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INTERNATIONAL

EXPERT EXPLAINS | PAST AND PRESIDENTS: POLITICS AND CULTURAL SIGNALLING IN BIDEN'S IRELAND VISIT

As the Emerald Isle (Ireland) prepares to welcome the 46th President of the United States of America on Tuesday evening (early on Wednesday in India), Joe Biden is being celebrated as the “most Irish of American presidents” by many in the Irish media.

The President's first stop, unsurprisingly, will be in Belfast, where he is expected to meet the British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. Overall, however, this visit will be more than about highlighting the 1998 Belfast Agreement or the Good Friday agreement, which, with crucial American mediation, had ended nearly three decades of armed conflict in Northern Ireland.

Biden's four-day itinerary in Ireland will aim to reaffirm the historical links between Ireland and the United States. It will also underline how having distant cultural roots and social anchors continue to nurture American political imagination.

At a time when India has begun to wake up to the varied political implications of having an Indian-origin political leadership in many countries around the world, President Biden's cultural signalling and the crafting of a sense of belonging in Ireland while remaining American should be instructive to Indian observers.

US Presidents' Irish roots

In the south of the island, Biden will be visiting Dublin, County Louth and County Mayo, where he will visit Carlingford Castle. Biden is the second Catholic (after John F Kennedy) to be elected US President, and it is from one of these counties that his great-great grandfather, Owen Finnegan, had left for America in the 1840s as the potato famine (1845-52) ravaged Ireland.

Biden will visit the catholic Knock shrine as well as the home town of his great-great-great grandfather Edward Blewitt, who had emigrated in 1850 to Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Politically, only since the 1990s have American Presidents begun to show an interest in tracing their ancestry to Ireland, and publicly celebrating their Irish roots. Ronald Reagan's great grandfather Michael Reagan was born in Ballyporeen in 1829 and when the former President visited Ireland in 1984, he delivered a speech at this Irish village.

John F Kennedy was the only Roman Catholic Irish American president. His great grandfather Patrick was from Dunganstown, County Wexford, and the Irish ballad Danny Boy was often played at Kennedy's political rallies. Kennedy also interacted closely with prominent Irish Catholics like Tip O'Neill, who later became the second-longest serving House speaker in history.

Political historians and experts view this display of Irish ancestry as a strategy adopted by American Presidents to accumulate Irish American or, more specifically, Catholic votes. During Barack Obama's presidency, his visit to Moneygall in Ireland played out effectively in the Rust Belt, which included former steelmaking cities like Buffalo, Cleveland, and Detroit, in New York City, and in parts of Massachusetts.

Such a campaign ensured exposure in the Catholic newspapers, which were not traditional Obama supporters because of his stand on abortion, and also because of his African-American roots.



ON FINLAND'S JOURNEY TO JOIN NATO

The story so far:

On April 4, 2023, Finland finally became the 31st country to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) after applying last May. The Finnish president, Sauli Niinistö, marked the event by stating that “the era of military non-alignment in our history has come to an end”. The move to join the security alliance was precipitated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine last year, Finland’s historical experience with Moscow, and the changing nature of international geopolitics with a declining Russian influence.

What has been Russia’s response?

The Kremlin spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, responded to Finland joining NATO with “naturally, this forces us to take countermeasures to ensure our own tactical and strategic security”. The Russian Foreign Ministry said that while it will respond with “military-technical measures”, the specifics of its actions will depend on the terms under which Finland joins NATO. The Ministry deemed the now-defunct policy of non-alignment as a “wise decision” and said that Finland has now “lost its independence”. It made clear, in no ambiguous terms, that this decision “will have a negative effect on the bilateral relations between Russia and Finland”.

How has Finland’s security policy evolved via its neighbour?

Before the First Soviet-Finnish War, Russia sought to establish a buffer zone along its western border as a means of protecting itself because of its history of being invaded by foreign powers through Finland. Lingering tensions from the Russian Revolution and the Finnish Civil War between 1917 and 1918 as well as unresolved issues from the Treaty of Dorpat in 1920 were responsible for the First Soviet-Finnish War.

The Second Soviet-Finnish War, which took place between 1941 and 1944 ended with the defeat of Finland. Finland lost territories to the Soviet Union and had to pay war reparations. This, coupled with the independence process in 1917, the civil war between 1918 and 1919, and the Lapland War in 1944 impacted the collective psyche of the Finns. This made Finland pursue a pragmatic security policy which was flexible enough to balance its autonomy with the need for military cooperation with the West. It was careful of not taking overt actions which could be seen as a security threat by Moscow. Finland made concessions to the Soviet Union, one of which was the Finno-Soviet Treaty of 1948. This treaty ensured that Finland would remain neutral and would not allow any foreign troops on its soil without permission from Moscow. While this helped Finland boost trade with the Soviet Union, it became heavily dependent on Moscow thereby making it vulnerable to economic and political overtures from the Soviets.

After the Second World War, Paasikivi’s line emerged and began to morph into what would eventually become Finland’s foreign policy strategy. Named after Juho Kusti Paasikivi, the president of Finland between 1946 and 1956, Paasikivi’s line was based on the idea of peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union with neutrality being its cornerstone. It helped Finland navigate complex international relations after the turbulent time of the Second World War.

Why did the security policy change?

Finland’s experience during the Cold War shaped its approach to security policy. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it sought to build closer ties with Russia while also pursuing



greater integration with Europe. The country has been an active participant in European security initiatives such as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO). At the same time, it has been able to maintain close economic ties with Russia. However, there were tensions between Finland and Russia as a result of the flux in domestic politics in both countries. For instance, Nikita Khrushchev was willing to negotiate with Finland and allowed for increased trade and cultural exchange between the two countries, despite the 1950s seeing Finland side with the West when the Soviet Union called for a boycott of the 1956 Summer Olympics in Australia.

Could there have been an alternative to joining NATO?

For Finland, an alternative to joining NATO could have been to develop its own military capabilities and pursue a deeper level of cooperation with other European countries, through arrangements like the CSDP and the NORDEFECO. However, the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and a declining Russian influence made the decision for the risk-averse Finns easy.

What lies ahead?

The continuation of the Ukraine invasion, a declining Russian might, and now a confirmed security umbrella by NATO gives the impression that Finland's security concerns are mostly assuaged. The extent to which this new cooperation between the Finns and the NATO countries pan out will dictate Russia's actions, but it seems that Moscow, under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, might wish to further escalate by increasing troop presence along the Russo-Finnish border.

SAUDI ARABIA'S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

The story so far:

Saudi Arabia, which had adopted an aggressive foreign policy in recent years seeking to expand its influence in West Asia and roll back that of Iran, its bitter rival, is now following a dramatic course correction. It's reaching out to old rivals, holding talks with new enemies and seeking to balance between great powers, all while trying to transform its economy at home. If the Saudi drive to autonomise its foreign policy and build regional stability through diplomacy holds, it can have serious implications for West Asia.

How is Saudi foreign policy changing?

For years, the main driver of Saudi foreign policy was the kingdom's hostility towards Iran. This has resulted in proxy conflicts across the region. For example, in Syria, Iran's only state ally in West Asia, Saudi Arabia joined hands with its Gulf allies as well as Turkey and the West to bankroll and arm the rebellion against President Bashar al Assad. In Yemen, whose capital Sana'a was captured by the Iran-backed Shia Houthi rebels in 2014, the Saudis started a bombing campaign in March 2015, which hasn't formally come to an end yet. One of the demands the Saudis made to Qatar when it imposed a blockade on its smaller neighbour in 2017 was to sever ties with Iran. However, the Qatar blockade came to an unsuccessful end in 2021.

Last month, Saudi Arabia announced a deal, after China-mediated talks, to normalise diplomatic ties with Iran. Soon after, there were reports that Russia was mediating talks between Saudi Arabia and Syria, which could lead to the latter re-entering the Arab League before its next summit, scheduled for May in Saudi Arabia. Earlier this week, a Saudi-Omani delegation travelled



to Yemen to hold talks with the Houthi rebels for a permanent ceasefire. All these moves mark a decisive shift from the policy adopted by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman after he rose to the top echelons of the Kingdom in 2017. Aggressiveness makes way for diplomacy and loyal alliances make room for pragmatic realignments. This is happening at a time when Saudi Arabia is also trying to balance between the U.S., its largest arms supplier, Russia, its OPEC-Plus partner, and China, the new superpower in the region.

Why are there changes now?

To begin with, these changes do not mean that the structures of Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran are undergoing a transformation. In fact, Iran would continue to drive Saudi Arabia's security concerns and strategic calculus. But Saudi Arabia's response to the Iran problem has shifted from strategic rivalry and proxy conflicts to tactical de-escalation and mutual coexistence. A host of factors seem to have influenced this shift.

The Kingdom's recent regional bets were either unsuccessful or only partially successful. In Syria, Mr. Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, has won the civil war. In Yemen, while the Saudi intervention may have helped prevent the Houthis from expanding their reach beyond Sana'a and the north, the Saudi-led coalition, which itself is now in a fractured state, failed to oust them from the capital. Also, the Houthis, with their drones and short-range missiles, now pose a serious security threat to Riyadh.

In parallel, the U.S.'s priority is shifting away from West Asia. So the choices Saudi Arabia is faced with, is to either double down on its failed bets seeking to contain Iran in a region which is no longer a priority for the U.S., the kingdom's most important security partner, or undo the failed policies and reach out to Iran to establish a new balance between the two. When China, which has good ties with both Tehran and Riyadh, offered to mediate between the two, the Saudis found it as an opportunity and seized it.

Is Saudi Arabia moving away from the U.S.?

It is not. The U.S., which has thousands of troops and military assets in the Gulf, including its Fifth Fleet, would continue to play a major security role in the region. For Saudi Arabia, the U.S. remains its largest defence supplier. The Kingdom is also trying to develop advanced missile and drone capabilities to counter Iran's edge in these areas with help from the U.S. and others. But at the same time, the Saudis realise that the U.S.'s deprioritisation of West Asia is altering the post-War order of the region. What Saudi Arabia is trying to do is to use the vacuum created by the U.S. policy changes to autonomise its foreign policy. The early signs of this autonomisation was visible in Saudi Arabia's recent decisions.

Unlike most other American allies, Saudi Arabia refused to join anti-Russia sanctions. Despite protests from Washington, Saudi Arabia joined hands with Russia to effect oil production cuts twice since the Ukraine war began, aimed at keeping the prices high which would help both Moscow and Riyadh. (Saudi Arabia is currently undertaking massive infrastructure projects aimed at transforming its economy and to sustain those projects and meet its economic goals, the Kingdom needs high oil prices). It has also built stronger trade and defence ties with China, and the Iran reconciliation deal, under China's mediation, announced Beijing's arrival as a power broker in West Asia. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has placed orders for Boeing aircraft worth \$35 billion and entered into conditional talks with the U.S. on normalising ties with Israel. De-Americanisation of West Asia is not a Saudi goal. Rather it is trying to exploit America's weakness



in the region to establish its own autonomy by building better ties with Russia and China and mending relations with regional powers without completely losing the U.S.

What are the implications for the region?

Saudi Arabia's normalisation talks with Syria or its talks with the Houthis cannot be seen separately from the bigger picture of the Saudi-Iran rapprochement. If Syria rejoins the Arab League, it would be an official declaration of victory by Mr. Assad in the civil war and would help improve the overall relationship between Damascus and other Arab capitals. Likewise, if the Saudis end the Yemen war through a settlement with the Houthis (which would probably split Yemen), Riyadh would get a calmer border while Tehran could retain its existing influence in the Saudi backyard. Such agreements may not radically alter the security dynamics of the region but could infuse some stability across the Gulf.

But the path ahead may not be smooth. While the Saudis are trying to build cross-Gulf stability, another part of West Asia remains tumultuous — which was evident in the Israeli raid at Jerusalem's Al Aqsa, Islam's third holiest place of worship, last week. This triggered rocket attacks from Lebanon and Gaza and in return Israeli bombing of both territories. Israel also keeps bombing Syria with impunity. The impact of escalation of tensions between Israel and Iran on cross-Gulf stability remains to be seen.

Another challenge before Saudi Arabia is to retain the course of autonomy without irking the U.S. beyond a point. Though the U.S. publicly welcomed the Saudi-Iran rapprochement, CIA chief William Burns made an unannounced visit to Riyadh and complained to Mohammed bin Salman about being "blindsided" on the Iran deal, according to a report in The Wall Street Journal. The U.S. would also not be happy with Syria, where it once sought regime change, being re-accommodated into the West Asian mainstream. In post-War West Asia, the U.S. had been part of almost all major realignments — either through force or talks, from the Suez war to the Abraham Accords. But now, when China and Russia are mediating talks between rivals successfully and Saudi Arabia, a trusted ally, is busy building its own autonomy, the U.S., despite its huge military presence in the region, is reduced to being a spectator.

WHY SRI LANKA'S PROPOSED ANTI-TERROR LAW IS FACING WIDESPREAD CRITICISM

Lawyers, legal scholars, human rights activists, media, and at least one religious leader in Sri Lanka have asked the government not to take the Anti Terrorism Bill (ATB) to Parliament, and have demanded wider consultations on the provisions of the draft law that one newspaper has called a "remedy worse than malady".

The proposed law is meant to replace the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act, which gives security personnel virtual carte blanche in detaining terror suspects. It was widely misused during the three-decade civil war, leading to disappearances and deaths in custody of both Tamil and Sinhala youths in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. There has been immense international pressure, including from the UN Human Rights Council, on Sri Lanka to repeal the 1978 law.

However, nothing in the ATB suggests it will be more just or democratic than the existing law. It has been widely criticised as a potential tool to suppress dissent and protest. According to the Colombo think tank Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), the Bill has only one redeeming feature: confessions before the police cannot be presented in court as evidence, which is allowed in the existing law.



The proposed law

The main criticism of the draft law — published by the Gazette of Sri Lanka on March 22 — is that its definition of a terrorist act is not precise, and that it widens the scope of what is terrorism by including offences that can be prosecuted under other national laws.

Thus, intimidating the public, wrongfully compelling the government to act or not act in a particular way, preventing the government from functioning, violating the country's territorial integrity or infringing on its sovereignty, propagating war or hate speech and inciting violence, are all terrorist acts under the proposed law.

Ambika Satkunanathan, a former Commissioner of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, has pointed out that this definition does not meet internationally accepted norms on what constitutes a terrorist act.

“Not only does the definition of terrorism have to be precise but it must also adhere to the principles of necessity, proportionality and legality... The definition in the Anti-Terrorism Bill is broad and contains undefined elements, such as acts ‘violating territorial integrity or infringement of sovereignty of Sri Lanka or any other sovereign country’... Historically, even advocating for certain constitutional arrangements, such as federalism, has been construed and labelled as causing harm to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Sri Lanka,” Satkunanathan wrote in an analysis of the Bill in the citizen journalism website GroundViews.

The Bill has also moved hate speech into the terrorism category from a normal criminal offence.

Executive powers

The President can proscribe organisations on the recommendation of the Inspector General of Police or the government if he “has reasonable grounds to believe” the organisation is engaged in an act amounting to an offence under the proposed law, or is acting in “an unlawful manner prejudicial to the national security of Sri Lanka”. Banned organisations cannot recruit members or conduct programmes and meetings. The ban can be renewed every year.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who at this time last year advised his predecessor Gotabaya Rajapaksa to listen to the protesters on Galle Face asking for his resignation, has been criticised for turning on the same protesters once he was in office.

Critics believe that silencing the Aargalaya, as the protest movement is known, and outlawing likely protests against the tough economic reforms that have to be implemented as part of the IMF's bailout package for Sri Lanka, was a consideration guiding the draft legislation.

The CPA has flagged provisions in the Bill that allow the President to declare any public space a prohibited area for an indefinite period, adding to the suspicion that it “may be used to target legitimate dissent in the country”; and the weakening of the safeguards against detention, which will no longer require the consent of the Defence Minister, and can be ordered by a DIG-rank police officer.

Powers to military

Satkunanathan has also pointed out that the ATB gives wide law enforcement powers to the armed forces, including to prevent offences from being committed. “For instance, a military officer has the power to arrest a person if he has ‘reasonable grounds to believe (a person) has committed an



offence' ... This can be interpreted broadly and used to arrest people with no evidence and without following due process," she has written.

The proposed involvement of the military in the new law "contravenes best principles on policing, further militarizes law enforcement and creates a de facto state of emergency... The military is not trained in law enforcement, uses violence as a first response rather than last resort, and historically has been documented to have committed grave human rights violations," she has written.

Widespread criticism

The Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL) has urged the government to not ram the Bill through, saying there is no room for legislation that curtails individual liberties and undermines the rule of law.

The international advocacy Human Rights Watch has said the proposed legislation would "empower the authorities to systematically violate fundamental human rights", and called on the government to withdraw the Bill.

Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, the Archbishop of Colombo, who has been pushing the government to make public the findings of its investigations into the 2019 Easter bombings, has called for widespread opposition to the proposed law as it sought to curb dissent.

The conservative Island newspaper, which supported the existing anti-terror law as an effective instrument against the LTTE, has advised the government to "deep-six" the Bill, describing it as a "remedy worse than malady".



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NATION

NEUTRAL, NOT PASSIVE

The visit by Ukraine's Deputy Foreign Minister Emine Dzhaparova to India, the first such by a senior government official from the East European country since its invasion by Russia, demonstrates Kyiv's desire to build tighter ties with New Delhi and seek its help in resolving the conflict. Earlier, Ukraine had publicly expressed its displeasure over India's position on the war. In August last year, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba had attacked India's energy purchases from Russia, saying it involved "Ukrainian blood", and that Kyiv expected "more practical support" from New Delhi. But Ms. Dzhaparova sounded more pragmatic when she said Ukraine did not want to instruct India on its energy and economic ties with other countries, but that her nation was fighting an existential battle. The war has left India in a difficult position. Russia is a historical partner which India has deep defence ties with and there is no easy, immediate alternative here. And, Russia's aggression is a naked violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and international laws. The war has also made India's ties with its western partners complicated as the trans-Atlantic powers, led by the United States, have launched an economic war against Russia, from which India and most of the Global South have stayed away.

