



CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

16 to 22 April 2023



INTERNATIONAL

THE PRICE OF A LIE: THE FOX NEWS SETTLEMENT

The story so far:

Fox News, the U.S.-based conservative news channel, has agreed at the 11th hour before trial began, to pay \$787.5 million to settle claims brought by election technology firm Dominion Voting Systems. The firm accused the broadcaster of knowingly spreading false information about the company after the 2020 election, to support propaganda that the election was stolen from former President Donald Trump in favour of the current President Joe Biden. There are several other lawsuits that Fox News faces, relating to falsehoods propagated about the 2020 presidential election, which could be equally damaging to the news channel, and which now stand on firmer ground in light of the Dominion settlement.

What are claims against Fox News?

The actual settlement agreed between Fox News and Dominion is a little less than half of the amount originally claimed by Dominion, which was \$1.6 billion. It claimed this amount on account of its allegation that Fox News and its parent company, Rupert Murdoch-owned Fox Corporation, caused damage to the voting company's business and threatened its staff by implicating them in a false conspiracy about rigged elections designed to sabotage the prospects of Mr. Trump entering the White House.

The Dominion lawsuit claims that during the weeks following the election day in 2020, leading Fox News anchors engaged on their shows with Trump allies who falsely claimed that Dominion's voting machines had been deliberately programmed to deduct votes away from Mr. Trump and, in parallel, boost the numbers under Mr. Biden's column.

Why did Fox News opt to settle?

Fox News has not made any public comments on the settlement other than to say, "We acknowledge the Court's rulings finding certain claims about Dominion to be false," and that the settlement "reflects Fox's continued commitment to the highest journalistic standards."

However, it is likely that if the case had gone to trial before a jury, it would have exposed the inner workings of the network to even more scrutiny. In forcing a level of accountability at Fox News, a trial would have turned the spotlight on the channel's senior-most anchors including the likes of Tucker Carlson and Sean Hannity, and grilled them with hard questions on why they opted to spread lies about the election that they likely did not believe themselves.

Yet the strongest factor, likely to have made a settlement appear to be the best option for Fox News, is the fact that Dominion had managed to gather an extraordinary amount of evidence in terms of internal documents of the media house. The documents showed not only widespread organisational dysfunction but also clear proof that many insiders at Fox News knew that the Dominion election conspiracy theory was complete fiction and had no basis in reality. Reports suggest that the documentary evidence in this regard pointed to Fox News' highest ranks including Mr. Murdoch. In terms of U.S. law, the strength of this evidence is said to have given the Dominion lawsuit sufficient ammunition to cross, according to reports, the "legal threshold in defamation cases known as 'actual malice' — established when defamatory statements are 'made with knowledge of its falsity or with reckless disregard of whether it was true or not.'"

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



What are the broader implications?

In a sense the Dominion settlement reflects the limits of the First Amendment of the U.S. constitution. As the discussion around the concept of ‘actual malice’ shows, there is a high standard of proof under U.S. law required to establish defamation. Indeed, Fox News said earlier that “Dominion’s lawsuit is a political crusade in search of a financial windfall, but the real cost would be cherished First Amendment rights.”

However, the point is that it was the very same lies about the “stolen election” that made it possible for Mr. Trump and his associates to play a role in fuelling the January 6, 2021, riots leading to the assault of the Capitol buildings in Washington.

In that context, had the propagandistic messaging of Fox News remained unchecked it would likely presage an even more drastic return to the sort of yellow journalism seen in the late 19th century, such as the Hearst newspapers that is said to have egged on the Spanish-American war in the 1890s.

The settlement with Dominion is also likely to have a strong bearing on several other lawsuits that Fox News is facing for the same reasons — spreading election related falsehoods designed to aid Mr. Trump’s cause.

Among these is a case brought by Smartmatic, another election technology company, which has filed a \$2.7 billion defamation lawsuit against Fox News; and a case brought by a former Fox News producer, Abby Grossberg, saying that Fox’s lawyers pushed her to “give a misleading deposition in the Dominion case and alleging a hostile and discriminatory work environment”

NOT A WHISTLE-BLOWER

U.S. federal authorities have arrested Jack Teixeira, 21, a member of the Air National Guard, in the case of classified information of the Pentagon that was leaked on social media in recent months, which analysts say has exposed sensitive data regarding the war efforts in Ukraine, potentially undermining Kyiv’s plans to push back the Russian invasion. The top-secret files that were first leaked on social media websites Discord and 4chan in March this year also caused a flutter for the Joe Biden administration when it revealed confidential and unflattering information about U.S. allies, including South Korea, Israel, and other nations of West Asia and Africa, and assessments of China’s developing cyber-attack capabilities. Potentially most damaging, though, were the leaker’s posts, which, reports said, genuinely contained classified information of the U.S. military, on Ukraine’s air defences being compromised owing to a shortage of missiles in February. Also possibly undermining the tactical plans and the element of surprise for Ukrainian forces were files that spoke of the embattled country’s long-planned spring counter offensive to beat back Russian forces starting on April 30 with 12 Ukrainian brigades. While no explicit propagandistic post of the leaker has been revealed yet, it is obvious that the dots join to paint a clear picture of Mr. Teixeira’s intention to discredit the war effort of Ukraine and its western allies and show up the Biden administration in a bad light amongst its global partners.

One thing is clear: Mr. Teixeira is no whistle-blower and, certainly, comparisons to Chelsea Manning or Edward Snowden would be misplaced. The latest leak of U.S. federal government information lacks the moral clarity and ethical underpinning of the WikiLeaks files and the NSA global surveillance exposé that Ms. Manning and Mr. Snowden respectively shared with the world in a bid to highlight the excesses of the U.S. government and spur conversations on human rights,



foreign policy and privacy in the digital age. Whistle-blowing in the latter contexts led to introspection, policy dialogue and reforms to bring about greater transparency in U.S. government actions, within limits. The 2023 Pentagon leaks have, contrarily, achieved nothing of this sort but fuelled insecurity between the U.S. and other global powers, and potentially hobbled the war strategies of the Ukrainian armed forces in their bid to fight off Russian troops attacking their country. Mr. Teixeira has, appropriately, been charged for the leaks under the U.S. Espionage Act. The critical next step for the Biden White House is now to examine how and why he got top security clearance to handle classified information, and take steps to further secure and limit the distribution of sensitive information whose release could seriously undermine U.S. national security interests.

ECHOES FROM THE 'TROUBLES'

U.S. President Joe Biden visited Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland last week to commemorate 25 years of the Good Friday Agreement. The visit comes at a time when Northern Ireland is without a government. Its power-sharing government — a product of the Good Friday Agreement — collapsed last year over opposition to the post-Brexit trade rules.

Signed in 1998, the peace deal ended more than three decades of conflict, known as the 'Troubles', in which more than 3,700 people were killed.

The discord, however, precedes even the 'Troubles', going back to centuries of animosity between the Protestants, who mostly came from Britain, and the Catholics, who wanted a 'unified' Ireland freed from British rule. The Irish War of Independence (1919-21), fought by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) against British forces, led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which granted Ireland the status of a 'Free State', or what we know today as the Republic of Ireland. But the treaty also allowed the Protestant-majority north-east of the island to opt out of the Free State and remain a part of Britain.

While the Anglo-Irish Treaty ended the armed independence struggle, it could not eliminate the tensions between the Catholic Nationalists and the Protestant Unionists. The Protestant majority, having captured the reins of power in Northern Ireland, discriminated against the minority Catholics. Disgruntled Catholics signed up for a splinter group of the old IRA that sought to wage an armed struggle against the British. In response, the Protestants formed the Ulster Volunteer Force, a paramilitary group. In the late 1960s, a brutal civil war broke out.

The 'Troubles' ceased with the Good Friday Agreement, signed on April 10, 1998. It had two parts: a 'multi-party agreement' between Northern Ireland's major parties, and an agreement between the governments of the U.K. and the Republic of Ireland. It laid down that Northern Ireland would remain a part of the U.K. until a majority of its inhabitants wanted otherwise, and if that happens, then the U.K. would respect that choice.

Brexit woes

Northern Ireland began to prosper under the peace instituted by this deal, and then Brexit happened. With the Republic of Ireland a part of the EU market, Northern Ireland became the only part of the U.K. to have a land border with the EU. This went against the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement, which had guaranteed unfettered flow of goods and people on the island.

The U.K. and the EU then came up with the Northern Ireland Protocol, which shifted the trade border for inspection of the goods — to ensure that they are in compliance with EU rules — to



Irish ports. But the Unionists, led by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), were opposed to any kind of border checks on goods flowing between Britain and Northern Ireland. Holding that it undermined the Good Friday Agreement by instituting a customs border between Britain and Northern Ireland, the DUP boycotted the power-sharing government last year, causing Northern Ireland to continue without a government, which essentially means being governed directly by Westminster.

Just ahead of the Biden visit, and possibly to have something to show the U.S. President, the UK and the EU signed the Windsor Framework, under which all the goods arriving on the island would be split into two different lanes: goods destined for Northern Ireland would go into the 'green lane', meaning they wouldn't need inspection, while those destined for Ireland/EU would go into the 'red lane', where they will undergo checks.

While the Nationalists have mostly responded favourably to this arrangement, the DUP is yet to make up its mind. The power-sharing government remains in suspension. It is in this context that Mr. Biden's visit assumes significance — the last thing the U.S. wants is armed strife and security concerns in the backyard of its closest ally.

WHAT ARE THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN YEMEN?

The story so far:

Hundreds of prisoners captured during the war in Yemen were reunited with their families between April 14 to 16 amid diplomatic efforts to halt the conflict, the Associated Press reported. The main warring sides in Yemen are the Iran-backed Houthis and the pro-Yemen government, Saudi-led coalition.

How did the prisoner swap happen?

The two opposing sides had in March agreed to release 887 detainees after a ten-day meeting in Switzerland. The parties also agreed to meet again in May to discuss more such releases, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said in a press statement.

Flights of the ICRC carried 869 of the released detainees to six cities in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. An additional 104 detainees were released from Saudi Arabia to Yemen on Monday. The large-scale prisoner swap has given the people hope for a permanent ceasefire in Yemen.

What is the Stockholm Agreement?

The warring parties in control of parts of Yemen had signed the Stockholm Agreement in December 2018 whereby they had committed to freeing conflict-related detainees. The agreement brokered by the United Nations had three main components — the Hudayah agreement, the prisoner exchange agreement, and the Taiz agreement.

The Hudayah agreement included a ceasefire in the city of Hodeidah and other clauses like no military reinforcements in the city and strengthened UN presence. In November 2018, hundreds of people were killed in clashes in Hodeidah, an important port in Yemen, when government loyalists supported by a Saudi-led coalition launched an attack to oust the Iran-backed Houthi rebels from the Red Sea city.

The Taiz agreement includes the formation of a joint committee with participation from civil society and the UN.



How did the war in Yemen begin?

The conflict in Yemen began in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring protests. President Ali Abdullah Saleh was forced to hand over power to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. Mr. Hadi found himself faced with an insurmountable task of tackling Yemen's economic and security problems. The Houthis, backed by Iran, took advantage of Mr. Hadi's weak control and captured the Saada province in the north, and then Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, in 2014.

The thought of Iran-backed Houthis in control of Yemen bothered neighbouring Saudi Arabia due to its differences with Iran. Saudi Arabia then led a coalition that included other Arab countries and sent troops to Yemen in 2015. However, they were unable to oust Houthis from Sana'a as well as from the north of the country.

The war has continued since then and has only ceased once in April 2022, when the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition announced a two-month ceasefire ahead of Ramzan, the holy month of Islam. This was Yemen's first nationwide truce in six years, Deutsche Welle reported.

How has this affected Yemen?

According to the UN, Yemen is now the largest humanitarian crisis in the world with 80% of its population dependent on aid and protection. Over three million people have been displaced from their homes since 2015, and public service sectors like healthcare, water, sanitation, and education have either collapsed or are in a dire situation. Economically too, Yemen is in the trenches. It has lost \$90 billion in economic output and more than 6,00,000 people have lost their jobs. More than half of the country's population is living in extreme poverty.

ASSAD EMERGES FROM ISOLATION AS WEST ASIA DIPLOMACY SHIFTS

In 2011, when civil strife broke out in Syria following street protests, Saudi Arabia led the Arab efforts to isolate the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and expel the country from the Arab League. When the Sunni-majority country ruled by the secular Arab Baath party slid into a civil war, Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies in the Gulf backed different rebel groups that were fighting Mr. Assad, who belongs to the minority Alawite community (an offshoot of Shiism).

But those days seem like a distant past. Recent weeks saw Arab countries and Syria trying to rebuild their lost bonhomie. Jordan and Egypt recently sent their Foreign Ministers to Damascus for their first top level visits since the civil war broke out. Mr. Assad travelled to the UAE last month where he was greeted by Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, the ruler of the seven Emirates. Earlier this week, Tunisia became the latest Arab country to normalise ties with Syria. On Tuesday, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan travelled to Damascus where he held talks with Mr. Assad.

Victory in the civil war

These changes are part of the larger realignments that are under way in West Asia, say experts. "The normalisation between Saudi Arabia and Syria shows that regional powers are reassessing their strategies after Assad retook control of most of Syria in recent years," said Mohammed Soliman, director at the Washington-based Middle East Institute. "It also reflects Riyadh's approach vis-à-vis Tehran, which includes the China-backed Saudi-Iran agreement, the evolving ties with Baghdad, and now the restoration of ties with Syria," Mr. Soliman told The Hindu.



Iran and Saudi Arabia were at opposing sides in Syria's civil war. Mr. Assad's victory made most Arab countries rethink their strategy. The UAE made the first move when it reestablished formal ties with Damascus in late 2018. The February earthquake that killed thousands of people in Turkey and Syria turned out to be a diplomatic opportunity for Damascus and its Arab neighbours. Syria wanted help and its neighbours seemed ready to bring their old Arab brother in from the cold.

Jordan immediately held talks with the Assad regime, which was followed by others. Once Saudi Arabia warmed up to normalising ties with Damascus, it gave a fresh momentum to diplomacy.

"Why did the Saudis change their policy towards Syria? The reason is that the previous policy did not work," Foad Izadi, Associate Professor, Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran, said. In an interview with *The Hindu*, Mr. Izadi said the Saudis spent billions of dollars on their Syria plan to topple the government. "The result was death, destruction and civil war in that country... all that money was not enough for them to achieve their goal."

But engagement could help them find some stability in West Asia. In the case of Syria, other Arab countries have accepted the fact that Mr. Assad has won the civil war. The next step is to push for political reforms inside the country, create circumstances for the Syrian refugees to return, keep the Islamist forces under check, and roll back Iran's growing influence in Damascus. None of these goals can be met if they continue to boycott Mr. Assad.

