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INTERNATIONAL

THE ANATOMY OF A CORONATION: A GUIDE TO THE CROWNING OF KING CHARLES III

The coronation of Britain's King Charles III and Camilla, the Queen Consort, will take place at noon (London time) on Saturday, May 6, at Westminster Abbey, where coronations have taken place for around 900 years.

Prior to this, the King and Queen Consort will undertake a procession from Buckingham Palace to the Abbey for the ceremonies, which are scheduled to begin at 11:00 a.m. and will be officiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The event is expected to conclude at 1 p.m., following which the royal family will watch a fly past from the balcony of Buckingham Palace.

How does this British coronation compare to previous ones?

Apart from the coronation reflecting the individual preferences of the monarch, this year's events "will reflect the Monarch's role today and look towards the future, while being rooted in longstanding traditions and pageantry", according to Buckingham Palace.

For instance, at least one of the six coronation 'vestments' will be recycled from George VI's coronation "in the interests of sustainability and efficiency", Buckingham Palace said. Several of the chairs used during the ceremonies will also be restored and reused — such as the Chairs of Estate, which were made in 1953 and used during Queen Elizabeth's coronation.

There will also be traditions dating back hundreds of years. The throne that will be used for the ceremony was built over 700 years ago and used first by Edward the Confessor (whose reign ended in 1066). It sits over a 152 kg stone — the Stone of Scone or the Stone of Destiny, which has been used by Scottish rulers for centuries and was seized by Edward I of England in 1296 (the English and Scottish crowns were unified in 1603). Former U.K. Prime Minister John Major returned the stone to Scotland 700 years later, in 1996, and it was brought back to Westminster Abby last week for the May 6 ceremonies.

In a departure from tradition, Camilla will not wear the Platinum Crown, which has the Koh-i-Noor diamond embedded in it. The crown was set aside, reportedly following concerns that wearing the diamond could cause offence, especially in India, from where the East India Company took it.

The religious landscape of Britain is vastly different today than it was when Charles's mother ascended the throne in 1953. To reflect this, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Buddhist leaders will present the King with coronation regalia and also greet him following the coronation.

The British monarch is styled 'Defender of the Faith' — i.e., the Protestant faith espoused by the Church of England. In the 1990s, the King, then Prince Charles, had said, controversially, that he would be a 'Defender of Faith' rather than 'Defender of the Faith' to reflect the changed religious landscape of the country. The preamble to his oath on Saturday will have a reference to the King fostering "an environment in which people of all faiths and beliefs may live freely".

During the coronation, the public will be invited to swear allegiance to the King and "his heirs and successors". This is also a new element to the coronation. While some (such as Members of the U.K. Parliament) have come out in support of this, others have objected.



“In a democracy, it is the head of state who should be swearing allegiance to the people, not the other way around. This kind of nonsense should have died with Elizabeth I, not outlived Elizabeth II,” said Graham Smith, CEO of Republic, a group that is campaigning to make the U.K. a Republic.

Who is attending the coronation?

India will be represented by Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar. The funeral of Queen Elizabeth II was attended by President Droupadi Murmu and the last coronation, six years after India's independence, was attended by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

The U.S. will be represented by First Lady Jill Biden — President Joe Biden will not attend, sticking to the tradition of American Presidents skipping the crowning of a British monarch. French President Emmanuel Macron is also on the list as are the heads of government of the commonwealth ‘realms’— such as Prime Minister Anthony Albanese of Australia.

European and world royalty will also be in attendance — including the King and Queen of Bhutan, the Crown Prince and Princess of Japan and the Maori King and Queen.

The King's daughter-in-law, Meghan Markle, will be conspicuous by her absence. The Duchess of Sussex will remain in California while her husband, Prince Harry, will attend his father's coronation, months after publishing a revealing memoir, *Spare*, which further strained his and Ms. Markle's relationship with the King and the heir to the throne, Prince William.

Who pays for the coronation?

The U.K. Government, i.e., U.K. taxpayers, will foot the bill for the coronation which is estimated to be £100 million (\$125 million). In 1953, the British Government spent £1.57 million or £46 million in today's terms on the late Queen Elizabeth II's coronation in 1953, according to an analysis in *The Times*.

Is the monarchy popular?

A significant majority of Britons think that the U.K. should continue to have a monarchy. An April 26-27 YouGov poll showed that 60% of adults were in support of the institution continuing, while 26% said the country should have an elected head of state (15% were in the “don't know” category).

Support for the monarchy was the highest in England and then Wales. Only 42% of Scottish people surveyed thought the monarchy should continue, with 46% preferring an elected head of state.

Support for the monarchy was the lowest in the 18-24 age group (32% support it while 44% want an elected head of state) and higher in older groups. It was also higher among those who voted to leave the European Union and those who voted for the Conservative Party in the 2019 general election, and slightly higher among women.

Approval ratings for members of the royal family have dropped since the publication of Prince Harry's memoir. These ratings had risen around the death of Queen Elizabeth in September last year. At least 51% of adults think that King Charles will do a good job as monarch, according to March data from Ipsos.



FOREGONE CONCLUSION

Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev won overwhelming voter approval (90%) in Sunday's referendum to rewrite the Constitution, which the 65-year-old leader claims would not only improve governance and quality of life in the former Soviet republic but could also allow him to extend his rule beyond his current term. Mr. Mirziyoyev, a former loyal Prime Minister of dictator Islam Karimov, has gradually opened up the country for social and economic reforms ever since becoming the President in 2016 after his boss's death. He cracked down on forced labour in cotton fields, released political prisoners, relaxed media censorship and promoted women's rights, while his policies aimed at encouraging entrepreneurship and attracting foreign investments are transforming what was once a closed economy to becoming the fastest growing in Central Asia. The new charter, which describes Uzbekistan as "sovereign, democratic, legal, social and secular", promises a new media code and criminalises domestic abuse. It promises to ban the death penalty, guarantees prisoner rights and offers better social protection, including housing to lower income people.

But it would also reset the President's terms to zero, allowing him to contest in two more elections under the new Constitution, which has increased the presidential term from five years to seven. Mr. Mirziyoyev is currently serving his second five-year term, which would expire in 2026. Two more seven-year terms would mean that he could remain in power until 2040, the year he would turn 82. The Election Commission had made detailed arrangements to showcase the voting process as free and fair. International journalists and monitors were invited, allowed to visit polling stations and speak to voters and officials on the day of voting. But still, everyone knew what the results would be as there was no campaign against the President's proposals. While the big media houses were largely aligned with the government, social media activists and press freedom advocates were under pressure not to campaign against the reforms. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which had sent election observers, stated the voting was not truly representative. Yet, Mr. Mirziyoyev's reign is markedly different from that of his dictatorial predecessor. Mr. Mirziyoyev's social and economic reforms, while making sure that his political powers are not threatened, are not enough. If he is serious about his promise of building a new Uzbekistan, he should also launch political reforms, respecting the right to dissent and allowing the opposition to operate free from fear of government pressure and intimidation.

CHINA'S AMENDED ANTI-ESPIONAGE LAW

The story so far:

On April 26, China's legislature approved sweeping amendments to China's anti-espionage law, broadening the scope of what may be defined as activities related to spying and national security. The amendments come amid a string of high-profile cases involving journalists, foreign executives, as well as international companies in China, who have come under the lens of authorities on national security grounds. The expanded law follows the Xi Jinping government's increasing focus on "security" and a recent policy shift that now emphasises the dual importance of "development and security", rather than a focus solely on economic development.

What is China's anti-espionage law?

The recent amendments are to China's 2014 anti-espionage law. Article 1 of the law says the idea behind the legislation is "to prevent, stop and punish espionage conduct and maintain national security." The broad ambit of what constitutes "national security" as well as the law's focus on



involving a “whole of society” approach to counter-espionage, including from Chinese enterprises and organisations, evoked concerns among both rights groups and foreign enterprises in China.

Foreign governments are especially concerned whether Chinese companies, particularly in the tech sector, would be mandated to offer their vast amounts of data to the authorities. For instance, one article of the law mandates that “all State organs, armed forces, political parties and public groups, and all enterprises and organisations, have the obligation to prevent and stop espionage activities and maintain national security.”

Another article encourages ordinary citizens to take part in national anti-espionage efforts by reporting to the authorities any activity deemed to be suspicious and endangering national security.

The latest amendments are the first changes since 2014, and will take effect on July 1, 2023. They have further broadened the law’s scope, with one of the changes declaring that “all documents, data, materials, and items related to national security and interests” will be protected on par with what are deemed state secrets.

The definition of espionage has also been expanded to include cyber attacks. Essentially, the transfer of any information deemed by authorities to be in the interest of what they define to be “national security” will now be considered an act of espionage.

Only days before the amendments were approved, the family of a senior Chinese newspaper editor, Dong Yuyu, said he had been arrested almost a year ago while meeting with a Japanese diplomat and for his contacts with the Americans and Japanese. He has been accused of spying.

What will be the impact of the amended law?

The amended law is likely to have a chilling impact both within China and beyond. Chinese journalists, academics and executives who frequently engage with foreign counterparts are likely to think twice before doing so, at least without explicit government sanction, particularly in the wake of the arrest of Dong Yuyu. Unrestricted engagement between Chinese and foreign scholars, which has already become limited in the Xi Jinping era, is likely to become even rarer.

Foreign enterprises are also likely to be concerned following recent reported investigations by Chinese authorities on the U.S. consulting firm Bain & Company and a raid on the American due diligence company Mintz Group.

Indian companies with a presence in China, particularly in sectors deemed to be sensitive such as pharma and IT, will likely need to review their exposure to risks under the expanded law and broadened definitions of “national security”, particularly amid deteriorating relations between the neighbours. Chinese State media have, however, sought to push back against suggestions that the law signals a chilling in China’s business environment.

ON THE WASHINGTON DECLARATION

The story so far:

On April 25, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol arrived in the U.S. to commemorate the 70th anniversary of U.S.-South Korea bilateral relations. A highlight of the visit was the signing of the “Washington Declaration” as a nuclear deterrence strategy.



What prompted the U.S. visit?

The successful launch of North Korea's Hwasong-8 solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), a vital component for nuclear weapons delivery, seems to have triggered the U.S. visit of the South Korean President. Mr. Yoon aimed to advance the strategic partnership, drawing an alliance over an extended nuclear deterrence plan against the regional aggression of North Korea. The Washington agreement will launch a new phase in the partnership between Seoul and Washington. "Our two countries have agreed to immediate bilateral presidential consultations in the event of North Korea's nuclear attack and promised to respond swiftly, overwhelmingly and decisively using the full force of the alliance, including the United States' nuclear weapons," said Mr. Yoon.

What does the Washington Declaration say?

The agreement outlines cooperation towards deterrence.

According to the declaration, an American nuclear ballistic submarine would be deployed in the Korean peninsula; a nuclear consultative group would be formed to formulate principles of joint response tactics; South Korea would receive Intel from the U.S. regarding nuclear advancements; and the U.S. will strengthen South Korea's nuclear deterrence capabilities through joint military training programs and an annual intergovernmental simulation. The declaration reaffirmed the non-proliferation Treaty implying that South Korea would not venture into the creation of its own independent nuclear capabilities and would instead focus on deterrence measures through an alliance-based approach. It also mandates the U.S. President as the only 'sole authority' to use the nuclear arsenal of the U.S. in the event of a nuclear confrontation. While the existence of the agreement is based on the security needs of South Korea, the policy reflects big power politics where the interests of the larger power (U.S.) takes precedence.

Why is the U.S. not keen on S.Korea having a nuclear arsenal?

South Korea's nuclear development programme supported by former president Park Chung Hee was hindered due to U.S. pressure. In the 1990s, the U.S. withdrew one hundred nuclear weapons from South Korea as part of their "Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty". The U.S. was hoping to make North Korea unarm itself. Washington made an erroneous assumption that it could deter the weapons production of North Korea by extracting South Korea's nuclear capacity.

Secondly, the Nuclear Posture Review 2022 reflects a shift in the U.S. narrative where it is now concerned about the progressing nuclear capacities of North Korea. The report states that North Korea creates "deterrence dilemmas for the United States and its Allies and partners," and that "a crisis or conflict on the Korean Peninsula could involve a number of nuclear-armed actors, raising the risk of broader conflict."

And finally, the U.S. wants to control global nuclear arms production. It has been reluctant to allow South Korea to develop their own nuclear arsenal as it would hinder the prolonged efforts of controlling nuclear production in the world. The assurance that the U.S. and its nuclear weapons would protect its allies by being responsible for maintaining stability in the region aligns with the larger goal of non-proliferation. Washington plays a major influence in South Korea's foreign policy objectives, and Seoul would rather not disappoint the U.S. as they are a vital supporter of their cause.

What has been the regional response?



The Washington Declaration advocates for nuclear deterrence policy in the region, aiming to balance power dynamics against North Korea. While the aim is to defuse the threat, physical deployment of the arsenal can be deemed as a direct threat by opposing actors and used as leverage to act aggressively.

China criticised the agreement with Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning saying, “What the U.S. is doing .. provokes confrontation between camps, undermines the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the strategic interests of other countries.” North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un’s sister Kim Yo-jong warned that the declaration would, “only result in making peace and security of North-East Asia and the world be exposed to more serious danger.”

What is the domestic response?

The South Korean public are sceptic about U.S. support. A poll by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations reported that 71% of South Koreans want to build their own nuclear weapons. With an aggressive North Korea in the neighbourhood, they would prefer their own deterrence.

HORRORS OF A KENYAN CULT

In the run-up to last year’s Kenyan general election, Ida Odinga, wife of presidential candidate Raila Odinga, had expressed concerns over the “mushrooming” of churches in the country. A torrent of criticism followed and she was forced to withdraw her statement. A year later, the country’s civil society has thrown its weight behind Ms. Ida’s proposal after mass graves were discovered at the ranch of a self-styled pastor suspected of running a religious cult in Malindi.

More than 90 corpses, mostly of children, were exhumed after a tip-off led the police to a property in the Shakahola forest, where over a dozen emaciated people said they were starving “to meet Jesus.” There are fears that the incident is just the tip of the iceberg, with more than 300 people reported missing in Malindi. As the horror unfolds, the arrest of suspected cult leader Paul Mackenzie Nthenge has put the spotlight on the religious group he led — the Good News International Church.

In the predominantly Christian country, over the years, self-styled pastors have exploited religion to control people. Some used religion for financial gains, but a few operated with darker agendas. One such group, known as the Good News International Church, was established in August 2003 by taxi driver-turned-pastor Paul Mackenzie, with its headquarters in Malindi. According to its website, the organisation intended to “nurture the faithful” in Christian spirituality for the “second coming of Jesus Christ”.

The church built its base via the ‘End Time Messages’ programme on a dedicated TV station and used social media to spread its messages. Most of the blog content, published in 2014, centres on the end of the world, Judgement Day prophecies, and salvation.

Belief system

A look at the church’s YouTube channel reveals its true nature. Other than warning followers against ‘diabolical’ mobile phone-based money transfer services and ‘satanic’ forces in power, the group stood against imparting school education to children. It discouraged women from seeking medical treatment and told them not to wear ‘demonic’ wigs. “Why can’t women be content with the natural hair given to them by God,” a clip shows.



The group asked followers to avoid medical treatment when sick. It even called upon its members to quit their jobs. Over time, the televangelist with ‘prophetic powers’ and the ability to speak to God amassed a cult following.

However, his sermons caught the attention of the police. Mackenzie’s first brush with the law came in 2017 when he was arrested for advocating against school education for children. Two years later, he was held for disobedience of the law and distribution of unexamined films with radicalisation-like content. After his release, Mackenzie said he was closing down the church. He sold the television channel and moved to the forests of Shakahola in 2019.

Soon, Mackenzie started leading cult members to his Malindi ranch, nestled in the forest, where he allegedly convinced them that the world was going to end. He preached that the only way to meet God was to fast until death. Though he claimed to have closed the church, Mackenzie continued uploading video sermons for his 7,000-odd subscribers on YouTube.

It was an activist’s tip-off that finally led the police to the 800-acre ranch. The subsequent searches led investigators to uncover the scale of the ‘Shakahola forest massacre’. During the raids, investigators unearthed dozens of decomposed bodies buried in shallow graves marked with a cross. Some were left exposed in the open air. A few people were found alive but starving inside mud huts scattered on the ranch. The incident sent shockwaves across Kenya. It has come to light that Mackenzie was arrested in March in connection with the death of two children. Their parents had allegedly starved the two kids on the pastor’s advice.

Authorities suspect the pastor and his group were involved in murder and radicalisation, but Interior Minister Kithure Kindiki awaits more followers of the group to come forward to tell the world the real story of “how a fellow Kenyan decided to hurt so many people, heartlessly, hiding under the Holy Scriptures”.