What India has done is to try and navigate this maze of geopolitics through realpolitik — it has refused to condemn Russia, maintained defence and trade ties, as well as expressed its uneasiness with the war and called for respecting the territorial integrity of all nations. But as the war drags on, this balancing act could be interpreted as inactiveness. India is the chair of the G-20 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and will be pressed to do more to show global leadership and help end the war. The conflict has hurt not only Europe but also the entire world and there is growing consensus among the countries in the Global South that the hostilities should cease at the earliest. China and Brazil have sensed this urgency and have hinted at playing a bigger role in brokering peace. India should not shy away. New Delhi has good ties with Moscow, and Ms. Dzhaparova's visit suggests that Kyiv is also looking to India to play a bigger role in peacemaking. India's policy towards the conflict is rooted in its strategic neutrality. But neutrality does not mean that it should do nothing, waiting for the conflict to run its course. It should empathise more vocally with the victim, raise the voice and interests of the Global South, and call for upholding international laws and sovereignty of all states, while at the same time pushing for a pragmatic and permanent solution to the conflict.

WHAT IS BEHIND CHINA'S RENAMING SPREE?

The story so far:

On April 2, the Chinese government announced it would "standardise" the names of 11 places in Arunachal Pradesh. The Ministry of Civil Affairs in Beijing published a list of 11 places along with a map showing the Indian State of Arunachal Pradesh as a part of China's Tibet Autonomous Region. While India dismissed the renaming, which is a largely symbolic move and unlikely to have any tangible on-the-ground impact on the border dispute, it has underlined a hardening Chinese stance on the boundary, the dim prospects of any meaningful progress in the long-running talks, as well as the current strained relations between the neighbours.



What are the places on the list?

The Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs notification announced 11 “place names for public use”, in Mandarin, Tibetan and English (pinyin transliteration of the Chinese names). These include five mountain peaks, two more populated areas, two land areas and two rivers. All of the 11 sites are on Indian territory, and the southernmost is close to Itanagar. The Chinese government referred to the location of the sites as “Zangnan”, or “south Tibet”, which is how it refers to Arunachal Pradesh. China claims as much as 90,000 sq km in the eastern sector of the India-China boundary, covering the entire State.

The list of names follows a new rule on the management of place names by the State Council, or China’s cabinet, that came into effect on May 1 last year, according to the Party-run Global Times, which said the regulation “requires strict management over the naming and renaming of localities and sites” and standardising names.

Is this the first such renaming attempt?

This is the third time China is issuing names for places in Arunachal Pradesh, a gesture seen as provocative by India and one that has coincided with periods of strains in relations. In 2017, the first list of “standardised” names was issued for six places in Arunachal, which was then seen as a retaliatory move after the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, visited the State. The second such list was issued in December 2021, more than a year into the crisis sparked by China’s multiple transgressions across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) starting in April 2020. The second list coincided with a new border law passed by the Chinese government that called for various Chinese civilian and military agencies to take steps to “safeguard” Chinese territory, including through such administrative measures. The second list had 15 places, including eight towns, four mountains, two rivers and the Sela mountain pass.

Zhang Yongpan, a leading border expert at Beijing’s Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, told the Global Times in an earlier interview that the renaming lists, as well as the border law, were “important moves made by the country to safeguard national sovereignty, better maintain national security and manage border-related matters at the legal level amid regional tensions, including frictions with India.” The border law, which took effect on January 1, 2022, contains 62 articles covering delineation and border defence as well as immigration, border management and trade. The issuing of new names is related to Article 7, which calls for promoting border education at all levels of government.

What is behind China’s moves?

As with the two previous cases, India rejected the Chinese announcement. “Arunachal Pradesh is, has been, and will always be an integral and inalienable part of India. Attempts to assign invented names will not alter this reality,” Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said.

More broadly, the moves from Beijing point to a hardening of its stand on territorial disputes, which are now seen less as matters to be resolved diplomatically and bilaterally, but as questions of China’s sovereignty. Besides the renaming, the new border law as well as the new regulations from the State Council all underscore how under current leader Xi Jinping, the protection of national sovereignty and territory has been mandated under various laws. This has also driven more activity along the borders from local-level authorities, such as stepped up programmes to build new civilian settlements (including some that have come up on territory disputed by both Bhutan and India) as well as other border infrastructure.



What will be the impact on the boundary dispute?

Though this symbolic gesture may have little real impact on the ground, it, at the same time, also does reflect how the situation along the borders, described by India as “stable but unpredictable”, is the most concerning since the normalisation of ties between India and China in 1988, when they agreed to shelve differences and maintain peace along the boundary. Both sides also took tentative steps towards a permanent settlement, by appointing Special Representatives (SRs) in 2003 to find a solution to the dispute. This was, however, predicated on maintaining peace and tranquillity through a range of mechanisms set up by both sides. China’s 2020 transgressions have, however, left those arrangements in tatters. A large number of troops from both sides, for the first time in decades, have been stationed permanently in forward areas. Discussions to disengage have moved slowly, and both are yet to reach an agreement on Demchok and Depsang after having disengaged in four other friction areas.

In the eyes of most observers, the most realistic permanent package settlement is one that would see minor adjustments along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in both the western sector, where India sees China as occupying as much as 38,000 sq km in Aksai Chin, and in the eastern sector, where China claims as much as 90,000 sq km in Arunachal. Differences in the middle sector are less complex. The “swap” in the west and east tacitly suggested by then leader Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s was also along these lines.

Beijing, however, has increasingly been vocal about its Arunachal claims and its officials have said any settlement would require India to give up territory in the east, a departure from the Deng suggestion and an unthinkable prospect for any Indian government. The renaming and issuing of “standardised” names by the Chinese government — which has essentially conveyed to the Chinese public that the eastern sector is also non-negotiable for China — has only underlined the hardening Chinese stand, which has left prospects of a settlement dimmer than ever.

RACE TO THE BOTTOM

China’s decision to “freeze” the visas of two Indian journalists, including The Hindu’s Beijing correspondent, has shown how journalists have unfortunately been dragged into rising geopolitical tensions between the neighbours. China’s government, on April 6, 2023 said its decision was a response to India taking steps aimed at Chinese journalists. In 2017, China said, India had shortened the visas for India-based reporters to three months, down from the one year that is the norm in both countries. Then on March 31 this year, reports said, a Xinhua reporter was told to leave India. With Beijing’s retaliatory move, there are only two Indian reporters in China, who have been warned of countermeasures if Chinese visas were not restored to one year validity. It is now entirely possible that there will be no reporters from the world’s two largest countries covering the other — a most unfortunate development amid worsening relations. Restoring the access of journalists on the basis of reciprocity is not complex. Indeed, until 2016, reporters from both countries were on one-year visas and largely left to do their work. The troubles began that year, when three Xinhua reporters were expelled after visiting a Tibetan settlement without permission from the Home Affairs Ministry, which subsequently began placing all Chinese reporters on three-month visas.

India appears to increasingly be following the Chinese playbook by tightening scrutiny on foreign reporters in general. India has, as G-20 host, highlighted the strength of its democracy, but recent actions, including the government’s over-the-top response to a BBC documentary, appear to show insecurity. While New Delhi is right to scrutinise non-journalistic activities of some Chinese

reporters, restricting all of them will be counterproductive. On the spectrum of Chinese media coverage — largely negative on India — ground reports have been among the more multifaceted, showing sides of India that most Chinese usually do not get to see. Beijing, meanwhile, also stands to lose from its decision to restrict Indian media access. Last year’s fake news of a coup in China, published in Indian websites, highlighted the absence of on-the-ground context. Moreover, if Beijing is now justifying its freezing of visas by pointing to reciprocity, it should be aware that reciprocity would also mean giving Indian organisations the kind of freedom that Chinese media enjoy in India. Even in the absence of Chinese employees, Xinhua and CGTN can continue to report with their Indian journalists. In contrast, Beijing bars foreign media organisations from hiring Chinese journalists except as assistants. In this race to the bottom, both sides stand to lose.

TEJAS, RAFALE, SUKHOI TO FACE OFF WITH U.S. FIGHTER JETS AT COPE INDIA 23

The light combat aircraft Tejas, Rafale, Su-30MKI and Jaguars of the Indian Air Force (IAF) are all set to undertake manoeuvres with F-15 fighters and B-1B long-range bombers of the U.S. Air Force (USAF) from Thursday under the second phase of the ongoing bilateral air exercise, Cope India 23.

In a rare gesture, General Kenneth S. Wilsbach, Commander, U.S. Pacific Air Forces (COMPACAF), who is visiting India, undertook a sortie in a Russian-origin Su-30MKI fighter of the IAF on Tuesday during the exercise at the Kalaikunda air base.

“This segment of the exercise will witness participation of B-1B bombers of USAF. F-15 fighter aircraft of the USAF will also join the exercise subsequently,” an IAF statement said. The IAF element will include the Su-30MKI, Rafale, Tejas and Jaguar fighter aircraft. Japan is taking part in the exercise as an observer. The exercise will be supported by aerial refuellers, Airborne Warning and Control System and Airborne Early Warning and Control aircraft of the IAF,” the statement said. The exercise will conclude on April 24.

The first phase of the exercise began on April 20.

This is the first time ever that U.S. bombers will be taking part in a military exercise in India. B-1B bombers had earlier done fly-bys during Aero India on two occasions.

BUILDING SAFEGUARDS

The Supreme Court’s observation that preventive detention laws are a colonial legacy and confer arbitrary powers on the state is one more iteration of the perennial threat to personal liberty that such laws pose. For several decades now, the apex court and High Courts have been denouncing the executive’s well-documented failure to adhere to procedural safeguards while dealing with the rights of detainees. While detention orders are routinely set aside on technical grounds, the real relief that detainees gain is quite insubstantial. Often, the quashing of detention orders comes several months after they are detained, and in some cases, including the latest one in which the Court has made its remarks, after the expiry of the full detention period. Yet, it is some consolation to note that the Court continues to be concerned over the misuse of preventive detention. In preventive detention cases, courts essentially examine whether procedural safeguards have been adhered to, and rarely scrutinise whether the person concerned needs to be detained to prevent prejudice to the maintenance of public order. Therefore, it is salutary that the Court has again highlighted that “every procedural rigidity, must be followed in entirety by the Government in



cases of preventive detention, and every lapse in procedure must give rise to a benefit to the case of the detenu”.

Some facts concerning preventive detention are quite stark: most detentions are ultimately set aside, and the most common reason is that there is an unexplained delay in the disposal of representations that the detainees submit against their detention to the authorities. Failure to provide proper grounds for detention, or delay in furnishing them, and sometimes giving illegible copies of documents are other reasons. In rare instances, courts have been horrified by the invocation of prevention detention laws for trivial reasons — one of the strangest being a man who sold substandard chilli seeds being detained as a ‘goonda’. An unfortunate facet of this issue is that Tamil Nadu topped the country (2011-21) in preventive detentions. One reason is that its ‘Goondas Act’ covers offenders who range from bootleggers, slum grabbers, forest offenders to video pirates, sex offenders and cyber-criminals. The law’s ambit is rarely restricted to habitual offenders, as it ought to be, but extends to suspects in major cases. Across the country, the tendency to detain suspects for a year to prevent them from obtaining bail is a pervasive phenomenon, leading to widespread misuse. Preventive detention is allowed by the Constitution, but it does not relieve the government of the norm that curbing crime needs efficient policing and speedy trials, and not unfettered power and discretion.

WHY IS THE SC STRESSING ON NUMBERING PARAGRAPHS IN ALL COURT ORDERS AND JUDGEMENTS?

The Supreme Court Thursday (April 13) observed that all Courts and Tribunals, as a matter of practice, must adopt a uniform format in writing judgements and orders. The Court also said that numbering all the paragraphs in orders would be desirable.

Why is the SC discussing paragraph numbering?

A bench of Justices Krishna Murari and Ahsanuddin Amanullah made this suggestion while in a judgment in a service case involving a Commandant in the Border Security Force. The case was an appeal against a 2010 ruling of the Punjab and Haryana High Court which was “not numbered paragraph-wise.” “It is desirable that all Courts and Tribunals, as a matter of practice, number paragraphs in all Orders and Judgments in seriatim, factoring in the judgments afore-extracted,” the apex court said.

The court also directed the Secretary-General of the Supreme Court to circulate its judgment to the Registrars General of all High Courts for it to be placed before their respective Chief Justices so that they consider adopting a uniform format for judgments and orders that includes paragraphing. It also said that the Chief Justices may further direct the courts and the tribunals subordinate to the High Courts to do the same.

Why does it matter?

The SC record of a case is called a “paperbook” which is often voluminous and runs into several volumes. It would have copies of all earlier court rulings, the petitions, responses by each party. Given the huge number of cases SC hears every day, judges often have only a few hours to locate the meat of a judgement that is under challenge.

Numbered paragraphs in lengthy judgments saves the court’s time. While dictating judgements in open courts, judges also refer to paragraph numbers of precedents that need to be reproduced verbatim in the judgement.



Even in a 2021 ruling had observed that it's "useful for all judgements to carry paragraph numbers as it allows for ease of reference and enhances the structure, improving the readability and accessibility of the judgements." Additionally, it had said that a "Table of Contents in a longer version assists access to the reader."

NO SCIENTIFIC DATA TO OPPOSE SAME-SEX MARRIAGE, SAYS PSYCHIATRISTS' BODY

The Indian Psychiatric Society (IPS), the professional organisation of psychiatrists in India, marshalled scientific data from countries where same-sex marriage and adoption have been legalised to prove that there is no scientific basis in the belief that same-sex couples are not fit to be parents. The body issued a statement on Sunday mentioning the positive impact of legalisation of same-sex marriage on the mental health of individuals on the LGBTQIA spectrum.

The move comes amid an ongoing case in the Supreme Court over providing legal validation for same-sex marriages.

The IPS, in its statement, mentioned that individuals on the LGBTQIA spectrum be treated like all citizens of the country, and they should "enjoy all civil rights like marriage, adoption, education, and employment, to name a few". Opposing the Union of India's counter affidavit in the Supreme Court, they argued that "there is no evidence to indicate that individuals on the LGBTQIA spectrum cannot partake in any of the above. On the contrary, discrimination which prevents the above, may lead to mental health issues".

Based on research

The statement issued by the IPS is based on scientific research conducted in countries such as the U.K., the U.S., the Netherlands and Taiwan, where same-sex marriage and adoption by LGBTQIA couples has been legalised.

Dr. Ajit Bhide, the ex-president of IPS, says that "nowhere did we find that the same-sex couples were inept in adopting and fostering children."

"A study looking at 23 empirical studies on children raised by lesbian mothers or gay fathers were reviewed [one Belgian/Dutch, one Danish, three British, and 18 North American] that took into consideration their emotional functioning, sexual preference, stigmatisation, gender-role behaviour, behavioural adjustment, gender identity, and cognitive functioning. It concluded children raised by same-sex couples did not systematically differ from other children on any of the outcomes," the body said, further countering the Indian government's stand.

Lawyer and queer rights activist Rohin Bhatt said the statement was a welcome step. "We have read reports about all sorts of unscientific hogwash from the Solicitor-General about the effect marriage equality will have on children, but a statement based on scientific knowledge countering that argument will surely go a long way," he said.

The IPS also stated that a child adopted into a same-gendered family may face challenges, stigma, and/or discrimination along the way and therefore, it is imperative that, once legalised, such parents bring up the child in a gender-neutral, unbiased environment.

Further, the panel stressed the importance of sensitising social units such as families, communities, schools and society in general to protect and promote the development of such a child, and prevent stigma and discrimination at any cost.



MATERNITY BENEFITS TO ADOPTIVE MOTHERS: WHAT THE LAW SAYS, WHY IT IS FACING A CHALLENGE IN SC

The Supreme Court Wednesday agreed to hear a petition challenging the constitutional validity of Section 5(4) of the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, which states that a woman who legally adopts a child below three months old will be entitled to 12 weeks of maternity leave.

A bench led by Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud agreed to hear the Public Interest Litigation (PIL), filed by Karnataka-based Hamsaanandini Nanduri, on April 28. The petition challenges Section 5(4) of the Act on grounds of being “discriminatory” and “arbitrary” towards adoptive mothers and orphaned children over three months.

What is this provision?

The original 1961 legislation did not have specific provisions for mothers who adopt, and these were inserted with the 2017 amendment to the Maternity Benefit Act.

According to Section 5(4) of the amended Act, “A woman who legally adopts a child below the age of three months or a commissioning mother shall be entitled to maternity benefit for a period of twelve weeks from the date the child is handed over to the adopting mother or the commissioning mother, as the case may be.” The term “commissioning mother” refers to a surrogate mother and has been defined as “a biological mother who uses her egg to create an embryo implanted in any other woman.” A woman adopting a child older than three months gets no benefits.

The PIL challenges this provision on grounds of being “discriminatory” and “arbitrary” towards adoptive mothers. “Section 5(4) apart from being discriminatory and arbitrary towards the adoptive mothers, also arbitrarily discriminates against orphaned, abandoned or surrendered children above the age of three months, which is completely incompatible to the object of the Maternity Benefit Act as well as the Juvenile Justice Act,” the plea contends.

Dubbing the purported benefit of 12 weeks’ maternity leave as “mere lip service”, the petition also states that when compared to the 26 weeks’ benefit for biological mothers, the provision fails to stand the basic scrutiny of Part III of the Constitution, which is linked to the concept of non-arbitrariness.

What has happened in the case so far?

This is not the first time this petition is being heard by the top court. On October 21, 2021, a bench of then Justice S Abdul Nazeer along with Justice Krishna Murari sought responses from the Ministry of Law and Justice and the Ministry of Women & Child Development on this plea. Their responses are yet to be filed.