Remaining challenges

While Syria's return to the Arab fold marks a turn of the page in West Asia's tumultuous contemporary history, a return to the pre-civil war normalcy faces critical challenges. One, the wounds of the civil war, in which millions of people were killed, are still fresh for many Syrians. It is to be seen whether Mr. Assad would be ready for serious political reforms. Second, the U.S., the region's traditional great power, is not happy with the Arab-Syria rapprochement as Damascus continues to remain under Western sanctions.

"Obviously, the U.S. and Israel don't like the new policy. But the hope we have is that the Saudi government can resist this type of pressure," added Mr. Izadi.

SUDAN'S TRAGEDY

For 30 years, Omar al-Bashir, a former military officer, ruled Sudan with an iron hand and indiscriminate violence. When he was toppled in April 2019 in a mass uprising, many hoped that the resource-rich country in the Horn of Africa would finally get a chance to move towards a freer society with a representative and responsive administration. But the tragedy of Sudan is that the monstrous regime that Mr. Bashir built outlasted his reign. Within two years of his fall, the military was back, and now, a power struggle between the top two generals has pushed Sudan to the brink of a civil war. Dozens of civilians have already been killed in fighting that broke out on Saturday in Khartoum and other parts of the country between the military and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a notorious paramilitary group. Despite international calls for truce, Lt.Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the military chief as well as the head of the Sovereignty Council, the transitional administration, and his deputy, Lt.Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, who commands the RSF, have refused to negotiate, blaming each other for the attacks. Mr. Dagalo, who has close ties with Russia's Wagner private military company and Saudi Arabia, claims that the RSF has taken control



of the presidential palace and has vowed to bring Gen. Burhan to justice, while the military has dismissed such claims and launched air strikes against RSF sites.

Just two years ago, the two generals stood hand in hand when they ousted a civilian transition government and took over the reins of the country. Faced with international isolation and domestic pressure, they agreed to transfer power back to the civilians. But differences emerged on who should control the post-transition military. Gen. Burhan supports the integration of the RSF into the regular military and transition to civilian government to take place in two years, while Gen. Dagalo, who fears that he would lose his clout, wants to delay it by 10 years. Discord grew into mistrust and mistrust led to fighting. And the fighting could drag the country, which has a history of internal strife, into an all-out civil war. Sudan's generals are known for their scant regard for the welfare of their people. The country is struggling with an economic crisis, with rocketing inflation and a burning hunger problem. The last thing Sudan wants now is a civil war. If the priority of the generals is to address Sudan's basic problems, they should pay attention to the call for a truce and dialogue, and commit themselves to a timeline-sensitive democratic transition. Decades of military rule in Sudan have resulted in a lot of atrocities. Generals Burhan and Dagalo should not tread the same course.

WATCH: JAPANESE PM UNHURT AFTER BLAST SHAKES PORT HE WAS VISITING

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was evacuated unharmed after an explosion at a western port on Saturday, NHK television reported, and a suspect was apprehended for allegedly throwing the explosive.

Kishida was visiting the Saikazaki port in Wakayama prefecture to cheer his ruling party's candidate in a local election. The explosion occurred just before he was to begin his speech, NHK said. No injuries were reported in the incident and Kishida was taken to Wakayama prefectural police headquarters, it added.

The incident comes only nine months after former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated while delivering a campaign speech in the western city of Nara. The assassination shocked the nation and a subsequent investigation found holes in Abe's security and led to reinforcement of Japan's police security measures. The latest attack also comes as a series of Group of Seven ministerial meetings begins this weekend ahead of the May 19-21 summit that Kishida will host in Hiroshima.

A man believed to be a suspect was arrested at the scene on Saturday. NHK footage showed several uniformed and plainclothes police officers gathered around the man, pressing him to the ground and dragging him to the side. The suspect, identified only as a young male, allegedly threw the explosive, NHK said. One witness told NHK she was among the crowd and saw something come flying from behind and that there was a sudden loud noise and she fled with her children. Another witness said people were screaming and that he saw someone being apprehended right before the explosion occurred.

Saturday's attack comes ahead of nationwide local elections, including a by-election for a vacated seat in the lower house of the Parliament, with voting scheduled for April 23. In Abe's assassination, the attacker allegedly shot Abe with a homemade gun as the former leader was making a campaign speech. The suspect, Tetsuya Yamagami, has been charged with murder and several other crimes including violation of a gun control law.



Abe's alleged assassin told investigators that he killed Abe, one of Japan's most influential and divisive politicians, because of Abe's apparent links to a religious group that he hated. In his statements and in social media postings attributed to him, Yamagami said he developed a grudge because his mother had made massive donations to the Unification Church that bankrupted his family and ruined his life.

In a country known for public safety and tight gun controls, the assassination led to the resignation of top local and national police chiefs and a tightening of security guidelines for political leaders and other prominent people.

THE ROHINGYA AND MYANMAR'S PLANNED ELECTION AS ICJ KEEPS HEAT ON JUNTA

Earlier this month, the International Court of Justice at The Hague rejected the Myanmar junta's appeal for a 10-month reprieve to file a counter-memorial — or reply — to The Gambia's case that Myanmar was in breach of the international Genocide Convention.

The case relates to the Myanmar military's "clearing" operations in 2017 in Rakhine state, in which many Rohingya were killed or subjected to atrocities, and lakhs were forced to flee to Bangladesh.

The ICJ has given Myanmar only a month's reprieve, and scheduled the next hearing for May 24. In July 2022, the court had rejected Myanmar's objections to the case brought by The Gambia, and asked it to file a reply by April 24, 2023.

On March 14 this year, Myanmar asked for time until February 24, 2024 citing, among other things, the junta's own coup, the "limited" resources at its disposal, the time needed to translate case documents and obtain statements from witnesses living in camps in Bangladesh, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

The case has been before the court since November 2019.

Rohingya back on table

With the ICJ deadline looming, the military regime has been in talks with Bangladesh for repatriation of Rohingya refugees, possibly hoping that this might buy it some time with the court, and make a favourable impression on the international community.

A 22-member Myanmar junta delegation landed in Bangladesh's Cox Bazar, where over a million Rohingya refugees have taken shelter, on March 15 — just the day after it asked the ICJ for more time to respond to The Gambia.

Bangladeshi media reported that the Myanmar delegation would verify the identities of 429 Rohingya as part of a "pilot project" for repatriation.

However, Myanmar's less than half-hearted attempts at taking back a handful of Rohingya are matched by the refugees' reluctance to give up the safe haven that Dhaka has provided for an uncertain future in their home country. The Rohingya want a dignified return, with concrete assurances of citizenship — which Myanmar has not so far given.

Push from the Chinese

Earlier in 2018, a China-brokered repatriation agreement too had failed due to Rohingya reluctance. Under that plan, drawn up before the Myanmar military's February 1, 2021 coup, a



few families had been identified for repatriation, but word spread that they would return not to their villages but to prison-like camps. The plan never took off.

Beijing was behind last month's effort too, Bangladeshi media reported. Two days prior to the junta delegation's Bangladesh visit, the military regime in Naypyidaw took diplomats of Bangladesh, India, China, and five other countries to Rakhine state, and showed them around temporary camps in Sittwe and Maungdaw.

While the Myanmar delegation was still in Bangladesh, the UNHCR put out a statement that it was not part of the ongoing discussions — and that while everyone had the right to return home, it had to be voluntary and based on informed choice.

The agency said conditions in Rakhine were not yet conducive for the return of the refugees, and reminded Bangladesh that it had “consistently reaffirmed its commitment to voluntary and sustainable repatriation since the onset of the current crisis”.

The democracy movement

With virtually the entire Rohingya population forcibly displaced from Myanmar, the community has been cut off from the pro-democracy movement that continues to challenge the junta on a daily basis through armed resistance on the ground.

In Rakhine, the Arakan Army, an insurgent group of the ethnic Buddhist Rakhine, has been fighting the Myanmar military, but it has not joined the pro-democracy movement.

The “National Unity Government”, formed by pro-democracy activists including elected candidates of the usurped 2020 Myanmar parliamentary election and members of ethnic organisations, declared last June, on the fifth anniversary of Myanmar's “clearance” war against the Rohingya, that after it removes the military dictatorship, it will restore full citizenship to members of the community as part of its commitment to establishing a democratic, federal, rights-based polity.

The NUG, led by “acting President” Duwa Lashi La, a member of the Chin ethnic minority, calls itself the legitimate government of Myanmar — and has demanded that the ICJ should deal with it in the Rohingya matter, and not the “illegal” junta government. The NUG is not recognised by the international community, but some countries engage with it.

The leader of the junta, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, has said he will crush the resistance by the People's Defence Force, the NUG's armed wing. He is determined to hold an election, apparently with the objective of claiming that the regime is “elected”, although the plan has been dismissed as a “sham” by the NUG and international experts.

No dates for the election have been set yet, but it is likely next year. The junta also plans to hold a census before the election. Most Rohingya now live outside Myanmar, and they will be excluded.

Signal from air strikes

Last week's air strikes on a gathering at the opening of a new office by local pro-democracy forces in Pazi Gyi village in the Sagaing region, is now reported to have killed 170 people, including many women and children. It is the worst death toll in a single incident in the two-year-long war, and an indication that wherever ground conditions favour the armed resistance, the junta will likely rely on air strikes.



In such violent and chaotic circumstances, for the lakhs of Rohingya forced to flee to Bangladesh after being let down by the democratically elected National League for Democracy government — its leader Aung San Suu Kyi appeared before the ICJ to defend the military — the promise of citizenship by the NUG means nothing yet.

CONSERVATIONISTS IN SRI LANKA SLAM PLAN TO EXPORT MONKEYS TO CHINA

Zoologists and conservationists in Sri Lanka on Wednesday slammed a recent government proposal exploring the export of monkeys to China, terming it an ad-hoc, illegal, and short-sighted response to a long-standing human-animal conflict.

Earlier this month, Minister of Agriculture Mahinda Amaraweera said the government was studying a proposal from a Chinese company to purchase Sri Lankan toque macaques, a golden brown-coloured monkey endemic to the country.

The Chinese firm, said to be an animal breeding company according to Sri Lankan portal Newswire, had written to the Ministry, making an offer to buy “a large quantity of monkeys” from Sri Lanka, as the island nation was reportedly looking to “get rid of certain crop-destroying species”. Local media reports said authorities were considering exporting about 1,00,000 monkeys.

Sri Lanka’s farmers have been voicing concern over crop damage and consequent financial losses, owing to frequent attacks by monkeys in their areas. However, the government’s announcement came abruptly, the conservationists told a media conference in Colombo, adding that farmers had not demanded such an “ad-hoc” solution.

Even as environmental groups in Sri Lanka raised alarm over the Minister’s remarks, Sri Lanka’s Cabinet spokesman recently said the government was yet to hold a discussion on the subject.

Testing labs

Further, the conservationists said they were worried that the monkeys could end up in testing laboratories abroad. “If the monkeys are exported to Chinese labs [as some reports claim], they would be tested, and their skin and eyes could be burnt. They will effectively be tortured and killed,” said Panchali Panapitiya, an animal rights activist from the non-profit Rally for Animal Rights and Environment (RARE).

Challenging the official estimates of 3 million toque macaques, Sri Lanka-based primatologist Wolfgang Dittus said that in 1977, when a large-scale enumeration was undertaken, Sri Lanka had about 6,00,000 toque macaques. “Since then, their natural habitat [forest cover] has decreased by 50 to 70 % and that would mean that the monkey population has also dropped, because their existence depends on their natural habitat. So, my estimation is that Sri Lanka currently has about 3,00,000 toque macaques. They are an endangered species,” he said.

“We fully sympathise with the farmers and the point is to reduce the conflict between monkeys and humans. We can’t change monkey behaviour, but feeding monkeys at temples, or poor management of garbage are serious problems we need to address.”



NATION

OLD FRIENDS

Growing and balancing India-Russia trade ties dominated the agenda of Russian Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov's India visit and the Inter-governmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological and Cultural Cooperation meet he chaired with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar. They hailed the surge in bilateral trade (up by 2.6 times in the past year, and at about \$45 billion), surpassing the 2025 target. Both sides noted the problem of trade imbalance, calling for more market access and the use of "national currencies" to circumvent sanctions. Mr. Manturov suggested that Indian companies could increase exports in road construction and pharmaceuticals. Mr. Jaishankar said that Indian businesses should guard against "over-compliance" when it comes to increasing trade with Russia, due to concerns over western sanctions. They also referred to progress in negotiations for an FTA between India and the Eurasian Economic Union, that was launched in 2017. Its signing could catapult trade, which has been the laggard in bilateral ties dominated by defence, nuclear and space cooperation.

While the impetus in trade and the effort to balance imports and exports with an important partner (Russia) are welcome, it is hard to ignore the circumstances surrounding these developments. Since Russia's war in Ukraine began last year, and western sanctions drastically cut Russian exports, Moscow has turned increasingly to India and other countries including China that have not joined the sanctions to export resources. India's oil imports from Russia (a negligible 0.2%), have jumped since the war to a massive 28% of its total oil intake, contributing to trade as well as a growing deficit. While the Ukraine Foreign Minister's accusation that India has "blood" on its hands by buying Russian oil is overstating the case, the impression that New Delhi is "benefitting from the war" is gaining traction in western countries, which must be noted, especially as Mr. Modi will soon visit Japan, Australia, the U.S. and France, and also welcome Mr. Putin for the SCO summit in Delhi in July. Mr. Jaishankar's contention that India-Russia ties are among the "steadiest of the major relationships of the world" is well-made, especially at a time of global turmoil and shifting alliances, and provides the basis for the warm welcome to Mr. Manturov. What is harder to explain is that no public comment was made by any Indian leader during any of Mr. Manturov's meetings in Delhi, about the original reason for the current turmoil and its global economic impact: Moscow's decision to launch attacks on its neighbour, and the bombing of civilians, that has continued for over a year.

INDIA, CHINA SNAP UP RUSSIAN OIL IN APRIL ABOVE 'PRICE CAP'

India and China have snapped up the vast majority of Russian oil so far in April at prices above the Western price cap of \$60 per barrel, according to traders and Reuters calculations. That means the Kremlin is enjoying stronger revenues despite the West's attempts to curb funds for Russia's military operations in Ukraine.

India accounts for more than 70% of seaborne supplies of the Urals grade so far this month and China for about 20%, Reuters calculations show. Lower freight rates and smaller discounts for Urals against global benchmarks nudged the daily price of the grade back above the cap earlier in April from a period of trading below. India and China have not agreed to the price cap, but the West had hoped the threat of sanctions might deter purchases above the cap. Average discounts for Urals were at \$13 per barrel to dated Brent on a DES (delivered ex-ship) basis in Indian ports, according to traders.