WHY IS BRAZIL PUSHING OUT ILLEGAL MINERS FROM ITS YANOMAMI TERRITORY?

In January this year, Lula’s government launched a crackdown on illegal mines located across the Portugal-sized Yanomami region. So far, around 80 per cent of the more than 20,000 miners that invaded the territory have been evicted.

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva-led Brazilian government has promised to speed up the expulsion of illegal miners in the country’s largest indigenous territory, Yanomami, after five people were reportedly killed in two separate violent attacks in the region, The Guardian reported on Monday (May 1).

The first attack took place on April 29, when between 15 and 20 heavily armed miners opened fire on residents of a Yanomami village called Uxiu, killing one of the indigenous health workers. The second attack happened in a different part of the territory in which four illegal miners were shot dead in a gun battle after the special forces members of the environmental protection group Ibama and the federal highway police (PRF) — two of the government forces responsible for pushing out the illegal miners — raided an illegal cassiterite and gold field.

What has been the impact of illegal mining in Yanomami territory?

The spread of illegal mines and the arrival of thousands of miners has caused a spike in reported cases of diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria. In a 2022 study published in BioMed Central’s

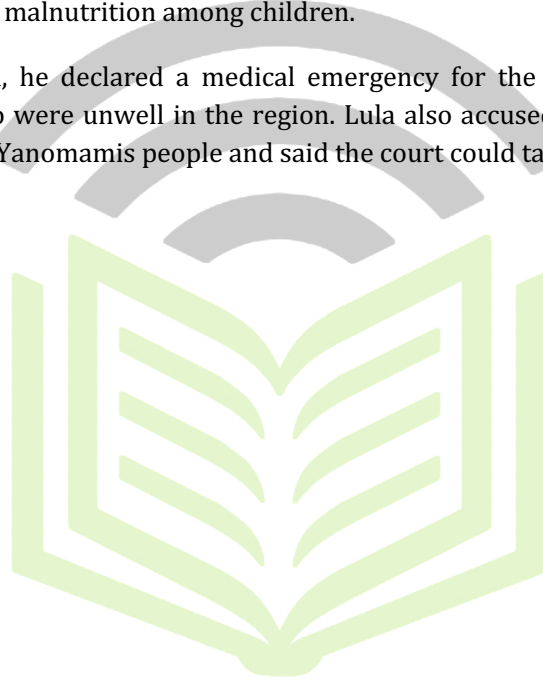


Malaria Journal, researchers wrote that between 2016 and 2020, the number of malaria cases rose by 1,090 per cent in Indigenous areas and 75,576 per cent in mining areas.

Moreover, at least 570 Yanomami children have died from preventable causes since 2018, Brazil's health ministry told CNN. One of the main reasons for these deaths has been malnutrition. Historically, the indigenous people of Yanomami have relied on the forest, birds and animals to feed themselves. But illegal gold mining has destroyed vast patches of the forest, leading to a scarcity of food.

Another problem is mercury poisoning. Miners in the region "search for gold by mixing liquid mercury into excavated sediment of the Amazon's rivers", which has polluted Yanomami areas traditionally used for hunting, fishing and gathering, DW reported. This has also contributed to the increase in cases of malnutrition among children.

Days after this speech, he declared a medical emergency for the Yanomamis and evacuated hundreds of those who were unwell in the region. Lula also accused Bolsonaro of perpetrating "genocide" against the Yanomamis people and said the court could take action against him.



DreamIAS



NATION

THE LAC CRISIS AND THE DANGER OF LOSING WITHOUT FIGHTING

It was in the first week of May 2020 that news broke of ingress by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) in multiple areas across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh. Three years later, some of those areas have witnessed disengagement — pulling troops apart by a few miles of buffer zones — while two of them, Depsang and Demchok, remain unresolved. Indian soldiers cannot touch 26 of the 65 patrolling points in Ladakh.

Neither diplomatic meetings nor talks between corps commanders have elicited any progress since September last year; regular meetings between Indian and Chinese Ministers, Foreign and Defence, have not yielded results either. Beijing has ignored Delhi's talking points, even after they have been watered down so much that India no longer demands a return to the status quo of April 2020. Verbose non sequiturs in Indian statements can hardly cover up the government's failure in handling the current China crisis.

The Depsang crisis of 2013

During the 2013 Depsang crisis, the United Progressive Alliance was in power, the current External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar was India's Ambassador to Beijing and the current Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, Lt. Gen. K.T. Parnaik (retired) was the Northern Army Commander. The PLA had then blocked Indian patrols at Bottleneck or Y-Junction, the same place where it has now blocked them in Depsang since 2020. Within three weeks, the PLA had been forced to lift the block after the Indian Army, as per Lt. Gen. Parnaik, launched a quid pro quo operation on the Chinese side in Chumar. Negotiations followed, including in Beijing, and the status quo as it existed before PLA's block was restored.

The criticism of the government over those three weeks was deafening. Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat, argued that the problem was not on the border but in Delhi. He also asked why our soldiers were vacating the area after disengagement if they were on Indian territory.

Most media reports were strident in criticising the government then, but the same journalists have been silent when the very same spot has been blocked by the PLA for over three years. Their constant labelling of Depsang as a legacy issue disconnected with the current crisis so offended former Ladakh Corps Commander, Lt. Gen. Rakesh Sharma (retd.) that he was compelled to pen a strong rejoinder. However, misleading claims about Depsang continue to be regurgitated.

Unlike mainstream media, the military brass (this includes the Indian Army chief General Manoj Pande, and the Northern Army Commander, Lt. Gen. Upendra Dwivedi) has been more forthcoming about the ground realities. The cover up emanates from the political leadership, in the silence of the Prime Minister and the Home Minister or by way of the deceptive euphemisms of the External Affairs Minister. The reason is known even to watchers in Washington DC. A White House official until 2021, Lisa Curtis, wrote recently that the government of the day "might not want its public to know the full extent of PLA activities in disputed areas as this might become fodder to protest government incompetence or inaction".

Incompetence and inaction

Incompetence may be a function of capability, but inaction seems to be driven by fear — a fear of military escalation in case India were to attempt a proactive move in disputed border areas to



unsettle Beijing. If negotiations are about 'give and take', New Delhi must militarily take something that its diplomats can then give at the table. Devoid of that, Beijing holds all the cards. No one can deny that China is a much bigger economic, military, industrial and geopolitical power than India, but the gap shrinks considerably when it comes to local balance on the LAC. If Russia is unable to vanquish Ukraine, Chinese President Xi Jinping knows that China cannot militarily walk over India.

The decision rests with the Prime Minister but he seems haunted by the ghost of 1962. Many officials believe that Jawaharlal Nehru was pushed into a military confrontation with China then because of domestic pressure created by the likes of the Swatantra Party and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The Prime Minister does not wish to fall into that trap. They are right. Mr. Modi is no Nehru. Nehru faced Parliament and answered questions regularly, even during the 1962 conflict. Unlike Nehru's time, the public relations and propaganda machinery now has fabricated such a hyper-nationalist narrative that more than 70% Indians contend that India can militarily defeat China. The pressure on Mr. Modi to militarily deliver, when the ruling party's political campaigns have ridden the hype of so-called 'Surgical Strikes' and Balakot airstrike, is even greater.

Over nine years, Mr. Xi seems to have got the measure of Mr. Modi. Mr. Xi sent PLA soldiers to Chumar even as there was intense media focus and the hyped optics during the Xi visit to Ahmedabad, Gujarat, in 2014. The Chinese leader rebuffed the Indian leader's plea in Beijing in 2015 to delineate the LAC, has blocked India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and has remained vague about the outcomes of informal summits. Satellite imagery shows that the Chinese were already building massive military infrastructure in Ladakh by the time the Second Informal Summit was taking place in Mamallapuram, off Chennai, in late 2019. However, Mr. Modi's faith in the force of his personality and personal charm to win over the Chinese leader, such as by offering a handshake and having a chat in Bali last November, did not result in even a telephone call, let alone a breakthrough on the Ladakh border.

Proactive move

India is under pressure on the border, and it needs to find a way to transfer that pressure back to China. Beijing has never compromised unless it has been forced into an uncomfortable spot — a tactic India has deployed since Nathu La in 1967. This warrants India to be proactive, which calls for the political leadership to boldly use its imagination. If the political leadership is timid and fearful, the military on the China border will remain in a defensive posture. If strategic thought in Delhi lacks boldness, tactical actions on the LAC will not be daring. After all, the military is used as an instrument by states to pursue policy ends, to try and impose its will upon the adversary.

India's failure to impose its will upon China is a direct consequence of its fear of military escalation, in the backdrop of the ghost of 1962 that hovers over the top political leadership's thinking. Three years after the border crisis began, a status quoist approach can no longer be the answer. India will have to wrest the initiative from China; else things will happen only at a time and place of Beijing's choosing. Mr. Modi's personal success may lie in avoiding another 1962 but it would be a national failure for India. Unlike 1962, China would have now won without fighting.



INAUGURAL ASEAN-INDIA MARITIME EXERCISE IN SOUTH CHINA SEA FROM TODAY

In a step further in the expanding India-ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) military cooperation, the maiden ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME) is set to begin, with war games in South China Sea.

The Navy chief, Admiral R. Hari Kumar, is in Singapore for the exercise as well as to take part in the International Maritime Defence Exhibition (IMDEX-23) and International Maritime Security Conference (IMSC) being hosted by Singapore.

The inaugural edition of the naval and maritime defence event IMDEX was held in 1997 and has since been expanding year on year. There are about 50 delegations this year, it has been learnt.

Mr. Singh reached Male on a three-day visit, the first by an Indian Defence Minister to the Maldives in 11 years, according to the Indian High Commission.

India and the Maldives are working closely to address shared challenges, including maritime security, terrorism, radicalisation, organised crime and natural disasters, the Ministry said.

THE SCO OPPORTUNITY FOR INDIA SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION MEET IN GOA: AS RUSSIA, CHINA VIE FOR UPPER HAND, WHAT SCO MEANS FOR INDIA

While Russia needs India in the SCO, with relations between India and China rough since 2017, the group has provided Delhi a forum to play up its proximity to Moscow. It has also helped India stay involved in the regional discussion on Taliban rule, from which it is otherwise excluded

The Council of Foreign Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) will meet Friday in Goa. The SCO is a multilateral grouping comprising eight member states of China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; four Observer States; and six "Dialogue Partners".

This year, of the four observers, Iran and Belarus are set to be admitted as full members. Afghanistan and Mongolia are the two other observers. The dialogue partners are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turkey.

India, which was admitted as a full member in 2017 along with Pakistan in the first-ever expansion of the group, holds the rotating presidency of the SCO this year, and in this capacity has hosted several ministerial-level SCO meetings, including a tourism ministers' meeting at Varanasi in March.

The main work of the foreign ministers' meeting is to prepare for the upcoming meeting of the Heads of State Council, or the SCO summit, expected to be held in July. The foreign ministers will put their heads together to prepare a draft declaration to be adopted at the summit, formalise the admission of Iran and Belarus to the SCO, and discuss other regional and international issues.

As a pointer, at the foreign ministers' meeting hosted in July 2022 by last year's chair Uzbekistan, the discussions centred on the Ukraine conflict, the resulting energy crisis and food shortages, Afghanistan, terrorism, trade and connectivity.

China and Russia dominate the SCO. Like last year, this year too, SCO meetings are being held under the shadow of Russia's war in Ukraine, and the resultant geopolitical changes in the world.



Central Asia, the heart of SCO

Eurasia, which in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) definition includes 13 countries (Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan), is at the centre of this flux in the world order. Excluding Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Turkmenistan, all others are either members, observers or dialogue partners of the SCO.

While the West views the SCO as a cosy club run by China and ally Russia, those familiar with the workings of the group describe the forum as a venue where the two dominant powers are in competition with each other for influence. Four of the five Central Asian republics are members of SCO. Russia has viewed these resource-rich republics, that were part of the erstwhile Soviet Union, as its strategic backyard. But it has not been able to stop a growing Chinese footprint over the region, which has been driven both by strategic economic and security reasons.

The power play in central Asia has its impact in the SCO. And this is where Russia needs India.

India and the SCO

Moscow sees India's presence in the SCO as a potential countervailing force to Chinese dominance of Central Asia. It was Russia that began pushing for India's membership of the group, around the time that China's Xi Jinping launched his Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan. In 2015, India was admitted as an observer along with Iran and Pakistan.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit the same year to all five central Asian republics in one trip gave India's interest in the region an authoritative imprimatur. The region spoke to all the recurrent themes of Indian foreign policy over the last two decades – trade, connectivity, energy security and combating terrorism. A membership of the SCO two years later gave India a higher profile in Central Asia to which it does not have overland access. In post-US Afghanistan, it has helped India stay involved in the regional discussion on Taliban rule, from which it is otherwise excluded.

Just last month, the foreign ministers of Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which have formed a group called "Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan", met in the Uzbek city of Samarkand.

Just as much as Russia needs India in the SCO, with relations between India and China rough since the Doklam episode in 2017 and worsening steadily after the Chinese incursions in eastern Ladakh, the group has provided Delhi a forum to play up its proximity to Moscow.

Some experts have tended to view the Quad grouping of Australia, India, Japan and the United States as a counter to the influence that Russia and China seek to project through the SCO, and India's membership of both as an irreconcilable contradiction.

But if the Quad is India's diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific, the SCO represents its diplomacy in the Eurasian landmass. It can also be seen as an exercise of true multipolarity. If the SCO is a bipolar China-Russia platform, it offers several multiplicities within as other members leverage their strengths to get the best deal for themselves. At last year's foreign ministers' meeting in Tashkent, India was the only country that did not sign a joint statement calling for the strengthening of the Biological Weapons Convention. The entry of Iran and Belarus can only increase the cross currents within.



SCO veterans describe the forum as a “diplomatic battlefield”. The challenge for India is to use both the SCO and the Quad to further its own interests instead of getting trapped in an either-or proposition.

INDIA SLIPS IN PRESS FREEDOM INDEX, RANKS 161 OUT OF 180 NATIONS

India’s ranking in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index has slipped to 161 out of 180 countries, according to the latest report released by the global media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF). In comparison, Pakistan has fared better when it comes to media freedom as it was placed at 150, an improvement from last year’s 157th rank. In 2022, India was ranked at 150.

Sri Lanka also made significant improvement on the index, ranking 135th this year as against 146th in 2022.

Norway, Ireland and Denmark occupied the top three positions in press freedom, while Vietnam, China and North Korea constituted the bottom three.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) comes out with a global ranking of press freedom every year. RSF is an international NGO whose self-proclaimed aim is to defend and promote media freedom. Headquartered in Paris, it has consultative status with the United Nations. The objective of the World Press Freedom Index, which it releases every year, “is to compare the level of press freedom enjoyed by journalists and media in 180 countries and territories” in the previous calendar year.

RSF defines press freedom as “the ability of journalists as individuals and collectives to select, produce, and disseminate news in the public interest independent of political, economic, legal, and social interference and in the absence of threats to their physical and mental safety”.

Concerns arise

The Indian Women’s Press Corps, the Press Club of India, and the Press Association released a joint statement voicing their concern over the country’s dip in the index.

“The indices of press freedom have worsened in several countries, including India, according to the latest RSF report,” the joint statement said.

“The constraints on press freedom due to hostile working conditions like contractorisation have to also be challenged. Insecure working conditions can never contribute to a free press,” it added.

PRESENT IMPERFECT

For the fourth consecutive year, the government has expressed outrage and rejected the recommendations of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom’s (USCIRF) latest report, calling it “biased and motivated”. In its report released on Monday, the independent congressional body has called for India to be designated a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) for its “worsening” record on religious freedoms. The report has targeted the Indian government for “promoting and enforcing religiously discriminatory policies”, naming laws that deal with conversion, interfaith relationships, wearing the hijab and cow slaughter, as well as the CAA and the NRC. All of these, it alleges, have impacted minorities including Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, and Adivasis (indigenous peoples and Scheduled Tribes) negatively. The USCIRF has also catalogued acts of violence and the vilification of minorities and criticised the “suppression of critical voices” by intimidation that includes surveillance, demolition of property, detentions and



the targeting of NGOs through laws curtailing foreign donations. It has criticised the U.S. State Department for not having designated India as a CPC, and has called for sanctions on Indian government agencies and officials. In the only such sanction imposed on India, the U.S. had, in 2005, revoked Prime Minister Narendra Modi's U.S. visa after a USCIRF recommendation on the 2002 Gujarat riots. In its response, the External Affairs Ministry has told the USCIRF to "desist" from such reports and to "develop a better understanding of India...."