The absence of any provision for maternity leave for a mother adopting an orphaned, abandoned, or surrendered child above three months invariably prevents them from being able to utilise the statutory maternity benefits for adopted mothers, accorded by way of the 2017 amendment, the plea states, while adding that it’s “almost impossible” for a mother to adopt a child less than three months old, owing to the adoption procedure being fraught with delays.

Finally, the plea also submits that Section 5(4) of the Maternity Benefit Act conflicts with Section 38 of the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, which requires any orphaned, abandoned, or surrendered



child to be declared “legally free for adoption” by the Child Welfare Committee. The Adoption Regulations require two months for a child to be declared “legally free for adoption”.

What is the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961?

The Maternity Benefit Act was originally passed by Parliament on December 12, 1961, to regulate the employment of women in “certain establishments” for the period before and after childbirth and “to provide for maternity benefit and certain other benefits.” Originally it applied to every establishment “being a factory, mine or plantation” and later in 1973, it was extended to “any such establishment belonging to Government” and “every establishment where persons are employed for the exhibition of equestrian, acrobatic and other performances.” It repealed the Mines Maternity Benefit Act, 1941 and Maternity Benefit Act, 1929.

Section 4 of the 1961 Act prohibited the employment of or work by women during a certain period and under sub-section (1) stated, “No employer shall knowingly employ a woman in any establishment during the six weeks immediately following the day of her delivery or her miscarriage.”

The right to paid maternity leaves was also given under Section 5 of the 1961 Act, although the period of such leave could not exceed twelve weeks, “that is to say, six weeks up to and including the day of her delivery and six weeks immediately following that day.”

Additionally, no woman could be allowed to avail maternity benefits if she had not worked in the establishment for at least “one hundred and sixty days in the twelve months immediately preceding the date of her expected delivery.” These benefits would be allowed without dismissing the female worker from service or reduction of wages. Violating provisions of the Act could result in three months’ punishment, with or without a fine.

On March 9, 2017, the Maternity Benefits (Amendment) Act 2017, was passed by Parliament, which brought about key changes to the original Act.

What did the amendment in 2017 do?

The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 amended Section 5 of the erstwhile Act to allow 26 weeks of paid leave after childbirth, although only to biological mothers.

The amendment also inserted Section 5(4) which said that adoptive or surrogate mothers legally adopting a child below three months will be entitled to a maternity benefit period of 12 weeks from the date the child is handed over to the mother.

Further, it inserted provisions to allow women to work from home under Section 5(5) which said, “...Where the nature of work assigned to a woman is of such nature that she may work from home, the employer may allow her to do so after availing of the maternity benefit for such period and on such conditions as the employer and the woman may mutually agree.”

Under the amended Act, Section 11 was also inserted to say that, “Every establishment having fifty or more employees shall have the facility of creche within such distance as may be prescribed, either separately or along with common facilities.” It is also mandated that the employer allows four visits a day to the creche by the woman as well as rest intervals for her.

However, a much-received criticism of this Act is that it does not apply to the unorganised sector.



Does it not apply to every sector evenly?

Women in the unorganised sector cannot avail the benefits of the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act 2017. In 2020, a report by TeamLease – a human resource company, revealed that even three years after the amendment Act was passed, it was yet to “deliver a positive impact on job opportunities for women.”

Besides this, the report said that women’s participation dropped in more than five out of 10 sectors since the implementation of the Act. The report suggests that 7 out of the 10 sectors reviewed were expected to show positive momentum in women workforce participation in the medium term (1-4 years) owing to the Act. However, 5 of the 10 sectors are lagging, and instead indicating a drop in the share of women in their workforce, as per the report.

After maternity, women face several challenges. Most of the women (30 per cent) cited wage cuts followed by resistance or lack of support from family (25 per cent) and access to childcare (20 per cent), as per the report.

KURMIS’ PUSH FOR ST STATUS, ADIVASI WOMEN MISTREATED: TRIBAL SITUATION SIMMERS IN BENGAL

A five-day agitation last week by the Kurmi community in West Bengal for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes (ST) list and an incident in Balurghat in north Bengal around the same time when four tribal women were made to perform “dandavat parikrama (circumambulation in a prostrate position)” as punishment for joining the BJP has shifted the focus on the struggle between the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the BJP for the tribal vote in the state.

On Sunday, after five days of rail and road blockade in the Jangalmahal area of West Bengal, a section of the Kurmi protesters ended their protest. The Kurmis are rec as Other Backward Class (OBC), want to be recognised as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) community and want their Kurmali language to be included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution.

Though the blockade left rail and road traffic paralysed, sources said the government did not consider using force on the agitators because of possible electoral consequences. On Tuesday, a group of protesters met Chief Secretary H K Dwivedi but the two sides failed to come to a consensus on the demands. Kurmis were not included among the communities classified as STs in the 1931 Census and were excluded from the ST list in 1950. In 2004, the Jharkhand government recommended the community be added to the ST list rather than be categorised as OBCs. Following the recommendation, the matter went to the Tribal Research Institute (TRI), which held that Kurmis are a sub-caste of Kunbis and not tribals. Based on this, the Centre rejected the demand of Kurmis to be considered as ST.

Meanwhile, in Balurghat in Dakshin Dinajpur district, about 200 people defected to the BJP from the TMC last Wednesday. The BJP accused the ruling party of forcing four tribal women to return to the TMC the following day and, as atonement, they were made to perform “dandavat parikrama”. A video of the incident went viral on social media on Friday. On Monday, state BJP president Sukanta Majumdar wrote to President Droupadi Murmu and the chairperson of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes to bring the incident to their notice. While the BJP alleges that the TMC forced the women to do the “parikrama”, the ruling party and one of the women have claimed they did it of their own accord.



As the video of the incident triggered a backlash, the TMC quickly went into damage control mode and removed the Mahila Trinamool Congress's district president Pradipta Chakraborty and, on Sunday, issued a statement appointing tribal leader Snehalata Hembrom to the post.

The ruling party's calibrated response to both incidents highlights the importance of the tribal vote ahead of the coming panchayat polls and next year's Lok Sabha polls. According to the Tribal Development Department of the state government, the state's tribal population is almost 53 lakh as per Census 2011, or about 5.8% of the state's population. A high number of tribals live in the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Dakshin Dinajpur, Paschim Medinipur, Bankura, Purulia, and Jhargram. In the four parliamentary constituencies in the Jangalmahal region and the eight spread across North Bengal, their share in the population rises to nearly 25 per cent.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP won both the Alipurduar and Jhargram Lok Sabha constituencies, which are the only parliamentary seats reserved for STs in the state. But in the 2021 Assembly elections, the TMC managed to regain some of the lost ground and the BJP failed to win a single Assembly segment in Jhargram. The party, however, retained its hold on Alipurduar, winning all seven Assembly segments that are part of the constituency.

SC RULING ON AGNIPATH SCHEME: WHAT DOES PROMISSORY ESTOPPEL UNDER CONTRACT LAW MEAN?

The Supreme Court on Monday (April 10) dismissed petitions challenging the Delhi High Court judgment which upheld the Agnipath scheme for recruitment to the armed forces. Some of the petitioners included candidates who were shortlisted in the earlier recruitment process to Army and Air Force.

Advocate Prashant Bhushan who appeared for some of these candidates told the apex court that their names appeared in a provisional list for recruitment to Air Force but the recruitment process was cancelled when Agnipath scheme was notified. He argued that the government must be directed to complete the old process citing the doctrine of promissory estoppel.

What was Bhushan's argument?

Bhushan argued that there was written exam, physical test, medical exam conducted under the old recruitment process after which a provisional selection list was published with the ranks. "Thereafter for more than one year, every three months they kept saying that appointment letters were going to be issued, however they were postponed due to Covid-19, etc...in the meantime they did recruitment rallies for the same posts claiming it was for fast-track recruitments to address the demographic imbalance to recruit tribal people, etc".

He added that these candidates had got jobs in BSF and other paramilitary organisations, but had refused as they were told that Air Force recruitment letters will be issued. "They didn't say the issue of letters being postponed due to Agnipath," he said, adding there was the issue of promissory estoppel.

What is the doctrine of promissory estoppel?

Promissory estoppel is a concept developed in contractual laws.



A valid contract under law requires an agreement to be made with sufficient consideration. A claim of doctrine of promissory estoppel essentially prevents a “promisor” from backing out of an agreement on the grounds that there is no “consideration.”

The doctrine is invoked in court by a plaintiff (the party moving court in a civil action) against the defendant to ensure execution of a contract or seek compensation for failure to perform the contract.

In a 1981 decision in *Chhaganlal Keshavalal Mehta v. Patel Narandas Haribhai*, the SC lists out a checklist for when the doctrine can be applied. First, there must be a clear and unambiguous promise. Second, the plaintiff must have acted relying reasonably on that promise. Third, the plaintiff must have suffered a loss.

How does it relate to the Agnipath case?

Bhushan’s argument invoking the doctrine essentially means that the government’s actions of putting up a shortlist etc would be a “promise” made by it. The other party here — the candidates acted based on that promise — they refused other jobs in CRPF, BSF etc and now must be compensated for their loss.

However, the judges quickly refused this argument. CJI DY Chandrachud pointed out that “promissory estoppel is always subject to overarching public interest”. Justice PS Narasimha added that “this is not a contract matter where promissory estoppel in public law was applied, it is a public employment” and that “the question of applying this principle will not arise in this case”.

EXPRESS VIEW: CONMAN SAGA REVEALS DANGERS OF BUREAUCRATIC RAJ IN J&K

As more details have emerged of the Kiran Patel saga, reported in this newspaper, two things about it are truly astonishing. One, that the conman who pretended to be an official in a PMO with a designation that does not exist, was able to pull off his hoax in Jammu & Kashmir, one of the most securitised places in the world, where cross-border terrorism combined with local militancy remains a potent threat; and two, no one has been penalised yet for this outrageous breach of security. Patel, who was finally arrested in March, visited the union territory four times from October 2022, once with his family, on two other occasions accompanied by the businessman son of Hitesh Pandya, a senior official in the Gujarat chief minister’s office, with another businessman once, and on one visit a doctor who wanted to organise a conference in Pulwama. He was given a bullet-proof vehicle, two escort vehicles and a dozen security personnel from the Seema Sashastra Bal. Patel held meetings with officials, projecting power with nothing more than a visiting card and a false designation, stayed in five-star accommodation courtesy of the administration, was even allowed to visit the Line of Control at Uri. Recall that 15 years ago, a man named David Headley pulled a hoax in Mumbai, charming his way through the city’s social circuit as he recced the city for the 26/11 attacks. What if Patel had been a man with more deadly intent? The episode has demonstrated a complete failure of institutional mechanisms that are supposed to be in place just to prevent such eventualities. But it seems that in the general climate of unaccountability that prevails in J&K’s bureaucrat raj since 2018, officials have been playing merry with the rules, no questions asked.

After his son’s involvement came to light, Pandya, who had worked in the Gujarat CMO since 2001, had to step down. But while an enquiry has got underway, the J&K administration is yet to act against the officials who enabled the elaborate fraud. Patel is one among many political power



brokers who have mushroomed since 2019 and believe the Valley is now their playground. They push their way around dropping names, all the while milking “naya” Kashmir for their own benefit. The administration has closed its eyes to these unsavoury developments even as it works to ensure there is no word of criticism.

As a state of strategic national importance, J&K cannot be treated as a remote outpost of the ruling party where anything goes. Where guards can be lowered depending on who pulls the strings. While the state waits for its long overdue election, people need to be assured that those who rule in their name have no unchecked powers. Those behind the Patel breach need to be held accountable as per due process, whatever their rank.

AMIT SHAH LAUNCHES VIBRANT VILLAGES PROGRAMME IN ARUNACHAL: WHAT IS THIS SCHEME

Recently, Union Home Minister Amit Shah was in Arunachal Pradesh for the launch of the ‘Vibrant Villages Programme’ (VVP) in the border village of Kibithoo. The constant threat along the country’s border amid the ongoing standoff with China has led to a concerted push to upgrade infrastructure in the border areas. To this end, the Union Cabinet on February 15 approved the allocation of Rs 4,800 crore for the Centre’s ‘Vibrant Villages Programme.’

What is the ‘Vibrant Villages Programme’?

This village development scheme was first announced in the 2022 Budget. The programme’s targets are to provide comprehensive development of villages on the border with China and improvement in the quality of life of people living in identified border villages. The development in these villages will help prevent migration, and thus also boost security.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee in 2018 had pointed towards backwardness, illiteracy, and lack of basic facilities and infrastructure in our border areas. The VVP aims to address all these issues.

Which states come under VVP?

Under this centrally sponsored scheme, 2,967 villages in 46 blocks of 19 districts have been identified for comprehensive development. These villages abut the border in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh and the Union Territory of Ladakh. In the first phase, around 662 villages have been identified for priority coverage.

What are the funds allocated for the programme?

According to Shah, a population of about 1.42 lakh people will be covered in the first phase. Under the programme, the government has allocated Rs 4,800 crore for infrastructure development and to provide livelihood opportunities in the border areas. Out of the total outlay, Rs 2,500 crore will be spent exclusively on the creation of road infrastructure. The total outlay is for financial years 2022-23 to 2025-26. There is a conscious effort to not overlap VVP with the Border Area Development Programme.

What are the objectives of the scheme?

The aims of the scheme are to identify and develop the economic drivers based on local, natural, human and other resources of the border villages, as per a press release by the Ministry of Home Affairs on February 15, 2023. Development of growth centres on the “Hub and Spoke Model”

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



through promotion of social entrepreneurship, empowerment of youth and women through skill development is also one of the objectives of VVP.

Moreover, the programme also intends to leverage tourism potential through promotion of local, cultural, traditional knowledge and heritage in the border areas, thus increasing the employment opportunities of the people and, as a result, stemming migration. Development of sustainable eco-agribusinesses on the concept of “One village-One product” through community-based organisations, cooperatives, SHGs, NGOs etc is also aimed at.

The district administration will prepare action plans with the help of Gram Panchayats for the identified villages to ensure 100 per cent saturation of Central and state schemes.

The scheme envisages that drinking water, 24×7 electricity, connectivity with all weather roads, cooking gas, mobile and internet connectivity be made available in the border areas. Special attention will be given to solar and wind energy, tourist centres, multi-purpose centres and health infrastructure and wellness centres.

“Under this programme, the development work of villages will be done at 3 levels. The Government of India will take care of the facilities of every person living in the villages and the benefits of various schemes will be delivered to the people. There will not be a single house in the border villages which does not have basic amenities,” Shah said while launching the scheme in Kibithoo.

TRACKING THE TRAIN TO KASHMIR: HOW THE VANDE BHARAT IS SET TO TRANSFORM COMMUTE IN THE VALLEY

Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said last month that a Vande Bharat Express will run between Jammu and Kashmir “in December [2023] or January-February next year” after work on the 272-km Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Railway Line (USBRL) is completed.

History of the project

The line will connect Srinagar and Baramulla in the Valley with the rest of the country by train, and will provide a reliable and cost-effective all-weather alternative to the Jammu-Srinagar national highway that is frequently shut down by landslides.

The first railway line in the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was built by the British in 1897 over a distance of 40-45 km between Jammu and Sialkot in the plains. In 1902 and 1905, a railway line was proposed between Rawalpindi and Srinagar along the course of the Jhelum, which would have connected the Kashmir Valley with the railway network of undivided India. But Maharaja Pratap Singh of Jammu and Kashmir was in favour of a Jammu-Srinagar line via Reasi, and neither project progressed.

After Partition, Sialkot went to Pakistan, and Jammu was disconnected from the rail network of India. Until the inauguration of the Pathankot-Jammu line in 1975, the railway station nearest to Jammu and Kashmir was Pathankot in Punjab.

In 1983, work began on a railway line between Jammu and Udhampur. The 53-km line, estimated to cost Rs 50 crore, was supposed to be completed in five years, but ultimately took 21 years and Rs 515 crore. The project, which was completed in 2004, has 20 major tunnels, the longest of which is 2.5 km long, and 158 bridges, the highest of which is 77 m high.



With work underway on the Jammu-Udhampur line, the government of Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao in 1994 announced the extension of the line from Udhampur to Srinagar, and then Baramulla. This was the USBRL project, which was approved in March 1995 at an estimated cost of Rs 2,500 crore.

The project got momentum after 2002, when Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee declared it a national project on account of its being among the most challenging works undertaken by the Indian Railways after Independence. The project cost has now ballooned to more than Rs 35,000 crore.

Challenges & innovations

The Himalayas are young, and the geologically unstable Shivalik Hills and Pir Panjal mountains lie in the seismically most active Zones IV and V. The terrain is difficult and sees heavy snow in winter, and presented serious challenges in the construction of bridges and tunnels.

More than 205 km of motorable roads — including a tunnel and 320 bridges — were built at a cost of Rs 2,000 crore to transport heavy machinery, construction material, and workers to construction sites, many of which were on sheer mountain faces at inclines of 70 degrees or more.

In view of the challenges in the construction of highly complex tunnels and huge bridges in unstable mountainous terrain, engineers of the Railways devised a novel Himalayan Tunneling Method (HTM), in which horseshoe-shaped tunnels were constructed instead of the usual D-shaped ones. In this method, the site comes down in a curve giving strength to the structure where the soil above it is loose.

Safety and security

The broad gauge railway line will have 0.5-1 per cent ruling gradient, avoiding the need for bank engines in a mountainous region. The trains will be powered by diesel locomotives for now, but there is a provision for electrification in the future. Trains can run at speeds up to 100 km/h for the entire length of the journey.

All the major bridges, tunnels, and railway stations will be illuminated and have CCTV cameras. The track and tunnels have been designed to require as little maintenance as possible.

Development benefits

The train will bring down the travel time between Srinagar and Jammu to between three and three-and-a-half hours from the five to six hours that it takes by road currently. According to Railway Minister Vaishnav, the Vande Bharat trains will allow people to travel from Jammu to Srinagar and return that same evening.