The Urals price on a free-on-board basis in Baltic ports, allowing about \$2 per barrel of transport costs, has been slightly above \$60 per barrel so far in April, Reuters calculations show.

CHINESE DUAL-USE FACILITIES IN MYANMAR AND SRI LANKA RAISE SECURITY CONCERNS IN INDIA

Recent satellite images show the construction of a military facility on Coco Islands, located very close to the Andaman and Nicobar island chain. In the second case, China has proposed setting up a remote satellite receiving ground station system through a collaborative effort between the Aerospace Information Research Institute, under the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the University of Ruhuna in southern Sri Lanka. Given its critical location, it can be used to spy on Indian assets and intercept sensitive information and also across the region, sources in the security establishment said.

One of these sources, on condition of anonymity, cited intelligence inputs on what is believed to be a complete military base being built entirely by the Chinese on the Coco Islands. "There are obvious concerns. There was a radome [dome-shaped structure to protect radars] spotted on the island recently through satellite images," the source said, adding that the island is being connected to the southern landmass using a new bridge that is 175 m in length and approximately 8 m wide.

The facility can always be used by the Chinese military when required, the source stated.

Last month, the London-based think tank Chatham House published a report based on the satellite imagery of January 2023 from Maxar Technologies, which showed large-scale construction activity on the strategic archipelago. "Visible are two new hangars, a new causeway and what appears to be an accommodation block, all of which are visible in proximity to a freshly lengthened 2,300-metre runway and radar station. Visible as of late March on the southern tip of Great Coco, just beyond the causeway connecting the islands, is evidence of land clearing efforts indicating construction work to come," the report said. Noting that satellite tracking facilities are inherently dual use in nature, sources said that the Chinese civil space programme is known to work closely with the Chinese military.

China's expanding ground stations in the region could potentially be used to intercept sensitive information about Indian assets, another source said on condition of anonymity. The source said that India's satellite launch facilities in Sriharikota and the integrated missile test range in Odisha could come under the scanner of the ground station, and launches from there could be tracked to obtain sensitive data.

Referring to the recent instance of a Chinese research and survey vessel docking at Hambantota in Sri Lanka, sources said the stations are likely to work in coordination with such vessels to gather vital information in the region. For example, space tracking and surveillance ships can perform many of the same functions as ground stations, with the added benefit of mobility, the source noted.

INDIA TO HOST SUMMIT ON BUDDHISM

India will host an international summit on Buddhism here on April 20 and 21. Delegates from 30 countries will participate, a notable exception being China. Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, is also unlikely to attend the two-day conclave.



The maiden conference being organised by the Union Culture Ministry and the International Buddhist Confederation will discuss contemporary global issues through a Buddhist perspective.

“India is the birthplace of Buddhism. The summit aims to find solutions to problems such as climate change, poverty, and conflict, among others, by exploring the Buddhist teachings and practices,” Union Culture Minister G. Kishan Reddy said.

Over 170 delegates from countries such as Mexico, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Japan, and 150 from India will participate in the summit to be held in the national capital.

The delegates include prominent scholars, monks, diplomats and members of Buddhist organisations across the globe. The largest number of delegates are from Sri Lanka (20) and Vietnam (30).

Abhijit Haldar, Director General of International Buddhist Confederation, said that while no delegate had confirmed from China, there would be two participants from Taiwan.

“The invitations were sent to various Buddhist institutions and not to governments,” Mr. Haldar added.

He also mentioned that the Dalai Lama might not attend the event due to “health issues”.

PM to open conclave

The conference themed “Responses to contemporary challenges from philosophy to praxis” will be inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The discussion will be under four themes — Buddha Dhamma and peace, Buddha Dhamma: environmental crisis, health and sustainability, preservation of Nalanda Buddhist tradition and Buddhist pilgrimage, living heritage and relics.

SHUTDOWN, PROTEST RALLY IN LADAKH AGAINST BID TO ‘DEFAME DALAI LAMA’

Buddhists as well as Muslims participated in a shutdown in Ladakh on Monday to protest against the “attempt to defame Buddhist spiritual leader Dalai Lama” after the recent controversy stoked by a video.

Hundreds of locals assembled at Polo Ground, Leh, and raised the slogans “Long Live Dalai Lama” and “We stand for Dalai Lama”. Markets in Leh and Kargil districts remained shut. The demonstrators were demanding an official inquiry to identify people who allegedly spread unverified videos about the Dalai Lama and hurt the sentiments of Buddhists across the world.

“A protest was observed in all parts of Ladakh. All social and religious groups supported the protest. The protest is against the disinformation campaign launched against His Holiness Dalai Lama. We condemn the act of circulating the unverified video. It has hurt our sentiments and has the potential to create law and order problem if action is not taken against those who indulged in the act,” Thupstan Chhewang, former Member Parliament and president of the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), said.

Monday’s shutdown call was issued by the LBA and the Ladakh Gompa Association. The call was supported by Muslim organisations too.

A video of the Dalai Lama and a child created a controversy recently. It was followed by an official apology from the office of the Dalai Lama.



SMART POLICING, SLICK BUNKERS AND REALIGNED ROADS FOR UPCOMING G-20 MEETING IN SRINAGAR

Srinagar will have slick bunkers and smart policing in place ahead of the working group meeting of tourism delegates from G-20 nations from May 22-24.

The Srinagar Smart City Ltd. (SSCL) has been tasked to “facelift and renovate” the existing bunkers on the main roads in Srinagar’s south and eastern pockets. An official said the facelifting will cost ₹44.44 lakh with the entire cost to be borne by the SSCL.

Scores of permanent bunkers were set up in Srinagar after the Centre ended the special constitutional position of Jammu & Kashmir by reading down Article 370 in 2019. Dozens of bunkers jutting out on the roadside could be spotted on the routes where the cavalcades of delegates are scheduled to drive on, including the route from the Srinagar airport to the Sher-e-Kashmir International Convention Centre (SKICC) on the Dal Lake, the main venue of the meeting.

Officials said the bunkers will be realigned, painted and subtly placed so as not to become an eyesore during the meeting. Many security barriers will be removed from the roadside, they added.

Around 200 delegates, including 80 delegates from the G-20 countries, are likely to attend the meeting in Srinagar. SSCL chief executive officer and Srinagar Municipal Commissioner (SMC) Athar Aamir Khan, in a notice, asked locals to undertake facade improvements and paint their walls white and peach.

Around 600 policemen, who would handle the delegates, have been sent to Udhampur in Jammu for soft skills training, where a lot of focus will be put on polite mannerisms. An official said a lot of thrust has been put on smart policing during the delegates’ visit. Officials said the footsteps of security personnel will also be reduced from the city streets and traffic restrictions for locals, when the cavalcades of delegates move, are “likely to be minimal”.

Meanwhile, the city is also getting a makeover with newly-laid footpaths and realigned roads. G-20 theme colours have been used to paint flyovers and streets.

THE PETITIONS AROUND SAME SEX MARRIAGE

On April 18, a five-judge Supreme Court Bench, headed by the Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, is scheduled to hear a series of petitions seeking legal recognition of same sex marriage even as a host of statutory organisations, religious bodies and NGOs have rushed to court seeking an opportunity to be heard. Their submissions touch upon various issues from the definition of “marriage” to the “psychological impact” growing up with two men or two women as parents would have on children. While some have cautioned judges that Indian society is not ready to accept same sex marriage others have linked it to sexual liberation movements in western countries.

The various petitions

Main petitioners Supriyo and Abhay Dang, represented by senior advocate Menaka Guruswamy, advocate Arundhati Katju and Govind Manoharan, argue that the non-recognition of same sex marriage amounted to discrimination that struck at the root of dignity and self-fulfillment of LGBTQIA+ couples. They reminded the court that LGBTQ+ citizens form 7 to 8% of the population

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



of the country. The petitioners point out that the legal protection available in about 15 legislations guaranteeing the right of wages, gratuity, adoption, surrogacy, etc, were not available to LGBTQIA+ citizens.

In a related vein, the Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR) said that same sex couples would make equally good parents as heterosexual parents. By depriving legal status to homosexual marriages, the state is denying the legal security of dual parenthood and guardianship to the child.

Since the Netherlands' legalisation of same-sex marriages in 2000, over 34 countries have legalised same-sex marriages either through legislation or through court decisions. At present more than 50 countries allow same-sex couples to legally adopt children. A 2020 study by the American Sociological Review show that academic results of children raised by same-sex parents from birth outperformed children with heterosexual parents.

The stand of the government

The Union government has said that the idea of same sex marriage is merely an “urban elitist view”. The judicial creation of a “new social institution” like same sex marriage cannot be claimed as a matter of right. It is the Parliament and not the courts that have to decide on same sex marriages, which is a threat to the “holy union” of marriage between a biological man and woman in India.

The State of Madhya Pradesh has also sought to intervene in the case, saying it was a “necessary stakeholder”. It said the legal recognition of same sex marriage would “seriously affect” the interests of the residents of Madhya Pradesh.

Additionally, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), unlike its Delhi counterpart, argued that same sex marriage would violate the provisions of the Juvenile Justice Act. The Juvenile Justice Act of 2015 prohibits a single man, let alone two men, from adopting a girl child. The NCPCR highlighted a study by the Catholic University of America which said that the emotional problems suffered by children of same sex couples were twice more than of children living with heterogenous parents.

It said a “proper legislative system needs to be adopted regarding same sex couples”.

Religious bodies and NGOs

The Shri Sanatam Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha opined that the concept of same-sex marriages is “catastrophic” and that it would have a “pernicious effect” on Indian culture and society. The Hindu body quotes the Vedas, saying “those who have wives truly have a family life; those who have wives can be happy; those who have wives can have a full life”. It refers to stanzas from the Manusmriti that state “to be mothers were women created, and to be fathers, men”.

The Jamiat-Ulama-i-Hind also opposed same-sex marriage by stating that marriage between opposite sexes is like the ‘basic feature’ of marriage. “Islam’s prohibition of homosexuality has been categorical from the dawn of the religion of Islam itself. LGBTQIA+ movement dates back to the western sexual liberation movement,” the Jamiat said.

Similarly the Telangana Markazi Shia Ulema Council also claimed that persons raised by same-sex couples were “much more likely” to suffer from depression, low academic achievement, unemployment and are more likely to smoke marijuana etc. It said that in the “West/Global



North”, religion has largely ceased to be a source of law and plays very little role in public life. On the other hand, religion plays an instrumental role in shaping personal law, along with social norms and family ties in India.

Additionally, the Akhil Bhartiya Sant Samiti said to “keep husband and wife together is the law of nature. ‘Kanyadan’ and ‘Saptapadi’ have basic importance in Hindu marriages.” The reiterated that same sex marriage is “totally unnatural”.

Bringing in a different angle, the Kanchan Foundation has submitted that deep-seated stereotypes and mental barriers that have been constructed over centuries cannot be dismantled by a mere judicial ruling. It says that Indian society requires more time to be sensitised in order to accept same sex unions and understand their impact on society.

The Call for Justice NGO argues that “marriage flows from natural law” and the “millennia-old institution” of marriage between a man and a woman is recognised across the world. Any amendments in the institution of marriage “must flow from popular will as expressed through the legislature”.

EXPRESS VIEW: A CAMPUS THAT IS SAFE AND FREE

Mandatory NOC from the police. Concertina wires on boundary walls. CCTVs at all gates, including hostel entrances. These are some of the measures that, as per the 17-point advisory issued by the University of Delhi on April 13, colleges and departments must implement when organising festivals and other events. The advisory has come in the wake of alleged security lapses during the Indraprastha College for Women’s annual fest — intruders scaled the boundary walls of the institution and allegedly harassed women students — and ensuing protests by students who accused the college administration of failing to protect them. There is no arguing against the need for greater safety of students. But the university’s response to this latest instance of a security lapse — a similar incident had occurred during Miranda House’s Diwali Mela in October last year and at Gargi College’s annual fest in 2020 — raises concerns about how exactly this safety will be ensured. Will it shift the onus onto the students themselves? Will it come at the cost of their privacy and freedoms?

It’s not incidental that the three campuses on which the incidents occurred are all women’s campuses. This makes it even more necessary for authorities to tread sensitively, and not be heavy-handed in the name of women’s safety and security. For many students in an all-women institution, the campus is a place of openness and a refuge from the confines and constraints of home, family and community. It is a place where they can, away from censoring eyes and voyeuristic stares, explore new ways of being. They can question and discover, study and socialise in an enabling environment that is also a safe space. When there is a threat to their safety, however, the response cannot be the all-too-common one of asking the women to retreat from their freedoms, by barricading them in their hostels or monitoring their every move through the CCTV.

The growing trend of securitisation and surveillance in the name of students’ safety is not limited to all-women institutions, and is deeply concerning. Cameras in classrooms and police permissions to organise routine events are not a guarantee against untoward incidents, but they do impinge on the privacy of students, and end up reducing trust in the authorities. It would be much better, instead, to talk to the students, sensitise them on the challenges and support them



when needed. That is much harder work, of course — but it is the only way to ensure that security does not mean having to step back from freedom.

THE CASTE IMPERATIVE

With the Congress party joining the chorus for an updated caste census, there seems to be an emerging consensus among the political opposition on the need for this exercise. While the parties committed to reservations in the northern belt — the SP and the RJD in particular — have made this demand as a reaction to the expansion of reservation benefits to economically weaker sections among “forward” castes using income criteria, the Congress’s pivot towards supporting this stems from the party’s new political emphasis on expanding its support base. With the Mandal Commission report of 1980, that was based on caste census data of 1931, still remaining the basis of identifying backwardness and determining the extent of reservation to the OBCs, the need for a comprehensive census that provides data to support, or evaluate existing reservation quotas, or to assess demands for them remains pertinent. Such a diligent exercise would also serve a legal imperative allowing the government to answer the Supreme Court’s call for quantifiable data. But counting castes is not easy. An inherent weakness is evident in how the government described the Socio-Economic and Caste Census in 2011: as being riddled with infirmities that made the data collected unusable. Data here recorded 46 lakh different castes, sub-castes, caste/clan surnames, which required adequate parsing before being used for proper enumeration. The survey’s hurried conduct, without utilising the Census Commissioners and the Office of the Registrar General properly, also rendered it problematic.

A more thoroughgoing exercise would entail an adequate consolidation of caste/sub-caste names into social groups based on synonymity and equivalence of the self-identified group names revealed by respondents in the census. Marking these groups against the OBC/SC/ST lists for each State would build a useful database, which can be utilised in the decennial Census. The data obtained this way can be used to parse aggregated socioeconomic information for these groups. But with the government having postponed the long-delayed 2021 Census and not acquiescing to the demand of including caste counts, questions remain whether an effective caste census is possible. There is of course the risk of reification of caste identities even as the constitutional order seeks to build a casteless society. But with caste-based identification still predominant, such a census seems politically imperative, even if morally flawed, for the purpose of addressing socioeconomic inequities through facile reservation quotas that confer income benefits and a degree of social justice without actually advancing the cause of a truly casteless society.