The government's stern reaction is understandable, and is in line with its response to such reports over the last two decades, since the USCIRF began to publish its findings. The process the USCIRF follows is non-inclusive, and the fact that it does not study the state of religious freedoms inside the U.S., suggests a double standard. Moreover, its recommendations hold no sway within India, and are meant only for the U.S. government to deliberate on, and accept or dismiss. Either way, there is little need for or utility to New Delhi's public responses, which make it sound defensive and do not actually repair the reputational damage to India as a secular, inclusive and pluralistic democracy. Given the detailed and pointed accusations, however, the Centre may well consider an internal review of its conduct and the direction it hopes to lead India in, on issues such as religious freedoms and rights. Eventually, any government's duty is not in achieving a perfect score in a survey run abroad, but rather in burnishing its record of delivering justice, equality and security to its citizens back home.

STRATEGIC TIMEOUT

It is disconcerting when a judge is impelled to say that he discerns in the tactics adopted by the convicts in the Bilkis Bano case, an intent to avoid his Bench. The convicts were released last year. Justice K.M. Joseph's remarks that it was more than obvious that there was an attempt to avoid his Bench came in response to requests for adjournments on behalf of some of the convicts claiming they had not yet been served notice of Ms. Bano's petition challenging their release. The requests came on a day when the matter was listed for final hearing. No one can dispute the right of the convicts to be informed of hearings through proper service of notices, but it would be questionable if claims of not being served properly were made with an oblique motive. In the end, the Bench had to adjourn the hearing to July, long after Justice Joseph's last working day later this month. The release of the 11 convicts, who were serving life terms for multiple murders and the gang-rape of women during the Gujarat pogrom of 2002, had raised questions about the remission process. It became known later that the Union government had consented to their release. Justice Joseph had, at an earlier hearing, wanted to see the relevant files to ascertain whether the decision to release them was based on relevant considerations. The files were not produced on the stipulated day, but counsel for the Centre indicated that both governments may seek a review of the order to produce the files. However, in the latest hearing, the Solicitor General has agreed to produce the records.

It is debatable whether the outcome of a case will be different if heard by another Bench, but it is difficult not to see these developments in the backdrop of the influence the convicts seem to have with the incumbent regimes. They also seem to have considerable political support from the ruling parties at the Centre and the State. Their release itself came about as a result of another Supreme Court order which ruled, somewhat intriguingly, that the Gujarat government was the "appropriate government" to consider their case for remission, and that the 1992 remission policy, applicable at the time of their conviction, may be the basis. There is considerable interest in the outcome of this challenge as the question of jurisdiction on Gujarat granting remission — the trial took place in Mumbai and the appeal was heard by the Bombay High Court — and the



correctness of the decision to release them prematurely based on a report of a committee that included political nominees have become contentious issues.

A GOOD DIVORCE

Not all marriages are happy, and not all divorces are unhappy. For those who want to opt out of a bad marriage, Monday's Supreme Court ruling on divorce will be seen as a good move. Leaning on the "guiding spirit" of Article 142(1) of the Constitution to do "complete justice" in any "cause or matter", a Constitution Bench said it could use this extraordinary discretionary power to grant divorce by mutual consent to couples trapped in bitter marriages. It also aims to spare couples the "agony and misery" of waiting six to 18 months for a local court to annul it, as stipulated under Section 13B of the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955. The Bench, headed by Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul, observed that the law of divorce, built predominantly on assigning fault, fails to serve broken marriages. It pointed out that if a marriage is wrecked beyond hope, public interest lies in recognising this fact, not upholding a 'married' status regardless. The Court said it could use Article 142 to quash pending criminal or legal proceedings, be it over domestic violence or dowry, against the man or woman. Continuing in this strain, the Bench said the Supreme Court could grant divorce on the grounds of an "irretrievable breakdown of marriage" if the "separation is inevitable and the damage is irreparable". Under the Hindu Marriage Act, irretrievable breakdown of marriage is not yet a ground for divorce.

In its judgment, there was a word of caution that the grant of divorce would not be a "matter of right, but a discretion which is to be exercised with great care... keeping in mind that 'complete justice' is done to both parties." Several factors would be considered by the Supreme Court before invoking Article 142 in matrimonial cases, including duration of marriage, period of litigation, the time the couple has stayed apart, the nature of pending cases, and attempts at reconciliation. The Court will have to be satisfied that the mutual agreement to divorce was not under coercion. In India, while divorcees have doubled in number over the past two decades, the incidence of divorce is still at 1.1%, with those in urban areas making up the largest proportion. But the divorce numbers do not tell the whole story; there are many women, particularly among the poor, who are abandoned or deserted. Census 2011 revealed that the population which is "separated" is almost triple the divorced number. In a country which is largely poor, where gender discrimination is rife and many women are still not financially independent, the Court's stress on "care and caution" and not to rush into a quick divorce must be welcomed. After all, marriage equality is not a reality for all.

NO UNION, BUT CENTRE READY TO EASE LIVING OF GAY COUPLES

The Union government informed the Supreme Court on Wednesday that it was willing to form a committee headed by the Cabinet Secretary to consider administrative measures for addressing "genuine, human concerns" faced by same-sex couples in their daily lives in areas such as banking and insurance, without delving into their petitions for legal recognition of same-sex marriage. The Bench termed the government's stand a "step forward" and even a "big, big positive" towards achieving wider social acceptance of the right of same-sex couples to cohabit.

The Chief Justice said the court could now go into whether same-sex couples have a "right to cohabit together in a normal, peaceable environment in our country without facing any form of discrimination, societal or otherwise". The court said the suggestion from the government to form



a committee headed by the Cabinet Secretary indicates its readiness to recognise the incidence of cohabitory relationships among same-sex couples.

The court said the Centre's offer of a forum to address the day-to-day human concerns of the same-sex community would ensure that the petitioners' movement does not hit a wall, even if they may fail in their endeavour in court.

Justice Hima Kohli said the petitioners should not go for an "all-or-none approach" and finally reach a dead end.

DESPERATE FOR JUSTICE

India's leading wrestlers, especially women supported by their male counterparts, have again taken to the streets in Delhi. If the first protest was during the winter in January, the latest is happening in peak summer at Jantar Mantar. That both the biting cold and the searing heat did not diminish these athletes' determination to air their sexual-harassment grievances against the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) office-bearers, especially its president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, is a reflection of their trauma. It also reveals their sheer despondency as even the Oversight Committee led by Olympian Mary Kom set to clean up the system, has not yielded any results. That three inconclusive months have lapsed since the first public complaint is another pointer to the inhumane reaction that often trails sexual-harassment allegations. First there is silence from people in authority, then there are furious denials, and third, insinuations are allowed to seep in about the victim's morality. Brij Bhushan may have stepped aside from the day-to-day functioning of the WFI but this sports administrator, essentially a BJP MP from Uttar Pradesh, has enough clout to stymie efforts to prise him out from the federation.

Wrestling harks back to India's rural heartland, especially North India, and is seen by sportspeople as an opportunity to escape the suffocating feudal atmosphere. The trust in a coach or official borders on blind devotion and this trait gets exploited. To not accept gender-violence as a sordid reality and to sweep it under the political-rivalry carpet does no good to Indian sport. This is not about the central government pitted against the opposition; it is about fairness in dealing with athletes. The Indian Olympic Association president, P.T. Usha, an icon for many, made it worse by stating that the athletes are tarnishing the country's image. Be it Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik or Bajrang Punia, who have led the protests, their quest for justice and desire for a complete overhaul of the WFI structure are genuine endeavours. The Supreme Court's directive that forced the Delhi Police to lodge a first information report against Brij Bhushan is a step in the right direction. More was expected from the larger sporting fraternity but with the exception of Olympic gold medallists Abhinav Bindra and Neeraj Chopra, the rest, especially the much-feted cricketers, have responded feebly. Kapil Dev and a few other players besides Sania Mirza voiced their concern through social media. But these remain the few volleys of resistance. India's medal-winning wrestlers deserve better.

EXPRESS VIEW ON SHOW CAUSE NOTICE TO CPM MP: LET THEM DEBATE

On May 1, the Government of India told the Supreme Court that it's "re-examination" of the Section 124-A of the Indian Penal Code — the sedition law — is at a "substantially advanced stage". The colonial era law itself, as well its alleged misuse by governments across the political spectrum, has been under question for some years now and the Centre's re-examination is a welcome part of and a response to these concerns, now before the Court. Against this backdrop, the summoning of



CPM MP John Brittas by Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar for “seditious” political views expressed in a newspaper article strikes a discordant note.

On February 20, Brittas wrote an article in this newspaper titled, ‘The perils of propaganda’. In it, he took exception to statements made by Home Minister Amit Shah while addressing a rally in Mangaluru, Karnataka. “There is Kerala in your neighbourhood. I do not wish to speak more. Only the BJP under the leadership of Modi can protect Karnataka,” Shah had said. Kerala is ruled by the CPM and has been invoked as a part of political rhetoric on the campaign trail by senior BJP leaders. Brittas’s article, too, must be seen in that vein — a politician’s response to statements by his rivals. Kerala BJP leader P Sudheer objected to the article, complaining that it is “highly divisive and polarising” and “seditious”. The V-P’s summons to Brittas and the Rajya Sabha’s issuing of a show cause notice to him came after Sudheer’s complaint. However, the Secretariat’s jurisdiction in the matter is far from clear.

That the V-P as ex-officio Chairman of the Upper House in his wisdom chose to have a discussion with an MP is unexceptionable. However, Dhankhar and the Secretariat must avoid the impression that they are acting to curb the free speech of an MP. Even if Brittas were not a legislator, he has the right to speak and write against the government and its leaders — as every citizen does. As far back as 1962, the Supreme Court in Kedar Nath vs Union of India affirmed that “comments, however strongly worded, expressing disapprobation of actions of the Government” do not constitute “seditious” speech. The office of the Chairman of the House and the Secretariat must enable debate and discussion — and protect the right of peoples’ representatives to put their views across. That role is ill-served by seemingly making an issue of political rhetoric by an opposition leader.

WHAT IS BEHIND MANIPUR’S WIDESPREAD UNREST?

The story so far:

Manipur has been restive since February when the BJP-led government launched an eviction drive seen as targeting a specific tribal group. The drive led to protests but not on the scale of the one on May 3 triggered by the Manipur High Court’s direction to the State to pursue a 10-year-old recommendation to grant Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the non-tribal Meitei community.

What is Manipur’s ethnic composition?

Geography has a lot to do with Manipur’s problems. The State is like a football stadium with the Imphal Valley representing the playfield at the centre and the surrounding hills the galleries. Four highways, two of them lifelines for the State, are the valley’s access points to the world beyond. The valley, which comprises about 10% of Manipur’s landmass, is dominated by the non-tribal Meitei who account for more than 64% of the population of the State and yields 40 of the State’s 60 MLAs. The hills comprising 90% of the geographical area are inhabited by more than 35% recognised tribes but send only 20 MLAs to the Assembly. While a majority of the Meiteis are Hindus followed by Muslims, the 33 recognised tribes, broadly classified into ‘Any Naga tribes’ and ‘Any Kuki tribes’ are largely Christians.

What is the Meitei argument?

Hearing a petition by eight people representing the Meitei (Meitei) Tribe Union, the Manipur High Court on April 19 directed the State government to submit, within four weeks, a 10-year-old recommendation to the Union Tribal Affairs Ministry for the inclusion of the Meitei community in



the ST list. The court referred to the Ministry's letter in May 2013 to the Manipur government seeking specific recommendation along with the latest socio-economic survey and ethnographic report. The letter followed a representation submitted by the Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM), which began demanding ST status for the Meiteis in 2012. The petitioners told the High Court that the Meiteis were recognised as a tribe before the merger of the State with the Union of India in 1949. They argued that the ST status is needed to "preserve" the community and "save the ancestral land, tradition, culture, and language" of the Meiteis. The STDCM also said the Meiteis needed constitutional safeguards against outsiders, stating that the community has been kept away from the hills while the tribal people can buy land in the "shrinking" Imphal Valley.

Why are tribal groups against ST status for Meiteis?

The tribal groups say the Meiteis have a demographic and political advantage besides being more advanced than them academically and in other aspects. They feel the ST status to the Meiteis would lead to loss of job opportunities and allow them to acquire land in the hills and push the tribals out. Groups such as the All Tribal Students' Union of Manipur point out that the language of the Meitei people is included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and many of them have access to benefits associated with the SC, OBC or EWS status. "To the hill tribal people of Manipur, the demand for ST status is a ploy to attenuate the fervent political demands of the Kukis and Nagas, as well as a tacit strategy of the dominant valley dwellers to make inroads into the hill areas of the State," Jawaharlal Nehru University lecturer Thongkhohal Haokip wrote in 'The Politics of Scheduled Tribe Status in Manipur'.

What led to the unrest?

Pro-government groups in Manipur claim some tribal groups with vested interests are trying to scuttle Chief Minister Nongthombam Biren Singh's crusade against drugs. The anti-drug drive began with destroying poppy fields and the theory that "illegal settlers" from Myanmar — ethnically related to the Kuki-Zomi people of Manipur — are behind clearing forests and government lands to grow opium and cannabis. The first violent protest on March 10 was against the eviction of the residents of a Kuki village. This made the State government withdraw from the suspension of operations with two Kuki extremist groups accused of inciting the protesters. The large-scale arson and violence claiming the life of at least one person on May 3 and 4 followed a "tribal solidarity rally" against the reported move to include the Meiteis in the ST list.

THE PROTESTS AGAINST THE REFINERY PROJECT IN MAHARASHTRA

The story so far:

On April 25, the Maharashtra government started conducting soil testing at Rajapur tehsil's Barsu village in the coastal Ratnagiri district to know if the site was suitable for the proposed multi-billion dollar Ratnagiri Refinery and Petrochemicals Limited project which is touted as the world's largest single location refinery complex. As of April 2022, India's oil refining capacity stood at 251.2 million metric tonnes per annum, making it the second-largest refiner in Asia and the fourth largest in the world.

What is the Barsu refinery project?

The project, which is expected to have a capacity of 60 million tonnes per annum, is a joint venture between Saudi Aramco, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), Indian Oil Corporation

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Limited, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited, and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited. The project was initially mooted in 2014 and is estimated to cost around rupees three lakh crore. Besides fuel, the project also proposes to develop various downstream petrochemicals to meet India's fast-growing petrochemical demand. Initially, the project was supposed to come up at Nanar, about 20 kilometres from Barsu. However, due to strong opposition from the locals, environmental activists and the Shiv Sena, the project was denotified in 2019.

How have the villagers reacted?

Hundreds of residents from Barsu-Solgaon and neighbouring villages are protesting the government's decision as they are concerned about the potential impact on the environment and the livelihoods of local communities. The project site is in a region that is ecologically sensitive, with several species of flora and fauna endemic to the area. The Konkan region has large mango orchids as well as jack fruit and cashew plantations. The villagers also expressed concern about the potential health hazards posed by the refinery and petrochemical unit, which is expected to emit a large amount of pollutants. According to locals, Konkan already suffers from air pollution due to the presence of coal-fired power plants. Many farmers expressed concern that they would lose their source of livelihood if their land is acquired for the project.

Locals say that the project should be shifted to more arid zones in the State like Marathwada and Vidarbha.

What is the State govt.'s stand?

In November last year, the Shinde-Fadnavis government started issuing land acquisition notices to residents of six villages to acquire the initial 2,220 acres of land. It has been a strong supporter of the project and argued that it would help reduce India's dependence on crude oil imports and provide a boost to the economy, apart from generating employment for over one lakh people, both direct and indirect. While the BJP has been tight-lipped about the recent developments at Barsu, Chief Minister Eknath Shinde said the project would not be implemented without the local people's consent. "We are a people's government...we will not proceed without the local people's consent," he said. According to Mr. Shinde, the Ratnagiri project is a green refinery and there will not be any pollution.

Why is the BJP pushing the project?

Firstly, the BJP leaders believe that the project would help them make inroads in the Shiv Sena and Shiv Sena (UBT) dominated Konkan region. Secondly, the party is touting the project as a significant step towards making India self-sufficient in the petrochemical sector, reducing the country's dependence on imports and further boosting the local economy. Further, Saudi Aramco has been expressing concern about the delay in the project due to the unavailability of land which has become a cause of concern for both the Centre and State governments.

VOTERS EXPRESS CONCERN OVER BREACH OF DATA AND PRIVACY

Priyanka K., a voter from Yelahanka constituency, received a phone call from an unknown number, which was identified as 'Election Commission of India' by a caller identification app. When she answered, there was an automated message which asked her to indicate her voting preference.