The train will benefit the people of Kashmir by facilitating hassle-free transport of goods such as apples, dry fruits, pashmina shawls, handicrafts etc., to other parts of the country in the shortest possible time and at lesser cost. The cost of transporting items of daily use to the Valley from elsewhere in the country is also expected to go down significantly.

Four cargo terminals will be built between Banihal and Baramulla; land has been identified for three of these terminals.



THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES

The former President of the U.S. Woodrow Wilson once remarked, 'It is not far from the truth to say that Congress in session is Congress on public exhibition, whilst Congress in Committee rooms is Congress at work.' The universality of this statement seems to have stood the test of time and geography.

Due to the sheer volume of information and scale of operations that the Indian Parliament is required to undertake, it is not feasible to take up all issues on the floor of the House. Thus, Parliamentary committees — panels made up of MPs — are constituted to deal with such situations and take up sector-specific concerns. Contrary to popular perception, looking into Bills is not the only purpose that committees serve. We tend to underestimate their relevance, not realising the sheer magnitude of effort that goes into making Parliament a dynamic, functional space where members converge every few months and debate on matters that concern the nation. Behind every such speech, every comment and every Bill introduced or taken up for discussion lies the ceaseless work of various committees that deserve a nuanced perusal if we are to understand how the highest platform of multilateral dialogue in India is brought to life.

However, in these times of political rancour and polarisation, public proceedings of the House seem to reflect serious fault lines. It does not allow for any deliberation, let alone consensus. During the course of the 17th Lok Sabha, only 14 Bills have been referred for further examination so far. As per data from PRS, as little as 25% of the Bills introduced were referred to committees in the 16th Lok Sabha, as compared to 71% and 60% in the 15th and 14th Lok Sabha respectively. This represents a declining trend of national legislation being subjected to expert scrutiny.

The evolution of committees

Even though a structured committee system was only established in 1993, individual committees were being formed for various reasons as far back as independence. For instance, five of the many crucial committees of the Constituent Assembly are worth a mention here.

The Ad Hoc Committee on the Citizenship Clause, as the name suggests, was formed to discuss the nature and scope of Indian citizenship.

Two other very significant committees were the Northeast Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee (July 28, 1947) and the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas (Other than Assam) Sub-Committee (August 18, 1947). The former, chaired by Sh. G.N. Bordoloi, covered the Naga, Khasi, Garo, Jaintia and Mikir Hills and collected a reservoir of people's lived experiences and demands, beliefs and customs. It looked at the status of land and forests, local government and courts, finance and taxation, making its report invaluable for determining the status quo of the region and bestowing rights/privileges accordingly. The latter was characterised by Sh. Jaipal Singh Munda's Minute of Dissent with regard to scheduled areas in the Chhota Nagpur Plateau. A towering Adivasi leader, Munda objected to the exclusion of Manbhum, Hazaribagh and Palamau districts from the ambit of the report. He claimed that all the witnesses had been "emphatic" that all six districts in question must form a consolidated territory for the purposes of scheduling. Not just for administrative reasons but also to protect the interests of the 14,79,485 Adivasis inhabiting the three excluded districts from the veto of the Tribes Advisory Council. Sh. A.V. Thakkar, the Chairman, took note of the Minute but concluded that it lacked merit and "the award of the Boundary Commission is unalterable".



Then there was the Expert Committee on Financial Provisions of the Union Constitution (December 5, 1947), which was responsible for giving recommendations on Union and Province (State) tax collection, central excise duty, liquor revenue, divisible pool of income tax, sharing of proceeds among provinces, residuary powers, and the institutions of the Finance Commission and the Auditor General, among other things. Finally, the Advisory Committee on the Subject of Political Safeguards for Minorities (May 11, 1949), chaired by Sardar Patel, looked at the abolition of reservations for religious minorities.

So, in essence, committees have been doing monumental work since the unveiling of independent India. Today, both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha have their own Standing (permanent) Committees and Ad Hoc (need-based) Committees. There are also Joint Committees with representation from both Houses.

The role of committees

Committees go into the details of a specific piece of legislation, analyse the impact it may have on governance indicators, and then make their recommendations. The government is required to table an 'Action Taken' report for the House to judge the progress made on the suggestions of the committee. Even though committee reports aren't binding on the government, it helps the legislature ensure an oversight on the executive. For instance, during the recently concluded Budget Session, reports tabled on the Demand for Grants highlighted certain inconsistencies on the part of the government. The Committee on Rural Development & Panchayati Raj in its report noted that the revised estimates always fell short of the budget estimates. More importantly, the actual figures are also way less. In 2022-23, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has been able to spend only ₹701 crore out of the allocation of ₹905 crore, approximately, at the revised estimates stage. Such objective assessments are only possible in the confines of a committee room, where partisan divides dissolve to make way for consensus. The alternative scenario, that is discussion on the floor of the House, involves glaring cameras that nudge parliamentarians to perform as per their respective party-lines and voter-base. There also exists the Business Advisory Committee which prepares the entire schedule of both Houses when Parliament is in session. Interestingly, papers laid on the table of the House — something we often tend not to pay attention to — have a whole committee dedicated to them. So, the seemingly insignificant few minutes at the very beginning of each sitting which are utilised to lay said papers are actually backed by a well-oiled machinery of members. Each individual paper is prepared after a careful and often long-drawn process of deliberation, writing and screening. A lot goes into the functioning of Parliament and the committees shoulder a big chunk of that responsibility.

Current progress

Perhaps the most salient work done by a committee in recent years is on the Digital Data Protection Bill. Beginning in 2017 in the wake of the Puttaswamy judgment that recognised privacy as a fundamental right, the Justice Srikrishna Committee was formed and tasked with preparing a data protection framework for India. It presented the final 166-page report in 2018, covering everything from data processing and storage to rights and enforcement — on the basis of which the Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019 was tabled in the Lok Sabha. It was referred to another committee, this time a Joint Parliamentary Committee chaired by P.P. Chaudhary, whose report came out in December 2021, following which the bill was withdrawn and a new Draft Digital Data Protection Bill was introduced for public consultation in November 2022. In each iteration, the committees' insights have not only been invaluable but also formed the very basis of what is possibly the single most crucial legislation for a growing economy in the digital age.



But this is not all. Several important laws such as the Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill that seeks to raise the legal marriageable age of women to 21, the Anti-Maritime Piracy Bill that brings into enactment the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea for combating piracy in the high seas, the Jan Vishwas Bill that amends 42 laws across sectors like agriculture and media, the Wildlife Protection (Amendment) Bill that extends the scope of protected species, the Competition (Amendment) Bill, the Electricity (Amendment) Bill, the Criminal Procedure (Identification) Bill, and the Multi-State Cooperative Societies (Amendment) Bill have all been referred to Committees.

Another important mandate of Committees is to go into issues that are crucial from a nation-building standpoint but don't hold as much political significance. Take the example of defence shipyards. These shipyards are not a primary poll issue. However, it is extremely important to develop these capabilities for safeguarding the security of the nation. While next to no questions have been asked in the Lok Sabha on defence shipyards, the Public Accounts Committee highlighted several concerns plaguing the same in a 2015 report including but not limited to audit findings about inadequate shipbuilding practices, frequent mid-course changes, delays in finalisation of weapon packages, and an underestimation of costs by shipyards.

The road ahead

In the U.S., committees play a crucial role and Bills are referred to them post introduction for scrutiny. It allows changes to be made and the modified Bill to go for voting.

The Parliament could consider a compulsory referral, for the Bills that are tabled on the floor, to the appropriate committees. Arming them with more powers will help them ensure accountability from the executive instead of making them toothless tigers. It is essential for the parliamentary ecosystem in India to institutionalise such procedures and not allow political considerations to hasten law-making.

THE 17TH LOK SABHA IS LIKELY TO BE THE SHORTEST SINCE 1952

The 17th Lok Sabha, which is entering its final year, has functioned for 230 sitting days so far. Of all the Lok Sabhas that completed the full five-year term, the 16th Lok Sabha had the lowest number of sitting days (331). With one more year remaining, and 58 average sitting days a year, the 17th Lok Sabha is unlikely to sit for more than 331 days. This could make it the shortest full-term Lok Sabha since 1952.

The terms of the fourth, sixth, ninth, eleventh and twelfth Lok Sabha were shorter than five years and so the number of sittings were fewer. Among those terms which lasted for at least five years, the 17th Lok Sabha may end up being the shortest. The term of the fifth Lok Sabha was extended for six years.

The latest session (Budget session) held from January 31, 2023, to April 6, 2023, with a recess from February 14 to March 12 saw limited legislative activity, and minimal discussion on the Budget amidst continuous disruptions. In this session, the Lok Sabha functioned for 33% of its scheduled time (46 hours) and the Rajya Sabha functioned for 24% (32 hours). In the 15 days of the second part of the session, the Lok Sabha worked for 5% of its scheduled time and the Rajya Sabha for 6%, with most of the time spent on the procedural work of tabling papers.

In this Lok Sabha, so far, 150 Bills have been introduced and 131 Bills have been passed (excluding Finance and Appropriation Bills). In the first session, 38 Bills were introduced and 28 were passed.



Since then, the number of Bills introduced and passed has declined. Fewer than 10 Bills have been introduced or passed in each of the last four consecutive sessions.

The latest Budget session was the sixth shortest Budget session since 1952. The Lok Sabha spent 18 hours on financial business, of which 16 hours were spent on the general discussion of the Budget. In the previous Budget sessions of the 17th Lok Sabha, financial business was discussed for 55 hours on average.

The Motion of Thanks on the President's Address was the only item discussed in the latest session. It was discussed for about 28 hours in both Houses, with 150 members participating in total. The Rules of Procedure of both Houses of Parliament provide for various devices which can be used to draw attention to matters of public importance, and hold the government accountable. These include half-an-hour discussions, short-duration discussions, and adjournment motions. In the 17th Lok Sabha, only 11 short-duration discussions and one half-an-hour discussion have been held so far. None of these were held in the latest session.

The latest session also saw the least amount of time spent on questions in the current Lok Sabha. Question Hour functioned for 19% of the scheduled time in the Lok Sabha and 9% of the scheduled time in the Rajya Sabha. About 7% of starred questions were answered in each House. No Private Member Bills were introduced or discussed in this session. Each House discussed one Private Member Resolution.

HOW CAN L-G ACT WITHOUT THE AID AND ADVICE OF THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS: SC

How can the Lieutenant-Governor act without the "aid and advice" of the Council of Ministers in nominating members to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, the Supreme Court observed orally on Monday.

The apex court made the observation while hearing a plea by senior advocate A.M. Singhvi, appearing for the Delhi government, to quash the nomination of the 10 aldermen. "What is there by electoral majority is nullified by the aldermen. The whole object is patently illegal," Mr. Singhvi said.

The court granted 10 days to Raj Niwas, represented by Additional Solicitor General (ASG) Sanjay Jain, to file a response.

On February 17, after the city's mayoral polls were deferred thrice amid chaos in the MCD, the Supreme Court, while hearing a plea by AAP's then Mayor candidate Shelly Oberoi, ordered the L-G to notify the MCD's first meeting to elect a Mayor within 24 hours. In the same order, the court also overturned a decision by the L-G-appointed presiding officer and ruled that aldermen cannot vote in the elections.

Act amended

The ASG argued that the GNCTD Act (the Government of National Capital Territory Act) had been amended after the 2018 judgment by a Constitution Bench, which held that the L-G should act as per the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers.

The law officer added that "in view of the amendment, a notification, which is under challenge in a separate petition, was issued", referring to the battle between the Centre and the Delhi government over the control of Capital's services, also being heard in the Supreme Court.



Mr. Singhvi opposed the submissions, saying they were “patently wrong” and that the constitutional interpretation of Article 239AA (which deals with Delhi) by the Supreme Court cannot be negated by amending a statute. He alleged the Delhi government officers were “emboldened” as they were sending the files directly to Raj Niwas without first sharing them with the Delhi government, and demanded that strictures be passed against the Delhi government officers.

THE RULES FOR RECOGNITION AS A NATIONAL PARTY

The story so far:

Ahead of the upcoming Karnataka Assembly elections, the Arvind Kejriwal-led Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) received a shot in the arm from the Election Commission of India, as the poll body accorded it the status of a national party on April 10. Meanwhile, the Trinamool Congress (TMC), the Communist Party of India (CPI), and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) lost their national party status. The EC also revoked the recognition of some parties as State parties.

How does a party get recognised as a national party?

The Election Commission reviews the poll performance of recognised parties after every State Assembly election or general election to the Lok Sabha. The rules for recognition as a national party are specified by the Commission in para 6B of the Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968.

A party becomes eligible to be accorded national status if it manages to fulfil one of the following conditions: (a) if it is recognised as a State party in at least four States, (b) if it secures 6% of the total votes polled in four States in the last Lok Sabha or Assembly elections, and in addition, gets four of its members elected to the Lok Sabha, or (c) if it wins 2% of seats in the Lok Sabha from at least three States.

Besides this, the Symbols Order of 1968 was amended in 2016 to give parties one additional “pass over”. As per this amendment, deemed to have been in force since January 1, 2014, if a national or State party fails to fulfil the eligibility criteria in the next general elections (March 2014 Lok Sabha polls in this case) or the Assembly election after the election in which it received recognition, it will continue to be recognised as a national or State party, meaning it will not be stripped of its status. However, whether it will continue to be recognised after any subsequent election would again have to be determined by the eligibility criteria.

The AAP gained national status after the EC order on Monday, as it was recognised as a State party in four States — Delhi, Punjab, Goa, and Gujarat. Its application with the EC was pending since the Gujarat election results, but a Karnataka High Court order asked the poll body to decide on the party’s status before the State Assembly elections were notified.

The Trinamool Congress, which lost its national status on Monday, had gained it in 2016 by virtue of the “pass over” amendment to the Symbols Act. It was a State party in three States — West Bengal, Tripura, and Manipur — but it did not meet eligibility conditions to remain a State party in Arunachal Pradesh in the 2014 General and State elections. However, the Commission did not revoke its State party status, in line with the amendment. In the EC’s most recent review, the party did not manage to remain a State party in the required four States — losing its status in Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, while continuing to hold recognition in West Bengal, Tripura, and Meghalaya.



Meanwhile, the NCP lost its recognition in three States (Goa, Manipur, and Meghalaya) where it did not secure enough assembly votes between 2017 and 2018. It is currently a State party in only two States — Maharashtra and Nagaland.

Lastly, the CPI, which was accorded national status in 1989, also retained its status despite its performance in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, courtesy the amendment to the Symbols Act. While the EC held off on its revocation of the party's national status during the pandemic, it was withdrawn on Monday.

What are the criteria to be recognised as a State party?

For recognition as a State party, it has to secure at least 6% of the valid votes polled and two seats in Assembly polls or one in Lok Sabha polls.

There are three other alternatives for eligibility: (a) at General Elections or Legislative Assembly elections, the party has to win 3% of the seats in the legislative assembly of the State (subject to a minimum of 3 seats), (b) at a Lok Sabha General Elections, the party has to win one Lok Sabha seat for every 25 Lok Sabha seats allotted for the State, or (c) at a General Election to the Lok Sabha or the Legislative Assembly, the party has to poll 8% of votes in a State.

Besides, the changes to the state recognitions of the TMC, the NCP, and the CPI, the ECI also revoked State party status granted to the Rashtriya Lok Dal in Uttar Pradesh, the Bharat Rashtra Samithi in Andhra Pradesh, the People's Democratic Alliance in Manipur, the Pattali Makkal Katchi in Puducherry, the Revolutionary Socialist Party in West Bengal and the Mizoram People's Conference in Mizoram.

The Tipra Motha in Tripura, the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) in Nagaland and the Voice of the People Party in Meghalaya were granted "recognised State political party" status.

What are the benefits of recognition as national and State parties?

A recognised political party enjoys privileges such as a reserved party symbol, free broadcast time on State-run television and radio, consultation in the setting of election dates, and giving input in setting electoral rules and regulations. Candidates put up by registered but unrecognised political parties are allotted election symbols by the Returning Officers of the constituencies after the last date for withdrawal of candidature as per availability. Thus, the party cannot use a single poll symbol across the country.

SKILL OVER CHANCE

Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi's assent, on April 7, to the Bill prohibiting online gambling and regulating online games in the State, has brought closure to a controversial issue. Almost all parties, including the AIADMK and the BJP, have backed the legislation, now called the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Online Gambling and Regulation of Online Games Act. The passage of the Bill has seen ups and downs. About a month ago, the Governor returned the Bill, on the grounds that the State Assembly had "no legislative competence" to enact such a law. In late March, the House re-adopted and sent the Bill back to him. In the meantime, Union Minister of Information and Broadcasting Anurag Thakur had, referring to the presence of "betting and gambling" in the State List (Entry 34), clarified in Parliament that online gambling too came under the jurisdiction of States. The news that the piece of legislation had received the assent of the Governor came out on



April 10 — the day the House had adopted a resolution urging the President and the Union government to ensure time-bound gubernatorial assent to Bills passed.

The Governor's approach to the Bill — of late assent — is in contrast to when he approved an identical ordinance in October last. His meeting with e-gaming industry representatives, even as the Bill was under his consideration, came in for criticism. Adding to the intrigue was the Raj Bhavan's silence over four months when the Bill was with the Governor. In fact, on the day that the Raj Bhavan returned the Bill to the Assembly (March 8), there was no official word from the Governor's side in support of his stand. Mr. Ravi could have deflected criticism had he made his stand open, as he had done to a Bill that he had returned in February 2022, seeking exemption for students of the State from the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) for medicine (this Bill is awaiting presidential assent). Further, with the Centre having notified the IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, there should be no confusion as far as enforcing the law is concerned — which has to be done in conjunction with the IT Act, 2000. Addiction to online gaming has resulted in financial distress in many a family and also caused serious health issues. Even while seeking to implement the law banning online gambling and online games of chance (rummy and poker), the proposed Tamil Nadu Online Gaming Authority should ensure a balance: no restrictions on online games permitted under the Act as well as monitoring of online game providers. In an ever-evolving digital world, it would be in the interests of all to create an environment for healthy online games.