THE MEERUT COURT VERDICT AND THE MALIANA MASSACRE

The story so far:

Almost 36 years after the Maliana massacre in which 72 people lost their lives in May 1987, the Meerut court of additional district judge Lakhvinder Singh Sood, after more than 800 hearings, set free all the 39 accused on grounds of insufficient evidence.

What happened in Maliana?

Hashimpura and Maliana were among the earliest known cases of communal violence in western Uttar Pradesh after the locks of the Babri Masjid were opened by the Rajiv Gandhi government in 1986. The Meerut city had reported cases of Hindu-Muslim clashes in mid-May, 1987. Curfew had been imposed in the city when the Vir Bahadur Singh government sent 11 companies of the



Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) to Meerut to control the riots. On May 22, the PAC landed in Hashimpura, rounded off Muslim men from the area, bundled them into waiting trucks and drove away. Some men were sent to jail in Meerut and others were taken to the Upper Ganga canal in Muradnagar at Ghaziabad and the Hindon river near the Delhi-U.P border, now part of the NCR. The men were allegedly shot dead by the PAC there.

Next day, the PAC reached Maliana and led by R.D. Tripathi, commandant of the 44th battalion, the men entered Maliana in the afternoon of May 23 and allegedly killed 72 people, all Muslims. Additionally, all the entry and exit points of Maliana had been sealed, making it impossible for the residents to flee.

How did the investigation proceed?

Then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi ordered an investigation into the massacre and later in May, Tripathi, who ordered firing in Maliana, was suspended. An FIR was filed in which 93 people were accused of the massacre. However, the FIR mentioned only civilians. Not one policeman was accused of violence. It was alleged by a local resident, Yaqub Ali, that he was forced to sign a document which he learned later was the FIR in which only civilians were named. Ali alleged he was mercilessly beaten up by the police before being compelled to sign the document. The names of the accused were apparently taken from the local voters' list. It included even those who had deceased by then. A judicial inquiry was ordered under retired High Court judge, Justice G. L. Srivastava in August, 1987. The presence of the PAC hindered fair investigation, forcing the inquiry commission to remove the Constabulary. After examining 84 public witnesses, the Commission submitted its report in July 1989. The report was not made public.

What is the current situation?

The victims saw no ray of hope for more than 30 years. Finally, a public interest litigation was filed by senior journalist Qurban Ali and Vibhuti Narain Rai, former director-general police, U.P before the Allahabad High Court in 2021. The co-petitioners were Ismail, a man who had lost 11 family members in the Maliana massacre, and M.A. Rashid. The petitioners drew the court's attention to the fact that not much progress had been made in giving justice to the massacre victims as key papers, including the FIR had gone missing. They accused the State police and PAC personnel of trying to intimidate the victims and eye witnesses. They sought a special investigation team to look into the violence of May, 1987. The court ordered the UP Government to file a counter affidavit. The case is still being heard.

The Meerut court verdict has been called a travesty of justice as no one was held guilty for the killing of 72 people. Alauddin Siddiqui, the lawyer representing the victims, expressed disappointment with the verdict stating that, "it is an abrupt decision at a time when the proceedings were still on and hearing on the 34 post-mortem reports had not taken place." He plans to approach the High Court for relief.

CBI WANTS JAGDISH TYTLER'S VOICE SAMPLES IN 1984 RIOTS CASE: HOW VOICE TESTING WORKS, ITS VALUE AS EVIDENCE

Last week, Congress leader Jagdish Tytler appeared before the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to submit samples of his voice in connection with his alleged role in three murders in Delhi's Pul Bangash area by a mob during the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. The CBI said it had fresh evidence in



the case, for which Tytler's voice had to be corroborated with a particular speech he made 39 years ago.

How is a voice sample taken?

An investigating agency generally moves court, seeking permission to collect a person's voice sample in connection with a case. Such forensic analysis is used to corroborate other aspects of the case.

Senior forensic officials told The Indian Express that the frequency of a person's voice remains the same for several years unless there is a medical condition in the voice chord or tract.

An official from Central Forensic Science Laboratory (CFSL), requesting anonymity, said, "A voice sample is generally taken in an echo-proof room for a controlled and noise-free environment and a voice recorder is used...the person is asked to speak a specific clue word from a statement already part of the evidence.

The official added that certain technical parameters are kept in mind while recording a person's voice sample. "A spectral analysis of the audio speech is undertaken where the pitch, energy and frequency of the voice are kept as the base to study and match the original audio sample," he said.

Forensic officials use international phonetic alphabets while recording a voice sample and ask the subject to pronounce only a small part of the original statement so that both vowels and consonants in the spoken bit can be alternatively analysed.

"There are two methods of comparison, you either get an anonymous voice sample and check it with a suspect list of five persons, or you know who the speaker is and corroborate both the voices," said another official.

An official from Forensic Science Lab, Rohini, said the semi-automatic spectrographic method of voice sampling is used in Indian forensic labs while some countries use the automatic method where a likelihood ratio of the voice samples is developed, which increases accuracy.

The spectrographic method for speaker recognition makes use of an instrument that converts the speech signal into a visual display.

While the results of the voice sample either turn out to be positive or negative and the final report is submitted by the forensic lab to the investigating agency, officials said that inaccuracies mainly arise when the person's voice is altered due to the effect of medicines, or if the person is suffering from a cold.

When was it first used?

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had first used the technique of voice identification analysis, also known as spectrographic at the time, as early as in the 1950s, but the procedure gained legitimacy in a 1962 study by Lawrence Kersta, a researcher working with a 1940s-model Bell Laboratory sound spectrograph.

What were the past cases in India where voice samples were collected?

A special NDPS court had in February this year allowed a plea moved by the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), seeking collection of voice samples among 33 accused in a drugs case it was



investigating after the death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput. NCB had claimed that it needed to verify certain voice calls that had emerged among the accused.

What is the legality behind collecting voice samples?

In a 2013 case, the Supreme Court considered whether compelling an accused to give his voice sample in the course of an investigation would be violative of the fundamental right against self-incrimination or the right to privacy.

Our criminal procedure laws do not contain a specific provision for testing voice samples because it is a relatively new technological tool. Collection of semen, hair samples for DNA analysis or taking general body measurements is routine and has specific provisions under law but for collection of voice samples, the police have to move court or seek consent of the accused.

Section 53 (1) of the Code of Criminal Procedure allows examination of accused by a medical practitioner at the request of a police officer. The provision reads: "When a person is arrested on a charge of committing an offence of such a nature and alleged to have been committed under such circumstances that there are reasonable grounds for believing that an examination of his person will afford evidence as to the commission of an offence, it shall be lawful for a registered medical practitioner, acting at the request of a police officer not below the rank of sub-inspector, and for any person acting in good faith in his aid and under his direction, to make such an examination of the person arrested as is reasonably necessary in order to ascertain the facts which may afford such evidence, and to use such force as is reasonably for that purpose."

The word examination in this provision includes "the examination of blood, blood stains, semen, swabs in case of sexual offences, sputum and sweat, hair samples and fingernail clippings by the use of modern and scientific techniques including DNA profiling and such other tests which the registered medical practitioner thinks necessary in a particular case."

Here, the phrase "such other tests" is read to include a collection of voice samples.

While delivering a split verdict in the 2013 case, the SC acknowledged that there is no specific law for collection of voice samples. The case was subsequently heard by a 3-judge bench in which the SC said that the fundamental rights of the accused will not be violated by collecting a voice sample for investigation.

The Court held that fundamental right to privacy cannot be construed as absolute and must bow down to compelling public interest.

In a ruling on March 30, 2022, the Punjab and Haryana High Court observed that "voice samples in a sense resemble fingerprints and handwriting, each person has a distinctive voice with characteristic features dictated by vocal cavities and articulates. The samples are collected after having permission in accordance with the law. The sample taken itself would not be an evidence, rather they are for comparing the evidence already collected."

VETO BY SILENCE

In recalling its recommendation to appoint Justice S. Muralidhar as Chief Justice of the Madras High Court, the Supreme Court collegium has let the Union government, which did not act on the decision for eight months, have its way. One can only conclude that the Centre has been deliberately refraining from acting on the recommendation, presumably to stall the transfer. The



Collegium has now decided instead, to propose the name of Justice S.V. Gangapurwala, a judge of the Bombay High Court, as the next Chief Justice of the Madras High Court. The reason appears to be the Collegium's keenness to have a permanent Chief Justice for the High Court, as the senior-most judge has been acting as Chief Justice for nearly eight months. It was decided in September 2022 that Justice Muralidhar would be shifted from the Orissa High Court to succeed Justice M.N. Bhandari, who retired as head of the Madras High Court. Meanwhile, Justice T. Raja, the senior-most judge in Chennai, was acting as Chief Justice, but it was decided in November 2022 that he would be shifted to the Rajasthan High Court. Justice Raja's representation that his transfer be reconsidered was rejected by the Collegium. However, the Centre did not notify his transfer too, resulting in his continuance as Acting Chief Justice in the Madras High Court for an unusually long period. He is due to retire on May 24, 2023. As if to underscore its disapproval of the state of affairs, the Collegium resolution reiterated that Justice Raja's transfer "be effectuated at the earliest", and observed that even his continuance as a judge would not be an impediment to the appointment of Justice Gangapurwala as Chief Justice.

There are recent instances of the government highlighting the political views of prospective appointees to stall their elevation to the Bench. In most cases, however, inaction is the main means to stall an appointment. A question that arises is whether such deliberate inaction on the Centre's part will be allowed to be the norm. The last move will, no doubt, embolden the Centre, to exercise a right to veto any appointment or transfer proposed by the Collegium. Notwithstanding the flaws in the Collegium system, the present state of affairs bodes ill for the independence of the judiciary. The system is founded on the premise of judicial primacy, but it now appears that the executive has found a way of circumventing it — merely by refusing to give effect to the Collegium's recommendations. In effect, the present regime has upended the legal position that the recommendations are binding on the government if the Collegium reiterates its stand with regard to any appointment.

MURDER OF LAW, ORDER

In life and in death, former lawmaker Atiq Ahmed typified the collapse of the rule of law in Uttar Pradesh. The visuals of both him and his brother Khalid Azim being shot dead in cold blood, on Saturday, while they were handcuffed and in police custody, show the abject lawlessness that prevails in the State. Early in March, Ahmed had approached the Supreme Court of India expressing fear that he might be "killed in a fake encounter on one pretext or the other by the U.P. Police". The Court refused to entertain his plea. His son, Asad Ahmad, was killed in an alleged encounter with a U.P. police team on Thursday in Jhansi. Father and son were both accused in the sensational daylight murder of a political rival in February. Ahmed, the former leader of the Samajwadi Party and Apna Dal opened his history sheet at the age of 17 and had more than 100 criminal cases at the time of his murder at the age of 60. Far from facing the force of law, he reigned supreme as a don-cum-politician through various regimes in U.P. since the 1990s. Even when he went to jail, his empire of crime did not collapse. He was shifted to a prison in Gujarat in 2019, and on his return to U.P., was facing fresh charges of murder which ended with his own killing in the most chilling manner.

According to the U.P. police, 183 alleged criminals have been gunned down in encounters in the last six years. More than 10,900 police encounters have taken place since March 2017. Due process is central to any rule of law, and once that is allowed to be short-circuited, the result is chaos. The U.P. police and administration have stretched the limits of its legitimate power by the dubious and discriminatory application of law and processes. The demolition of properties of people suspected



of crime or participating in political protest has become routine. It appears that this practice is popular among the supporters of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, and that makes this trend not merely lawlessness but also a social pathology. Several political parties have sought accountability in the double murder that took place under the watch of the U.P. police. The State has announced a three-member commission headed by a former High Court judge to inquire into the lapses. Considering the serious charges that the State government and its police face of discrimination based on religion and caste, and scant regard for due process, an inquiry of a demonstrably independent nature is required.

TERROR ON THE ROAD

In another spectre of violence in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), five soldiers were killed and another critically injured in a terror attack on April 20 in the Rajouri-Poonch Sector, close to the Line of Control (LoC) in the Jammu division. Preliminary reports have suggested that terrorists — their numbers and affiliations are not known immediately — attacked, in inclement weather, an Army vehicle that was on a counter-insurgency patrol between Bhimber Gali-Poonch in the Rajouri sector. The attack also comes at a time when J&K is working diligently to host a G-20 Tourism Working Group meeting, in May. Separately, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari is likely to attend a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting in Goa next month, which has kindled the possibility of fresh India-Pakistan engagement. The attack raises the question about the management of patrols in sensitive locations in the region which has seen a spike in militant violence in the recent past, including a terror attack on a village on January 1 this year that left seven civilians dead. The fact that the Army vehicle was on an unaccompanied drive and remained unattended immediately after the attack is a matter of serious concern.

The images of the Army vehicle on fire and charred bodies have reignited memories of and visuals from the Pulwama attack in 2019. On February 14 that year, a convoy of buses with Central Reserve Police Force jawans was on the Jammu-Srinagar national highway way in Pulwama's Lethpora area when a suicide bomber in an explosive-laden car managed to breach security. Forty personnel lost their lives in the terror attack that shocked the political class, the military establishment and the country. With Indian intelligence agencies pointing to the role of the Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), India sent its fighter jets across the Line of Control to strike JeM training camps in Balakot, Pakistan, inflicting casualties and damaging the terror infrastructure there. India's strident response to cross-border terror was noticed internationally, and became a topic of campaign during the Lok Sabha election soon after. However, terror emanating from Pakistan has failed to ebb, which is evident from the rising violence in J&K over the past three years, especially after the government decided to end the region's semi-autonomous status on August 5, 2019. Claims on the subject made recently by the then J&K Governor Satya Pal Malik, in interviews, have brought to the fore fresh questions about the intent behind the political class while approaching the issue of terrorism in the country. Perhaps it is time India reviewed its strategy in Kashmir, including the current freeze on talks with Pakistan.

OPPN. TARGETS MODI OVER MALIK'S CLAIMS ON PULWAMA ATTACK

Mr. Malik, who was the J&K Governor during the Pulwama terror attack, made several explosive comments as part of an hour-long interview with journalist Karan Thapar for The Wire in which he described Mr. Modi as "ill-informed" about J&K. The former Governor also said that the Pulwama attack was used for political benefit and added that even the National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval advised him to remain silent.



In the interview, Mr. Malik said the Prime Minister was “not particularly averse to corruption” and did not take action against the Goa government when Mr. Malik pointed it out to him as the Governor of the State and he was subsequently transferred to Meghalaya. He also said that his appointment with President Droupadi Murmu was cancelled at the last minute when he was Governor and claimed that the Prime Minister’s Office decides the appointments list for the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Mr. Malik also said “people have started believing that the Prime Minister is interested in the financial dealings of the Adani Group” and the government has not been able to answer Congress leader Rahul Gandhi’s questions.