Many voters across Bengaluru are getting similar automated calls where they are being asked whom they would vote for. Not just that, breach of privacy and data have been a major concern



this election season as many citizens are receiving multiple calls and messages from various political parties, media agencies, canvassers and unknown entities.

Voters have also received automated messages from the BJP and the Congress asking them to vote for particular candidates and in the BJP's case, sometimes also to re-elect Basavaraj Bommai. The pre-recorded call also asks the respondents to record a message, which they claim would be sent to Mr. Modi, some voters reported.

The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike and the Election Commission officials said that they were aware of such cases. "The usage of the name of EC is concerning. We have forwarded the complaints to the cyber team to investigate," said Manoj Kumar Meena, Chief Electoral Officer, Karnataka.

EXPRESS VIEW: THE AD-HOC EPIDEMIC

It would be unfortunate if the suicide by a former ad-hoc lecturer at a Delhi University college does not end the government's inertia over the broken recruitment system in the country's higher education institutions. The 33-year-old who took his life last week, had reportedly not got a tenure after a provisional teaching stint of nearly five years. It's no secret that ad-hoc appointees like him keep colleges and universities in several parts of the country running under demoralising working conditions. The education ministry figures for last year show that the central universities employed more than 4,000 teachers on a temporary basis. Though expected to perform the same duties as the permanent faculty, the ad-hoc lecturers are not eligible for benefits such as gratuity, pensions, and the full range of medical allowances. Last year, in response to a question in Parliament, the government said it had no plans to regularise the services of these teachers.

The statute books of most universities do underline that teaching demands regular forms of employment. If a vacancy is for a period longer than what is stipulated in the rules, interviews for permanent posts must be held. DU's rules, for instance, state that "ad hoc appointment shall only be made for a period of more than one month and up to four months". They specify that such appointments must only be made to tide over "unexpected" and "short-term vacancies". But most universities have found ways to dodge these provisions and normalise ad-hocism. The services of these teachers are either terminated at the end of the academic year or breaks in employment tenures are contrived to prolong contingency arrangements. According to a report in this newspaper, the number of ad-hoc teachers in DU has grown eight times in the last 10 years — last year, they comprised 40 per cent of the university's teaching force. Even when posts are advertised, interviews get delayed because of the centralised procedures. According to data presented by the education ministry in Parliament in March, more than 6,000 teaching positions are currently vacant across the country's central universities.

The National Education Policy 2020 envisions cutting-edge pedagogy, talks of multi-disciplinary instruction, and lays emphasis on developing the critical faculties of the student. It recognises the teacher's role in bringing about these far-reaching reforms. But the epidemic of ad-hocism in colleges and universities devalues the role of the teacher and stands in the way of attaining the policy's lofty goals. A cadre of overburdened instructors, under constant stress over tenurial security, will find it difficult to contribute meaningfully towards the development of the knowledge economy envisaged by the NEP. Institutions cannot be built on the back of unfair employment conditions. The DU teacher's suicide should be warning enough.

**EXPRESS VIEW: LET ALL INDIA RADIO CO-EXIST WITH AKASHVANI**

Names, with due respect to the Bard, matter. Often, they are more than just labels — by what a thing is called, its peculiarities are defined. “Akashvani” and “All India Radio”, for example, do not mean the same thing. Akashvani can represent either wonder at what would have once seemed an almost magical technology, or a top-down, authoritative (and, at times, even authoritarian?) voice from the sky.

All India Radio (AIR) may seem more quotidian, a mere description: But given the size and diversity of the country it serves, the hold-all, generic name carries within it multitudes. The recent order by Prasar Bharati mandating that all references to AIR be stopped/removed and that state radio will now be known exclusively as Akashvani must be seen in this light.

To be fair, the internal order merely puts into effect the provision made in the Prasar Bharati Act, which came into force in 1997. The nub of the matter, though, lies in the official papering over of the “unity in diversity” that’s associated with AIR/Akashvani. In Tamil Nadu, AIR is Vanoli, in Kerala Akashvani is Aakasha-vaani. Given the linguistic diversity and its politics in India, the English-language name is not divorced from local cultures — it is part compromise, a benign way of establishing national symbols.

AIR is an abbreviation that has become a term in itself. And it is a source of evolving nostalgia — from memories of the 9 o’ clock English news bulletin to the jingles which preceded, for years, the only shows where teenagers could hear Western music — from The Beatles to Pink Floyd, down to Michael Jackson and Aerosmith. Perhaps, AIR can co-exist with Akashvani even today. All India Radio, then, can be for all of India.

EXPLAINSPEAKING: THE HISTORY AND ECONOMICS OF INDIA’S POPULATION GROWTH

Last week, it was announced that India overtook China as the world’s most populous country. According to the estimates of the United Nations, in April 2023, India’s population reached 1,425,775,850 people.

This is a dubious distinction for a country that, notwithstanding its genuine credentials of being the fastest-growing major economy in the world at present, still belongs to the lower-middle income category (per capita income is around \$2,200; one-sixth of China’s and even lower than Bangladesh’s). As such, this moment throws up several questions: How did India reach this summit? Does population growth help economic development or hinder it? Will India be able to become rich before it becomes old?

India’s population over the ages

Let’s first look at how India’s population grew over the centuries. The following information is sourced from the 2018 book *A Population History of India* written by Tim Dyson, Emeritus Professor of Population Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science. While reading these numbers, note that “India” refers to different geographies over the millennia and, of course, the accuracy of data becomes more and more a matter of debate as one goes back in time.

The earliest estimates date back to around 9,500 years ago. “If the first modern people arrived in the subcontinent sometime between 60,000 and 80,000 years ago, then following the end of the last glacial period — say around 9,500 to 7,000 years before the present — they probably numbered in the several hundred thousand,” writes Dyson.

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Around 4,000 years ago, most of the population (estimates vary between 4 to 6 million) was living in and around the Indus basin. "This was perhaps the largest concentration of human beings anywhere in the world at the time," he states.

By the time the Mauryan empire flourished, most of the population had shifted to the Ganges basin. Regardless of the exact population, "from this time forth the Ganges basin would always contain one of the world's largest concentrations of people."

The next data estimate has been arrived at by using Hsuan Tsang's observations.

Data estimates continue to be quite uncertain for almost a thousand years and the next milestone, as it were, uses data from Ain-i-Akbari in 1595

Since 1871, however, data has become more and more precise, thanks to formal census and UN projections.

Does population growth help economic development or hinder it?

The starting point of this debate is Thomas Malthus' argument in 1798 that population growth would depress living standards in the long run. Unaware of how technology would raise productivity on the one hand and improve health on the other, Malthus had suggested that the way to avoid mass starvation and disease in the wake of a population far exceeding resources was to exercise "moral restraint". Since then, however, the world population has grown eight times to reach the 8 billion mark. Still, Malthus' essential insight and apprehension was hugely influential among policymakers.

During the 1950s and 60s, "the general view of economists was that high birth rates and rapid population growth in poor countries would divert scarce capital away from savings and investment, thereby placing a drag on economic development. They hypothesized that larger families have fewer aggregate resources and fewer resources per child. Larger families therefore spread their resources more thinly to support more children. This leaves less for saving and investing in growth-enhancing activities. It also reduces spending on enhancing the economic potential of each child (e.g. through education and health expenditures)," write Fox and Dyson.

However, between the 1970s and 1990s, this pessimism abated as several studies "failed to detect a robust relationship between national population growth rates and per capita income growth".

The global view reverted in the 1990s when researchers again found a clear "negative association between population growth and economic performance". The world was also introduced to the concept of "demographic dividend," which essentially refers to a period in an economy's trajectory when there is a bulge in the working-age population (roughly speaking, population between 15 and 65 years). This happens when fertility rates decline significantly over a period of time. With a lower proportion of children depending on the working population, there opens a window of opportunity during which such a country can potentially raise its level of savings and investment.

What does it mean for India?

According to the UN's projection, unlike China whose population has already peaked, India's population will continue to rise until 2064.

But the crucial thing is that India's fertility rate (the number of children per woman) is already below the replacement rate of 2.1. To be sure, the replacement rate is the rate of fertility at which



the population stabilises (because it replicates itself). In case you are wondering why it is 2.1 and not 2, the additional 0.1 children per woman is to account for infant mortality.

Given the fact that India is already the most populous country and still expected to see a rise in total population for the next 40 years despite being below the replacement rate of fertility, the main concern now is not family planning.

To be sure, India must not allow the fertility rate to go up but the bigger challenge now is to figure out how to best use India's demographic dividend — the bulge highlighted in green in the Chart 2 below — to ensure that India becomes rich before it becomes old.

Many experts argue that China, which has been experiencing the bulge in the working-age population (relative to the old and young population), might fail to become a rich country before it starts ageing.

This is noteworthy for Indians and Indian policymakers because China has grown quite remarkably over the past four decades.

Not every country has managed to escape what is often called the “middle-income trap”. For instance, while South Korea and Israel did transition to becoming a rich country, Argentina and South Africa have failed to transition.

India, which is a lower-middle income country (Argentina, South Africa and China are upper-middle income countries), will not only have to grow remarkably fast but also do that on a sustained basis if it has to outgrow the negatives of a huge population.

That, in turn, requires a whole host of domestic reforms especially since global growth is expected to remain muted in the coming years.

Top of the list is ramping up on primary health and primary education. No country has become rich without first investing in these two areas. India, on the other hand, has a long history of neglecting both these areas.

As things stand, India has the most number of poor people in the world, one of the highest proportion of wasted and stunted children, alarming levels of unemployment, especially among the youth, and one of the lowest levels of participation in the workforce by women.

Unless India finds policy solutions to address these gaps, having a higher proportion of population in the working-age group will, far from helping matters, likely cause social unrest.

EXPRESS VIEW: LUDHIANA GAS TRAGEDY POINTS TO A LONGSTANDING PROBLEM WITH WASTE MANAGEMENT IN INDIAN CITIES

A probe is on to ascertain the reason for the gas leak that claimed 11 lives on Sunday in Ludhiana's Giaspura area. One thing, however, appears clear — the leak was precipitated by a chemical reaction in an open sewer. The FIR on the incident notes that “some people usually get rid of industrial waste by dumping it in sewage lines”. There can be no doubt that culpability for the gas leak must be fixed. But untreated waste getting into the city's sewer network has been a longstanding concern for the city's municipal authorities. Preliminary reports suggest that Sunday's calamity could be linked to this problem.



Giaspura has much in common with urban conurbations in several parts of the country where factories co-exist with residential buildings. Areas with such mixed land-use profiles require stringent pollution monitoring and well-maintained sewerage networks. But pipes and drains are in a poor state of upkeep in most parts of the country and pollution control bodies in the states rarely manage to do justice to their mandate. Unlike the Central Pollution Control Board, which has robust laboratories and specialised units, state pollution bodies do not offer a congenial environment for developing expertise. An assistant environmental engineer at a state pollution control board or a Grade B scientist has to monitor the implementation of every aspect of environment protection rules — biomedical and industrial waste, air and water pollution. In February, Union Minister of State for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Ashwini Kumar Choubey, informed the Rajya Sabha that 49 per cent of the positions in SPCBs and pollution control committees are vacant. Last year, a Centre for Policy Research study of nine SPCBs — including that of Punjab — revealed that scientists, medical practitioners and academics constitute only seven per cent of the members of these boards while potential polluters, such as industries and public sector corporations, have a more than 50 per cent representation.

Giaspura is the latest in a long list of waste-related calamities in the country. Last year, six people died after a tanker dumped toxic material in Surat. In March, a mountain of garbage caught fire in Kochi and spewed noxious gases for over a week. Delhi's waste mounds have been a public health hazard for more than a decade. Dealing with such problems requires joining the dots with municipal governance, urban planning and environmental management. Unfortunately, Indian cities have rarely been up to this task. Giaspura is a reminder that the task cannot be postponed for long.

STRAY DOGS AND POOR WASTE MANAGEMENT

The story so far:

In April, a 65-year-old woman in Srinagar was attacked by street dogs outside her home. A garbage collection point, a mound of food and poultry waste that becomes food for free-roaming dogs in the area, was situated in front of her house. Frequent reports of dogs attacking people to death have made the management of stray dogs an administrative and legal issue.

What do dog bites have to do with poor waste management?

The “carrying capacity” — the ability of a city to support a species — is determined by the availability of food and shelter. Free-ranging dogs, in the absence of these facilities, are scavengers that forage around for food, eventually gravitating towards exposed garbage dumping sites. Dogs thus congregate around urban dumps, such as landfills, due to feeding opportunities.

A population boom in Indian cities has contributed to a staggering rise in solid waste. Indian cities generate more than 1,50,000 metric tonnes of urban solid waste every day. According to a United Nations Environment Program 2021 report, an estimated 931 million tonnes of food available to consumers ended up in households, restaurants, vendors and other food service retailers' bins in 2019. Indian homes on average generated 50 kg of food waste per person, the report said. This waste often serves as a source of food for hunger-stricken, free-roaming dogs that move towards densely-populated areas in cities, such as urban slums which are usually located next to garbage dumping sites and landfills.



Urban dogs are believed to have a distinct set of traits as compared to rural dogs, as they have “learnt to develop survival techniques in fast-paced, often hostile motorised urban environments”, a 2014 study argues. It also says “...dogs do not usually pose a threat to human well-being, and proper management of refuse and a tolerant, if not friendly attitude towards dogs can ensure their peaceful co-existence with us.”

What role does urbanisation play?

Cities have witnessed a sharp increase in the stray dog population, which as per the official 2019 livestock census stood at 1.5 crore. However, independent estimates peg the number to be around 6.2 crore. The number of dog bites has simultaneously doubled between 2012 and 2020. India also shoulders the highest rabies burden in the world, accounting for a third of global deaths caused due to the disease. In 2015, a study conducted in 10 Indian metro cities found a strong link between human population, the amount of municipal and food waste generated, and the number of stray dogs in the cities. It argued, “in effect, the present mode of urbanisation and paradigm of development innately promotes urban sprawls, slums, disparity... With the development of cities, managing solid waste has become a daunting challenge,” and the “unconfined and unmanaged leftovers” end up aiding the proliferation of stray dogs.

While there is no evidence to show that a rising population and municipal waste directly led to an increase in dog bites, experts agree there may be a correlation between urbanisation and solid waste production, made visible due to the mismanagement of waste disposal. Tepid animal birth control programmes and insufficient rescue centres, in conjunction with poor waste management, result in a proliferation of street animals in India.

Additionally, most landfills and dumping sites are located on the peripheries of cities, next to slums and settlement colonies. Thus, the disproportionate burden of dog bites may also fall on people in urban slums. In 2021, 300 people living in Pune’s Shivneri Nagar slum complained of stray dog bites in the area, as per reports. In 2020, 17 people, including young children, who lived in Ramabai Nagar, a slum spread over an area of 120 acres in Ghatkopar East, were bitten by stray dogs.

A study published in 2016 found that the prevalence of dog bites was higher in urban slums — usually located in close proximity to dumping sites — than rural slums. The proximity of residential areas to dumping sites and the rise in dog attacks speak to “core issues of unplanned and unregulated urban development, the lack of serviced affordable urban housing for all, lack of safe livelihood options and improper solid waste management”, researchers at the World Resource Institute wrote in a blog.

How has India managed the problem?

India’s response to the “stray dog menace” has relied upon the Animal Birth Control (ABC) programme, through which municipal bodies trap, sterilise and release dogs to slow down the dog population. The second anchor was rabies control measures, including vaccination drives. But implementation suffers from low awareness around the health implications of dog bites, irregular supply of vaccines, delay in seeking treatments, and a lack of national policy, experts say.

THE EVER-EXPANDING MEDICINAL USES AND PROPERTIES OF PSYCHEDELIC SUBSTANCES

Psychedelics are a group of drugs that alter perception, mood, and thought-processing while a person is still clearly conscious. Usually, the person’s insight also remains unimpaired.



Psychedelics are non-addictive, non-toxic and compared to illicit drugs, they are less harmful to the end user. In India, the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act 1985 prohibits the use of psychedelic substances. Ketamine, a dissociative anaesthetic with psychedelic properties, is used under strict medical supervision, for anaesthesia and treatment-resistant depression.

What is the history of psychedelics?

A psychiatrist named Humphrey Osmond first used the term 'psychedelic' in 1957. The word is derived from the Greek words psyche, meaning 'mind', and deloun, meaning 'to manifest'. Humans have used psilocybin and mescaline for ceremonies, healing, and spiritual rituals for millennia. Temples built for mushroom 'deities' in indigenous cultures in Mexico and Guatemala date back to 7000 BC. Records of the Greek 'Eleusinian Mysteries' indicate that psychedelics were used in ceremonial rituals.