DRACONIAN RULES

With the advent of social media — the product of the evolution of the Internet into a sphere of communication that allows for relatively unfettered user-generated content — the problem of misinformation has taken a grotesque form. Express measures to curb misinformation, called “false news” and the somewhat inaccurate “fake news”, are a must. However, this raises the question whether the Union government or its divisions can be the regulating entity. In the IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2023, the Union government has added a provision of a fact-check unit to identify fake or false or misleading online content related to the government. Against such content identified by this unit, intermediaries, such as social media companies or net service providers, will have to take action or risk losing their “safe harbour” protections in Section 79 of the IT Act, which allows intermediaries to avoid liabilities for what third parties post on their websites. This is unacceptable and problematic. Also, Section 69A of the IT Act, 2000 elucidates the procedure to issue takedown orders, which these notified amendments could bypass. They also run afoul of *Shreya Singhal vs Union of India* (2015), a verdict with clear guidelines for blocking content.

Without a right to appeal or the allowance for judicial oversight, the government cannot sit on judgment on whether any information is “fake” or “false” as the power to do so can be misused to prevent questioning or scrutiny by media organisations. Takedown notices have been issued by the government for critical opinion or commentary on social media platforms, with several having to comply with them and only a few such as Twitter contesting them in courts. By threatening to remove a platform's immunity for content that is flagged by a government unit, it is clear that the Union government intends to create a “chilling effect” on the right to speech and expression on online platforms. To keep the establishment — which includes the executive government of the day — on its toes and to speak truth to power is a non-negotiable and salient role of journalism in a democracy. In India, freedom of the press is guaranteed through Article 19 of the Constitution, with media rights and public right to free speech derived from this Article. It stands to reason that



any relationship between the government and the media should be one kept at arm's length, with the media having sufficient freedom. The government being the arbiter on what constitutes "false" or "fake" news and having the power to act upon platforms for publishing these will amount to draconian censorship.

AZAD REFERENCE OMITTED IN NCERT TEXTBOOK

He was a freedom fighter and India's first Education Minister, but any mention of Maulana Azad has been deleted from a revised political science textbook published by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT). The authors of the revised Class 11 textbook have also deleted the fact that Jammu and Kashmir had acceded to India on the basis of a promise that the State would remain autonomous.

These are the latest in a spate of controversial deletions from new NCERT textbooks as part of the process of rationalising the syllabus. More glaring is the fact that the NCERT failed to declare either of these revisions in the public domain.

Azad's reference appeared in the old Class 11 NCERT political science textbook, Indian Constitution at Work, in the first chapter, which is titled "Constitution — Why and How?" Last year, when the NCERT published a list of deletions in a list of rationalised content, it had declared that 'no changes' had been made in this particular textbook.

Name dropped

In the older version of the textbook, a paragraph in the first chapter read, "The Constituent Assembly had eight major Committees on different subjects. Usually, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad or Ambedkar chaired these Committees. These were not men who agreed with each other on many things. Ambedkar had been a bitter critic of the Congress and Gandhi, accusing them of not doing enough for the upliftment of Scheduled Castes. Patel and Nehru disagreed on many issues. Nevertheless, they all worked together."

On mapping the changes between the old and the revised version of the textbook, The Hindu found that Azad's name had been dropped from the new version, with the relevant sentence now saying, "Usually, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Sardar Patel or B.R. Ambedkar chaired these Committees."

Azad, however, had played a key role in 1946, when he led the Congress in the elections for the new Constituent Assembly of India, which would draft India's Constitution. He had also headed the delegation to negotiate with the British Cabinet Mission, in his sixth year as Congress president.

This is not the first time that references to Azad have been expunged from the current political narrative, says historian and author S. Irfan Habib, whose biography Maulana Azad: A Life was released earlier this year.

Fellowship closed

"Last year, the Ministry of Minority Affairs chose to discontinue the Maulana Azad Fellowship, which was launched in 2009 and provided financial assistance for five years to students from six notified minorities — Buddhists, Christians, Jains, Muslims, Parsis and Sikhs — to pursue M.Phil and Ph.D.," Professor Habib told The Hindu.



What makes the deletion more glaring, he adds, is that Azad was the first Education Minister of Independent India and had a leading role to play in advocating for key reforms such as free and compulsory primary education for all children up to 14 years.

Azad was also a key founding member of the Jamia Millia Islamia, various Indian Institutes of Technology, the Indian Institute of Science, and the School of Planning and Architecture.

In the 10th chapter of the same textbook, titled “The philosophy of the Constitution”, the reference to Jammu and Kashmir’s conditional accession has also been deleted. The dropped paragraph had said, “For example, the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to the Indian Union was based on a commitment to safeguard its autonomy under Article 370 of the Constitution.”

NCERT’S BLUE PENCIL ON HARSH REALITIES

References to the water crisis in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra which leads to agrarian distress, deaths due to pollution in India, and class-based killings by the police have all been dropped from the newly printed National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) textbooks.

The Hindu mapped the changes in the Class 11 sociology textbook, Understanding Society, which revealed multiple instances of dropped topics. The culling of these topics was not declared in the public domain when the NCERT released the list of rationalised content last year.

The starkest deletion is in Chapter 3, Environment and Society, in a section titled “Why environmental problems are also social problems”. Three full pages from the chapter that deal with two case studies have been culled: one is on water-starved Vidarbha having a growing number of water parks and amusement centres, while the other is about the killing of an 18-year-old labourer and four others by the Delhi police in the industrial area of Wazirpur.

The case study on Vidarbha’s agrarian and water crisis was authored by veteran journalist P. Sainath and had first appeared in The Hindu on June 22, 2005. It describes the Fun and Food Village Water and Amusement Park in Bazargaon village of Nagpur district, a 40-acre haven that offers 18 kinds of water slides and games. Another branch of this water park is in Gurugram. The Hindu has confirmed that both the Nagpur and Gurugram facilities are still functional.

An entire subhead titled “The urban environment — a tale of two cities”, has been chopped off. The section described conflict between the rich and the poor in the Ashok Vihar area of north Delhi. After a morning walker saw a poorly clad 18-year-old boy strolling in the park, he was beaten to death by a group of enraged house owners and two police constables. The boy was from a neighbouring colony of labourers in Wazirpur. The deleted section includes this line: “When a group of people from the jhuggis gathered to protest against this killing, the police opened fire and killed four more people.”

The revised version of the chapter has simply merged two subheads into one, titled ‘Sustainable Development’, and provided a generic narrative devoid of any detailed stories or examples.

Key statistics replaced

Further in the same chapter, statistics on indoor air pollution-related deaths in India have been deleted, including this section: “But we often don’t realise that indoor pollution from cooking fires is also a serious source. The World Health Organisation has estimated that almost 600,000 people



died due to (cumulative) indoor pollution related causes in India in 1998, almost 500,000 of them in rural areas.” This has been replaced with global figures in the new version.

None of these deletions have been declared by the NCERT in its published list of revisions. The only declared change is the deletion of an article published in Outlook on May 8, 2006 titled ‘Meet the Parents’, about the “vicious cycle” of “teen marriages, migrant labour and cane factories in crisis”.

Earlier, students were required to read the report and discuss the constraints that poverty posed to the children of migrant labourers.

RIGHT LESSONS

The arbitrary and surreptitious deletion of several portions from various textbooks by the NCERT betrays bad faith and lack of professionalism but, in the prevailing political climate, it is not entirely surprising. The ruling BJP has made the creation of a new knowledge ecosystem across all fields central to its politics. Among the key deletions, which the NCERT describes as rationalisation of syllabus, are references to the dislike of Hindutva extremists for Gandhi, a ban on the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh after his assassination, entire chapters on the history of the Mughals, references to the 2002 communal riots in Gujarat, the Naxalite movement, the Emergency and discussions on social movements. History texts have been targeted in particular, and 250 historians from leading Indian and foreign universities have pointed out that those who prepared them through a process of consultation and wide-ranging discussions were all kept in the dark. These changes are not limited to school textbooks. The UGC draft syllabus for bachelor-level history has also been altered, “leading to a plainly prejudiced and irrational perception of our past”, according to the Indian History Congress. The NCERT has sought to characterise its failure to be transparent as an “oversight”, but remains firm on the revision.

Knowledge expands continuously, and syllabus revision is essential for a robust education system. What is taught to the younger generation is a collective decision of a society in which formal education is a critical part. The values and ethics of the collective are reflected in education, which evolve over time. In India, education has evolved with an aim to promote national integration, critical thinking, and scientific temper. As any society matures, it might be able to process darker episodes of the past with more equanimity. There is also the question of deciding the appropriate levels at which learners are introduced to various levels of knowledge. For all these reasons, textbooks and pedagogy need to be revised periodically. The trouble is when this exercise is carried out in a politically partisan manner, and in disregard of expertise. It turns out to be toxic when strife, not harmony, is promoted through formal education. India’s growth and development depends almost entirely on educating its bursting young population with vocational and social skills and shaping youngsters into caring citizens of a pluralistic nation. They should learn history with the aim of not repeating its tragedies in order to build a harmonious future. There should be wider, more transparent consultations in shaping the curriculum at all levels.



INDIAN HISTORY CONGRESS DENOUNCES RECENT CHANGES MADE IN NCERT TEXTBOOKS

The Indian History Congress has said that it is “greatly alarmed by the changes in the history syllabi and textbooks” recently effected by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), and urged historians to stand up against “distortions of history”.

The body issued a statement signed by its president, Professor Kesavan Veluthat, and secretary, Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, expressing apprehensions about the consequences of the new changes.

“The Indian History Congress has been greatly alarmed by the changes in the History syllabi and textbooks that have recently been effected by central official agencies, leading to a plainly prejudiced and irrational perception of our past,” the statement read.

The distortions

It pointed out that the University Grants Commission (UGC), in the draft syllabus that it has framed for the Bachelor’s course for History, claims for India the “honour” of being the Aryan homeland, deems the epics as possible historical chronicles and excludes all reference to caste system in its ancient India portion. It expressly treats the caste system as an institution arising after the coming of Islam, the statement added.

Mughal emperor Akbar, along with his policy of religious tolerance between various religions, has been excluded from the syllabus. “The students in the Bachelor’s course would not, thus, learn of any cultural or intellectual developments of the Mughal era,” it read.

It claimed that the same process of “misrepresentation has been introduced in the prescribed History textbooks by omitting whole sections, along with individual passages and sentences [or parts thereof]”. These include complete omission of the narrative of the Mughal dynasty which gave India political unity, and sundry other deletions of statements that are held to be inconsistent with the narrow communalist formulations favoured by the present regime. Even the narrative of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination has been trifled with, the statement added.

EMPIRE-BUILDERS OF MEDIEVAL INDIA

The Mughals At the peak of their power, Babur’s descendants, most of them born and buried in undivided India, controlled the entire subcontinent, comprising parts of modern Afghanistan, the whole of Pakistan, Bangladesh and parts of Myanmar

Within hours of the National Council of Educational Research and Training’s (NCERT) decision to remove a chapter on the Mughals from the history textbooks for Class 12 students, noted historians of the country issued a statement, denouncing the deletions. “The selective dropping of chapters which do not fit into the ideological orientation of the present dispensation exposes the partisan agenda of the regime,” a statement signed by Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib, Aditya Mukherjee, Barbara Metcalf, Dilip Simeon, Mridula Mukherjee and others read. “Driven by such an agenda, the chapter titled “Kings and Chronicles: The Mughal Courts” has been deleted... In medieval times, the Mughal empire and the Vijayanagara Empire were two of the most important empires... In the revised version, while the chapter on the Mughals has been deleted, the chapter on the Vijayanagara Empire has been retained.”

It’s hard to understand the history of modern India without the contribution of the Mughals, who, including Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, were all born in undivided India; and were



buried here. None of them ever left the country, not even to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. "Is there anything in India today which does not owe to the Mughals?" asks Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, secretary, Indian History Congress. "From legal system to legal jargon, we owe to the Mughal and Turkish Sultanate before them. Words like vakalatnama, kacheri, durbar, we owe them all to the Mughals. Today, when a large number of Indians consider Lord Ram as a major deity, we have to thank Tulsidas who wrote his version of Ramayana during the Mughal period. Also, Vrindavan, associated with Lord Krishna, developed thanks to Chaitanya saints who were given grants by Akbar, Jahangir and Shahjahan, and helped Vrindavan and Mathura emerge as a key centre of Krishna Bhakti."

It all started with Babur when he defeated Ibrahim Lodi in the First Battle of Panipat in 1526, and went on to capture all of North India in his brief reign of four years. Babur's victory was to usher in a prolonged period of political stability for the next nearly 200 years. His grandson Akbar ruled for almost 50 years, as did Akbar's great grandson Aurangzeb, while his son Jahangir and Shah Jahan ruled for over 20 years each, making sure there was consistency in state policy and the development of the empire was unimpeded. Their influence gradually reduced from 1707 onwards, and the last Mughal, Bahadur Shah Zafar, was only a symbolic leader of the Revolt of 1857. However, in this symbolism lay a message; common Indians, as evidenced by the sipahis' uprising, considered Mughals to be their kings; hence the leadership role to Zafar.

This was a throwback to the golden era of the Great Mughals; the latter Mughals, post-1707, had done nothing to earn that kind of trust. Aurangzeb's prolonged battles in the Deccan had enfeebled the state's finances, and his successors were unable to replenish the treasury. To augment resources, Aurangzeb had imposed jizyah, a tax solely on non-Muslims, which proved detrimental in the long run. Once Aurangzeb passed away in 1707, his successors proved incapable of ruling over a huge, unwieldy empire. Their internecine battles didn't help. Many like Mohammed Shah Rangeela were given to a life of debauchery. Add to that the gradual advance of East India Company in India and the latter Mughals proved unequal to the task of defending their empire. It all came to a sad end with the banishment of Zafar to Rangoon after the 1857 revolt.

The beginning

It started more promisingly. A descendant of Timur and Genghis Khan, Babur, who knew Turkish and Persian, started the practice of chronicling the events and noting down his impressions of the landscape and the artists he met. He thus authored a unique document Baburnama, originally in Turkish which was later translated into Persian. Not just Baburnama, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Upanishads were also translated during the Mughal era. "The first translations of texts like the Ramayana and Mahabharata in any language from Sanskrit was done under the Mughals. Dara Shukoh translated 25 Upanishads into Persian. He also translated Yogavashishta," says Mr. Rezavi.

Incidentally, Shukoh, the man who never became the king, was way ahead of the times. Eldest son of Shah Jahan, he was a Sunni Muslim who associated closely with Hindu philosophers and Christian priests. He was, as Vincent Smith wrote in the Oxford History of India, "deeply imbued with the pantheistic mysticism of the Sufis".

Shukoh clearly inherited all this from Jalaluddin Akbar, the Emperor who built Ibadat Khana where scholarly debates were held between Brahmins, Christians, Jain, Buddhist and Islamic scholars. It was a move way ahead of the time when one thinks until then the religion of the Emperor was supposed to be religion of the kingdom. The modern Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb stems



from that shared feeling, a synthesis of different cultures. The philosophical discussions during the time of Akbar and his son Jahangir led to intermingling among commoners. In Mughal India, Hindus and Muslims lived cheek by jowl in the same locality. The respect extended to places of worship. Often land grants for temples were made by the Mughal emperors; even the much maligned Aurangzeb, who demolished temples, issued grants.

Vast empire

By the end of the reign of Akbar, the population of the Mughal kingdom exceeded that of entire Europe, and the Mughal wealth was unmatched. As Mr. Rezavi put it, “Today, there is talk of Akhand Bharat. This was a reality under the Mughals who controlled the entire subcontinent comprising parts of modern Afghanistan, the entire Pakistan, Bangladesh and parts of Myanmar, the land mass from Sindh to knocking distance of Kanniyakumari and even parts of Assam was under Aurangzeb for a few years. Shah Jahan was the first Indian ruler after Ashoka to reach Balkh and Badakshan. There was no mightier empire in the world.”

The richness was owed substantially to the Rajputs, who were sharers of power from the time of Akbar, who defeated Rana Pratap in the Battle of Haldighati, and co-opted them in his empire through matrimonial alliances. Most Mughal rulers after Jahangir were born to Rajput women. As a result, within the family, Hindavi was often the language of communication. Aurangzeb, incidentally, conversed in Hindi and composed in Braj bhasha.

Today, when a hue and cry is raised if a Muslim enacts a Hindu hero in cinema, it’s important to remember that during the time of the Mughals, Raskhan wrote of Krishna in Hindi and Balkrishan Brahman in Persian. It was a time of synthesis: Hindu practices were adopted to commemorate Imam Hussain and the concept of triple dome mosque architecture, popularised by the Mughals, is uniquely Indian. Just like the Mughals.

EXPRESS VIEW: NCF SUGGESTION TO BREAK BOUNDARIES BETWEEN ARTS, SCIENCE AND COMMERCE IS WELCOME

An expert panel appointed by the Centre has suggested a long overdue restructuring of the school education system. Last week, the committee released a “pre-draft” of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for public feedback on recommendations, which include giving senior secondary students the freedom to pursue a mix of arts, commerce and science subjects. This flexibility is in accordance with the multidisciplinary approach underlined in NEP 2020. The NCF’s proposal to assess the students’ capabilities in Classes 10 to 12 through examinations over four years — and not one board exam every year — also fits in with the NEP’s vision of “holistic education”. The changes will have an enhanced role for “well-designed” textbooks. Implicit in the NCF approach is also a greater role for the teacher.