The Congress also demanded answers from the Centre on the outcome of the probe into the 2019 Pulwama terror attack in which 40 CRPF jawans were killed. Addressing a press conference along with party leaders Pawan Khera and Supriya Shrinete, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh accused the BJP-led Union government of adopting a strategy of “silence” on every key issue.

Delhi Chief Minister and Aam Admi Party (AAP) convener Arvind Kejriwal cited Mr. Malik’s interview to target the BJP over corruption. “Satya Pal Malik ji has said that Modi ji is not averse to corruption. I am not saying this but one of their own... In the same interview, he also said some BJP Chief Ministers indulge in corruption and collect money. They don’t keep all the money to themselves but send the money to above and from there, it is invested in the companies of their friend,” he said. The Trinamool Congress tweeted, “Now, we learn that even the President’s official appointments are fixed as per PM @narendramodi’s will & whim! India’s Democracy is endangered!” Communist Party of India general secretary D. Raja tweeted that the allegations are serious and “... if true, are a damning indictment of the state of national security, corruption & federalism under Modi.”

EXPRESS VIEW ON PARLIAMENT MUSEUM ROW: IT’S TIME TO REIMAGINE THE INDIAN MUSEUM

The Parliament Museum upgrade could serve as a textbook case of all that is wrong with the building and upkeep of museums in India. The project was meant to modernise the museum and turn it into a showcase of India’s rich and rambunctious democratic experience. However, the private agency entrusted with the task has found the material provided by the “content creator”, National Museum Institute (NMI), under the Union Ministry of Culture, to be substandard. The history expert with the agency has alleged that Parliament Museum is being curated on the “basis of Wikipedia and questionable sources from the net rather than published sources in the libraries”. The NMI has rejected the charges, of course. But the content debate is only a subset in a dismal bigger picture — the unimaginative and unambitious manner in which a premier museum of “the mother of democracy”, to borrow PM Narendra Modi’s phrase, is being refurbished. The Parliament Museum should have been reimagined by the finest curators in India, and the world, and not be reduced to a site for ego battles and turf wars.

Unfortunately, most Indian museums are caught in a time warp and administered as government departments rather than sites of aesthetic or cultural experience. They are viewed mostly as spaces to store inert objects/artefacts than as learning centres where visitors can engage with art and history. The rare exceptions struggle to stay afloat amid the flotsam of mediocrity. Successive governments have to be blamed for this sorry state of affairs. Governments have been quick to own up, and even celebrate, the country’s cultural heritage, but they are often stingy in providing funds to institutions mandated with its upkeep. No effort has been made to nurture a cadre of



officials literate in cultural matters or provide agency and autonomy to those with the skill sets to build and manage museums. This would, of course, require investment in education and training of personnel — from supervisory staff to institutional heads — if museums are to be revived.

A museum is not merely an inventory, it's the curator who breathes life into it. If curatorial vision is central to making the museum more than the building and contents, the institution will connect with its potential audience. The Parliament Museum calls for a curatorial imagination that can capture the vibrant spirit of Indian democracy and transmit it to its visitors. The current row over the upgrade is an opportunity to rescue it from being turned into a morgue of banal claims and context-free information.

THE KOHIMA MUNICIPAL COUNCIL IN NAGALAND. KMC.NAGALAND.GOV.IN

The story so far:

On March 28, the Neiphiu Rio-led Nagaland government preferred to be in contempt of the Supreme Court than face the wrath of the community-based organisations by repealing the Nagaland Municipal Act of 2001. This led to the cancellation of the State Election Commission's March 9 notification for holding elections to Nagaland's 39 urban local bodies (ULBs) with 33% of the seats reserved for women. The apex court has however, stayed the notification cancelling the civic body polls. It was in this year, for the first time, that Nagaland elected two women to power in the recent Assembly elections.

Why is there opposition to ULB polls?

Nagaland is arguably the only State where ULB seats are not reserved for women as mandated by clause IV of the 74th Amendment to the Constitution of India. Most of the traditional tribal and urban organisations oppose the 33% reservation of seats for women as they argue that such reservation would violate the special provisions granted by Article 371A of the Constitution to Nagaland. The Article states that no Act of Parliament would apply to the religious or social practices of the Nagas, Naga customary law and procedure, administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to Naga customary law, and ownership and transfer of land and its resources. The hohos (apex tribal bodies) point out that women have traditionally not been part of decision-making bodies.

Have such polls ever been held in Nagaland?

The first and only civic body election in Nagaland was held in 2004 without any reservation of seats for women. The State government amended the 2001 Municipal Act in 2006 to include 33% reservation for women in line with the 74th Amendment. This triggered widespread opposition forcing the government to indefinitely postpone the ULB polls in 2009. Efforts to hold the elections in March 2012 met with strong protests and in September 2012, the State Assembly passed a resolution to exempt Nagaland from Article 243T of the Constitution which is related to the reservation for women. This resolution was revoked in November 2016 and elections to the civic bodies with 33% reservation were notified a month later. The notification led to widespread mayhem in which two people were killed in large-scale violence and arson.

This made the government declare the process to conduct election null and void in February 2017.



Why did the govt. decide on ULB polls this time?

Under pressure from the Supreme Court, the Rio government laid the ground for holding ULB polls after consultations with various stakeholders, including churches, NGOs, and tribal bodies in March 2022. The State Election Commission on March 9 notified that the polls would take place on May 16. The tribal bodies and civil society organisations threatened to boycott the polls until the “borrowed” Municipal Act of 2001 factoring in women’s reservation is “reviewed and rewritten in complete consonance of the voice of the Naga people” so that it does not infringe upon Article 371A. The government succumbed to public pressure and repealed the Municipal Act with immediate effect as the people “cannot be compelled” to participate in the elections.

What is the way forward?

The groups against reservation for women want a “guarantee” that the 33% quota would not violate the provisions of Article 371A. Before “rushing to conduct” the ULB elections, they suggested that the duration of the reservation should be capped at two tenures and demanded that the post of chairperson should not be reserved for women. The Naga Mothers’ Association (NMA) said that the State government erred in not listening to or consulting with women’s organisations before taking the decision to repeal the Municipal Act.

On April 17, the Supreme Court pulled up the Nagaland government for adopting an “ingenious method” of repealing the Municipal Act to evade the undertaking given to the court for holding the polls.

The apex court also noted “nothing has so far emerged (with respect to Article 371A) to advance a plea that religious or social practices of Nagas or Naga customary law and procedure denies the right of equality to women insofar as the participatory process is concerned in such elections”.

PROMOTING IMPUNITY

In denying sanction to the Nagaland police to prosecute 30 Army men for the December 2021 killing of 13 civilians in a botched-up operation, the Union government has sent out a disconcerting message that it is unable or unwilling to do anything about impunity in insurgency-hit States. In what was later described as a case of mistaken identity, six workers returning home in a vehicle from a coal mine bordering Assam were gunned down by the security forces at Oting village in Mon district. Seven more villagers were shot dead later, following a scuffle with villagers who had found the bodies in an Army vehicle. Prior sanction to prosecute Army personnel is necessary under Section 6 of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA). A Special Investigation Team of the Nagaland Police completed its probe in March 2022, and filed a charge sheet in the case. It had sought sanction for prosecution from the Defence Ministry’s Department of Military Affairs. The police had claimed they had established the involvement of 30 personnel, who allegedly violated standard operating procedures and rules of engagement, and resorted to indiscriminate and disproportionate firing on the vehicle. Meanwhile, the Army also ordered a court of inquiry, but its outcome is not known. On petitions by the wives of the Army personnel involved, the Supreme Court of India stayed the criminal proceedings in July 2022.

The Centre has been quite keen on reducing the areas covered by the law giving special powers in disturbed areas to the armed forces. In recognition of the significant improvement in the security situation in the northeastern region, it has reduced the notified areas in Nagaland, Assam and Manipur in recent years. On the political side, it has been working towards peace accords and



getting insurgents and extremists to lay down arms. However, it is quite incongruent with its overall policy of creating an atmosphere conducive for peace and development, and making partners out of those laying down weapons, for the government to disallow the prosecution of those suspected to be involved in an admittedly mistaken counter-insurgency operation. It would have redounded to the government's credit had it allowed the criminal courts to decide on the extent of culpability of the Army men. Prosecution of armed forces personnel involved in excesses is quite rare, leading to the widespread impression that AFSPA is used to promote impunity. The government must demonstrate its commitment to peace in the region and justice for the victims by either granting sanction for their prosecution, or taking exemplary action based on the findings of the military court of inquiry.

UPGRADED X-RAY MACHINES TO FAST-TRACK BAGGAGE CHECK AT AIRPORTS BY END OF THE YEAR

The Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS) has ordered all major airports in the country to upgrade baggage X-ray machines by end of 2023 so that passengers won't have to remove electronic devices during screening of handbags.

The move comes after airports such as Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru witnessed overcrowding in December when the country recorded the highest number of domestic flyers since the outbreak of COVID-19, and government officials found flaws in the security infrastructure that led to longer queues.

The BCAS has made adoption of CTX, an X-Ray baggage inspection system based on computed tomography (CT), mandatory for all airports with over 50 lakh annual passenger traffic by December 31. Nearly 25 airports fall in this category.

"We need the CT machines to upgrade security at airports. The technology it uses is superior as it can discover more prohibited items and the bonus is that it can also ensure better passenger experience because they don't have to take out their electronic devices," Director General of BCAS Zulfiquar Hasan told The Hindu.

While X-ray machines used at airports produce a 2D image, newer technologies produce a 3D image and have better automated detection of explosives.

The BCAS has also made deployment of full body scanners mandatory at airports with more than one crore passengers per annum. This will do away with strip searches.

MILLIONS OF OLIVE RIDLEYS MAKE IT TO SEA AFTER ODISHA BEACH HOSTS RECORD TURTLE NESTING

Millions of baby olive ridley sea turtles crawled towards the Bay of Bengal after emerging from eggshells along Odisha's Rushikulya beach in Ganjam district, recording one of the most successful mass nesting and hatchings in past few decades.

This year, the Rushikulya beach has hosted around 6.37 lakh turtles — highest ever congregation — from February 23 to March 3. After 50 days, baby turtles have emerged from eggs themselves and started their journey towards sea. "This year, mass nesting and hatching have been smooth. There was no adverse weather condition that could have hampered the processes. On part of the



forest department, we have provided best possible protection for turtles to lay eggs and prevent damage during incubation period,” Sunny Khokkar, Berhampur Divisional Forest Officer, said.

Generally, an olive ridley turtle lays 100-150 eggs in a cavity created by them with their front flippers in the beach sand. They scoop out sand for hours to create the void. After laying eggs at one go, these creatures cover it again with sand. Before sunrise, the turtles return to the sea, leaving behind the eggs to hatch after 40-60 days. Sometime, a turtle lays eggs in a pit at a place that was previously used by another turtle, leading to loss of thousands of eggs.

The Rushikulya beach is a unique phenomenon — it is not a wildlife sanctuary, yet turtles feel safe to carry out mass nesting. Baby turtles started coming out from egg shells from the second week of April this year.

FSSAI NEEDS AN ENERGY SHOT TO REGULATE PROCESSED FOOD

The social media influencer drawn into the Cadbury’s Bournvita controversy has a supporter. The Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest — India (NAPi), a think tank working on nutrition policy, has issued a statement saying it stands by him.

Revant Himatsingka, who calls himself @foodpharmer on social media, with 1,35,000 followers on Instagram, drew the ire of Mondelez India, the company that owns Bournvita, with his April 1 video in which he flagged the product’s high sugar content. He, however, deleted the video following a legal notice from the company on April 13. He has also apologised on his Instagram handle, while his Twitter handle has been suspended.

In January, the NAPi said that a Bournvita advertisement and product packaging was misleading and did not disclose the sugar content. The organisation has filed a formal complaint with the Department of Consumers Affairs, working under the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution. It alleges the ads violate the provision of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019.

However, this has brought to the boil the real issue at hand — the Food Standards and Safety Authority of India (FSSAI) dragging its feet over implementing its own guidelines to regulate packaged and processed food.

Labelling on front

The FSSAI has been discussing the possibility of front-of-pack labelling. According to this, brands would need to put a notification indicating if a food product was high in fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS). The labelling would allow consumers to make informed choices.

In September 2022, the statutory body had issued a draft notification on front-of-package labelling that proposed “Indian Nutrition Rating” (INR). The health star-rating system for packaged foods will assign half a star (least healthy) to five stars (healthiest) depending on the ingredients and the degree of processing.

Dr. Arun Gupta, paediatrician and NAPi convener, said the FSSAI has not been at the forefront of implementing its regulations. “Stars are a method to reward, and they should not be used. An upfront warning that a product is high in sugar content is required,” he said.

In a statement, Mondelez India said, “Every serving of 20 grams of Bournvita has 7.5 g of added sugar, which is approximately a teaspoon and a half. This is much less than the daily recommended intake limits of sugar for children.”



In 2020, the FSSAI looked into 1,306 product samples across 30 food companies, including dairy, confectionery, sweets and snacks. None complied with its threshold for sugar to avoid warning labels — 6 g per 100 g.

A panel then proposed increasing the threshold arbitrarily by six times. Despite that, only 20% of products were found to be meeting the new threshold — 36 g of sugar per 100 g. The rest had over 36 g of sugar, a source in the technical expert committee constituted by the FSSAI told The Hindu. The panel was later dissolved.

A BIG FAT PROBLEM IN MILK: WHAT'S DRIVING UP PRICES?

Till mid-October last year, Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (Amul) was charging consumers Rs 10 per litre more for full-cream milk compared to toned milk. The maximum retail price (MRP) for its 'Gold' full-cream milk, containing 6% fat and 9% SNF (solids-not-fat), was Rs 62 per litre in Delhi, as against Rs 52 for 'Taaza' toned milk with 3% fat and 8.5% SNF.

But since then, the price difference has gone up to Rs 12, with the MRP of Gold raised to Rs 66, and of Taaza to Rs 54 per litre.

The Karnataka Cooperative Milk Producers' Federation, India's second-largest dairy concern, has done the same for its Nandini milk. While regular pasteurized toned milk is retailing at just Rs 39 per litre, the MRP for the 'Samrudhi' full-cream variant was Rs 50/litre before being increased in a roundabout way in early March. Consumers are still paying Rs 50, but only for 900 ml, which translates into an effective MRP of Rs 55.56 a litre. The price difference vis-à-vis toned milk has widened from Rs 11 to Rs 16.56/litre.