The modern-day use of psychedelics is commonly associated with the German chemist Arthur Heffter isolating mescaline from the peyote cactus in 1897. In 1938, while investigating compounds related to ergotamine (one of the ergot alkaloids), the Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann first synthesised LSD. When Hofmann accidentally contaminated himself with a small dose of LSD, he experienced what was likely the world's first 'acid trip'. On a hunch, he resynthesised LSD in 1943 and, with further testing, found LSD to be extremely potent and physiologically relatively safe.

Between 1947 and 1967, LSD was widely used as a therapeutic catalyst in psychotherapy. The Harvard Psilocybin Project, founded by psychologist Timothy Leary, further proselytised LSD and psilocybin which led to the increasing recreational use of these substances. Around this time, medical concerns and the Vietnam War prompted the conservative Richard Nixon administration to criminalise the use of psychedelics and other psychoactive drugs. This "war on drugs" stopped all medical use and pushed recreational use underground. Media campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s further stigmatised the use of all psychoactive drugs.

How do the drugs work in the body?

Users of psychedelic substances report changes in perception, somatic experience, mood, thought-processing, and entheogenic experiences. Perceptual distortions most commonly include the visual domain. An intriguing phenomenon called synaesthesia may occur, where the sensory modalities cross and the user may 'hear colour' or 'see sounds'.

About half of the ingested psilocybin is absorbed via the digestive tract. In the body, psilocybin is converted to psilocin, which is then metabolised in the liver. LSD is completely absorbed in the digestive tract and then metabolised in the liver. Classical psychedelics boost brain serotonin levels. Psilocybin's therapeutic effects require a 'trip' that is mediated by the activation of serotonin receptors. A recent case report published in the American Journal of Psychiatry demonstrated that robust and sustained antidepressant effects can occur even in the absence of psilocybin's psychedelic effects. This finding, if replicated in larger trials, will have major implications for people with treatment-resistant depression. They can then get better without having to endure a trip.

Modern neuroimaging suggests that psychedelics are neither stimulants nor depressants of brain activity. Instead, they increase the cross-talk between different brain networks, and this correlates with the subjective effects of psychedelics.



Can such substances cause harm?

Death due to direct toxicity of LSD, psilocybin or mescaline has not been reported despite 50-plus years of recreational use. An overdose requires cardiac monitoring and supportive management in a low-stimulus and reassuring environment.

Synthetic psychedelics (such as 25I-NBOMe) have been associated with acute cardiac, central nervous system, and limb ischaemia, as well as serotonin syndrome. There have also been reports of death attributed directly to synthetic psychedelic use.

The psychological effects of psychedelics depend on the interaction between the drug and the user's mindset (together called a set), and the environmental setting. People with a personal or family history of psychosis are strongly discouraged from experimenting with psychedelics.

There is also no evidence that psychedelics cause physiological or psychological dependence — nor has any withdrawal syndrome been identified. Tension headaches are common in the 24 hours after use and are offset by the use of simple analgesics. This said, brief and self-limiting psychotic episodes can occur when a user is intoxicated with psychedelics, particularly LSD. They are more common among first-time users and among those with a personal or family history of psychiatric illness. Users describe these experiences as a 'bad trip' and they are more likely to occur in unfavourable environments.

Can psychedelics be used to treat neuropsychiatric disorders?

In November 2022, the results from a phase II psilocybin trial were published in the New England Journal of Medicine. The trial found that a single 25-mg dose of psilocybin reduced depression scores over three weeks in people with treatment-resistant depression. Adverse events included headache, nausea, and dizziness which occurred in 77% of the participants. Suicidal ideation, suicidal behaviour, and self-injury occurred in all dose groups (1 mg, 10 mg, and 25 mg).

In 2017, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) designated the use of 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, also known as MDMA, to be the "breakthrough therapy" in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Under its "expanded access" program, the FDA has allowed a small number of people — particularly those seriously ill with PTSD and who haven't responded to other treatment — to use MDMA.

Recently, the U.S. non-profit Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) also announced positive results from its observational study on MDMA-assisted therapy for patients with PTSD, echoing the findings of its phase-III MDMA trial, published in Nature Medicine in May 2021. In 2018, the FDA had granted "breakthrough therapy" status to psilocybin for treatment-resistant depression as well.

What does this mean for the use of psychedelics?

Although recent findings are encouraging, there remains uncertainty about where the psychedelic renaissance will take us. Psychedelic substances provide an intriguing avenue through which one can probe the broader constructs of creativity, spirituality, and consciousness, aside from their therapeutic effects.

While not a panacea, psychedelic substances have certainly reinvigorated clinical and research interests, and have added to psychiatry's ever-expanding therapeutic armamentarium. If larger



phase III trials establish their safety and therapeutic efficacy, the FDA and other regulatory bodies may clear these agents for routine clinical use.

THE GOLDEN GLOBE RACE: THE VOYAGE OF MAD MEN

The story so far:

Abhilash Tomy, former Commander in the Indian Navy who became the first Indian to go around the world on a sailboat solo and unassisted back in 2013, has now attained another record of completing a solo circumnavigation under even more gruelling circumstances when he made podium finish at the Golden Globe Race (GGR) (30000 miles), 2022, on April 29. He finished second after South African Kirsten Neuschäfer.

What is GGR?

The Golden Globe Race is a non-stop, solo, unassisted yacht race around-the-world which was held for the first time in 1968-69. Just one of the nine participants — 30-year-old British sailor Robin Knox-Johnston — made it to the finishing point sailing a boat named Suhaili which was built in India. The second edition of the race was held 50 years later, in 2018, when Tomy threw his hat in the ring. One of the conditions was that the contestants would use boats designed to prescribed premodern specifications and would not be allowed to use any modern navigational gear. They would have to rely entirely on sextants and paper charts. To be more specific, anything that wasn't available in 1968 would not be allowed. Satellite phones would be available for extremely restricted use, up to four short messages a day, and use of the GPS chart plotter carried in a sealed box (for emergency) would lead to disqualification from the race. And the sailing would be along a stipulated route, rounding the three great capes, the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, Cape Leeuwin in Australia and Cape Horn in Chile.

100 EPISODES OF PM MODI'S MANN KI BAAT: UNDERSTANDING THE POWER OF RADIO

Mann Ki Baat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popular radio programme, completed 100 episodes on Sunday. Over the last almost nine years, the broadcast experiment that had a global history but no significant Indian precedents, has become a successful element in the communications strategy of the Prime Minister, a leader who believes in talking directly to the masses.

In terms of similar global examples of radio broadcasts, what came before Mann ki Baat?

The earliest example of the use of radio broadcasts by a national leader remains the "Fireside Chats", a series of 30 radio addresses, each typically 20-30 minutes long, delivered by United States President Franklin D Roosevelt between 1933 and 1944.

The chats were popular, and played a role in shaping American public opinion on a range of issues at a time when the US battled with crises ranging from the Great Depression to World War II. Roosevelt also used the chats to counter criticisms from the conservative media and to unpack his policies to the American public without the use of intermediaries.

Decades later, Ronald Reagan used a daily radio commentary that ran from 1975 to 1979 to build a reputation as a "great communicator", and to prepare the ground for his successful presidential run in 1980.



Earlier, in an entirely different context, Subhas Chandra Bose had started Azad Hind Radio as part of Germany's radio service, first broadcasting on January 7, 1942. The programmes were meant to create bonds between Indians living abroad with those in the motherland under British colonial rule.

Why did the Prime Minister choose radio over newer broadcast mediums?

While leaders like former US Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump used television and videos on social media, Modi chose radio as the most effective medium in the Indian context to reach the last Indian at the end of the country's last mile. He recognised that the rapid growth of Internet penetration notwithstanding, not everyone owned a mobile device — and that parts of the country would present problems of connectivity.

The Prime Minister has spoken about having understood the power of radio early on in life, when he travelled across the country as a pracharak of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. He said on an episode of Mann ki Baat that he had noticed people in the remote upper reaches of the Himalayas tuning in to radio for news as well as entertainment.

What are the issues/ themes that the PM has referred to most frequently?

Yoga, women-led initiatives, youth, and cleanliness have been among the most touched-upon topics on Mann ki Baat since it began in October 2014.

The PM has also frequently spoken of the valour and sacrifice of India's soldiers, the nation's cultural heritage, and recounted the stories of the life and work of Padma awardees and other achievers. He has also spoken on issues of science and environment.

The PM has dwelt on khadi at length, transcripts of episodes show.

The 100th episode on Sunday recalled some of the important issues that he has spoken on — and how some of them became wider movements. Sunil Jaglan, who started the 'Selfie with Daughter' campaign in Haryana, a state with a skewed sex ratio, joined the PM on the show over a call. Soon after being mentioned on the show, 'Selfie with Daughter' had turned into a global campaign — and the result of such efforts can be seen in an improvement of the gender ratio in Haryana, the PM said.

Among similar campaigns are those related to cleanliness, environment and ecology, and encouraging people to buy local products and visit Indian tourist spots.

Has Mann ki Baat been a political/ electioneering tool of the PM?

One of the salient features of the programme is its non-partisan approach to social issues. It has helped to widen and deepen its reach, and allowed the PM to convey his ideas to a broad spectrum of people.

An official involved in the production of the show said that the idea and concept is to convey positivity — to involve the people in the nation's progress, to make them feel a part of its growth trajectory, and to spread optimism. Politics and negativity do not find space in this vision, the official said.



During the two years of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns, almost all episodes had a health-related capsule. The PM repeatedly underlined the need for socially responsible and Covid-appropriate behaviour, and widespread vaccinations as the country battled the coronavirus.

The PM has also used the platform extensively to spread awareness about government schemes and initiatives — exports, the e-marketplace initiative, Pradhan Mantri Sangrahalaya, Azaadi ka Amrit Mahotsav, Har Ghar Tiranga, digital payments, startups and unicorns, and advancements in the space sector.

What are the chords that Mann ki Baat strikes with listeners?

In an age of social media saturation, in which the PM is constantly active on Internet platforms, he has framed Mann ki Baat as a more intimate, longer-duration, participative interaction with the people. On Sunday, he framed the radio show as a national conversation that helps him connect with the people — “a matter of faith, of worship”, and a “thaal of prasad” at the feet of “Janata Janardan”.

Mann ki Baat is consciously not a monologue by the PM. The design of the programme is participative, and involves the engagement of citizens. A backend communications network involving people writing in, and the PM personally engaging with ordinary people on the show, has increased interest.

Almost every show includes some new and interesting little-known information about India’s arts, craft, folk culture and heroes, etc. that inform and educate, and evoke and sustain listener interest.

Around 730 individuals have been mentioned by the PM on the show so far, said officials, adding that 281 private organisations (including NGOs and village self-help groups) working in states and Union Territories around the country have been praised for their inspirational work. Even 38 individuals from foreign countries have found mentions for their extraordinary work and stories, the officials said.

HISTORIAN RANAJIT GUHA, A PIONEERING FIGURE IN SUBALTERN STUDIES, DIES AT 99

A pioneering figure in Subaltern Studies, the movement to mainstream the history of marginalised farmers and their suppressed voice in the Indian subcontinent, Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) is widely considered a classic.

Guha, who would have turned 100 in May, passed away on April 28 at his house in Vienna Woods, Austria, where he had settled after his retirement from Australian National University in 1988.

Guha was born on May 23, 1923, at Siddhakati village of Bakerganj upazila of Barishal in Bangladesh. He migrated from India to the UK in 1959, and was a reader in history at the University of Sussex. He lived in Purkersdorf, Austria, with his German-born wife Mechthild Guha, née Jungwirth, herself a leading scholar of Subaltern Studies, whom he met at the University of Sussex in the early 1960s. Afterwards, they moved to the Australian National University where both continued their work.

In her condolence message on Saturday, West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee said the historian’s numerous writings on Indian peasant uprisings not only became a trend-setter but inspired a group of powerful historians whose works on the subaltern had an impact across the world. “The world of knowledge suffered a great loss in the death of Ranajit Guha,” wrote Banerjee.



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

EXPRESS VIEW: US FED AND ECB RAISE INTEREST RATES, BUT THE RATE HIKE CYCLE MAY BE DRAWING TO A CLOSE

On Wednesday, the US Federal Reserve raised interest rates by 25 basis points, continuing its fight to bring inflation down in line with its target. The federal funds rate now stands at 5-5.25 per cent — its highest level in around 16 years. However, there are indications that the US Fed will now likely pause the rate hike cycle. In its last meeting in March, the policy statement had said the committee “anticipates that some additional policy firming may be appropriate”. This framing has been dropped this time around. The more tempered statement points towards a more cautious approach, as the committee takes into consideration effects of the cumulative tightening on economic activity and inflation. Future decisions, as Fed Chair Jerome Powell said, will be taken on a “meeting by meeting” basis.

Recent data shows that even as inflation has moderated in the US, it continues to remain elevated. The price index (personal consumption expenditure) moderated from 5.1 per cent in February to 4.2 per cent in March. Core inflation, which excludes the volatile food and energy components, also remained high at 4.6 per cent. This suggests that interest rates may perhaps remain higher for longer. Powell himself has acknowledged this, noting that the “process of getting inflation down has a long way to go”. Tighter policy will depress consumption and investment demand, weighing down economic activity. As per the projections accompanying the last policy statement, median expectations of change in GDP were at 0.4 per cent in 2023 with the unemployment rate at 4.5 per cent. There are indications of the labour market softening. As per reports, labour market data shows that job openings declined while layoffs rose in March. Powell has admitted to the downside risks to growth, saying that “the case of having a recession, I don’t rule that out either: It’s possible that we will have what I hope would be a mild recession”.

As inflation concerns continue to persist, central banks across much of the developed world are following suit. On Thursday, the European Central Bank announced its decision to raise interest rates by 25 basis points as “price pressures remain strong”. In the UK, as inflation continues to remain stubbornly elevated, there are expectations that the Bank of England will also opt for an interest rate hike when it meets next week. However, there are risks of a sharp economic downturn even as signs emerge of the rate hike cycle drawing to a close.

DE-DOLLARISATION: THE RACE TO ATTAIN THE STATUS OF GLOBAL RESERVE CURRENCY

A reserve currency refers to any currency that is widely used in cross-border transactions and is commonly held as reserves by central banks. Countries have tried to dethrone the dollar as the global reserve currency for many decades now for various reasons. But of late, attempts to de-dollarise have picked up pace in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine last year. The U.S. imposed several sanctions that restricted the use of the U.S. dollar to purchase oil and other goods from Russia, and this has been seen by many countries as an attempt to weaponise the dollar. Since international transactions carried out in the U.S. dollar are cleared by American banks, this gives the U.S. government significant power to oversee and control these transactions. Currently, the Chinese yuan is seen as the primary alternative to the U.S. dollar owing to China’s rising economic power.



The reserve currency advantage

Other currencies such as the British pound and the French franc have served as international reserve currencies in the past. It should be noted that it is the currencies of economic superpowers that have usually ended up being used as the global reserve currency. As the economic clout of these countries waned, their currencies faced a similar downfall. This was the case, for example, with the British pound which was gradually replaced by the U.S. dollar as Britain lost its status as a global economic superpower in the first half of the 20th century.

Critics of the U.S. dollar believe that the global reserve currency status gives it unfair privileges over other countries, thus justifying de-dollarisation attempts by many countries. It should be noted that when a country's fiat currency enjoys reserve currency status, it gives the country the power to purchase goods and other assets from the rest of the world by simply creating fresh currency out of thin air. However, such irresponsible expansion of the money supply can cause the debasement of the currency and eventually threaten its status as a reserve currency.

Others point to the expansionary monetary policy adopted by the U.S. Federal Reserve over the decades to argue that this could threaten the U.S. dollar's status as a global reserve currency. The U.S. central bank usually increases the supply of dollars through various means to tackle economic downturns and also to fund the U.S. government's expenditures. But it should be noted that the U.S. Federal Reserve is not the only central bank in the world that has been debasing its currency by engaging in expansionary monetary policy over several decades. Other countries have also been expanding their respective money supplies to address their domestic economic problems. As long as the U.S. does not debase its currency at a faster pace than other countries, the dollar may manage to hold its value against other currencies and hence its reserve currency status may not come under serious threat.