It is increasingly becoming evident that the rigid boundaries between arts, science and commerce do not provide the child the foundational knowledge to deal with the more pressing challenges of today. Combating climate change and other environmental crises, for instance, require an understanding of politics, economics, sociology as well as disciplines that deal with natural phenomena. Business studies are not purely about what happens in the realm of commerce. Understanding of human behaviour plays an important role in shaping economic models. The significance of humanities in the Fourth Industrial Revolution has been underlined by several research papers. That’s why NEP “envisions a complete overhaul and re-energising of the higher education system”, including “moving towards a more multidisciplinary undergraduate



education". The new NCF approach could provide the groundwork for such a change at the school-level. It recognises that the current system encourages rote learning and does very little to develop critical skills. It rightly points out that a large number of students have developed a "fear" of mathematics and current methods of assessment have created a perception that mathematics is about "mechanical computation". It, therefore, recommends a shift to play, activity, discovery and discussion-based learning at the primary school level.

In the coming weeks and months, the panel will hold several rounds of discussion on the "pre-draft". An urgent task should be to ensure that the reforms are applied in an inequitable manner. According to the education ministry's data, more than a lakh government schools in the country have just one teacher. Saddled with a number of responsibilities, the instructor may not be able to make learning a creative exercise, as the NEP and NCF demand. The NEP is alive to these concerns. The document's section on empowering the teacher should not escape the planners' attention while they lay the framework for reforms in school education.

EXPRESS VIEW: AMUL VS NANDINI THREATENS TO LIMIT CHOICES FOR CONSUMERS

The political row over Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF) entering the Bengaluru market, and supposedly threatening the local Karnataka Cooperative Milk Producers' Federation (KMF), is both unfortunate and unwarranted. Unfortunate, because what should be a matter of economic competition in the marketplace has been turned into an emotive issue and misplaced sub-nationalism, amplified by the ongoing Karnataka state elections. Unwarranted, because, as this newspaper has reported, GCMMF's Amul brand milk and curd are priced 20-40 per cent higher than KMF's Nandini. Even if GCMMF comes to Bengaluru, it is unlikely to really eat into Nandini's market share. But Amul or any other player shouldn't be prevented from trying, just as the Bengaluru consumer must not be deprived of competition that could take the form of better quality or product differentiation. Incidentally, Amul has been selling in northern Karnataka markets since around 2015 – without inviting any provincial ire.

The current brouhaha is probably also a reflection of rivalry between India's two largest dairy cooperatives. Amul is, of course, the original big brother. Its unions, in 2021-22, procured an average 264 lakh kg per day (LKPD) of milk, including around 43 LKPD from outside Gujarat. Nandini's was only about 82 LKPD, much of it from the southern old Mysuru region districts. But the procurement increase, from a mere 30 LKPD in 2007-08, has been impressive and largely courtesy of a Rs 6-per-litre incentive given to farmers supplying to the KMF unions. The incentive, over and above their procurement price, has given a huge stimulus to dairying in Karnataka. Successive governments, whether of the BJP under B S Yediyurappa or the Siddaramaiah-led Congress, can take credit for Nandini's growth, which has also been enabled by captive markets (Bengaluru, Mysuru and Mangaluru) not far from its main milk-shed areas.

That success only stands undermined by the calls for boycott of Amul products in Karnataka and "Amul vs Nandini" becoming a major poll issue. Karnataka's dairy farmers, like their Gujarat counterparts, need to find new markets. By blocking Amul in Bengaluru, politicians are risking similar retribution when it comes to Nandini selling outside Karnataka. In fact, Maharashtra's dairies allege that the Rs 6/litre producer incentive has led to KMF unions procuring milk far in excess of what can be absorbed within Karnataka. This surplus is, then, being "dumped" as milk powder, butter and ghee in other states. Neither producers nor consumers benefit from such protectionism and beggar-thy-neighbour policies: In this case, it's happening not between nations, but between states in an ostensibly unified national market. The consequences of even milking a



non-issue and creating imaginary fears can be dire. It also frames a political economy challenge where the government has to consider electoral exigencies before embarking on market reforms.

UNRULY PASSENGERS: DGCA ISSUES ADVISORY TO AIRLINES, REITERATES NORMS TO DEAL WITH SUCH INCIDENTS

Aviation regulator DGCA on Monday issued an advisory to airlines reiterating the existing provisions in place to deal with unruly passengers.

The advisory comes against the backdrop of rising incidents of unruly passengers onboard flights and also on a day when a male passenger was deboarded by Air India from a Delhi-London flight for causing physical harm to two cabin crew members.

In an advisory, DGCA said there are provisions under the Civil Aviation Requirement (CAR) for action to be taken by the airline to deal with unruly passengers.

Besides, it said the responsibilities of pilots, cabin crew members and the director of inflight services are also mentioned in the CAR.

DGCA said that in the recent past, it has noticed a few incidents such as smoking in aircraft, consumption of alcoholic beverages resulting in unruly behaviour, altercations between passengers and sometimes inappropriate touching or sexual harassment by the passengers onboard an aircraft during the flight, wherein “post holders, pilots and cabin crew members have failed to take appropriate actions”.

“Such incidents have potential of compromising the safety of aircraft operations,” the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) said.

The watchdog has advised the heads of operations of all airlines to sensitise their pilots, cabin crew and post holders on handling of unruly passengers through appropriate means.

The measures can be “but not limited to training programme for ensuring effective monitoring, maintenance of good order and discipline on board the aircraft so that safety of aircraft operations is not jeopardised in any manner,” the advisory said.

DGCA regulations provide for classifying unruly passenger behaviour into three levels and such people can face flying ban for varying periods.

Unruly behaviour such as physical gestures, verbal harassment and unruly inebriation are classified as Level 1 while physically abusive behaviour like pushing, kicking or sexual harassment will be classified as Level 2.

Life threatening behaviour such as damage to aircraft operating systems, physical violence like choking and murderous assault will be considered as Level 3.

Depending on the level of unruly behaviour, an internal committee set up by the airline concerned can decide on the duration for which an unruly passenger can be banned from flying.

On Monday, Air India deboarded an unruly male passenger who caused physical harm to two cabin crew members onboard a Delhi-London flight, which returned to the national capital shortly after departure.



The passenger was handed over to the security personnel after the flight AI 111 landed at the Delhi airport and an FIR has also been lodged with the police, the airline said in a statement.

In a written reply to Rajya Sabha on April 3, Minister of State for Civil Aviation V K Singh said as many as 63 persons were put in the 'No Fly List' by airlines in 2022.

BBC INDIA'S 'FOREIGN EXCHANGE VIOLATIONS' UNDER ED SCANNER

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has initiated an inquiry into the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) India under the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA) for suspected violations.

It is learnt that the agency has also asked some BBC India officials to submit the documents which it has to scrutinise as part of the proceedings. On Thursday, one official appeared before the investigators.

The move came about two months after the Income-Tax Department in February surveyed the Delhi and Mumbai offices of the BBC, and allegedly uncovered multiple irregularities, including non-payment of tax on certain remittances that were not disclosed to the authorities as income in India.

The surveys were carried out weeks after the BBC had released a two-part documentary India: the Modi Question, related to the 2002 Gujarat riots and situation of minorities in India. The I-T Department had then said that the income/profits shown by various group entities was not commensurate with the scale of operations in India.

"During the course of the survey, the Department gathered several evidence pertaining to the operation of the organisation which indicate that tax has not been paid on certain remittances," said the agency.

As alleged by the Department, services of seconded employees (staff internally transferred on a temporary basis) had been used, for which reimbursement was made by the Indian entity to the foreign entity concerned. "Such remittance was also liable to be subject to 'withholding tax' [the amount employer deducts from the employee's salary and pays to the government as the individual's tax liability], which has not been done...the survey has also thrown up several discrepancies and inconsistencies with regard to Transfer Pricing documentation," it had said.

WHAT IS LIGO-INDIA, THE INDIAN NODE IN THE GLOBAL NETWORK OF LABS TO PROBE THE UNIVERSE

The government has given the final go-ahead to India's Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory, or LIGO, project, clearing the way for the construction of the country's biggest scientific facility that will join the ongoing global project to probe the universe by detecting and studying gravitational waves.

LIGO is an international network of laboratories that detect the ripples in spacetime produced by the movement of large celestial objects like stars and planets. These ripples were first postulated in Albert Einstein's General Theory of Relativity that encapsulates our current understanding of how gravitation works.



LIGO-India will be located in Hingoli district of Maharashtra, about 450 km east of Mumbai, and is scheduled to begin scientific runs from 2030. Here's what you need to know about gravitation, Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, and the purpose and significance of the LIGO project.

Newton's law of gravitation

Almost everyone with a high-school background would be familiar with Newton's law of gravitation. The English mathematician Sir Issac Newton (1643-1727) had postulated that the force that makes any object fall to the ground was also the one that makes heavenly bodies go around in their orbits.

Newton proposed that this was due to the fact that every celestial body exerted an attractive force on every other body in the universe. He worked out a mathematical formulation to calculate the strength of this attractive force which, he found, was directly proportional to the masses of the two bodies and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them.

For more than two centuries, this remained the best understanding of gravitation. It could explain the motion of all celestial objects, and the mathematical framework was able to produce results that matched precisely with the observations. Newton's law of gravitation is an integral part of elementary science education even today, and its mathematics continues to be applied in a wide variety of modern-day scientific investigations with a remarkable degree of accuracy.

Deficiencies in Newton's law

Its success notwithstanding, the theory suffered from a couple of major deficiencies, one of which was evident even during Newton's time. Newton himself acknowledged it while describing the gravitational force in his landmark publication, *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* in 1687, and his contemporaries were aware of it. The theory did not explain the reason for the existence of the attractive force between any two bodies. Why should every piece of matter feel attracted towards everything else?

The second problem became apparent much later, at the start of the 20th century, as a consequence of Albert Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity. Special Relativity, published in 1905, established that nothing could travel faster than the speed of light. But the gravitational force seemed to be propagating instantaneously, over any large distance, without any delay at all. Time does not even figure in Newton's gravitational equation.

General Theory of Relativity

Ten years later, in 1915, Einstein altered our understanding of gravitation with his General Theory of Relativity. He had already shown, with Special Relativity, that space and time were not independent entities but had to be woven together as spacetime. With General Relativity, which was essentially a new theory of gravitation, Einstein took a huge leap of thought.

He proposed that spacetime was not just a passive backdrop to the events happening in the universe. It was not a mere transparent, inert, and static stage. Instead, spacetime interacted with matter, was influenced by it, and in turn, itself influenced events. It was like a soft fabric that responds to a heavy object placed on it, and curls around it.

The curvature in spacetime so produced was the reason other smaller bodies in the vicinity felt the gravitational pull. In fact, there is no force at all. Gravitation is just the curvature in spacetime. Since the spacetime itself is curved around the heavier mass, other nearby objects, moving



normally in straight lines in their spacetime, find themselves going around the central mass. The heavier the mass in the centre, the steeper and bigger is the curvature in spacetime, and stronger and more extended is the gravitational field.

With one mind-bending idea, Einstein was able to explain the origin of the gravitational force, and also the reason for perpetual, near-circular, motion of all heavenly bodies. As physicist John Wheeler described very succinctly, matter tells spacetime how to curve and spacetime tells matter how to move. Also, this model of gravity does not involve instantaneous propagation of force. The experience of a pull towards the central mass happens at the speed of light.

Gravitational waves

General Relativity also predicted that moving objects would generate gravitational waves in spacetime, just like a moving boat produces ripples in water. Because these are ripples in spacetime itself, gravitational waves have the effect of causing a temporary deformation in a body when it comes in contact. Since the spacetime itself elongates or contracts during the propagation of the gravitational wave, everything lying in that spacetime also goes through the same experience.

This effect is similar to a ball being slightly squeezed along any of its diameters. The ball flattens a bit in the direction of pressure that is applied, while it bulges out in the perpendicular direction. When a gravitational wave passes the Earth, for example, the Earth gets similarly squeezed in one direction, and bulges in the perpendicular direction.

Because gravity is the weakest of all natural forces, the deforming effect of gravitational waves is extremely tiny, the reason why it could not be experimentally verified for 100 years even though many other predictions of General Relativity were tested repeatedly during this period.

How LIGO works

It is to measure these tiny effects of gravitational waves that scientists have set up the Laser Interferometer Gravitational Wave Observatory (LIGO), one of the most complex pieces of scientific equipment ever built. The observatory comprises two 4-km-long vacuum chambers, built perpendicular to each other. Highly reflective mirrors are placed at the end of the vacuum chambers.

Light rays are released simultaneously in both the vacuum chambers. They hit the mirrors, get reflected, and are captured back. In normal circumstances, the light rays in both the chambers would return simultaneously. But when a gravitational wave arrives, one of the chambers gets a little elongated, while the other one gets squished a bit. In this case, light rays do not return simultaneously, and there is a phase difference. The presence of a phase difference marks the detection of a gravitational wave.

The precision of the measurements required to detect gravitational waves is mind-boggling. At a 4-km scale, the changes in distance that light has to travel because of the gravitational wave are 10,000 times smaller than the width of the proton, and LIGO instruments are designed to pick this up. According to the LIGO website, this is similar to measuring the distance to a neighbouring star 4.2 light years away with an accuracy smaller than the width of human hair.

The first ever detection of a gravitational wave happened on September 14, 2015, by the two US-based LIGO detectors. These gravitational waves were produced by the merger of two black holes, which were about 29 and 36 times the mass of the Sun, 1.3 billion years ago. Black hole mergers



are the source of some of the strongest gravitational waves. But even these are extremely feeble to detect. Scientists checked the results for four months before announcing their result in February 2016.

This achievement was promptly rewarded with the Nobel Prize in 2017. Since then, nine more gravitational wave events have been detected by the four observatories in the United States, Europe and Japan.

Why LIGO India matters

LIGO India, for which the government approval was given on Thursday, would be the fifth node of this international network of gravitational wave observatories, and possibly the last. The instruments at these observatories are so sensitive that they can easily get influenced by events like earthquakes, landslides, or even the movement of trucks, and produce a false reading. That is why multiple observatories are needed to revalidate the signals.

The chances of two observatories, located in different geographies, producing the exact same false reading are negligible. But two detectors are the bare minimum. More are needed to tap all possible sources of gravitational waves, and to improve the quality and accuracy of information. The LIGO website indicates that the India detector, the fifth node in the international network, could be all that is required for the time being.

For India, LIGO is a momentous milestone. India has been an active collaborator in a number of international science projects. These include the Large Hadron Collider experiments, and ITER, the effort to create a thermonuclear reactor that would enable controlled nuclear fusion reactions. India is also expected to be a partner country in setting up the next space station after the current International Space Station comes to the end of its life later this decade.

However, India has not yet built a cutting-edge scientific facility on this scale on its own soil, something that can have huge spin-off benefits for its science and technology sector. The India-based Neutrino Observatory, one such facility that has been planned in India, has been facing delays. LIGO, therefore, is crucial to demonstrating India's intent and capability to pull-off complex science projects on its own.

MUCH TO WRITE HOME ABOUT THIS POST OFFICE: IN 3D PRINTED GLORY, DELIVERED ON TIME WITH BIG SAVINGS

In what is reportedly the country's first-of-its-kind post office building, to accommodate the Ulsoor Bazaar post office, 3D printing technology is being employed to construct the building. While houses and other buildings were previously built before with this technology, it is a first when it comes to post offices.

Depending on the success of this pilot project, the department might plan a few more in the future.

"The cost of this building will be 30-40% less than regular low-cost buildings. The building can also be of any shape and not just a square or a rectangle. The building will be completed in almost a month," he said.

The new-tech post office, which is being constructed at a cost of around ₹23 lakh, has garnered a wide range of reactions on social media.



READY, OR NOT

The better part of management is preparedness. Unless a certain clairvoyance, inspired by evidence, is possible and systems are ready, post facto management could be a damp squib. The rising numbers of COVID-19 cases in the country indicate the need to gear up again. On April 12, a total of 7,830 new cases were reported in a 24-hour period, according to the Union Health Ministry's data, possibly the highest in over 200 days. There are over 40,000 active cases in the country as on date. A lineage of the Omicron virus called XBB.1.16 is said to be behind the current rapid proliferation of cases in the country. Fatalities are also slowly increasing, being reported from States where there had been no deaths reported for months. It might be reassuring that initial studies of the behaviour of XBB.1.16 show milder infections not requiring hospitalisation, indicating that it is not a very virulent strain. However, health systems can scarcely afford to be under prepared, especially considering the recent traumatic experience of a raging pandemic taking a huge toll.

In any long-winded battle in the realm of public health, a sense of fatigue is inevitable, particularly during a pandemic when the demand on health human resources and infrastructure is relentless. Every opportunity to lay down the burden will be seized, naturally, and low infection levels over time can lead to complacency. The rising number of COVID-19 cases in India is that call to rouse health systems across the country and have them in a state of readiness to meet the challenge. The difference though, between March 2023 and March 2020, is that the world is no longer COVID-naïve. The experience has given an indication of how to be prepared, even if the World Health Organization has come round to treating COVID-19 similar to seasonal influenza. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, at the meeting of the COVID-19 taskforce two weeks ago, rightly advised States to focus on the stratagem that worked earlier — 'test-track-treat-vaccinate' and adhere to COVID-appropriate behaviour. He also called for enhancing lab surveillance, testing all severe acute respiratory illness cases, and for drills to be conducted regularly in hospitals, nationwide. Several States have brought in compulsory masking at various levels, and conducted drills. But, it is also clear from prior experience that a lot depends on compliance at the personal level — hand washing hygiene, masking, and reaching the hospital early particularly in the case of senior citizens and persons with co-morbidities. As governments prepare themselves, strengthening health systems, individuals should also be prudent to take adequate precautions.

NISAR SATELLITE TO MAP HIMALAYAS' SEISMIC ZONES

A forthcoming satellite, NISAR, jointly developed by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) of the U.S. will map the most earthquake-prone regions in the Himalayas with unprecedented regularity. The data this will generate can potentially give advance warning of land subsidence, as recently observed in Joshimath, Uttarakhand, as well point to places that are at greatest risk from earthquakes.

The NISAR satellite, expected to cost approximately \$900 million (with ISRO contributing about one-tenth) will use two frequency bands: the L-band and S-band to image the seismically active Himalayan region that will, every 12 days, create a "deformation map", said Prakash Chauhan, Director, ISRO-National Remote Sensing Centre at a seminar here this week.