The Tamil Nadu Cooperative Milk Producers' Federation (Aavin) has, likewise, raised the MRP of its 'Premium' full-cream milk in Chennai from Rs 48 to Rs 60 per litre with effect from November 4. The MRPs of toned and standardized milk (with intermediate 4.5% fat and 8.5% SNF content) have been kept unchanged at Rs 40 and Rs 44 per litre respectively. However, in some markets such as Madurai, Tirunelveli and Coimbatore, Aavin has replaced sales of standardized milk with so-called 'cow milk', having 3.5% fat and 8.5% SNF.

It's about fat

The current price inflation in milk has mainly to do with a shortage of fat. It has led dairies to increase full-cream milk prices more or to cut down fat content through rebranding of existing products. There have even been reports of branded ghee and butter disappearing from store shelves.

R S Sodhi, president of the Indian Dairy Association, links this partly to the falling contribution of buffaloes to national milk production. The share of buffaloes — their milk has an average 7% fat and 9% SNF content, against 3.5% and 8.5% of cows — to total output was about 46.4% in 2021-22. In 2000-01, it stood at 56.9%, even as the share of crossbred/exotic cows has risen (18.5% to 32.8%) and that of indigenous/non-descript cattle declined (24.6% to 20.8%) over this period.

"Demand is growing for ghee, ice-cream, khoa, paneer, cheese, and other high-fat milk products. But supply is coming more from crossbreds that give low-fat milk. The mismatch is pushing fat prices higher," explained Sodhi. Even tea shops prefer buffalo milk. This milk, with 15-16% total solids, can be diluted to serve more cups and creamier tea.



However, a more immediate reason for rising fat prices is exports. During 2021-22, India exported over 33,000 tonnes of ghee, butter, and anhydrous milk fat valued at Rs 1,281 crore.

Increased exports came at a time when milk production was taking a hit from farmers underfeeding their animals and shrinking herd sizes — due to low prices received during the Covid lockdowns, escalation in fodder and livestock feed costs, and lumpy skin disease outbreak among cattle.

The supply-side pressures built up just when demand was returning with the lifting of lockdown restrictions and resumption of economic activity. Exports — enabled by global fat prices skyrocketing from \$3,850 per tonne in September 2020 to a record \$7,111 in mid-March 2022 (see chart) — added fuel to the fire, exacerbating domestic shortages.

Ex-factory prices of yellow (cow) and white (buffalo) butter crashed to Rs 225-275 per kg during the March-July 2020 demand destruction period. From those lows, they had soared to Rs 420-430/kg by February-March this year. “Prices have since eased to Rs 400-405 for white and Rs 410-415/kg for yellow butter, following reports of the government planning to lower the import duty on milk fat (from 40%),” said Ganesan Palaniappan, a Chennai-based dairy commodities trader.

On Friday though, Union Animal Husbandry and Dairying Minister Parshottam Rupala dismissed any such move. Imports have become viable with global fat prices, too, dropping below \$4,750 per tonne.

Alternative to imports

With imports ruled out — high prices, it is believed, will incentivize farmers to invest more in their animals and ramp up production — can there be an alternative solution?

October-March is normally the ‘flush’ season in milk, when supply exceeds demand. Dairies convert the surplus that they procure into skim milk powder (SMP) and butter fat. This is done by separating the cream and removing the water in the skimmed milk through evaporation and spray drying. The same SMP and fat is reconstituted into whole milk during the ‘lean’ summer-monsoon months (April-September), when animals produce less amid rising demand for curd, lassi and ice-cream. Such processing into solids and reconstitution by adding water happens in no other farm produce: atta flour and sausages once made cannot be turned back into wheat or pigs.

The 2022-23 ‘flush’ was a rare season where milk procurement fell, leaving dairies with hardly any surplus for converting into fat and powder. And with production bound to fall further in the ongoing ‘lean’, the dependence on purchase of milk solids for reconstitution will only go up.

Fixing GST anomaly

Therein lies a problem. Milk doesn’t attract any goods and services tax. But SMP is taxed at 5% and milk fat at 12%. So while dairies pay no tax on milk procured from farmers, they have to shell out GST on solids. And input tax credit cannot be claimed, as there’s no GST on milk itself. Moreover, the tax incidence goes up as the fat in the reconstituted milk increases.

For every 100 litres (103 kg) of full-cream milk that dairies process, 6.18 kg of fat and 9.27 kg of SMP is produced. Butter contains 82% fat. Taking its price at Rs 425/kg (Rs 518/kg of fat) and SMP’s at Rs 325/kg, their combined cost in the reconstitution of 100 litres will be Rs 6,214. Adding 12% GST on fat and 5% on SMP takes it to Rs 6,749 or Rs 67.49 per litre.



Simply put, the total cost of fat and SMP used in reconstitution of one litre of full-cream milk is today around Rs 67.5. The GST component in that is Rs 5.35/litre — Rs 3.84 on fat and Rs 1.51 on SMP — which is ultimately passed on to the consumer.

One way to avoid this is by doing away with GST on milk solids used for reconstitution purposes. Alternatively, the GST on milk fats can be reduced to 5%. Differential rates on SMP and fat probably make no sense, when both are derived directly from milk. A 12% GST on milk fat is also an anomaly when vegetable fat (edible oils) is taxed at 5%.

TRAGIC FAILURE

The state of the ongoing global climate crisis is such that India is going to have hotter hot days and more of them every year. While some of the blame for the effects — heat-related morbidity and mortality — may lie at the feet of meteorological caprice, the bulk of it will lie at the door of the government, whose responsibility it is to deal with and manage foreseeable inevitabilities. On April 16, nearly a million people gathered on an uncovered ground in Navi Mumbai for an event in which social activist Dattatreya Narayan received a State award, with Union Ministers Amit Shah and Kapil Patil, Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde and Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis joining him on a covered podium. More than 120 people suffered considerable heat stress; 13 died and 18 others were hospitalised. Mr. Shinde called the deaths “very unfortunate”, but fortune had nothing to do with it. News reports said that individuals, especially police personnel, were scrambling to bring drinking water to those in distress (because water at the site had become too hot to drink), and to carry them on motorcycles to avail medical assistance. This speaks less to their resourcefulness and more to the absence of a systematic plan for the event that accounted for predictable second-order problems.

After the event, experts also said that the area lacked a local India Meteorological Department station to issue heat alerts. This misses the point. Many places in India are likely to have a large political event before an official weather station. This, together with the rapid onset of India’s heat crisis, puts the spotlight on the fundamental yet elusive cause of climate-related injustice: the persistence of conditions in which some people are at the mercy of their employers or their leaders, in order to survive a hot day, or, as at the April 16 event, even a few hot hours. As long as this imbalance in relationship is allowed to exist, heat action plans and heat alerts can only be of limited benefit. Instead, India must work towards becoming a country in which every individual is equipped with climate-literacy sufficient to know why higher temperature plus higher relative humidity and/or dehydration equals high risk of injury and death, and the ability to access cool and clean drinking water, ventilated shelter and lodging, and affordable emergency medical care wherever, whenever. Notice how these requirements are similar to those required to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in fact most national crises. This is not a coincidence. Governments must destroy conditions in which people are denied the means to prepare themselves for a crisis. But on April 16, a government created them.

NUMBERS GAME

The latest State of World Population Report, an authoritative analysis by the UN, has officially stamped what has been known for a while: that India will become the most populous country in mid-2023, surpassing China’s 142.5 crore by about 3 million. These estimates are based on official country data as well as extrapolating birth, mortality and international migration trends. India has had a vacillating relationship with the size of its population. In the ‘socialist’ era, the growing



population was a convenient excuse to explain India's poverty and the state's inability to improve average standards of living. These seeded deranged 'sterilisation' programmes that violently compromised dignity and freedom. Globalisation and the opening up of the economy in the 1990s saw India as a vast, untapped market, with 'fortunes at the bottom of the pyramid' that framed population as an advantage. India's large working age population — or the demographic dividend — relative to the developed countries, where the workforce was ageing, has provided labour-wage arbitrage and valuable economic opportunities. Indian numbers are behind the skilled and unskilled labour that power workforces in West Asia and Africa, undergird business process outsourcing projects from developed European countries and the United States, and are increasingly a significant component of university enrolment abroad.

This relative prosperity, though unable to solve India's crisis of economic inequality, has, however, busted the myth of forced sterilisation and legal limits on family sizes being key to population control. Despite overtaking China, India's population growth is slowing. The National Family Health Survey reported in 2021 that the total fertility rate had, for the first time, dipped to below the replacement level of 2.1. India's population is forecast to grow from its current 1.4 billion to 1.67 billion in 2050 before settling at 1.53 billion in 2100, with the peak at 1.7 billion sometime in 2064, according to UN estimates. While the pendulum of opinion regarding population has swung from 'disadvantage' to 'advantage' in national discourse, it is relevant to analyse the question while factoring in newer developments. Earlier population debates did not account for the climate crisis and the fact that many migrants, after years of skilled and unskilled labour abroad, were becoming permanent immigrants: over 16 lakh Indians have renounced citizenship since 2011, including 2,25,620 people in 2022, the highest during the period, the External Affairs Minister told Parliament in February. Economic opportunity, more than national pride, shapes the working population's aspiration and, in its absence, a naturally decelerating population will be of limited advantage.

WHAT THE UTTARAMERUR INSCRIPTION, RECENTLY REFERRED TO BY PM MODI, SAYS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday (April 14) referred to the Uttaramerur inscription in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, while discussing India's democratic history, PTI reported.

"India is the world's oldest democracy, it is the mother of democracy. There are numerous historical references to this. An important reference is Tamil Nadu," Modi said. "The inscription found there is like a local constitution for the gram sabha. It tells how the assembly should be run, what should be the qualification of members, what should be the process to elect the members, and how a member would be disqualified."

While Uttaramerur has multiple inscriptions spanning centuries, the most famous one – being referred to by Modi – is from the reign of Parantaka I (907-953 AD). These provide a detailed description about the village's self-governance and have been cited by historians and political leaders alike as evidence of India's history of democratic functioning.

Where is Uttaramerur?

Uttaramerur lies in present-day Kanchipuram district, approximately 90 km southeast of Chennai. Today, it is a small town and had a population of roughly 25,000 in the census of 2011. It is known for its historic temples built during Pallava and Chola rule.



The famous inscription from Parantaka I's reign is found on the walls of the Vaikunda Perumal Temple.

What does the inscription say?

The inscription gives details of the functioning of the local sabha, i.e. the village assembly. A sabha was an assembly exclusively of brahmins and had specialised committees tasked with different things. The Uttaramerur inscription details how members were selected, the required qualifications, their roles and responsibilities, and even the circumstances in which they could be removed.

Appointing representatives to the sabha

Describing how the sabha shall be constituted, the inscription says, "There will be 30 wards. Everyone living in these 30 wards would assemble and select one representative for the village assembly."

It then goes on to describe what the qualifications for such a representative must be. These include ownership of a certain amount of land, having a house, being between the age of 35 and 70 and "knowing mantras and Brahmanas" (from the Vedic corpus). An exception can be made on land ownership if the person has learnt at least "one Veda and four Bhashyas". One must also be "well-versed in business" and "virtuous".

The inscription then lists a number of factors which disqualify someone and their family (all the relations are systematically listed) from consideration. These include, "not having submitted accounts" while previously serving in a committee, committing any of the first four of the five 'great sins' (killing a brahmin, drinking alcohol, theft and adultery), being associated with outcastes, and eating 'forbidden' dishes.

All those eligible and willing would write their names on palm leaf tickets following which, the representative would be chosen on the basis of an elaborate draw of lots, conducted by priests in the inner hall of the building where the assembly meets.

Detailing responsibilities

The inscription describes a number of important committees within the sabha with their own distinct functions. These include, the garden committee, the tank committee, the annual committee (an executive committee which required prior experience and knowledge to be a part of), the committee for supervision of justice (for supervising appointments and wrong doing), the gold committee (in charge of all the gold in the village temple) and the five-fold committee (its role is unclear in the inscription).

These committee assignments would last for 360 days after which the members would have to retire. Anyone in the committee who was implicated in any wrongdoing, such as forgery or having ridden an donkey (i.e. being punished for a crime), was removed instantly. Also, the inscription emphasises upon the keeping of accounts – any discrepancy can also disqualify members of the sabha.

Is this an example of a democracy?

While the Uttaramerur inscription gives details of local self-governance, on closer inspection, it is far from a truly democratic system. Not only does it restrict sabha membership to a tiny



subsection of land-owning brahmins, it also does not have true elections. Rather, it chooses members from the eligible pool of candidates through a draw of lots.

That being said, this does not mean that this inscription should not be cited as a precedent for democratic functioning. The idea of a democracy, as understood today, is a fairly recent phenomenon. The United States, often hailed as the epitome of a liberal democracy, only gave universal adult franchise to its population in 1965.

What the Uttaramerur inscription details is a system of local self-government, outside the direct authority of the king. Furthermore, for all intents and purposes, the inscription is like a constitution – it describes both the responsibilities of members of the sabha as well as the limitations to the authority of these members. If the rule of law (rather than rule by personal diktat) is an essential component of a democracy, the Uttaramerur inscription describes a system of government which follows just that.

EXPRESS VIEW ON AI AND ART: DEFINE A PHOTOGRAPH

Three of the four categories at the World Photography Awards — “professional”, “student” and “youth” — are limited: By implication, they restrict the entries to those from people of a certain age, or achievement and experience. This year, though, the “open” category was pushed to its limits as well. German artist Boris Eldagsen’s entry — Pseudomnesia: The Electrician — won but the “creators” refused the award. Eldagsen revealed that the photograph — a haunting image of two women, generations apart — was made using artificial intelligence.

Eldagsen said he wants the work to open up a conversation around technology, art and photography, and the nature of authorship and creativity. The fact is that technology has been an integral part of artistic practice since the birth of photography. More recently, the question has been about how much digital intervention is kosher, and its moral implications — say, in terms of colour correction or even “photo-shopping” celebrities to make them conform to imagined standards of beauty on magazine covers. Yet, the current AI panic — heightened as it has been with the launch of mass-use apps like ChatGPT and Lensa — is premised on technology not just being a tool, but an artist of sorts itself.

Can a machine, with access to the collective human knowledge available on the internet, be truly creative? Isn’t that, after all, what human beings do — draw on experience, wait for inspiration, tinker around a bit, to produce “art”? Perhaps the discomfort around AI as artist comes from the fact that unlike, say, a car or a safety pin, the value of art comes more from the processes and persons involved in its production. Machines have already replaced workers, without much fuss. If self-driving cars are to become a reality, why not a camera-less, photographer-less photograph?