The popularity of the U.S. dollar

Many economists argue that the U.S. dollar is not forced on anyone to be accepted as a medium of exchange for cross-border transactions. They note that the U.S. dollar is widely used in international transactions because people actually prefer to use the American currency over others for various economic reasons. Other currencies that have tried to compete against the U.S. dollar are not as popular as the greenback for carrying out international transactions. For example, a recent attempt by India and Russia to carry out trade between the two countries in Indian rupees rather than in U.S. dollars has hit a roadblock because the value of India's imports from Russia far outweighs its exports to the country. This left Russia with excess rupees in hand which it was unwilling to spend on Indian goods or assets, and led to Russian demands for the settlement of bilateral trade in U.S. dollars. So, even Russia, a long-time friend of India and a long-time foe of the United States, preferred to carry out its trade with India using U.S. dollars since the dollar is far more widely acceptable than the Indian rupee.

The global acceptability of the U.S. dollar has primarily been attributed to the popularity of U.S. assets among investors. It should be noted that the U.S. has been running a persistent trade deficit for decades now (in fact the last time the U.S. ran a trade surplus was way back in 1975). That is, the value of its imports has for a long time exceeded the value of its exports to the rest of the world. The excess dollars that the rest of the world accumulates due to the U.S.'s trade deficit has been invested in U.S. assets such as in debt securities issued by the US government. The high level of trust that global investors have in the U.S. financial markets, perhaps owing to the 'rule of law' in the U.S., is considered to be a major reason why investors prefer to invest in U.S. assets. It should,



however, be noted that it is not necessary that a country must run a trade deficit for its currency to be accepted as a reserve currency.

China, for instance, which supplies the world with huge volumes of goods and runs a trade surplus, has been trying to make the yuan a reserve currency. However, restrictions placed by the Chinese government on foreign access to China's financial markets and doubts over 'rule of law' in China have adversely affected global demand for the yuan.

INDIA LEADS IN 'LAUNDERING' RUSSIAN OIL AND SELLING TO EUROPE: REPORT

Price cap coalition countries have increased imports of refined oil products from India, China, Turkey, UAE and Singapore that have become the largest importers of Russian crude, says Finland-based group, thereby circumventing the sanctions

India leads five countries named as the "Laundromat" countries that buy Russian oil and sell processed products to European countries, thus side-stepping European sanctions against Russia, says a Finland-based group that cited the latest figures for the first quarter of 2023.

The report, released last week, coincides with the latest data from analytics firm Kpler and a report by international agency Bloomberg that showed how European Union (EU) countries, which are all part of the "price cap coalition" that bars trade and insurance for any oil purchased above a certain price from Russia, are in fact increasing their intake of oil from India, China, Turkey, the UAE and Singapore.

The report also accused Indian sellers and European buyers of possibly "circumventing sanctions" by selling crude products from a refinery in Gujarat that is co-owned by Russian oil company Rosneft.

European countries are simply substituting oil products they previously bought directly from Russia, with the same products now "whitewashed" in third countries and bought from them at a premium.

Of the so-called "laundromat" countries, India, which in April remained the highest global consumer of seaborne Russian crude for a fifth month, is ahead of all others in the export of crude products to the coalition countries, exporting nearly 3.8 million tonnes of oil products to price cap coalition countries, which include the EU, G-7 countries, Australia and Japan.

India's exports of diesel, for example, tripled to about 1,60,000 barrels per day in March 2023, compared with the period before the Russian war in Ukraine, making diesel one of the largest components of India-EU trade at present.

The CREA report said the most oil products were being exported from two ports in Gujarat: the Sikka port that services the Reliance-owned Jamnagar refinery, and the Vadinar port that ships oil products from Nayara energies, which is partly owned (49.13%) by Rosneft, alleging that this could constitute "circumventing sanctions" imposed unilaterally by the U.S. and Europe.

"The port is of great value to the Russian oil industry, especially Rosneft," the report said.

"This situation where a Russian company owns an oil refinery in a third country highlights a possible way of circumventing sanctions. Rosneft or other oil companies from Russia are free to transport crude oil to Vadinar, where it is refined and can be exported to the price cap coalition



countries as oil products from India,” the report concluded, recommending that a “place of origin” certification should accompany oil products sold to Europe.

Neither the Petroleum Ministry nor the External Affairs Ministry responded to a request for a comment on the report, or the categorisation of India as an “oil launderer” for Russia.

BUOYANCY CHECK

India’s services sector seems to have had a great start to the financial year, if one were to go purely by the findings of the S&P Global Services PMI Business Activity Index. Based on surveys of around 400 firms across segments such as consumer services, finance and communications, the index reading stood at 62 in April — the highest seasonally adjusted figure in 153 months or nearly 13 years. A reading of over 50 on the index, constructed since 2005, indicates an expansion in activity levels relative to the previous month. To put the April number in perspective, the average PMI reading for services through 2022-23 was around 57.3. The increasing importance of the services economy to India’s total output and job creation does not need to be reiterated much. As per the second advance national income estimates for 2022-23, the Gross Value Added (GVA) growth from industry as a whole slipped to 4.1%, with manufacturing tripping to just 1.6% — both of them had grown at around 10% in 2021-22. Services’ GVA, on the other hand, is expected to have grown 9.1% during the year, accelerating from 8.4% in the previous year. Along with a pick up from the farm sector, services is expected to lift GVA growth in 2022-23 to 6.7% with GDP rising 7%.

On the trade front, India’s services exports are estimated to have hit a record \$325 billion in 2022-23, reflecting a growth of almost 28% over the previous year. The strong uptick in such intangible trade and the resultant surplus vis-à-vis imports of services have significantly plugged the hole in India’s current account deficit caused by a much sharper 40% widening of the goods trade deficit, which is reckoned to have hit \$267 billion during the year. Growth in services exports during March had slipped to around 3% from 29% in February. However, as per the April PMI print, along with a surge in fresh demand and output for domestic services, outbound deals also increased at the highest pace in three months. That offers some comfort amid a strengthening global slowdown in major markets for India’s IT-dominated services exports. Yet, the flurry of crises in U.S. and European financial institutions, a key clientele for India’s tech majors, for instance, remains a worry. That services exports growth could moderate going forward is corroborated by the lower earnings guidance provided by IT companies as well as their extended dithering over on-boarding young recruits. The latter is part of an uncomfortable trend captured within the PMI reading — despite April’s boom, job creation has remained negligible and input costs have resurged. Neither augurs well for sustaining domestic demand, which has already taken a hit from high inflation.

EXPRESS VIEW: PAY HEED TO MIXED TRENDS IN PRIVATE CONSUMPTION

In a few weeks from now, the National Statistical Office will release its estimates of economic growth for the fourth quarter (January-March) of 2022-23, and its provisional estimates for the full year. While this will shed greater clarity on how household consumption fared during this period of uncertainty, data on key consumption segments released so far points towards mixed trends in private consumption. Across a range of sectors such as housing, automobiles, two-wheelers, mobile phones, the incoming data points towards a continuing divergence in consumption patterns — robust sales at the top end of markets, alongside subdued sales at the lower end of the spectrum.



Take for instance the automobile sector. Maruti Suzuki accounts for a significant share of the cars sold in the country. In the fourth quarter, sales of its cars in the mini and compact segment (this segment accounts for almost two-thirds of the company's total sales) actually contracted. In comparison, sales of its utility vehicles continue to grow at a robust pace. Worryingly, its chairman, R C Bhargava, is reported to have said that demand for small cars has remained flat and that the company does not foresee any change in this financial year as affordability remains an issue. In the case of housing, there are also indications of the affordable housing segment coming under pressure. As per Anarock research, the segment's market share has dipped from 38 per cent in 2019 to 26 per cent in 2022 due to a combination of factors, including the economic condition of buyers. And with demand for this segment coming under stress, Anarock observes developers changing gears, launching more projects in the mid and premium segments. Reports do point towards healthy demand for these segments across major cities. Similarly, as per Counterpoint Research, even as India's smartphone shipments have actually declined, the premium segment has registered robust growth, and is likely to have almost doubled its share during January-March 2023 as compared to the same period last year. In the case of two wheelers — another indicator of household demand at the mid and lower segments of the income distribution — while domestic sales did rise by 17 per cent in 2022-23, they still remain lower than levels seen in 2018-19 as per data from SIAM. And while the number of individuals working under MGNREGA have fallen from the highs observed during 2020-21, they remain higher than pre-pandemic levels.

In 2022-23, the Indian economy is expected to have grown by around 7 per cent. In the April monetary policy committee meeting, the RBI pegged the economy to grow at 6.5 per cent in 2023-24. However, the uneven nature of this growth must be taken into consideration by policymakers as they formulate policies.

EXPRESS VIEW ON BAN ON SUGAR EXPORTS: HURTING TRADE IN THE LONG RUN

Fears over El Nino and its adversely affecting the upcoming monsoon are clearly weighing on the Narendra Modi government's mind, especially with national elections less than a year away. The latest evidence is the virtual ban on sugar exports. For the 2022-23 sugar year (October-September), only up to 6.1 million tonnes (mt) of exports were allowed, as against the record 11 mt shipped out in 2021-22. Mills have already dispatched the entire 6.1 mt, but the government has seemingly decided not to increase the cap.

This is despite overall comfortable domestic supplies. The 32.5 mt estimated production for 2022-23 is below the previous year's all-time-high of 35.9 mt. However, it is way higher than the projected domestic consumption of 27.5 mt. And with opening stocks of 7.1 mt, besides hardly any inflation in sugar, there's enough leeway to permit additional exports.

The extreme precaution with sugar is nowhere comparable to last year's outright export ban on wheat, which was a response to a failed domestic crop and depleted government stocks. In sugar, there is no such shortage. It's just that the government doesn't want to take any chances in the event of the monsoon turning out bad. But even these worries should not extend to sugarcane, which is largely an irrigated crop. It only points to one thing — a government that will do whatever it takes to control food inflation. The coming months leading up to elections may see more proactive "supply-side" interventions. This is already happening in pulses, where the government has made it mandatory for traders, millers and importers to disclose their stocks. It has also not ruled out clamping stock-holding limits "if the markets do not behave".



The problems with supply-side measures are two-fold. They are mostly invoked when prices rise, not when they fall. It imparts an inherent pro-consumer as opposed to pro-producer bias. Ideally, government policy should privilege neither and simply enable markets to balance supply and demand through the price mechanism.

The second problem is their sheer myopic nature. Building markets take time and effort, unlike undoing that requires just the stroke of a pen. India's sugar exports were valued at \$4.6 billion in 2021-22 (April-March) and \$5.8 billion in 2022-23. The industry did well to create a market, both for Indian raw sugar processed by refineries in Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and for regular plantation whites in Africa, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Restoring confidence among these buyers will not be easy. Nor would agri-businesses want to invest when policies are unmade faster than they are made.

GOVT WIDENS AADHAAR AMBIT: 22 PVT FIRMS CAN USE IT TO VERIFY CUSTOMERS

Widening the list of non-banking reporting entities, the Finance Ministry has allowed 22 financial entities — including Amazon Pay (India) Pvt. Ltd, Aditya Birla Housing Finance Ltd and IIFL Finance Ltd — to verify the identity of their customers via Aadhaar under the ambit of the money laundering law.

Last month, the Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) proposed allowing a wide range of private entities to carry out Aadhaar authentication for a number of services, expanding the use of the digital identity beyond its ministries and departments.

E-KYC (know your customer) carried out through OTP-based Aadhaar authentication allows entities to offer a limited set of services to their users. Such a KYC has to be renewed every year and the aggregate amount of term loans sanctioned shall not exceed Rs 60,000 in a year.

In 2019, the government had amended the Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and Other Subsidies, Benefits and Services) Act, 2016, under which it had allowed only banking and telecom companies to carry out such authentications for KYC requirements.

The amendment was necessitated after the Supreme Court, in 2018, had struck down Section 57 of the Aadhaar Act, which allowed the use of Aadhaar data by any “body corporate or person” – essentially private companies – to establish the identity of an individual for being “unconstitutional”. It was under this provision that private companies like Paytm and Airtel Payments Bank sought Aadhaar details from customers prior to the landmark judgement. Even the subsequent 2019 amendment was challenged in the Supreme Court. The case is yet to come to a conclusion.

According to amendments proposed to the Aadhaar Authentication for Good Governance (Social Welfare, Innovation, Knowledge) Rules, 2020 by the IT Ministry in April, private entities and state governments would be allowed to conduct Aadhaar-based authentication for promoting “ease of living” of residents and enabling better access to services for them, among other things.

BUYING TIME

Barely two days before the expiry of a Supreme Court-stipulated deadline to probe allegations raised by Hindenburg Research about misdemeanours and violations of stock market norms by the Adani group, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has sought at least six more months from the Court to finalise its findings. Following the bloodbath in the prices of most Adani

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



group stocks after the publication of Hindenburg's report in late January, the Court had responded to a PIL and set up an expert committee to investigate the causal factors behind investor losses and ascertain regulatory failures. The SEBI chief, who termed the Hindenburg-Adani-linked issues as "the elephant in the room", was to ensure the committee gets the information it needs. Separately, the Court tasked the regulator to speedily conclude its ongoing probe into the group for violations of its regulations. It also sought a look into whether the group had flouted the minimum public shareholding norms, failed to disclose related-party transactions, and manipulated stock prices. The two-month deadline set for SEBI and the expert committee, led by former Court judge A.M. Sapre, ends on May 2. SEBI's last-minute plea for more time, shall also affect — if not effectively derail — the deliberations of the Justice Sapre panel.

The regulator has "crystallised a prima facie view" on some issues, including a dozen suspicious transactions that pertain to misrepresentation of financials, circumvention of norms and possible fraud. However, it has cited the complexities of the transactions to argue that a detailed assessment would normally take 15 months and it is trying to do it in six months. Even if one leaves aside the merit of the complexity card played by a professionally-led independent regulator with a primary mandate to protect investor interests, the timelines suggested are disingenuous. If SEBI does submit its report to the Court by this November, it would mark 10 months since the Hindenburg report, and almost two years since it initially started examining complaints against the group. Where wrongdoing has been found, it need not take six months to confirm them. Interim findings must be presented with any caveats deemed fit, just as interim orders can be passed on established violations (thus, informing and protecting investors) rather than condoning them in the name of uncovering the big picture. For an issue that has undermined the credibility of the Indian market and its governance standards at a scale unmatched by the Satyam fiasco and the IL&FS implosion, SEBI's petition does not inspire confidence. And that is bad news for investors in India's financial markets.

SYMPTOMATIC STALL

Go Airlines, the Wadia Group's low-cost carrier, this week became India's first domestic airline since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic to go into a mid-air stall and seek bankruptcy protection. For an airline that rebranded itself as Go First less than two years ago in a bid to make a fresh start, with CEO Kaushik Khona declaring at the time "our consumers come first" and "...our confidence in the brighter tomorrow", the carrier's abrupt announcement of a suspension of operations is rich in irony. While it has laid the blame squarely on "the ever-increasing number of failing engines" supplied by Pratt & Whitney, which it claimed had resulted in half its Airbus fleet being grounded, the engine problems could at best be termed the proximate cause. Go First's financial woes predate the fleet troubles and the pandemic and are largely symptomatic of the malaise afflicting the wider industry. Given the high capital and operational costs, the commercial air transport industry operates with wafer thin margins. Added to this, the swelling competitive intensity in India's budget airline sector a decade and a half ago saw rivals adopt aggressive pricing strategies to gain market share that stretched balance sheets and made companies more vulnerable to shocks.

If the lockdowns announced in India in March 2020 and the tight travel curbs to combat the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus dealt a deeply bruising blow to all contact intensive sectors, last year's surge in crude prices in the wake of the Ukraine invasion combined with the rupee's depreciation against the dollar sent aviation turbine fuel (ATF) costs soaring for domestic carriers. And when air travel demand rebounded last year as the pandemic-linked restrictions were lifted, Go First



found itself already hobbled with almost a third of its fleet having been grounded by December 2020, ostensibly due to engine issues. With the airline now moving the National Company Law Tribunal for initiation of insolvency proceedings and an accompanying moratorium on outstanding credit, aircraft lessors have opposed the carrier's resolution plea and instead sought aircraft deregistration and repossession. The outcome in the NCLT notwithstanding, the developments hold a mirror to the industry's systemic infirmities. Rival carrier SpiceJet is simultaneously facing an irate overseas lessor who has moved the insolvency tribunal over unpaid lease rentals. The government knows the issues dogging the industry including a tax structure that keeps ATF costs prohibitive and a regulatory apparatus that is outdated. The onus is on the Centre to find long-term policy solutions if it wants India's struggling airlines to reach cruising altitude.

WHY ARE BLINKIT WORKERS PROTESTING?

The story so far:

The recent strike by Zomato-owned Blinkit delivery agents has once again brought to the forefront issues plaguing the gig economy in the country. The strikes began when Blinkit rolled out its new payout structure for delivery executives, under which the minimum payout per delivery was slashed to ₹15 from ₹25. As a result, Blinkit delivery executives are now set to earn ₹600-700 a day as opposed to ₹1,200 before.

