plans to monetise Twitter features, such as verified checkmarks for organisations and the previously free API.

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Twitter has also garnered the ire of the EU over its inadequate report on fighting disinformation. An official said that Twitter's report lagged behind other tech platforms, especially during Russia's invasion and its "full-blown disinformation war." Apart from this, Twitter has seen several outages across the world in the past three months. All in all, Twitter's Slack woes come at a time when there is an extra high demand for the company to run a stable communication service infrastructure for its rapidly shrinking workforce.

Is Twitter's Slack back?

Not exactly. Citing an internal company email, Zoe Schiffer of The Platformer reported on Tuesday that Twitter would be bringing back the company Slack, but that it was archiving old channels in order to ease the burden on the support team.

According to the email, Twitter reportedly had over 88,000 Slack channels. Tech outlet The Verge reported on Monday that Mr. Musk also shut off access to employees' Google Chat around the time of the latest layoffs at the company.

ICMR: RISING CASES OF COUGH AND FEVER LINKED TO INFLUENZA SUBTYPE A H3N2

Rising cases of intense cough lasting for over a week coupled with fever, observed in most parts of the country, can be linked to influenza A H3N2, a subtype of a virus that causes flu, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) said on Saturday.

"Surveillance data from December 15 reflects the rise in number of cases of influenza A H3N2," the health agency has stated.

The ICMR has 30 Viral Research and Diagnostic Laboratories (VRDL) for respiratory virus surveillance. These VRDLs are attached to top medical colleges in different States and gather samples from patients suffering from severe acute respiratory infections (SARI).

In its observations, the ICMR noted that about half of all patients admitted with SARI and patients walking into clinics were found to be afflicted with influenza A H3N2.

At least 92% of the hospitalised SARI patients detected with the virus were showing up with fever and up to 86% have cough.

Additionally, 27% progressed to breathlessness and 16% showed wheezing symptoms. Also, 16% had signs of pneumonia and 6% presented with seizures, the ICMR has stated.

The agency has also said that the virus appeared to lead to more hospitalisations than other influenza subtypes.

About 10% of all SARI patients who have influenza A H3N2 needed oxygen and 7% required ICU care, the health body has said, advising people against the intake of antibiotics without consulting a doctor.

Mumbai-based senior physician Altaf Patel sees at least 10 patients every day with suspected flu. "The cases have certainly risen, and patients are presenting with breathlessness and severe episodes of spasmodic cough. Some patients are showing symptoms for as long as 10 to 12 days," observed Dr. Patel.

Because it is a viral flu, antibiotics are of no use. The ICMR has advised patients against the intake of antibiotics or any other medication without consulting a doctor. "Treatment with paracetamol for fever and body ache is advised. Also, have plenty of fluids," the ICMR has stated.

Dr. Patel observed that there was very little difference in symptoms between COVID-19 and the illness brought on by Influenza A H3N2. Shaking hands or using other forms of contact greeting should be discouraged, the ICMR has said.

"Wearing masks while venturing out is a good idea. It is important for people to take their flu vaccination," Dr. Patel said.

SCRUB TYPHUS: COMBINATION THERAPY CAN SAVE MORE LIVES

Scrub typhus — a life-threatening infection caused by Orientia tsutsugamushibacteria — is a major public health threat in South and Southeast Asia. As per estimates, nearly one million cases are reported from South and Southeast Asia with 10% mortality. India is one of the hotspots with at least 25% of the disease burden; in CMC Vellore alone, 500-1,000 patients are treated each year, of which 250-300 have severe disease.

A seroprevalence study undertaken about five years ago in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, by researchers at the CMC Vellore showed over 30% antibody positivity for the bacteria in the community, indicating that they were exposed to the pathogen.

What makes scrub typhus a major public health threat is the very high mortality rate in patients with severe disease despite diagnosis and treatment. In a study published by CMC Vellore researchers in 2014,the mortality in patients with severe scrub typhus disease with multi-organ dysfunction was 24%.

Till date, monotherapies using either doxycycline or azithromycin was the commonly used treatment. A trial carried out now in seven centres in India where patients were randomly assigned to receive a combination therapy of both doxycycline and azithromycin showed faster resolution of complications compared with two other arms where patients were given monotherapy of either doxycycline or azithromycin. The trial enrolled nearly 800 patients (265 in the doxycycline group, 263 in the azithromycin group, and 266 in the combination-therapy group).The results were published in The New England Journal of Medicine.

No typical symptoms

Scrub typhus is transmitted to humans by bites from tiny infected larvae of mites; mites breed during July-March. Only the larval stage of the mite requires a blood meal, which is usually from rodents.

"The larvae are invisible to the naked eye and the bite is not painful. So people don't realise they have been bitten by an insect and possibly infected," Dr. Varghese says.The infection does not cause typical symptoms, thus, making correct and early diagnosis difficult.

Increasing the awareness can clearly bring down the mortality rate, as demonstrated by the CMC Vellore researchers.