"The geoscience community can use this to determine the how strain is building up in various parts of the Himalayas," he said. These two frequency bands will together provide high-resolution,



all-weather data from the satellite that is expected to follow a sun-synchronous orbit and will be launched in January 2024.

Scientists from the Geological Survey of India in 2021 published a “strain map” of the Himalayas based on data from 1,252 GPS stations along the Himalayas. It identified regions that had the greatest odds of generating earthquakes of magnitude above 8 and their extent. “ These many stations are still too few and there’s only one satellite (Sentinel) that we rely on...with NISAR, the costliest space mission ever, we can have a game-changer in earth-science observation,” said Dr. Chauhan.

While satellite imagery to study deformation in land is already employed, the frequency at which observations are taken and the clarity of the images are critical, V.K. Galalaut, of the National Geophysical Research Institute (NGRI) told The Hindu. “With a frequency of 12 days and the ability to be able to provide images even under cloudy conditions, NISAR would be a valuable tool to study deformation patterns, such as in Joshimath,” he added.

BURNING BRIGHT

India’s tiger population in 2022 was at least 3,167 cats, according to the results of the quadrennial census of the tiger population. The previous such exercise, in 2018, estimated the number to be 2,967. There is a fair chance that the 2022 numbers may be revised upwards as a full analysis of the census numbers remains to be done. Being the 50th year of Project Tiger, it is notable that governments, since 1973, have consistently devoted attention to ensuring that tigers — generally vulnerable to environmental degradation and extinct in several countries — continue to populate India’s forests. Being able to ensure an increase in tiger numbers without relying on fenced reserves and by engaging the participation of forest-dwelling communities in conservation are distinct traits of India’s big cat conservation approach. However, this does not mean that tiger numbers are ordained to grow in perpetuity. The ‘Status of Tiger’ report warns that all of India’s five main tiger zones, while largely stable, face challenges of deforestation and loss of tiger habitat. The Western Ghats, while one of the most biodiverse spots globally, also hosts some of India’s most populous tiger reserves. In 2018, 871 unique tigers were photographed, but this time, only 824 were captured. Over the years, there is an increasing presence of tigers outside protected reserves. In the case of the Western Ghats, however, these numbers are on the decline, with only populations within protected forests stable, the report says.

From nine tiger reserves in 1973 to 53 today, the increase in numbers has not translated to all of these reserves becoming suitable habitats for tigers. Serious conservation efforts are needed to help, for instance, tiger population recovery in Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. Wildlife habitats here face various threats that include habitat encroachment, hunting, conflicts with humans, unregulated cattle grazing, excessive harvesting of non-timber forest products, fires, mining, and expanding infrastructure. Experts have said India’s reserves, in their present state, ought to be able to sustain populations of up to 4,000, and with expanded efforts at improving fledgling reserves, these numbers can increase. But, care has to be taken to maintain the delicate balance between making the ground fertile for conservation and keeping the rights of forest-dwelling communities intact. Showcasing conservation efforts ought not to come at the expense of ensuring the right to livelihood and dignified living of communities, who often live the closest to these majestic wild creatures. The cheetah, the leopard, the lion and the tiger can co-exist in India only with the right incentives in place for all stakeholders.



PELICANS, MANGROVES, AND SALT MARSHES

The island of Sriharikota serves as a barrier that shields a brackish water lagoon that we call the Pulicat lake. Being mostly off-limits to tourists because it is an ISRO launch site, this area is teeming with 76 species of water birds. The lake itself has an average depth of only one metre, although it is nearly 60 km long.

The tidal flats, and both fresh and brackish water wetlands found here are ideal for the spot-billed pelican.

Although classified as 'Near-Threatened' in the IUCN red list, this bird looms large in our minds when we think of water birds.

Blue spots

The spot-billed pelican's comical walk points to weak leg muscles, which also means that the bird is not a great swimmer, and catches fish near the surface of the water. The common name comes from blue spots on the sides of the large bills. A social bird, this species sometimes goes fishing in groups, forming a semi-circle that pushes the fish towards shallow water. It also forms a foraging partnership with the little cormorant.

Cormorants are divers, and their dives cause the fish present in deeper regions to scatter towards the surface, where the pelican awaits them. Adult spot-billed pelicans weigh 4.5-5 kg. The pouch, which is called the gular, is for catching fish. In the breeding season, the adult may bring home 2 kg of fish in one catch. Spot-billed pelicans form stable colonies along with other water birds. Nests are built on trees, and two-three eggs are laid. When they are about a month old, the chicks destroy the nests.

Breeding colonies occur very close to, or even within villages, and the birds do not seem perturbed by human activity, and the villagers welcome and protect the pelicans and the nests. Villagers use the droppings of the spot-billed pelican as a fertilizer. After the breeding season, pelican populations scatter over a very large area as they forage for food.

Breeding sites

A detailed survey of spot-billed pelican populations by Kannan and Manakadan (Forktail, Vol 21, 2005) placed a crude estimate of their number in India at 6,000-7,000. The survey identified breeding sites for these birds in South India at Karaivetti-Vettangudi near Thanjavur and Koonthankulam near Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu, Kokkarebellur (Mandya District) and Karanji Lake (Mysuru city) in Karnataka, and Uppalapadu near Guntur and Nelapattu near the Pulicat lake in Andhra Pradesh.

Andhra Pradesh has recently lost a large breeding colony of the bird at the Kolleru lake, where aquaculture has contributed to a total degradation of the ecosystem. Paleobotanists have shown that the Pulicat lake, now a salty marsh, was a thick mangrove forest in the 16th century. Wetland ecosystems lock up carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, as 'Blue Carbon'. As carbon sinks, mangroves can store 1,000 tonne of carbon per hectare.

Ramsar sites

Wetlands of global importance are called Ramsar sites, after the city in Iran where the Treaty on Wetlands was signed.



India has 75 Ramsar sites, of which 14 are in Tamil Nadu, including three added last year: the Karikili bird sanctuary, the Pallikaranai Marsh Reserve Forest and the Pichavaram mangrove. The spot-billed pelican is seen in all these places.

WILL THERE BE AN EL NIÑO IN 2023 AND WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?

India has had four consecutive years of good monsoons and overall rainfall from 2019 to 2022.

In these four years, the country as a whole received an average area-weighted rainfall of 1,268 millimetres (mm) annually and 933.1 mm over the four-month southwest monsoon season (June-September).

By contrast, the preceding five years from 2014 to 2018 – roughly coinciding with the first term of the Narendra Modi government – registered an average annual rainfall of just 1,072.1 mm and 812.4 mm during the southwest monsoon.

The surplus precipitation – more than the “normal” or historical long period annual average of 1,160.1 mm and 868.6 mm for the monsoon season – during the last four years has helped deliver higher agricultural growth, relative to the previous period that recorded poor rain in three (2014, 2015 and 2018) out of the five years.

According to the national accounts data, the farm sector has grown by an average of 4.3% per year during 2019-20 to 2022-23 (the Modi government’s second term), as against 3.2% during 2014-15 to 2018-19.

The La Niña bounty

The bountiful rainfall during 2019-22 has been significantly attributed to La Niña – an atmospheric wind and sea surface temperature (SST) variability phenomenon occurring over the equatorial Pacific, but causing worldwide weather disruptions.

La Niña basically refers to an abnormal cooling of the central and eastern Pacific Ocean waters off the coasts of Ecuador and Peru. Such cooling (SSTs falling 0.5 degrees Celsius or more below a 30-year average for at least five successive three-month periods) is a result of strong trade winds blowing west along the equator, taking warm water from South America towards Asia. The warming of the western equatorial Pacific, then, leads to increased evaporation and concentrated cloud-formation activity around that region, whose effects may percolate to India as well.

The latest La Niña event was one of the longest ever, lasting from July-September 2020 to December-February 2022-23. And it brought copious rains to India – just as two previous “strong” La Niñas in 2007-08 and 2010-11, followed by one “moderate” episode in 2011-12, had done.

The most recent Oceanic Niño Index or ONI value — a three-month running-average SST deviation from the normal in the east-central equatorial Pacific — was minus 0.4 degrees Celsius for January-March 2023. Since La Niña is characterised by a negative ONI exceeding or equal to minus 0.5 degrees, it means that the so-called ENSO (El Niño-Southern Oscillation) cycle has entered a “neutral” phase.

The El Niño threat

While La Niña is associated with good rainfall in India, this isn’t the case with El Niño – the opposite “warm” phase of ENSO. During El Niño, the trade winds weaken or even reverse: Instead



of blowing from east (South America) to west (Indonesia), they could turn into westerlies. As the winds blow from the west to east, they cause the masses of warm water to move into the central and eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean. The rise in SSTs there, thus, produces increased rainfall along western Latin America, the Caribbean and US Gulf Coast, while depriving Southeast Asia, Australia and India of convective currents.

The ENSO cycle, as already pointed out, is currently in the “neutral” state. According to the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s most recent update, ENSO-neutral conditions are likely to “persist through the Northern Hemisphere early summer [of] 2023”. In other words, at least till June. However, “a transition to El Niño is favoured by July-September 2023”, with its chances “increasing through the fall (September-November)”.

The Australian Bureau of Meteorology, too, has forecast “a 50% chance that an El Niño may develop later in 2023”. This is “about twice the normal likelihood”, the agency has said in its March 28 report, adding that “warmer than average SSTs have [already] emerged in parts of the eastern tropical Pacific in recent weeks”. The India Meteorological Department is scheduled to issue its first long-range forecast of rainfall for the 2023 southwest monsoon on Tuesday.

The implications

Most global models are seeing the transition from ENSO-neutral to El Niño happening this year. But that would probably affect the monsoon only in the second half (August-September) of the season. Will it translate into deficient rainfall – after four-in-a-row surplus years – and, by extension, low or even negative agriculture growth?

Practically all drought years in India since Independence – marked by large declines in foodgrain production or monsoon failures – have witnessed El Niño events of varying intensity. The sole exception was 1966-67, although the year before had recorded a “strong” El Niño (To elaborate, mean SSTs have to be at least 0.5 degrees Celsius higher than the average for a minimum of five overlapping three-month periods to qualify as an El Niño event. The positive ONI values or SST deviations have to be 1.5-1.9 degrees for categorisation as “strong”, above 2 degrees for “very strong”, 1-1.4 degrees for “moderate” and 0.5-0.9 degrees for “weak”).

El nino

While all drought years have invariably been El Niño years, the reverse doesn’t hold true though. All the El Niño years that weren’t bad agriculture years. The best examples are 1982-83 and 1997-98. Foodgrain output fell only marginally in these two “very strong” El Niño years. Agricultural GDP growth was similarly positive in 1951-52, 1963-64, 1968-69 and 1994-95; all of them saw “moderate” El Niño events.

El nino

To sum up, 2023 could well end the run of good rainfall years since 2019. The statistical probability of that is high, whether or not there is an El Niño. Moreover, El Niño itself can turn out to be “weak”.

Either way, everyone – from policymakers to tractor companies that have posted all-time-high sales in the past four years – has to brace themselves for a not-too-great monsoon this time. And in an election year leading up to the national Lok Sabha polls in April-May 2024, the attendant political challenges would be no less daunting.



HOW HAVE RECENT WEATHER EVENTS AFFECTED WHEAT CROP?

The story so far:

The unusual rise in mercury in February this year, followed by an untimely spell of widespread rain accompanied by gusty winds and hails during the month of March in parts of the country's key grain-producing States — Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar and Gujarat — have left wheat-growing farmers worried as they anticipate a drop in yield (productivity), output (production) and quality.

How will the rains affect wheat crop?

According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), fairly widespread rains along with stormy winds between 40-50 kilometers per hour lashed several parts of the major wheat-growing States in the country during March, under the influence of consecutive western disturbances. Rain spells accompanied by winds are not considered to be a good sign for the crop's health if they are close to the ripening and harvesting stage, especially if there are instances of water logging in the fields. Unfortunately, there have been instances of crop flattening in fields, besides water logging, which could be detrimental for the ready-to-harvest wheat crop. Wheat, a key rabi (winter) crop is sown between late October till December; it nears the ripening stage in the month of mid-March, and harvesting of the early sown varieties usually commences by the end of March itself. The IMD data suggests that between March 1 and April 9, large excess rains (40% more rain than normal) were received in several States.

How much output would be affected?

Agriwatch, an agri-commodity research firm, in its latest report has stated that owing to the recent untimely rains, the country's wheat production in the agriculture year 2022-23 is likely to be 102.9 MT which is less than the Union government's estimate of 112 MT. The Centre, however, is optimistic that wheat production would be close to 112 MT on account of an increased acreage (area) of wheat and better yield this season, despite a slight production loss due to recent adverse weather conditions. As per the government, the average wheat acreage this year (2022-23) has been 14,86,240 hectares more in comparison to the last five years (2017-2021) which stood at 30,382,010 hectares.

A sizable section of farmers assert that the inclement weather has adversely damaged the standing wheat crop.

INDIAN-AMERICAN C.R. RAO WINS NOBEL PRIZE EQUIVALENT IN STATISTICS AT THE AGE OF 102

The Indian-American statistician Calyampudi Radhakrishna Rao has been awarded the 2023 International Prize in Statistics — the equivalent of the Nobel Prize for statistics. It is awarded once every two years to an individual or team "for major achievements using statistics to advance science, technology and human welfare". The work of Professor Rao, 102, has influenced, in the words of the American Statistical Association, "not just statistics" but also "economics, genetics, anthropology, geology, national planning, demography, biometry and medicine".

The citation for his new award calls him "a professor whose work more than 75 years ago continues to exert a profound influence on science".



WHY THE NAGAS ARE ATTEMPTING TO REPATRIATE THEIR ANCESTRAL HUMAN REMAINS FROM A MUSEUM IN BRITAIN

The Naga community of northeastern India has initiated an overseas repatriation effort to bring their ancestral human remains home from a museum in Britain.

The step is part of a larger move by museums around the world to “decolonise” their collections, often criticised for propagating colonial stereotypes. This is the first such effort to repatriate ancestral human remains of an indigenous community in India, possibly even South Asia. In 2020, the iconic Pitt Rivers Museum in England’s Oxford announced that it would take its collection of “human remains” and other “insensitive” exhibits off display, following a three-year-long “ethical review”.

According to the museum director Laura Van Broekhoven, these items, sourced during the expansion of the British Empire, played into stereotypical thinking about cultures across the globe as “savage” or “primitive”. The museum, which has a rich collection of 500,000 items representing almost all phases of human existence across the world, also said that it was reaching out to communities for restitution and repatriation of such remains to their rightful homes.

The news led Melbourne-based Naga anthropologist, Dolly Kikon, to reach out to Broekhoven, and ask if Naga remains, housed in the museum more than hundred years, could be repatriated to the Naga homelands. This request has spawned a community-led initiative among the Nagas for repatriation. The Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR) — a Nagaland-based collective which, since 2008, has been a key facilitator in the Indo-Naga peace process — is the main mover of the process.

What are the Naga objects that the Pitt Rivers Museum houses?

The museum is home to the largest Naga collection in the world: approximately 6,500 objects, 898 of which are on display. The types of objects include objects of everyday Naga social life including not just clothing items, agricultural tools, tools, figures, basketry, ceramics, musical instruments but also ancestral human remains. Most of these objects were sourced by two colonial administrators James Philip Mills and John Henry Hutton in the 1800s.

What about the human remains?

Broekhoven said that the ancestral remains (including skulls, trophy heads, a part of a finger, artefacts containing human) originate from at least thirteen different Naga groups. The largest number of remains are attributed to Konyak Naga (78), followed by Angami Naga (38) and Sumi Naga (30).

So, has the repatriation process begun?

Yes, but it is in its initial stages. Repatriation is a long and complex process that takes years. Most successful repatriation efforts (such as of New Zealand’s Moriori and Australia’s Tasmanian Aboriginal people from the Natural History Museum, London to their native lands) have taken at least two decades.

**BUSINESS & ECONOMICS****EXPRESS VIEW ON IMF LOWERING INDIA'S GROWTH FORECAST: POLICY FRAMEWORK MUST PRESERVE MACROECONOMIC STABILITY**

In its latest world economic outlook, the International Monetary Fund has lowered its expectations of global economic growth as signs of a possible soft landing abate amidst continuing elevated inflation and the recent turmoil in the financial sector. The IMF now expects the world economy to slow down to 2.8 per cent in 2023, down from 3.4 per cent in 2022. The slowdown is expected to centre around the advanced economies. The Fund now projects them to grow at 1.3 per cent this year, down from 2.7 per cent the year before, with the economies of the UK and the Euro region likely to fare the worst. On the other hand, the prospects for developing countries are better with these economies expected to grow at 3.9 per cent in the ongoing year, only marginally lower than last year.

The IMF has also revised downwards its growth forecast for the Indian economy to 5.9 per cent in 2023-24 from its earlier assessment of 6.1 per cent. The revision is on account of a slowdown in consumption and incorporation of recent data. This implies that the “revenge consumption” boom, the impetus to growth from pent up demand, is fading. The IMF now expects economic activity to be driven by investments and exports, primarily those of services. However, there is reason for caution on both. On investments, while both central and state governments have budgeted for an aggressive increase in capital spending, lower than expected capex by states last year raises questions over their ability to meet the ambitious targets this year. This implies that the overall public sector impulse to investment activity may perhaps be lower than expected, even as private investments remain subdued. On exports, while services exports have been robust — during April-February 2022-23, they grew by 30 per cent — goods exports rose by a mere 7.5 per cent. Strip away oil exports, and merchandise exports during this period were at the same level as the year before. And with global trade projected to slow down from 5.1 per cent in 2022 to 2.4 per cent in 2023, the rising tide of world growth will be unavailable. India's exports are likely to come under severe pressure, limiting the impetus to overall activity.