Who is a 'gig worker'?

Gig workers refer to workers outside of the traditional employer-employee relationship. There are two groups of gig workers — platform workers, and non-platform workers. When gig workers use online algorithmic matching platforms or apps to connect with customers, they are called platform workers. Those who work outside of these platforms are non-platform workers, including construction workers and non-technology-based temporary workers.

Whether gig workers should be categorised as 'employees' or as 'independent contractors' has been a heated debate. In India, employees are entitled to a host of benefits under statutes such as the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, Employees' Provident Fund and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952 (EPFA), and the Payment of Bonus Act, 1965. Similarly, contract labourers are governed under the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970 and are also entitled to benefits such as provident funds. However, given the unique nature of gig work, gig workers display characteristics of both employees and independent contractors and thus do not squarely fit into any rigid categorisation. As a result, gig workers have limited recognition under current employment laws and thus fall outside the ambit of statutory benefits.

What is the proposed law?

The Ministry of Labour and Employment introduced the Code on Social Security, 2020 which brings gig workers within the ambit of labour laws for the first time.

Under section 2(35) of the Code, a 'gig worker' is defined as 'a person who performs work or participates in a work arrangement and earns from such activities outside of a traditional employer-employee relationship'. The Code defines platform work as 'a work arrangement outside of a traditional employer-employee relationship in which organisations or individuals use an online platform to access other organisations or individuals to solve specific problems or to provide specific services' in exchange for payment. Although the Code recognises 'gig workers', it



distinguishes between such workers and employees. While employees have benefits such as gratuity, employee compensation, insurance, provident fund, and maternity benefits, the Code stipulates that Central and State governments must frame suitable social security schemes for gig workers on matters relating to health and maternity benefits, provident funds and accident benefits among others.

The Code also mandates the compulsory registration of all gig workers and platform workers to avail of the benefits under these schemes.

What are some of the concerns?

Out of the four new labour codes proposed, gig work finds reference only in the Code on Social Security. As a result, gig workers remain excluded from vital benefits and protections offered by other Codes such as minimum wage, occupational safety etc. They also cannot create legally recognised unions. Moreover, they remain excluded from accessing the specialised redressal mechanism under the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, denying them an effective remedy for grievances against their employers. Considering the non-traditional nature of their work, gig workers also do not have the right to collective bargaining — a fundamental principle of modern labour law crucial to safeguard the rights of workers.

A 2022 report by Fairwork India, an international research project, highlighted the deplorable working conditions of the employees of digital labour platforms in India and the need for statutory affirmation of the rights of gig workers. Despite receiving the assent of the President, the Labour Codes are still awaiting implementation three years on. The Centre has said that this is due to the delay in framing of rules by the States.

Have the courts intervened?

On September 20, 2021, the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) filed a public interest litigation on behalf of gig workers before the Supreme Court. The petition demanded that gig workers or platform workers be declared as 'unorganised workers' so that they can come under the purview of the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008 (UWSS Act) and be provided with statutory protection in the form of social security benefits. It has been contended that the exclusion of gig workers from the category of 'unorganised workers' or 'wage workers' under Sections 2(m) and 2(n) of the UWSS Act is violating their fundamental rights under Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution. Further, it has been argued that such denial of social benefits amounts to exploitation through forced labour, within the meaning of Article 23.

Although the Supreme Court sought the Centre's response to this petition back in December 2021, the Centre has not yet responded.

THE EROSION OF HARD-WON LABOUR RIGHTS

On May 1, 1886, Chicago in the United States became the major site of a demonstration by labour unions in support of an eight-hour workday. Police brutality and the victimisation of protesting workers by employees did not subdue the spirit of the protesters. To condemn anti-worker actions, labour anarchists called for a meeting on May 4, 1886, at the Haymarket Square. The peaceful meeting turned violent when a bomb exploded in the police ranks, and the police fired in response. The violent confrontation between the workers and the police became a symbol of the international struggle for workers' rights.



In 1889, the International Socialist Conference declared that, in commemoration of the Haymarket Square affair, May 1 would be an international holiday for labour, or May Day. In 1919, the International Labour Organization adopted the Hours of Work (Industry) Convention, which limited the number of working hours to eight a day and 48 hours a week. British India ratified the Convention on July 14, 1921. In the subsequent decades, the working class in various countries held several agitations to secure the right to an eight-hour working day.

Today, affluent countries in Europe such as Switzerland, Denmark, and the Netherlands have reduced the hours of work.

Regulating working hours

The theory of economic development anticipated that due largely to technological inventions and innovations, and with economic prosperity, people will have more leisure time to engage in sociocultural activities and that social welfare will improve. However, the itch to regulate or rather increase the number of working hours continues to persist. When COVID-19 hit India, several States amended the Factories Act, 1948, using the ordinance route. Recently, the Tamil Nadu and Karnataka governments also increased the number of working hours a day. Following opposition, the Tamil Nadu government put a hold on the amendment to the Factories Act on work hours.

Employers, especially in the garment and electronic industries, have clamoured for a flexible worktime regime so that they can manage export orders. In India, mainstream economists give the green signal to any initiative as long as it increases exports, even if it is at the cost of labour rights and human rights. They recommend emulating countries like Bangladesh (for garments) and Vietnam (for electronics). In 2022, according to the Global Right Index, launched by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Bangladesh ranked among the 10 worst countries where labour rights are not guaranteed. On a scale of 1 (best) to 5+ (worst) on the degree of respect for workers' rights, the ITUC rated Vietnam 4, which indicates systematic violation of labour rights. The comparator countries that neoliberals refer to are known for their poor record of labour rights.

Under the pretext of 'ease of doing business', regional governments offer many subsidies and exemptions to attract global and domestic capital. Apart from quantitative subsidies, these global companies press for qualitative subsidies. Employers prefer no unions or weak ones in an industrially peaceful context where cheap and skilled workers are available. While India bears the cost of skilling the workers, multi-national corporations reap the benefits. This low road to development employed by most capitalistic companies leads to a race to the bottom. We see one State after another amending labour laws despite the fact that these companies do not help significantly reduce unemployment rates; they mostly provide high-skilled jobs, which leads to jobless growth.

The typical demand is to increase the number of hours of work a day while adhering to the eight-hour-day rule. For instance, Karnataka has increased the number of working hours a day, including rest periods, to 12, while complying with the weekly threshold of 48 hours. We are also moving from the three shifts regime to the two shifts regime. What is the economic reason for this demand? The worker spends about nine hours in the factory. The companies believe they can enhance production by maximising the workers' time at the factory. This would help them cut travelling allowance and transaction costs.

As far as the workers are concerned, they are likely to be away from home for at least 14 hours since some of them spend two hours travelling to work. On four successive days, workers may

work for 12 hours and travel for two hours each day, which is daunting, even for younger workers. Eventually there is bound to be diminishing marginal productivity and employers may not benefit. As workers age, they become less efficient, highly fatigued and prone to industrial accidents.

Challenges

By extending the hours of work and ensuring job insecurity, we are setting the clock back to the 19th century in the name of ease of doing business. Due to lack of political unity as well as trade union cooperation, save a few instances, States are able to change labour laws without much opposition. The move of the Karnataka government close to May Day was disappointing. Companies employ Human Resources professionals who preach about a work-life balance, but don't say anything when workers are treated shabbily. The delay in the implementation of the new labour codes is hardly a concern for the Union government. Trade unions have a lot to be concerned about this May Day.



DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

CORE OF MARS

Scientists observed seismic waves travelling through Mars' core for the first time and confirmed model predictions of the core's composition.

The researchers used seismic data acquired by the NASA InSight lander to directly measure properties of Mars's core, finding a completely liquid iron-alloy core with high percentages of sulphur and oxygen (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences).

To determine these differences, the team tracked the progression of two distant seismic events on Mars, one caused by a marsquake and the other by a large impact, and detected waves that travelled through the planet's core. By comparing the time taken by the waves to travel through Mars compared with waves that stayed in the mantle, and combining this information with other seismic and geophysical measurements, the team estimated the density and compressibility of material the waves travelled through, as per a release.

The researchers' results indicated that Mars most likely has a completely liquid core.

THE EU'S ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ACT

The story so far:

After intense last-minute negotiations in the past few weeks on how to bring general-purpose artificial intelligence systems (GPAIS) like OpenAI's ChatGPT under the ambit of regulation, members of European Parliament reached a preliminary deal this week on a new draft of the European Union's ambitious Artificial Intelligence Act, first drafted two years ago.

Why regulate artificial intelligence?

As artificial intelligence technologies become omnipresent and their algorithms more advanced — capable of performing a wide variety of tasks including voice assistance, recommending music, driving cars, detecting cancer, and even deciding whether you get shortlisted for a job — the risks and uncertainties associated with them have also ballooned.

Many AI tools are essentially black boxes, meaning even those who designed them cannot explain what goes on inside them to generate a particular output. Complex and unexplainable AI tools have already manifested in wrongful arrests due to AI-enabled facial recognition; discrimination and societal biases seeping into AI outputs; and most recently, in how chatbots based on large language models (LLMs) like Generative Pretrained Transformer-3 (GPT-3) and 4 can generate versatile, human-competitive and genuine looking content, which may be inaccurate or copyrighted material.

Recently, industry stakeholders including Twitter CEO Elon Musk and Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak signed an open letter asking AI labs to stop the training of AI models more powerful than GPT-4 for six months, citing potential risks to society and humanity. "Powerful AI systems should be developed only once we are confident that their effects will be positive and their risks will be manageable," the letter said. It urged global policymakers to "dramatically accelerate" the development of "robust" AI governance systems.



How was the AI Act formed?

The legislation was drafted in 2021 with the aim of bringing transparency, trust, and accountability to AI and creating a framework to mitigate risks to the safety, health, fundamental rights, and democratic values of the EU. It also aims to address ethical questions and implementation challenges in various sectors ranging from healthcare and education to finance and energy. The legislation seeks to strike a balance between promoting “the uptake of AI while mitigating or preventing harms associated with certain uses of the technology”.

Similar to how the EU’s 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) made it an industry leader in the global data protection regime, the AI law aims to “strengthen Europe’s position as a global hub of excellence in AI from the lab to the market” and ensure that AI in Europe respects the 27-country bloc’s values and rules.

HOW HATE SPEECH AND CONSPIRACIES ARE THRIVING ON ELON MUSK’S TWITTER

Recently, there have been many spelling mistakes in the tweets of Twitter users debating controversial subjects like religion, terrorism, crime, and yes, even Indian history. These are not errors made in the heat of the moment, but careful distortions meant to keep the tweet from being flagged or deleted for hateful content. For example, a tweet posted in November 2022 that singled out people with Muslim names from a series of random crime news reports did not refer to the perpetrators as “Muslims” but instead used the phrase “Ola ke Bande” (Ola’s group/Ola’s gang). The word “Ola,” which refers to the Indian ride-hailing service, was used in place of “Allah.” The tweet was posted after CEO Elon Musk’s \$44 billion takeover of Twitter. The tweet author currently has close to 7,00,000 followers.

Reporting this tweet for targeting a group of people based on their religion is now more difficult than reporting a hateful tweet simply referring to “Muslims,” as the Twitter moderator viewing the complaint would have to be familiar with not only the Hindi phrase being used, but also the double meaning of “Ola.” Moreover, if the moderation process is automated, the machine would most likely see a user verbally abusing a taxi service, which does not constitute hateful conduct.

Distortions of hate

Some of the common hate speech distortions are — ‘beeph eaters’: a derogatory term used to refer to Muslims, by distorting the word ‘beef’; ‘muzlim’: a distortion of the word ‘Muslim’; ‘Islam’: a distortion of ‘Islam,’ which fools Twitter’s search filter by bringing up results for “isam” or “is am”; ‘peaceful/peacefuls’: a word used in place of ‘Muslim,’ to avoid being flagged for hate speech; and ‘rice bag’: a derogatory phrase referring to India’s religious minorities, referencing the bigoted stereotype that they left Hinduism in exchange for a “rice bag” or economic benefits.

A lack of moderation

There are fears that Twitter no longer has the resources or the staff it needs to adequately combat hateful conduct, spam, criminal content on the site, and misinformation in not just English but global languages. In an interview with a BBC journalist on April 12, Mr. Musk shared that there were around 1,500 employees still at Twitter, down from slightly under 8,000. The months after his takeover saw employees being fired in multiple rounds, as well as mass resignations. Fired employees included those involved in content moderation worldwide, reported Bloomberg.



The Center for Countering Digital Hate (NGO) said on February 9 that “Elon Musk has reinstated tens of thousands of accounts, including neo-Nazis, white supremacists, misogynists and spreaders of dangerous conspiracy theories.” It added that Twitter could rake in up to \$19 million a year from advertising on just ten such reinstated accounts, which included figures such as Andrew Tate and Robert Malone. Mr. Musk denied that hate speech was rising on Twitter and claimed that the BBC journalist was lying to suggest otherwise.

However, it is a mistake to assume that content moderation on Twitter before Mr. Musk’s takeover was effective. Former CEO Jack Dorsey has admitted to making “mistakes.” Yet, the key difference now is that Twitter does not even pretend to let users hold it accountable, as its press@twitter.com email ID automatically responds to all media queries and emails with a graphic emoji.

Furthermore, on April 17, the Twitter Safety team announced its new approach to content moderation, called “Freedom of Speech, Not Reach.” This policy would leave up select tweets that violate Twitter’s Hateful Conduct Policy but filter their visibility by adding a label flagging them as potential violations. Ads will also not be placed near them. Twitter’s Hateful Conduct policy says that users cannot “directly attack” others based on “race, ethnicity, national origin, caste, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or serious disease.” However, the new “freedom of speech, not reach” policy would mean that some tweets violating these principles will be allowed to remain on Twitter.

Hate speech on other platforms

The Hindu reached out to Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp-owner Meta to learn the rival social media company’s approach to hate speech.

In an emailed statement, a Meta spokesperson said the company takes a zero-tolerance approach to hate speech on Facebook and Instagram, and had pulled down such content as soon as they were made aware of it. “Since 2016, we have invested more than \$16 billion in teams and technologies to keep hate speech, and other forms of harmful content off the platform and to enhance safety and security of users on our apps. As a result of our efforts, we’ve reduced the prevalence of hate speech on our platforms down to .02% which means for every 10,000 pieces of content, two were violating,” said the spokesperson. Meta explained it used artificial intelligence (AI) to identify images or text identical to hate speech content it had already removed. This technology helps it accurately detect hate speech even when the meaning is not obvious or the content is changed to avoid detection, the company said.

Additionally, Meta said it had human content reviewers in 20 Indian languages including Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, Punjabi, Urdu, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati, Assamese, Telugu, Oriya, Sindhi, Mizo, Marwari, Chhattisgarhi, Tulu, Maithili/Bhojpuri, Konkani, and Meitei. The social media company also claimed it took down around 16 million pieces of content from Facebook and Instagram in the last quarter of 2022.

However, as Meta confirmed yet another round of layoffs in late April that impacted its technical employees, reduced staff could translate to less effective content moderation on Facebook and Instagram. Tech outlet The Verge further reported that most of Meta’s misinformation engineering team was fired as part of April’s cuts. Meta is due to fire more workers in late May and aims to reduce its workforce by around 10,000 people in 2023.



The Hindu also reached out to Mastodon and Reddit to learn their approaches to content moderation but did not receive a response.

As Twitter's roughly 1,500 employees put in the hours to take the social media company forward, hateful content is finding new ways to evolve on the platform.

WIDESPREAD LONELINESS IN THE US POSES HEALTH RISKS AS DEADLY AS SMOKING

Widespread loneliness in the U.S. poses health risks as deadly as smoking a dozen cigarettes daily, costing the health industry billions of dollars annually, the U.S. surgeon general said Tuesday in declaring the latest public health epidemic.

The declaration is intended to raise awareness around loneliness but won't unlock federal funding or programming devoted to combatting the issue.

Research shows that Americans, who have become less engaged with worship houses, community organizations and even their own family members in recent decades, have steadily reported an increase in feelings of loneliness. The number of single households has also doubled over the last 60 years.

But the crisis deeply worsened when COVID-19 spread, prompting schools and workplaces to shut their doors and sending millions of Americans to isolate at home away from relatives or friends.

People called their friend groups during the coronavirus pandemic and reduced time spent with those friends, the surgeon general's report finds. Americans spent about 20 minutes a day in person with friends in 2020, down from 60 minutes daily nearly two decades earlier.

Loneliness increases the risk of premature death by nearly 30%, with the report revealing that those with poor social relationships also had a greater risk of stroke and heart disease. Isolation also elevates a person's likelihood of experiencing depression, anxiety and dementia.