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

WORLD BANK'S FACE OF CHANGE

In an interview eight years ago with the Stanford Graduate School of Business, corporate veteran Ajay Banga, who was serving as the CEO of payment processing giant MasterCard at the time, spoke about one “tremendous” lesson from his 13-year career at Nestle. “You’re one person, but one person can make a difference,” he said. Almost a decade later, as he is being expected to become the next President of the World Bank, the focus is on how Mr. Banga, 63, is going to help the 77-year-old institution tackle its several challenges, including pivoting its focus toward climate action and transforming its lending model.

Even with his best intentions and the best people, Mr. Banga says, the “idea that somehow a magic wand has arrived” is flawed. The former CEO, who is U.S. President Joe Biden’s sole nominee to lead the Bank, believes, nonetheless, that the multilateral lender can do a lot more and has ambitious plans to mobilise private sector money for its development projects.

Some observers believe Mr. Banga, who spent most of his career in the corporate world, may not be the right candidate to shake up the World Bank in a way it needs. Notably, the institution’s role in mitigating climate change is under most scrutiny right now as the current World Bank head, David Malpass, announced his resignation from the post earlier this year, more than a year before the end of his term, after a controversy over his refusal to comment on whether fossil fuels are contributing to global warming.

Some others, including the likes of Mr. Biden, and IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva, believe the corporate leader’s background from a developing country and his work on financial inclusion and diversity at his previous stints make him a good fit for the job.

Born in the Khadki cantonment of Pune in 1959, Mr. Banga was inclined to a career in finance, receiving his bachelor’s degree in Economics from Delhi’s St. Stephen’s college. He then got himself an MBA from the prestigious Indian Institute of Management-Ahmedabad. Right out of college, he joined Nestle as a management trainee in 1981 and spent the next 13 years at the company.

After a short stint at PepsiCo leading its franchise expansion in India, Mr. Banga moved to the CitiGroup, also spending 13 years there and heading the bank’s business in the Asia-Pacific from Hong Kong. As he was on the decks to become CEO of the bank, he took up the role of President and Chief Operating Officer at MasterCard in 2009, moving to the U.S.

Financial inclusion

In his time at MasterCard, he became popular for being one of the best performing CEOs, as Harvard Magazine called him in 2013. Mr. Banga pioneered the concept of financial inclusion at MasterCard, by setting and achieving the goal to bring 500 million unbanked people into the formal banking system and digital economy by 2021. He currently serves as the Vice Chairman of General Atlantic, heading its climate-focused fund Beyondnetzero. He was also chosen by former U.S. President Barack Obama in 2015 to be a part of his Advisory Committee for Trade Policy and Negotiations.

Mr. Banga has promised to bring inclusion as a central tool of his leadership, while mobilising the private sector to help the World Bank in its work. While observers worry about how he will manage the task of getting low income countries to work on climate projects while they face gaps



in fundamental funding for infrastructure and health, the nominee has argued that the two issues are “intertwined”.

“Inequality is intertwined completely with challenges like climate change, challenges like fragility of the world with refugees and the like being caused by conflict, with challenges like the pandemic, with challenges like with Russia and Ukraine, with what that does to food and fertiliser,” Mr. Banga said in an interview. “I don’t think you can segregate these into buckets and hope that you can deal with one without dealing with the other.”

WTO PANEL RULES AGAINST INDIA IN IT TARIFFS ROW WITH EU, OTHERS

A World Trade Organization (WTO) panel said India had violated global trading rules in a dispute with the European Union (EU), Japan and Taiwan over import duties on IT products.

“We recommend India bring such measures into conformity with its obligations,” the report said.

In 2019, the EU challenged India’s introduction of import duties of between 7.5% and 20% for a wide range of IT products, such as mobile phones and components, as well as integrated circuits, saying they exceeded the maximum rate. Japan and Taiwan filed similar complaints that same year. The EU is India’s third-largest trading partner, as per the European Commission.

‘Legal purgatory?’

India’s diplomatic mission in Geneva did not immediately respond to a request for comment on whether it would appeal against the ruling. If it does, the case will sit in legal purgatory since the WTO’s top appeals bench is no longer functioning due to U.S. opposition to judges’ appointments.

The panel said India had already brought some of the challenged tariffs in line with global trading rules since last year. It, however, rejected Japan’s claim that New Delhi’s customs notification lacked ‘predictability.’

EXPRESS VIEW ON TRADE DATA: IN SHIFTS WITHIN TRADE BASKET, AN OPPORTUNITY

Recent trade data points to consequential shifts in India’s export basket. Three broad trends emerge. First, after registering robust growth in 2021-22, the country’s merchandise exports slumped in the second half of 2022-23. However, during this period, exports of electronic goods and mobile phones have seen a significant jump. Second, over the same period, services exports grew at a robust pace, even as the fourth quarter results of major IT firms suggest a subdued near-term outlook. Third, within services, exports of “other” IT services have gained considerable traction in the recent past. This suggests the emergence of other drivers of growth. How these trends play out could have a significant bearing on the country’s trade performance in the coming years.

Data released last week showed that India’s merchandise exports grew by a mere 6 per cent in 2022-23. Excluding oil, exports were lower than in the previous year. However, in the midst of this weak performance, electronic exports have surged by around 50 per cent. And as per reports, exports of Apple’s iPhone have witnessed a remarkable surge. While value addition in the case of iPhones may currently be low, there are reports of the tech giant looking to increase localisation, which would increase domestic value addition. Equally significant, the growing share of India in iPhones manufactured globally could act as a signalling factor for other companies looking at shifting their production bases away from China. In contrast is the weaker than expected fourth



quarter (January-March) results of IT majors such as Infosys, despite services exports estimated to have grown by 27 per cent in 2022-23. The weakness can be traced to US and European companies, especially in the banking vertical, postponing their spending after the recent turmoil in financial markets. Economic uncertainty in these major markets is likely to continue to exert pressure on Indian IT firms. But even as these concerns gain traction, a recent report by HSBC shows that “other” IT services have gained considerable momentum, growing at a faster pace than the IT majors. This category includes professional and management consulting (estimated to have grown by 29 per cent), followed by computer services and research and development. The report suggests that these activities are based out of global capacity centres, which are essentially delivery centres set up by multinational companies to provide tech services and research and development. As these centres grow in size and scope, their contribution to India’s exports will likely rise.

However, the immediate outlook is shrouded in uncertainty. With the IMF’s latest world economic outlook projecting global growth and trade to slow down sharply, India’s exports will come under pressure. In this scenario, even though the government has recently unveiled a new trade policy, more needs to be done to boost the country’s exports — from reducing the frictions in trade to ensuring a competitive exchange rate, lowering tariffs, and signing broader and deeper free trade agreements.

EXPRESS VIEW ON TUPPERWARE’S WOES: THE COMPANY MAY NOT LAST LONG, BUT IT HAS MEANT CONTAINERS AND MORE

The Tupperware brand — synonymous with tiffin boxes, storage containers, office lunch dabbas and essentially plastic food containers — may be going out of business, unless a cash influx comes to its rescue. It entered the Indian market in 1996, at a time when most households were still wary of using plastic containers. But it was soon able to build a relationship with its users: Mothers and caregivers fretted over lost Tupperware tiffin boxes, and many a ’90s kid had to bear their ire if they were careless. In a still newly-liberalised country, Tupperware was an indulgence. But over time, the resilient — yet plain — steel dabbas lost out to the lightweight imports.

For women engaged in domestic work, the mostly spill-proof, easy-to-transport containers were part of a slew of products — from mixies and vacuum cleaners, to washing machines — that made one of the most unrecognised kinds of labour a little less taxing. The mother-Tupperware love story lasted for decades. Refrigerators and kitchen shelves were lined with them. The dabbas ensured that the rajma or mutton curry being transported — be it for a school tiffin box or to the rishtedaar’s house — arrived leak-free. Promises were made of sending these boxes back promptly with even more goodies than what they arrived with. But while these containers fulfilled their promise, the rishtedaars frequently did not. Forgotten boxes lay in kitchens foreign to them — with the owner often lamenting the loss of yet another dabba. Resentments percolated and relationships deteriorated because of the unreturned boxes.

Tupperware’s financial woes may mean that the company will not last long. But the brand, over time and across India, became associated with convenience, food and its exchange — the essence of social bonds. Kids who were shouted at for losing their tiffin boxes will not forget this dictum in a hurry: Cherish your food, but cherish your food dabba more.



WHY APPLE STORES IN INDIA ARE A BIG DEAL

India's first Apple Store opened in Mumbai on Tuesday, a flagship retail outlet at the Jio World Centre in BKC. A second Apple Store will open in New Delhi's Saket, on April 20. Two Apple Stores in two days is unprecedented in several ways, and underlines the importance of India as a market for Apple.

Why is the opening of these Apple Stores significant?

Apple could not open a store in India earlier because of regulatory restrictions around single brand retail. So far, it has had stores operated by Indian partners such as Imagine and Future World. With the launch of its two stores, Apple will become a full stack player in India, managing everything from manufacturing to retail.

On Monday, Apple claimed it was also "supporting over 1 million jobs in India" with its developer network. At the new company-owned stores, Indian customers will be able to walk in to buy India-made iPhones, the culmination of the company's 25-year journey in India.

Apple products can be bought online too, so what is special about an Apple Store?

At Apple Stores, the actual sale of products takes the back seat, and the focus is on the experience. Like a town square, people can walk in and spend as much time as they want with the products, ask questions, and learn how to use an iPhone or a MacBook.

Each store has many "Apple Geniuses" who handhold customers and provide any technical advice that they might need. They are available to help make the customer's purchase decision as well.

Another aspect that makes the Apple Store different is that there are no points of sale or billing counters with queues. The Geniuses just record the sale wherever the customer is.

There are also regular 'Today At Apple' sessions with experts that try to inspire customers to use different aspects of Apple products. The entire bouquet of Apple products and accessories will be on sale at these stores.

When did Apple come up with its idea of an Apple Store?

The first Apple Store opened at Tysons Corner in McLean, Virginia, and the Glendale Galleria in California, United States, in 2001. The move encountered a lot of pushback, and Apple founder Steve Jobs was criticised for his attempt to get into retail.

Jobs countered: "Rather than just hear about megahertz and megabytes, customers can now learn and experience the things they can actually do with a computer, like make movies, burn custom music CDs, and publish their digital photos on a personal website."

Two decades on, Apple has more than 500 physical stores around the world, showcasing the unique value of the brand to old and new customers. Over the years, some of these stores have become iconic locations of the city — like the store at Carrousel du Louvre in Paris or the one inside Grand Central Terminal in New York.



TWITTER REMOVES PROTECTION AGAINST DEADNAMING: WHAT IS THIS PRACTICE, AND THE ROW AROUND IT

Twitter has removed a policy that prohibited misgendering or deadnaming of transgender people on the social media platform, according to the Associated Press. The move has sparked a row as many believe that the safety standards that the social media platform once afforded to various marginalised groups are being compromised under the stewardship of Elon Musk.

According to Forbes, Twitter’s “hateful conduct policy” used to read: “We prohibit targeting others with repeated slurs, tropes or other content that intends to dehumanise, degrade or reinforce negative or harmful stereotypes about a protected category. This includes targeted misgendering or deadnaming of transgender individuals.”

As per the report, around 10 days ago, the last line was removed. It had been first introduced in 2018.

On Monday, Twitter also announced that it will only put warning labels on some tweets that might violate its rules against hateful conduct. Earlier, the tweets were removed from the platform.

Speaking to AP, Sarah Kate Ellis, president of an LGBTQ advocacy group called GLAAD, said, “Twitter’s decision to covertly roll back its longtime policy is the latest example of just how unsafe the company is for users and advertisers alike... This decision to roll back LGBTQ safety pulls Twitter even more out of step with TikTok, Pinterest, and Meta, which all maintain similar policies to protect their transgender users at a time when anti-transgender rhetoric online is leading to real-world discrimination and violence.”

What is deadnaming and why is it harmful?

A deadname is essentially the name that a trans, non-binary, and/or gender-expansive person was called before they adopted a more self-affirming name. The act of, intentionally or not, calling a trans, non-binary, and/or gender-expansive person by the deadname is known as deadnaming, which can lead to adverse consequences.

“Deadnaming is harmful because refusing to use a person’s chosen name or pronouns is a form of transphobia or cissexism. Cissexism can contribute to mental health conditions, such as depression and suicidality. It can also lead to physical and verbal assault and abuse,” Medical News Today reported.

Moreover, deadnaming not only invalidates someone’s true identity but also may reveal information about the sex assigned to them at birth that the person concerned may not want anyone to know — this might result in the person being harassed, discriminated against or assaulted.

Has Twitter become less safe for users from marginalised communities?

This isn’t the first time that concerns related to the safety of marginalised groups on Twitter have surfaced.

In December 2022, after the social media platform suddenly announced to dissolve its Trust and Safety Council — an advisory group consisting of almost 100 civil, human rights and other organisations that sought to address child exploitation, suicide, self-harm and hate speech on the platform — Amnesty International took cognizance of the matter.

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



Deputy Director for Amnesty Tech Joe Westby at the time said, “Flippantly dissolving an independent advisory body that was set up to help Twitter users feel safe when expressing themselves online is only going to exacerbate the rampant issues of abuse and harassment on the social media platform. Twitter’s decision to dissolve the safety council harms efforts to protect the right to freedom of expression for women and marginalised groups, and to safeguard children from harm.”

A report published by the BBC in March this year quoted several Twitter insiders who said since Musk has taken over the company, it is no longer able to protect users from “trolling, state-coordinated disinformation and child sexual exploitation”.

“It shows that tens of thousands of new accounts have been created since Mr Musk took over, which then immediately followed known abusive and misogynistic profiles – 69% higher than before he was in charge,” it added.



DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

WHY IS A STAR-PLANET PAIR EMITTING RADIO SIGNALS?

The story so far:

An alien world called YZ Ceti b has suddenly become the cynosure of astronomers. YZ Ceti b is a rocky, earth-sized exoplanet rotating around a small red dwarf star, YZ Ceti, barely 12 light-years from Earth. Astronomers have detected a repeating radio signal from this exoplanet, suggesting the presence of a magnetic field — one of the prerequisites for a habitable planet — around it.

How was the discovery made?

The discovery was made by Jackie Villadsen from Bucknell University, Pennsylvania, and Sebastian Pineda from the University of Colorado, Boulder, using the Karl G. Jansky Very Large Array radio telescope in New Mexico. They published their findings in the journal *Nature Astronomy* on April 3.

They had to make multiple observations before they could detect the radio signals from the star YZ Ceti, which seemed to match the orbital period of the planet YZ Ceti b. From this, they deduced that the signals were a result of the interaction between the planet's magnetic field and the star.

Why does the magnetic field matter?

Just as energy surges from the sun sometimes disrupt telecommunications on earth and damage orbiting satellites, intense bursts of energy from the YZ Ceti star-exoplanet exchange produce spectacular auroral lights. "We get to see this indirectly in the form of the radio emission we receive," Dr. Pineda said.