"In 2005-2006, the mortality rate was 15% in patients presenting at our hospital. By building awareness and early diagnosis, we were able to more than halve the mortality from 15% to 6% in about 10 years even with monotherapy," he recalls.

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LOW-COST PAPER MICROSCOPE'S WIDER APPLICATION IN RESEARCH

Researchers from the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) have reported that a cheap microscope connected to a smartphone camera could find wider application in many areas, and in some cases potentially replace more expensive equipment.

The Foldscope is a handheld microscope made mostly of paper that can be connected to a smartphone camera. It has a magnification of around 140x and can identify objects just 2 micrometres wide. It was created by the Stanford University researchers in 2014 and costs around ₹400.

The researchers found that foldscopes could capture the roundness and aspect ratio of an object to within 5% of those captured by state-of-the-art instruments called scanning electron microscopes (SEM), which cost more than ₹50 lakh each. They also report that based on their findings, foldscopes can be used in pharmaceuticals (to inspect drug products), environmental science (pollutants), and cosmetics (powders and emulsions), among other areas.

P. Anbazhagan, Associate Professor in IISc's Department of Civil Engineering and the corresponding author of the study paper, said in an email that foldscopes can be used to study "soil particles' morphology", which can "help understand soil structure, nutrient availability, and plant growth" in agriculture.

WEIGHT LOSS

Timing from first meal to last meal was not associated with weight loss in a six-year study. Eating less overall and fewer large meals may be a more effective weight management strategy than restricting meals to a narrow time window, such as intermittent fasting, according to a study (Journal of the American Heart Association) that analysed the electronic health records of about 550 adults.

Researchers at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, found that total daily number of large meals (estimated at more than 1,000 calories) and medium meals (estimated at 500-1,000 calories) were each associated with increased weight, while fewer small meals (estimated at less than 500 calories) were associated with decreasing weight, as per a release.

Though prior studies have shown intermittent fasting may improve the body's rhythms and regulate metabolism, this study in a large group with a wide range of body weights did not detect this link.

THE HARDSHIPS OF A CAREER IN AYURVEDIC PRACTICE

Practice does not seem to be a feasible career option for most Ayurveda graduates. For a few idealists who consider this option, the hardships awaiting them are many. Despite the publicity campaigns to promote Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy (AYUSH), the fact is that there is a trust-deficit in these systems. For understandable reasons, Ayurveda is not the medical system of first choice for many people. "(Even) Ayurveda practitioners don't seem to trust it fully," Prime Minister Narendra Modi had noted in his speech at the sixth World Ayurveda Congress, in November 2014.

A scepticism that has some basis

There is widespread scepticism in the public mind about the soundness of Ayurvedic theories and the fruitfulness of its practices. This scepticism is not altogether baseless. The Ayurveda establishment has failed to keep pace with the intellectual and scientific advances of the times. Archaic theories that are apt to arouse suspicion in the minds of educated patients are peddled as sophisticated dogmas. Treatments are made to escape straightforward experimental scrutiny because of their supposed rootedness in such theories. When theories are kept mystified, using them to downplay the demands for experimental verification of practices becomes rather easy. Thus, a major reason for the trust-deficit in Ayurveda is its diminished evidence-based quality.

That Ayurveda treatments are slow to heal is another common view that characterises the public image of Ayurveda. This view also warrants a careful study.

Ayurveda's thrust is on patient benefit and not merely on patient gratification. Real patient benefit would be sustainable as opposed to patient gratification which is momentary. Sustainability of treatments requires a gradual transition from illness to wellness. Sudden relief is deemed superficial and temporary. There is enough material in medical literature today to substantiate the prudence of this approach — at least, in principle. The popular view that Ayurvedic treatments are slow to heal is thus a half-truth. It can be corrected by appropriate patient education.

A practitioner's ordeal

A novice who enters the field of Ayurvedic practice would be greeted with these difficult realities of public perception. As if this were not enough, he would soon discover that what has been generously handed over to him in his college training is a huge corpus of ancient medical wisdom, where only a part is practically usable. Given that Ayurveda does not have a vibrant ecosystem of science and research, the poor practitioner has to depend on himself to discover treatments and approaches that actually work. Sifting the usable parts from the obsolete ones requires prior experience, a knowledge of practice trends, and of course, a robust common sense. The process involves a lot of trial and error with patients and predictably leads to an erosion of the practitioner's reputation.

The practitioner's ordeal does not end here. After he arrives at a rough understanding of the conditions in which his treatments are likely to work, it would become clear that Ayurveda can be used safely and efficaciously only in about 60%-70% of primary-care illnesses. For the rest, patient interest would necessitate complementing Ayurveda with modern medicine. Most States prohibit the practice of modern medicine by Ayurveda graduates and, consequently, the practitioner finds himself crippled again. Fewer footfalls in his clinic would be the sad consequence. At this stage, the gratitude of loyal patients alongside a few unusual recoveries remain the sole incentives that keep him alive as a practitioner.