The surgeon general is calling on workplaces, schools, technology companies, community organizations, parents and other people to make changes that will boost the country's connectedness. He advises people to join community groups and put down their phones when they're catching up with friends; employers to think carefully about their remote work policies; and health systems to provide training for doctors to recognize the health risks of loneliness.

COVID IS NO LONGER AN EMERGENCY: WHAT CHANGES?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) on Friday said that Covid-19 was no longer a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, and that the focus would now be on the long-term management of the infection.

The novel viral infection came to light after China reported a cluster of pneumonia cases with no known cause from Wuhan on December 31, 2019. By the end of January 2020, nearly 10,000 cases had been reported, including more than 100 cases in 19 other countries.

WHO raised its highest level of alert and termed the infection a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, a designation that remained in place for over three years.



Why did the WHO declare Covid-19 a pandemic?

SARS-CoV-2 was a novel virus about which very little was known in the initial days. Later, as many patients reached hospitals with pneumonia and in need of oxygen support, doctors and researchers discovered that the infection put the immune system into overdrive, leading to a cytokine storm when immune cells started attacking the patient's own organs. This tended to happen more in the elderly, and in those with existing comorbidities like diabetes.

"There are three conditions for declaring a disease a public health emergency. One, it is spreading across several countries. Two, it is leading to serious illness, hospitalisations, and deaths. Three, serious stress on health systems because of the disease. Covid-19 fulfilled all three conditions in 2020 and 2021," Dr K Srinath Reddy, Distinguished Professor, Public Health Foundation of India, and former member of India's Covid-19 task force, said.

India has reported 4.43 crore cases and 5.3 lakh deaths due to Covid-19 so far. Globally, the number of infections has crossed 76.5 crore, and caused 69.2 lakh deaths.

And why has the WHO removed the designation now?

Over the last three years, doctors and researchers have figured out a lot — methods of transmission; who are at highest risk of severe disease and death; better, cheaper, and point-of-care diagnostics; a treatment protocol that works; medicines to prevent viral replication that can help in reducing severity of the disease; and most importantly, vaccines that can prevent severe disease.

Governments have strengthened healthcare systems and rolled out vaccination drives. In India, more than 90% of people above the age of 12 years have received their two primary doses. Since many were infected and vaccinated, the population has developed a 'hybrid immunity' that has been shown to offer better protection against future severe disease.

"Omicron was more infectious (transmitting quickly) but less virulent (causing milder disease). This was because the virus changed to become less dangerous but also because people acquired immunity," Dr Reddy said.

"Health systems are no longer stressed; focus is back on non-Covid conditions that were neglected during 2020 and 2021. So, for a good part of 2022 and now 2023 Covid-19 did not satisfy the three conditions for a disease to be a public health emergency," he said.

How will the WHO declaration change disease management?

There are no lockdowns; international travel, restaurants, and cinemas are normal; and containment and control measures haven't been needed for some time now. So, not much will change on ground with the WHO declaration.

BEHIND THE 'DEARTH' OF RABIES VACCINE

Every year from November to March, when the weather improves across most of India and people begin to spill out of their homes, the mating season for dogs begins. This brings on aggression and bites and attacks increase. "There are on an average six to seven million dog bites every year in India. Each dog bite will require five doses of vaccine. Many cases may also go unreported and not all patients who are bitten get their vaccines on time," says Dr. Simmi Tiwari, Joint Director, Public Health, National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC).

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Between March 6 and 12, for instance, four deaths by dog bite were reported by the NCDC. None of the deceased had got the rabies vaccine after the bite. Those who had come into contact with the people who died were advised vaccination.

Yet, in States such as Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, the emphasis on procurement of rabies vaccine is low, say government officials. "In other States such as Kerala, there was a shortage. So they raised demands for stocks to be moved from neighbouring Tamil Nadu," an NCDC official notes. But earlier this year, the Central Research Institute in Kasauli had to discard vaccine vials due to a lack of demand.

India's rabies vaccine market is growing at a steady rate. In 2022, its market value stood at \$141.4 million, while the 2023 estimated value is at \$147.6 million, Coherent Market Insights, a market research agency, says. It is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4.2% between 2023 and 2030.

However, last September, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) reported that it had only 5,000 doses of vaccine left for 2022, with many municipal corporation hospitals not having them at all.

There had been nearly 13,000 dog bites registered in Delhi alone from January to December. A late tender meant that the 30,000 additional doses they had wanted to procure would be delayed.

Manufacturers say State and Central governments fail to forecast demand, leading to delays. "A low manufacturing capacity requires orders to be placed in advance, so we can cater to larger volumes on time. At times, demands from States are delayed by many months making it difficult for us to cater to the demand on time," a senior executive working closely with one of rabies vaccine manufacturers says.

The rabies vaccine is lyophilized (freeze dried) and filled in vials in powdered form. In 24 to 32 hours, most Indian companies have the capacity to produce close to 50,000 vials. "In the case of polio, production of vials can go up to a lakh or two lakh in that time. With the polio vaccine, one vial has up to 10 doses. The rabies vaccine vial can be used only in the measure of one dose per person," the executive adds.

There are now seven big Indian makers: Indian Immunologicals' Abhayrab, Bharat Biotech's IndiRab, Cadila Pharma's ThRabis, Serum Institute of India's Rabivax-S, Sanofi Pasteur's Verorab, BIO-MED's SureRab, and Chiron Behring's ChiroRab.

Indian Immunologicals has a market share of 27.6%, with Bharat Biotech commanding 15.6%, followed by Chiron Behring at 8.7%, and Cadila Pharma at 7.9%.

A senior official from Bharat Biotech says that the company has the capacity to manufacture 4 to 5 million vaccine vials a month. Even if the manufacturing plant is functioning at 80% of its full capacity, the company can churn out 3.2 million to 4.2 million vials each month. In an ideal situation, States should forecast demand and stockpile rabies vaccine over a period of two years.

"Major Indian manufacturers supply rabies vaccine to countries like Turkey, Bangladesh, Myanmar and some African nations, among others. Although the rabies vaccines are produced in adequate amount to meet the demand of the country, the manufacturers focus on exporting more than 30% of their production as they get a higher price through exports," says Raj Shah, Lead Consultant, Coherent Market Insights.



H5N1 KILLS 50 MILLION BIRDS, SPREADS TO MAMMALS

This year, the world has been witnessing one of the worst-ever documented outbreak of the highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 killing millions of birds. The virus, which is known to cause severe disease and death in birds, has also been detected in mammalian species and also in humans.

This has put health authorities on high alert regarding the implications of the large outbreak on public health.

High mortality in birds

Although avian influenza has different subtypes, H5N1 is a highly pathogenic subtype that causes mortality in birds. Since 2022, the virus has infected over 100 million birds across the globe, resulting in the deaths of over 50 million and culling of millions of poultry. Unlike previous outbreaks of highly pathogenic subtypes of avian influenza, H5N1 is heavily impacting wild bird species, including many which were on the verge of extinction.

While it is difficult to ascertain how many wild birds have been affected by the virus, a significant impact has been seen in eagles, pelicans, geese, waterfowl, gulls, falcons and shorebirds, in addition to the highest possible impact on poultry seen till date, at least in the U.S.

The impact of H5N1 on wild bird populations has varied depending on several factors, such as level of exposure, geographical locations and migratory patterns of the affected species.

High mortality in wild birds due to the virus could lead to significant ecological consequences, including vulnerability of predators and alterations in species composition in affected ecosystems, and therefore a possible impact on biodiversity not just limited to avian species.

It has raised concerns regarding the spread of the virus among critically endangered avian populations.

In recent weeks, reports suggest that at least 20 California condors, a species that was on the verge of extinction since 1980s, have succumbed to H5N1 avian influenza. With around 300 condors estimated to be remaining in the wild, this would roughly account for a significant 7% of the species. H5N1 has also killed a large number of bald eagles and Caspian terns in the U.S. since January 2022, along with thousands of cranes in Israel. Last year, H5N1 hit a colony of the endangered African penguins in South Africa, killing at least 30 penguins.

Spread to animals

The highly contagious H5N1 virus can also occasionally spillover from birds to animals through direct or indirect contact with infected birds or their droppings.

Worryingly, there have been several reports on spillover of H5N1 to mammals during the current outbreak from different countries, infecting species such as sea lions, minks, foxes, wild bears, and skunks, apart from domestic animals such as dogs and cats.

In 2023 alone, H5N1 caused the deaths of over 3,000 sea lions in Peru. In a recent yet-to-be peer-reviewed study, scientists found that the virus could efficiently spread between ferrets in the laboratory. The only known cases of the virus spreading between mammals were reported in minks that were raised in close confinement in a farm in Spain.



The transmission of H5N1 from birds to mammals is rare, but when it does occur, it can be a cause for concern, as the virus could accumulate mutations and acquire the ability to potentially initiate human outbreaks. H5N1 has a high mortality rate of over 60% in humans and is primarily transmitted to humans through close contact with infected birds or animals, either through handling infected poultry or exposure to contaminated environments.

In the recent months, a few sporadic cases of human H5N1 infections have also been reported from Ecuador, Cambodia, and more recently in Chile. However, since the virus does not yet transmit efficiently among humans, the World Health Organization (WHO) has assessed the risk of H5N1 to humans to be low.

However, the large and unabated outbreak in avian species and not so rare mammalian spillovers could potentially provide the virus a chance to adapt for mammalian transmission.

Enhanced measures

As the current H5N1 outbreak continues unabated with devastating impact on avian population globally, and with significant ecological and economic consequences, the time has never been better to initiate efforts for preparedness towards building better, efficient vaccines for avians and humans and genomics surveillance to map the continued evolution of the virus. Enhanced biosecurity measures are also needed to protect both animal and public health.

HOW MUCH WATER DOES YOUR BODY NEED? WHAT'S SILENT DEHYDRATION?

Silent dehydration is a condition that affects millions of people worldwide. This is especially true in India, where dehydration is a common occurrence due to the hot and humid climate. Many people, however, are not aware of the symptoms of dehydration and may not realize that they are suffering from it.

Dehydration occurs when the body loses more fluid than it takes in. This can happen due to a variety of factors, including excessive sweating, diarrhoea, vomiting, and not drinking enough water. When the body loses water, it also loses important electrolytes like sodium, potassium, and chloride. These electrolytes are important for proper cell function, and their loss can lead to serious health problems.

One of the biggest challenges with dehydration is that the symptoms can be subtle, and many people may not realize that they are dehydrated until it is too late. Some common symptoms of dehydration include thirst, dry mouth, fatigue, and headache. In more severe cases, dehydration can cause dizziness, confusion, rapid heartbeat, and even seizures.

In India, where the climate is hot and humid for most of the year, dehydration is a common problem. In fact, a recent study found that up to 75 per cent of Indians are dehydrated to some degree. This is particularly true for people who live in rural areas, where access to clean drinking water may be limited.

One of the biggest challenges with silent dehydration is that it can affect anyone, regardless of age or health status. Children and the elderly are particularly susceptible to dehydration, as are people who engage in strenuous physical activity or who are exposed to hot temperatures for extended periods of time.



Fortunately, there are steps that you can take to prevent dehydration. The most important thing is to drink plenty of water throughout the day. Experts recommend drinking at least 8-10 glasses of water per day, but this can vary depending on your age, weight, activity level and health status. It's also a good idea to avoid sugary drinks and alcohol, which can actually dehydrate you further. You may be tempted to have fizzy drinks and artificial juices in summer but these contain sugar, dehydrating you further. If you are not one of those concerned about their water intake, try sipping small amounts through the day to keep you on an even keel.

Another important step in preventing dehydration is to be aware of the signs and symptoms of dehydration. If you start to feel thirsty, have a dry mouth, or experience fatigue or headache, it's important to start drinking water immediately. You can also eat foods that are high in water content, such as fruits and vegetables, to help keep you hydrated.

In addition to drinking plenty of water, it's important to replace any electrolytes that you may have lost due to dehydration. This can be done by drinking sports drinks or by eating foods that are high in electrolytes, such as bananas, avocados, and leafy greens.

If you suspect that you are suffering from dehydration, it's important to seek medical attention right away. In severe cases, dehydration can lead to serious health complications, including kidney failure and even death. Your doctor can help you determine the best course of treatment, which may include intravenous fluids and electrolyte replacement.

It is important to note that if you are suffering from cardiac ailments, kidney and liver dysfunction, the amount of fluid intake should be guided by the treating physician.

HOW AIIMS IS USING REPETITIVE TRANSCRANIAL MAGNETIC STIMULATION (RTMS) THERAPY TO HELP PREGNANT WOMEN DEAL WITH DEPRESSION

Thirty-year-old Karishma Sharma (name changed), a resident doctor working with a government hospital in Delhi, slipped into depression as she dealt with challenges in completing her education and loss of a close family member. Working hard to prove a point, she ignored consultation to deal with it. When she got married, other priorities took over. However, as she was undiagnosed for a long time, the severity of her depression increased when she became pregnant.

Experts say women are more at risk of depression while being pregnant than after delivery, the latter commonly understood as the baby blues or post-partum depression. According to AIIMS psychiatry professor, Dr Nand Kumar, "Pregnant women with depression tend to receive less prenatal care, don't eat as well and don't get enough rest. Their mental health troughs are enough to cause a miscarriage or pre-term births."

Karishma's mental health curve was plunging low when she visited the AIIMS psychiatry department for her check-up. Considering her pregnancy, doctors decided against antidepressants and opted for a Repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (rTMS) therapy. Simply put, this uses electromagnetic fields to generate electrical impulses in specific regions of the brain that are known to modulate moods. It is non-invasive and safe. All doctors do is place an electromagnetic coil on your scalp. This coil delivers magnetic pulses that stimulate nerve cells in the region of your brain that have decreased activity during a bout of depression. Once activated, the patient has no complaint for about six months.

AIIMS Delhi is the first institution to employ this neuromodulation tool for treating depression in pregnant women. Dr Kumar says that it has also shown significant improvement in treating

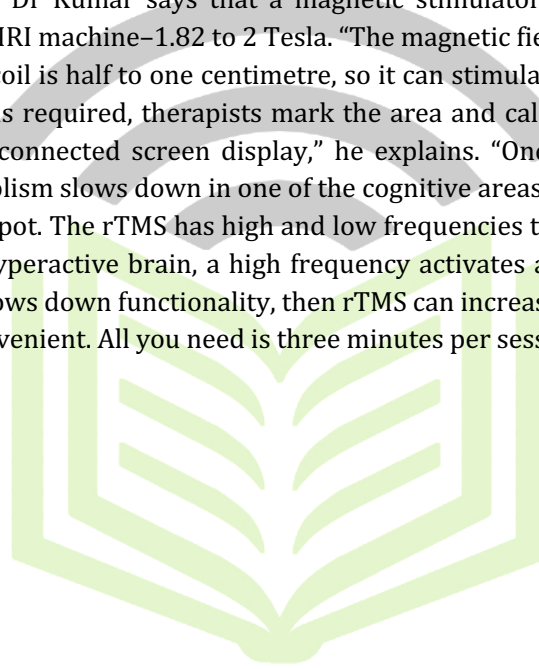
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several psychiatric and neuro-psychiatric disorders, including depression, obsessive compulsive disorder and migraine. “The rTMS wasn’t prescribed for pregnant women earlier but with more research and refinement, it has been found to be safe for pregnant women,” he adds. According to a study presented at the 12th World Congress of Biological Psychiatry in Athens, rTMS can be an alternative therapy for pregnant women experiencing depression.

The study noted how in a randomised controlled trial, the rTMS treatment was well-tolerated by women and no significant adverse effects were reported. It was also found to be statistically and clinically effective in pregnant patients with treatment-resistant depression.

According to a study published in Jama Network, depressive and anxiety disorder treatment during pregnancy remains clinically challenging because of safety concerns about antidepressant use during pregnancy. Dr Kumar says that a magnetic stimulator coil generates a very high magnetic field like an MRI machine—1.82 to 2 Tesla. “The magnetic field is in the centre of the coil. The resolution of this coil is half to one centimetre, so it can stimulate the equivalent area in the brain. No anaesthesia is required, therapists mark the area and calculate the brain’s threshold, which appears in the connected screen display,” he explains. “Once the patient goes through depression, the metabolism slows down in one of the cognitive areas of the brain. Through rTMS, we can stimulate this spot. The rTMS has high and low frequencies that can be modulated. A low frequency calms the hyperactive brain, a high frequency activates a dull one. If there is a head injury or stroke that slows down functionality, then rTMS can increase activity,” he adds. Besides, the therapy is very convenient. All you need is three minutes per session, spread over two weeks.



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