These radio waves, strong enough to be picked up on earth, confirmed the existence of an exoplanetary magnetic field. Such signals can only be produced if the exoplanet orbits very close to its parent star and has its own magnetic field to influence the stellar wind and generate the signals.

What does this mean for YZ Ceti b?

YZ Ceti b has a small orbit — astronomers determined that the planet takes just a couple of earth-days to circle its star. Since the mid-1990s, astronomers have found hundreds of planets orbiting stars similar to the sun. To have an atmosphere and sustain water, a planet has to be at a certain distance from its star (in orbits said to be in the star's "Goldilocks zone"), or it will get burnt. Earth, for example, would have been a lot more like Venus if it had been just a little closer to the sun or cold like Mars if it had been any farther. Astronomers believe nearly 30% of all star systems discovered could potentially have "Goldilocks zones".

How common are such magnetic fields?

With such overwhelming numbers, it always stood to reason that strong planetary magnetic fields should be common outside the solar system. Nevertheless, despite many of the larger exoplanets detected being found to possess magnetic fields, planetary scientists have never been able to identify such fields on smaller, rocky exoplanets — until now. Dr. Pineda said that if the latest findings are confirmed by further research, they will confirm their method's ability to lead to the



“magnetic characterisation of exoplanets”. This is important because the survival of a planet’s atmosphere may well depend on its having, or not having, a strong magnetic field, since the field protects its atmosphere from being eroded by the charged particles from its star.

What happens next?

Curiously, Mars orbiting the sun at a ‘safe’ distance has a similar story to tell. Both Mars and Earth were very much alike billions of years ago, with a lot of water and similar atmospheric systems. But in spite of this, life started on one planet while the other became cold as the solar winds stripped it of most of its atmosphere. Will the story of YZ Ceti b be the same? “We are hoping to get additional observations on this target,” Dr. Pinade said. “Longer-term monitoring is important to confirm these results and further investigate the properties of the radio signals.” But one thing is certain: these findings will help astronomers learn more about rocky worlds in the deepest reaches of space running rings around their parent stars.

UN REPORTS ‘OFF THE CHARTS’ MELTING OF GLACIERS

The world’s glaciers melted at dramatic speed last year and saving them is effectively a lost cause, the United Nations reported on Friday, as climate change indicators once again hit record highs.

The last eight years have been the warmest ever recorded, while concentrations of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide hit new peaks, the UN’s World Meteorological Organization said.

“Antarctic sea ice fell to its lowest extent on record and the melting of some European glaciers was, literally, off the charts,” the WMO spelled out as it launched its annual climate overview.

Sea levels are also at a record high, having risen by an average of 4.62 millimetres per year between 2013 and 2022 — double the rate it was between 1993 and 2002.

Record high temperatures were recorded in the oceans — where around 90% of the heat trapped on Earth by greenhouse gases ends up.

The 2015 Paris Agreement saw countries agree to cap global warming at “well below” two degrees Celsius above average levels measured between 1850 and 1900 — and 1.5 degrees Celsius if possible.

G-7 MINISTERS COMMIT TO WORK FOR CARBON-FREE ELECTRICITY BY 2035

Climate and Energy Ministers and envoys from G-7 countries on Sunday committed to work towards ensuring carbon-free electricity production by 2035 and “accelerating” the phase-out of coal. This was part of an agreement by the countries at the end of a two-day conference in Sapporo, Japan, ahead of the G-7 summit in Hiroshima this May.

A proposal to have a 2030 deadline for phasing out coal was shot down as the final text gives leeway for continued investment in gas, on the grounds that it could be a stopgap against energy shortfalls, Reuters reported.

Environment Minister Bhupendra Yadav had also participated in the summit with India being invited as a ‘guest’, in the context of its presidency of the G-20. At the United Nations-Conference of Parties (COP) meeting in Glasgow in 2021, India had objected to language in the agreement to “phase out” and pushed instead for a “phase down” of coal. At the COP meeting in Sharm el Sheikh



last year, India pushed for a proposal to phase out all fossil fuel sources, including coal and gas. India and China are significantly dependent on coal for electricity, whereas several developed countries, including the United States, Japan, Canada and Europe, are reliant on gas reserves. The latter however did not find mention in the final text of the Sharm el Sheikh agreement.

The participants on Sunday also agreed to accelerating solar and wind energy investments to produce 1,000 gigawatt (GW) by 2030 from solar power and 150 GW of wind power from off-shore platforms. This, they said, would be in line with recent reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that repeat the need to ensure that global temperatures not increase by more than 1.5 degrees Celsius of pre-industrial levels by the end of the century.

'Need assistance'

Mr. Yadav, in his remarks on Saturday, had said that developing countries too needed finance, technology and assistance from developed countries for transitioning away from fossil fuels. Reaching targets on carbon neutrality and increased ambition "will not fly" unless they were made keeping principles of equity and climate justice at their centre, he added.

PLANT 'CRIES': RECALLING JAGADISH CHANDRA BOSE

Late last month, a group of researchers from Tel Aviv University in Israel reported that they had been able to pick up distress noises made by plants. The researchers said these plants had been making very distinct, high-pitched sounds in the ultrasonic range when faced with some kind of stress, like when they were in need of water.

This was the first time that plants had been caught making any kind of noise, and the breakthrough research findings made global headlines. But many Indians just had a sense of déjà vu. Several previous generations of Indians had grown up hearing that Jagadish Chandra Bose had shown, more than a century ago, that plants experienced sensations and were able to feel pleasure and pain just like animals. Children were often advised not to pluck leaves, flowers or twigs because that could cause pain to the plants or trees. The discovery that plants 'cry' in distress, therefore, did not come as much of a surprise to them. It seemed just a logical extension of J C Bose's work.

Bose might not be a very familiar name to the current generation, but he is a colossal figure of Indian science. A physicist-turned-biologist, Bose, who lived between 1858 and 1937, made pioneering contributions in both the fields and was the first Indian to have made a powerful impact on modern science, much before Srinivasa Ramanujan, C V Raman, or Satyendra Nath Bose, a student of Jagadish, arrived on the scene.

J C Bose could — many believe he deservedly should — very well have been India's first Nobel Prize winner, ahead of his life-long friend and confidant Rabindranath Tagore, with whom he used to have a prolific, and often poetic, correspondence.

Bose's science

Jagadish Chandra Bose is remembered for two things — his work on wireless transmission of signals, and on the physiology of plants. He is also credited as one of the first contributors to solid state physics. Sir Neville Mott, Nobel Prize winner in 1977, is said to have remarked that Bose was "at least 60 years ahead of his time and he had anticipated the p-type and n-type semiconductors", according to an account in Remembering J C Bose, a 2009 publication by D P Sen Gupta, M H Engineer and V A Shepherd.



Bose is widely believed to be the first one to generate electromagnetic signals in the microwave range. In 1895, just a year after he began his active research, he demonstrated, before an audience in Kolkata, how microwaves could be used, wirelessly, to ring an electric bell on the other side of a building. He published as many as 12 papers on radio waves in the Proceedings of the Royal Society, and many more in some other prestigious journals, as reported in the book Jagadis Chandra Bose and the Indian Response to Western Science, by Subrata Dasgupta. He lectured on his work at some highly publicised scientific gatherings in Europe, in the presence of some of the leading scientists of the day. He was the first one to come up with radio receivers, which enabled wireless telegraphy.

And yet, Guglielmo Marconi, an Italian scientist who carried out the first transmission of signals across the Atlantic in 1901, is recognised as the sole inventor of the radio. Marconi, along with another colleague, was awarded the 1909 Nobel Prize for work that Bose is known to have accomplished earlier.

It was not just bias, but as several accounts put it, a reluctance on Bose's part to obtain patents for his work, that deprived him of the Nobel. As mentioned in the publication Remembering J C Bose, he wrote to Tagore about being approached by a big businessman in Europe with the offer to get his work patented. Bose not just rejected the offer, he felt disgusted at the idea of making money from science. "If only Tagore would witness the country's (England's) greed for money," Bose wrote to Tagore. "What a dreadful, all-consuming disease it was".

His study of plants

Bose, rather abruptly, changed tack in the initial years of the 20th century and began to focus his attention on plants. But as Professor A S Raghavendra from the University of Hyderabad explained, Bose's work was not as disjointed as it seems.

"J C Bose was extremely talented at picking electric signals. The other thing he was extremely creative at was making instruments. Bose was working with rudimentary facilities and, yet, was able to build some remarkably sensitive instruments. He used these instruments to try and detect the faintest signals from the plants. He was carrying over his skills from physics to probe the world of biology," Raghavendra, a former J C Bose National Fellow, who has written extensively on Bose's work, told The Indian Express.

"His (Bose's) contributions to the communication systems in biology as well as physics are amazing. He devoted strong attention to studies on the biology of movements, feelings and nervous system. The word 'feelings' was used for plants, but clearly this is a matter of semantics; plants react both chemically and physically to touch, but to use the word 'feeling' or 'sensation' as we know it is quite different. The simple experiments of Bose revealed a high degree of similarity in the responses of plant and animal tissues to external stimuli. This principle was amply demonstrated later by biophysicists, using highly sophisticated instruments," Raghavendra wrote in a 2010 paper.

In a way, Bose was possibly the world's first biophysicist. But some of his work became controversial as well, particularly when he claimed that not just plants, even inanimate inorganic matter could respond to stimulus, and that there was actually no sharp demarcation between living and non-living worlds. Such "mental leaps" have sometimes been attributed to Bose's "deep convictions in Indian philosophy" and his "faith in universalism". Bose regarded plants to be the "intermediates in a continuum that extended between animals and the non-living materials", according to the authors of Remembering J C Bose.



His work on plants, too, was also not easily digested. Bose himself records the opposition he faced. In a letter to Tagore, he mentioned a lecture he was delivering in Europe. "When I commented during my lecture at the Royal Society that plants which come between the living and the non-living will provide similar response, (John) Burden Sanderson (a leading physiologist of his time) told me that he had worked all his life with plants. Only mimosa (touch-me-not) responds to touch. That ordinary plants should give electrical response is simply impossible. It cannot be".

Over the years, much of Bose's work has been confirmed, though his genius is not always acknowledged. "He was much ahead of his times, no doubt. Many of his contemporaries did not fully understand him," Raghavendra said, adding that the recent discovery of distress noise from plants could lead to some exciting research in the field. "We cannot lose sight of the fact that it was Bose who started it all".

IIT GUWAHATI FINDS A WAY TO REVIVE SCARRED HEART MUSCLES POST A HEART ATTACK

While procedures like stenting and bypass can open up blocked blood vessels in the heart, and blood thinning medicines can reduce the risk of another blockage, there is no treatment to rejuvenate the heart muscles that die without oxygen during a heart attack. The dead muscle forms fibrous scar tissues that reduce the efficiency of the heart to pump blood, and can eventually lead to heart failure. This is one of the reasons heart attacks have to be treated quickly to ensure that as little of the muscle gets destroyed or scarred as possible.

For those presenting themselves with heart failure, transplant is the only option at present. The availability of very few hearts for transplants and life-long immune-suppression needed in transplant patients have now prompted researchers to look towards stem cell therapy to reprogramme other cells in the body to form the heart muscle cells called cardiomyocytes.

A research team from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Guwahati, has now developed a "toolbox" containing six proteins that can convert certain skin cells or cells from elsewhere in the body into these cardiomyocytes in a lab. This can then be injected into the heart to help regenerate the damaged muscles. The proteins in the toolbox when applied can change the expression of genes in the cells and "reprogramme" them to take on a new cellular identity of heart muscle cells.

The toolbox developed by the team includes three core cardiac transcription factors – proteins involved in the process of transcribing DNA into RNA at the time of replication of cells, two proteins that can derive basic heart cells that then get differentiated into different type of cells, including muscle cells, and one protein that helps the cardiomyocytes to mature.

More importantly, other than re-programming cells in the laboratory, the toolbox can also be used to convert some of the cells already present in the scar tissues of the heart to functioning heart muscle cells. This means that the step of deriving the skill cells, reprogramming them and growing them in a laboratory may be skipped.

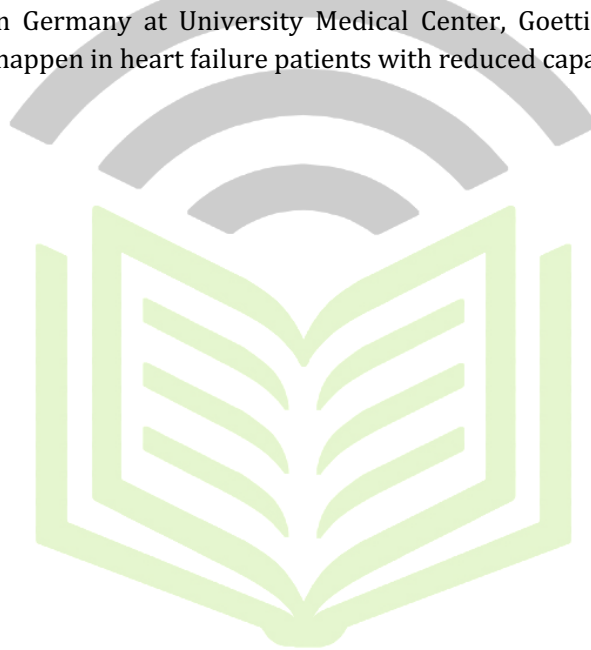
Although fascinating, it could be years before our damaged heart muscles can be regrown with a shot to the heart given at a hospital. At present, however, the results are based merely on laboratory-based studies. The research group is yet to try it out in mice.

What are the challenges for therapy? First, many of the efforts over the years have just been ineffective, with very few stem cells actually getting coaxed into becoming heart cells, most of the transplanted cells not surviving, and then not integrating properly into the existing heart muscles. Second, these re-programmed cells in some cases may end up producing tumours. Third, data

from animal studies have also shown that when injected into the heart muscles, these reprogrammed cells can also lead to an increased risk of arrhythmia or irregular beating of the heart.

Also, in a clinical setting, the therapy is likely to be used in patients, who are suffering from heart failure years after a heart attack. But, studies in rats and guinea pigs have shown that the therapy led to improvement in heart function only when done soon after the heart attack.

Researchers are also looking for ways to scale up manufacturing of clinical-grade cells. Initial human trials for these therapies have started over the last four years – with the first trial taking place in China in 2019. However, along with these modified cells, the patients in the trial also underwent bypass, so the benefits of the therapy can be hard to understand. There are two trials under way in Japan – one by Osaka university and one by a biotechnology company. The largest trial is under way in Germany at University Medical Center, Goettingen, to see whether re-muscularisation can happen in heart failure patients with reduced capacity to pump blood.



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