Even as a conscientious Ayurveda physician grapples with all these hardships, practitioners resorting to gimmickry and publicity have a field day. Using regular newspaper columns, television shows, and social media sites, they entrap gullible patients. The reticent counsels of decent Ayurveda physicians often get drowned in the cacophony of tall claims made by these charlatans. By supporting such gimmicks as "Ayurvedic astrology," the AYUSH establishment also implicitly lends support to their 'charlatanry'.

Focus on primary care

Appropriate policy-making can solve a lot of these problems that well-meaning Ayurveda practitioners face. Primary-care doctors are becoming an endangered species in India's health-care system. Rejuvenating primary care is a sine qua non if a country is to secure the health of its citizens. Ayurveda graduates can contribute enormously towards this rejuvenation if trained properly.

A proper training of Ayurveda graduates with a view to make them good primary-care doctors would involve two preparatory exercises. One, a vigorous evidence-based appraisal of Ayurvedic theories and practices in order to sift the usable from the obsolete; and two, a statutory decision to allow Ayurveda graduates to practise modern medicine in stipulated primary care areas. These are two reforms that would help create a workforce that can function effectively to meet the primary health-care needs of both urban and rural India. Ayurveda, science, and public welfare all stand to gain. What is needed is sincerity, straight-thinking, and some adventurism on the part of stakeholders.

'WHISKEY FUNGUS' DUE TO JACK DANIEL'S BARRELS COVERS US COUNTY IN A BLACK, SOOTY DEPOSIT: WHAT IS THIS MICROORGANISM?

A local court in Lincoln county, Tennessee, recently stopped the construction of a new barrel warehouse (also called a barrelhouse) for Jack Daniel's, the world's biggest-selling brand of American whiskey.

The order came after a resident named Christi Long, who lives close to the company's barrelhouses, filed a suit against the county claiming that a black, sooty fungus — known as whiskey fungus, which is commonly found near bakeries and distilleries around the world — has spread uncontrollably and covered cars, homes and trees.

Alleging that the county officials didn't properly approve permits for the warehouses, Long and other residents of the area are demanding that Jack Daniel's implement an air-filtration system to tackle the problem. Currently, the company has six barrelhouses in the region and was building a seventh on a property that has space to house one more, before the court ruling arrived, according to the New York Times.

Over the years, several lawsuits have been filed against alcohol makers by residents in different countries who claim that the whiskey fungus not only covers houses, trees and outdoor furniture with the black crust but also harms property value and adversely affects their lives.

What is whiskey fungus?

To understand what whiskey fungus is, we first need to know about something called "angel's share". When whiskey or any other spirit is kept inside a cask for maturing, a small amount of it evaporates into the atmosphere through the wood. Up to two per cent of the alcohol leaves the cask this way every year.

According to Oak & Eden, a famous whiskey maker, "This whiskey that evaporates into the air and perfumes the storehouse was dubbed the angel's share in mediaeval Ireland and Scotland. They believed the whiskey that disappeared into the air was meant as an offering for the angels."

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Whiskey fungus, or Baudoinia compniacensis, feeds on these alcoholic vapours and is velvety or crust-like — it can reach one or two centimetres in thickness. The fungus tends to spread to nearby surfaces, blanketing almost everything that comes in its way.

According to the Indiana State Department of Health, it is found across North America, Europe and Asia and thrives where fermentation occurs, like in bakeries and distilleries.

"Baudoinia compniacensis uses the ethanolic vapour to initiate germination and to express proteins in the fungus that allow the fungus to tolerate high temperatures," the department said.

It was first discovered in the 1870s, when Antonin Baudoin, the director of the French Distillers' Association, saw a "plague of soot" around the distilleries in the Cognac region of France, the NYT reported.

How dangerous is whiskey fungus?

Researchers haven't found any instances of health risks from short or long-term exposure to the whiskey fungus yet, the Indiana State Department of Heath mentioned in its 2019 report. However, it can destroy trees and damage properties.

Speaking to Insider, James Scott, the mycologist who first classified whiskey fungus, said, "I'd say it's more than a nuisance". He added, "It is really destructive."

Moreover, removing the fungus from the affected surfaces might prove to be a daunting task. In her lawsuit, Christie Long has claimed that she and her husband have to spend $10,000 annually to power-wash their house, covered with Baudoinia compniacensis, four times a year with bleach.

The health department recommended homeowners use N95 masks, goggles and gloves while removing the whiskey fungus. It also mentioned that if the fungus is found in a private water well, the well must be disinfected.

What are the different cases against distilleries?

Before Christie Long's case, a couple based in Scotland's Falkirk sued whiskey giant Diageo for £40,000 in 2019, saying the whiskey fungus caused due to the company's barrelhouse in the nearby area had damaged their house and furniture.

According to the BBC, the complainants claimed that "the value of their house has been reduced by between five and 10 per cent because of the effects of the fungus on properties."

In 2012, residents of Kentucky, the US, filed class-action lawsuits against several Louisville distilleries regarding the same issue but they were all eventually dismissed.