There is, however, variation across agencies in their assessments of India's growth. For instance, the Asian Development Bank has pegged growth at 6.4 per cent, the World Bank at 6.3 per cent, Crisil at 6 per cent, and Nomura even lower. At the other end of the spectrum is the RBI's more optimistic assessment — it has recently raised its forecast to 6.5 per cent. While there is considerable uncertainty in the global and domestic economy which makes it difficult to arrive at an accurate assessment of the state of the economy, at this critical juncture, with an uncertain growth outlook and with inflation staying above the central bank's target, the policy framework must be guided by the objective of preserving macroeconomic stability.

OPTICAL RELIEF

The pace of price rise faced by Indian consumers eased below the central bank's upper tolerance threshold of 6% in March. The 5.66% retail inflation level recorded in March was last seen in December 2021. That was followed by a sustained spell of high inflation that escalated after the Russia-Ukraine conflict that began in February 2022, and peaked at an eight-year high of 7.8% in April. Including last November and December, March marks only the third occasion in 15 months when inflation was within the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) mandated tolerance range of 2% to 6%. The RBI, which had to send an explanation to the government on why the target was missed



for three successive quarters — for the first time since the inflation targeting framework was introduced — hit a pause on interest rates this month after a streak of hikes. It now expects inflation to average 5.2% in 2023-24 (lower than the 5.3% it projected in February). As it stands, the average inflation between January and March has turned out to be 6.21%, far higher than the RBI's February projection of 5.9%. For the full year gone by, inflation averaged 6.66% vis-à-vis 6.5% the RBI expected.

The central bank and the government may now be sanguine about headline inflation staying below 6%, but that is in no small measure due to the statistical effects of higher numbers from the previous year's base. In the April to June quarter, the RBI expects inflation to average 5.1%, up from 5% predicted two months ago — the same quarter had clocked a mean inflation of 7.28% in 2022. While the pace of price rise may slow down, prices are still rising at a fairly significant clip, on top of price hikes effected in the past year. There is no medium-term reversal likely in amounts people shell out for most goods and services, barring seasonally triggered changes in items such as vegetables. In fact, excluding vegetables whose prices have been falling year-on-year since November 2022, the inflation faced by consumers in March was still 6.6%. Imported inflation fell to its lowest level since November 2019 at 2.8%, which means domestic factors are still spurring prices around 6%. Fresh global shocks from oil prices and other unknowns may cause imported inflation to spike again. With cereal, spices and milk prices on the boil and worries about crop losses due to recent unseasonal precipitation (as well as fears of El Niño effects this year), food prices may continue to pinch households. There is no room to let the guard down on inflation, even if propping up growth is the priority. Squeezed consumption is hardly going to inspire investment.

EXPLAINSPEAKING: IS INFLATION-TARGETING THE RIGHT POLICY MANDATE FOR INDIA?

Something remarkable happened last week. Quite unexpectedly, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the institution charged with the job to contain inflation, decided to stop raising interest rates.

This was quite odd because since May last year, the RBI had been exchanging jabs with high inflation, trying to bring it down close to RBI's target level of 4% by repeatedly raising interest rates. It was almost as if the RBI suddenly decided to stop boxing and instead stand in one corner of the ring.

Some background

Before we proceed, it is important to understand what RBI does to contain inflation and how it works on paper.

The RBI is one of those central banks that are charged with targeting a certain level of inflation, come what may. It primarily does this by raising interest rates in the economy. Higher interest rates drag down economic growth because loans of kinds become costlier. In essence, and this is the key point, the RBI hits overall demand to bridge the gap between what is demanded and what is supplied, thus bringing down prices.

In other words, a central bank's single-minded focus on targeting an inflation rate might imply overall economic growth contracting (read recession).

For instance in the US, the Federal Reserve has been hiking interest rates, thus dragging down overall demand and economic activity, in its bid to achieve its target of 2% inflation. However, in doing so, the Fed is running a very high risk of pushing the US economy into recession. While a



recession is not what the Fed may want, it is supposed to not care beyond a point because it has to achieve the 2% inflation target.

In RBI's case, it is even more stark. Unlike the Fed, which is charged with achieving 2% inflation and full employment, the RBI's main job is to achieve the 4% target.

Why was RBI's decision surprising?

While inflation had abated a bit, it was nowhere near close to that target. In fact, the last two readings (January and February) were 6.5% and 6.4%, respectively. To be sure, the RBI's legal mandate gives it a leeway of +/- two percentage points either side of 4%. That means RBI has a comfort zone of 2% to 6% within which inflation must remain.

On the face of it, the RBI — more precisely the six-member Monetary Policy Committee that has an equal number of members nominated by the RBI and the Union government — (unanimously) decided that it was a good time to stop throwing punches and assess the effect of the previous punches. The RBI Governor repeatedly emphasised that “the decision to pause on the repo rate is for this meeting only”.

But this too was odd. If your punches are landing, you might as well finish the job while you can. Why run the risk of giving a breather to your opponent? This is especially true because inflation has been getting the better of the RBI since late 2019. What's more, even by RBI's own calculations, it won't be able to bring inflation down to its target rate of 4% for another couple of years. That's five years of inflation besting the RBI. And these are the base case assumptions; things get worse if crude oil prices jump for some reason or there are unseasonal rains or some new geopolitical tension crops up.

To make the situation even more peculiar, the RBI presented a rather optimistic picture of the economy. The GDP estimate for the current financial year was revised up and the inflation forecast was reduced. The GDP growth rate's upward revision was most peculiar since almost all private estimates are significantly much lower than RBI 6.5% forecast and, thanks to the worsening global growth forecast, most experts are revising down their projections for India, not revising up.

In the commentary following the policy announcement, and regardless of what the RBI Governor said about this pause being only for this meeting, most economists openly stated that this was the end of rate hiking cycle for the time being. In fact, some even started penciling in an interest rate cut later in 2023.

What could be the real reason for the RBI to pause?

The question is: How can RBI be so far behind achieving its inflation target of 4% and yet be so comfortable as to pause when there's no clear evidence that inflation is no longer a concern.

Of course, one would have to wait for the minutes to get a better understanding of RBI's rationale but a look at the past two minutes is quite revealing.

In the last meeting in February, RBI raised repo by 25 basis points by a majority of 4-2. One of the two dissenting members (both were government-nominated ones) was Prof Ashima Goyal.

While opposing the hike, Prof Goyal made some very interesting points that not only show the limits of RBI's strategy of hiking interest rates to contain all kinds of inflation but also question the very efficacy of the inflation-targeting system for a country such as India.



Some of her key points were:

1) She felt that while RBI has been doing its bit, it may be time for fiscal policy (read the government) to help out in bringing down inflation. “The large commodity component in India’s consumer price basket, and pockets of supply constraints, respond better to fiscal action,” she wrote. As such she suggested it may be time for things like a cut in excise taxes, fuel prices. In other words, she felt under the circumstances — as in, when inflation is pushed up by supply bottlenecks and costs instead of being pulled up by demand — monetary measures were not enough to contain inflation and needed fiscal (relating to government’s taxes and spending) action.

2) Secondly, she hit at the root of the whole justification why central banks raise interest rates even when inflation is driven by supply-side bottlenecks, stating “...there are still little signs of wage or demand-led second round effects on inflation...”. On paper, even though raising interest rates does not boost the supply of food (say onions) and/or fuel items (say crude oil), central banks do this to crush demand for goods and services and thus, ensure that people’s expectation of future inflation do not soar. But this may not be happening to the extent imagined in the first place.

3) Lastly, and most significantly, she warned against raising interest rates because they can not only hurt growth but also be counter-productive from the perspective of containing inflation per se. “Excessive front-loading of rate hikes carries the risk of over-shooting that is best avoided for compelling reasons in the Indian context: First, raising real policy rates [that’s nominal interest rates minus inflation] to reduce demand has a stronger effect on growth than it does on inflation. Second, since there are more lags in monetary transmission in India, over-shooting can have persistent deleterious effects here, including instability. Third, macroeconomic stability improves most rapidly if real interest rates are kept smoothly below growth rates and counter external shocks. The Indian economy is well-poised to achieve this combination and to reduce its chronic underemployment,” she wrote.

Since the RBI shifted from a 4-2 majority to a 0-6 unanimity between February and April when there was still no evidence of inflation coming down sustainably, it makes sense to presume that the view held by Goyal resonated with the other members.

A big question-mark on the efficacy of inflation-targeting

A key part that is not covered in the minutes pertains to the kind of inflation India has been facing since late 2019. Contrary to the notion of an overheating economy, which experiences inflation because demand outstrips supply, in India’s case it is the supply costs and bottlenecks that have created inflation, not an economy running hot.

In fact, this is no coincidence. A September 2022 academic paper, titled “What Drives Indian Inflation? Demand or Supply”, written by Ashima Goyal and Abhishek Kumar, concludes thus: “Inflation is mainly driven by supply shocks and excess monetary policy reaction hurts the real economy. Excess tightening would not improve [RBI’s policy] credibility if excess demand due to supply-side deterioration causes inflation persistence.”

Two things stand out. One, in India, inflation is often driven by supply-shocks originating and operating through the food economy. Two, merely raising interest rates doesn’t help beyond a point; indeed, it is counter-productive. “Goyal (2015) supports flexible inflation targeting but at



the same time points out that its over-strict implementation proved very costly and contributed to significantly lower employment growth since 2011," she writes.

Wider policy implications

Just as policymakers in India's RBI are reconsidering whether further rate hikes will contain inflation or make matters worse by destroying growth and worsening inflation, similarly, there is global debate about the policy prescription of "inflation-targeting".

Many economists, such as Pulapre Balakrishnan of Ashoka University, have repeatedly warned against the use of inflation-targeting by the RBI.

"The RBI has been off-target (4%) for a very long time. The notion that inflation targeting works in India is a joke," he said over a phone interview.

Instead, he pointed to another way of viewing inflation and inflation control.

This is called the "structuralist model".

"In developing economies often agriculture productivity faces constraints and its growth is unable to keep pace with the rest of the economy. As a result, agricultural prices rise and overtime these higher prices permeate through the broader economy since the non-agricultural sectors such as industries practice a 'cost+' pricing," he explained.

Raising interest rates doesn't help matters in such a scenario. "The only way inflation can be handled is by the government increasing supply. In the short-term, imports are the only option.

What about the RBI is such a model? "The RBI has zero role. Raising interest rates can slow down the spread of inflation but eventually it comes at the cost of the economy's output," said Prof Balakrishnan.

In other words, if inflation is driven by supply factors, raising interest rates could lead to a situation akin to the operation being successful but the patient [the economy] being dead.

Given the fact that in India inflation is mostly due to supply factors and that RBI's recent record at meeting the inflation target has been woeful, should India reconsider the inflation targeting mandate for RBI?

CENTRE TO FORM 16TH FINANCE PANEL IN NOV.

"Since the last Commission was set up in November 2017, we are eyeing the same month this year to constitute the Sixteenth Commission. That should give the panel enough time to ready its report by around October 2025," the official said.

The government is bound to consider the Commission's suggestions and submit an action taken report that conveys its stance on those ideas, along with the first Union Budget of the five-year period. That will be the Budget of 2026-27, likely to be presented on February 2, 2026, as February 1 falls on a Sunday that year.

The last time the Constitutional body was given a six-year mandate was for the Ninth Finance Commission formed in June 1987. But the Tenth Finance Commission was still constituted in June 1992 within the five-year deadline specified by the Constitution.



Terms of reference not finalised

The official, who will be involved in the notification process of the Commission, said that the Centre is yet to make up its mind on the terms of reference that may be prescribed for it.

The Fifteenth Finance Commission was handed some contentious tasks, such as determining whether a separate mechanism was warranted for funding defence and internal security spends. It was also asked to rely on Census 2011 data for its recommendations, which had caused concern among some States that had done better on health and population management vis-à-vis other peers.

“The terms of reference will take a while to work out. The world is in the midst of multiple challenges and new priorities may emerge by the time it is November. For now, we will begin by identifying an officer on special duty who will take charge of the process of laying the groundwork to constitute the Commission,” the official said.

GST Council impact

Typically, this officer is also appointed the member secretary of the Finance Commission, once it is constituted. A fresh challenge for the Sixteenth Commission is that it will have to figure out a way to factor in the impact of decisions taken by another Constitutional body created recently — the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council.

“While the Finance Commission is not a permanent body, the GST Council is, and the latter’s decisions on tax rate and administration changes can impact the former’s projections,” Fifteenth Finance Commission chief Mr. Singh has noted.

DO THE WEALTHY INFLUENCE POLICY-MAKING MORE ACROSS ALL FORMS OF DEMOCRACY?

One of the reasons that a democracy is held to be superior to other forms of governance is the promise it holds out that every citizen will have equal say in policy-making. This would indeed be the case in a perfect democracy where every individual is politically equal. But in the real world, no democracy is perfect, and what has typically been observed is that the affluent enjoy a disproportionately greater say in policy-making compared to the average citizen.

The Gilens model

The most prominent studies on this phenomenon have been conducted by American political scientist Martin Gilens who, in a 2012 study, found that in the U.S., public policy decidedly favoured the preferences of the affluent, at the expense of the poor and the middle classes. American democracy, however, has certain unique features, such as the heavy reliance of political parties on private campaign donations, which might make it far more unresponsive to the non-affluent.

Three different studies inspired by Gilens tried to answer this question, with regard to Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. In all these countries, policy was once again found to be skewed in favour of the preferences of the affluent.

Studying Norwegian democracy



Although in Norway, too, public policy skewed towards the preferences of the affluent, their influence was by no means exclusive, and the opinions of the poor and the middle classes also found expression in government decisions. Secondly, the study revealed that on economic issues, the preferences of both the poor and the rich seemed to matter almost equally; and most interestingly, the opinions of the highly educated were found to be strongly related to policy outcomes regardless of whether they were rich or poor. Clearly, in a social democracy like Norway, the link between money and politics was much weaker than in the U.S.

There are implications and lessons here for anyone interested in deepening democracy in their society. Mathisen advances several reasons why the wealthy in Norway haven't managed to capture policy-making, the way they have in the U.S. The first factor seems to be Norway's universal welfare schemes and high levels of wealth redistribution. 'Universal' welfare measures are ones that benefit every citizen (such as free education and free public healthcare). This is in contrast to 'targeted schemes' like the ones we have in India which only benefit the so-called 'needy' and tend to provoke resentment among the 'non-needy' about how their tax money is being frittered away in 'freebies'. This universality of social benefits has the effect of ensuring their legitimacy and endorsement across classes, including the affluent. As a result, policies favoured by the poor have a "better chance at being maintained or even expanded by the government" and there is often a "self-reinforcing component by which new policy gains for the poor are more easily achieved over time."

The second effect of redistributive welfarism is that Norway has one of the lowest levels of income inequality in the world, which essentially means "less of a resource advantage for the affluent to be used (in whichever way possible) to influence politics." A key aspect related to this phenomenon of being able to convert money power into political influence is political party funding, and here, the contrast between Norway and the U.S. is sharp. While political candidates in the U.S. rely on large donations from individuals and organisations to run their campaigns, parties in Norway get two-thirds of their financing from state subsidies. This shuts down a major channel of influence-buying by the wealthy. Moreover, while television advertising is a huge campaign expense in American elections, political advertising on television is banned in Norway. This not only helps to bring down campaign costs, it also reduces the effect of disparities in spending power between candidates, making the entire campaign process less vulnerable to private wealth. In India, for instance, we have the exact opposite scenario, where electoral bonds empower wealthy private entities to make astronomical donations to political parties with zero transparency in terms of who gave how much money to which party or candidate. Understandably, inequality and policies known to worsen inequality have been gaining ground in India in recent years.

Thirdly, Norway has historically had strong trade unions. They have been able to influence economic and social policy through their close political links with the Norwegian Labor Party, serving "as a countervailing force to the influence of the wealthy". And this is again a contrast to democracies such as the U.S. and India where trade unions are no longer politically powerful as they once were.

The effect of unlimited energy

There is another element that is perhaps unique to Norway and has enabled the state to cater to the concerns of the non-affluent without troubling the affluent — its vast reserves of oil and natural gas. They have made it possible for the government to "maintain generous welfare transfers while imposing lower tax rates than otherwise would be necessary, presumably catering



to the preferences of both the poor [subsidies] and the wealthy [low taxes].” Mathisen cites the example of how, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, unlike other western democracies, the Norwegian government used oil money, rather than spending cuts or tax increases, to fund stimulus packages.

Lastly, the country’s political class is not particularly wealthy. The median wealth among Norwegian MPs is zero, according to tax records, which means that it is unlikely for policies to be biased in favour of the rich just because the politicians are themselves rich. There are also other, relatively minor factors that could explain the relatively greater influence of the non-affluent on policy-making: one of them is laws requiring proportionate representation of women in government institutions. Since women on average have lower income than men, their higher levels of representation resulted in greater political influence for women, which, in turn, got translated into greater political influence for lower-income citizens.

The study concludes by pointing out that although policy-making in democracies overall (including Norway), tended to skew in favour of the affluent, thereby violating the basic democratic principle of political equality, the Norway example demonstrated two things: one, in a welfarist social democracy with low inequality, education was a stronger predictor of responsiveness than income; and two, restricting how money can be used to influence elections, and strengthening countervailing forces (such as trade unions) might change the balance of power. Mathisen does add, however, that initiating such changes would be most difficult in precisely those democracies that need them the most, because it is in those countries that the affluent already wield the greatest influence on policy.

WHAT IS ‘DABBA TRADING’ AND HOW DOES IT AFFECT THE ECONOMY?

The story so far:

In the past week, the National Stock Exchange (NSE) issued a string of notices naming entities involved in ‘dabba trading’. The bourse cautioned retail investors to not subscribe (or invest) using any of these products offering indicative/assured/guaranteed returns in the stock market as they are prohibited by law. It added that the entities are not recognised as authorised members by the exchange.

What is ‘dabba trading’?

Dabba (box) trading refers to informal trading that takes place outside the purview of the stock exchanges. Traders bet on stock price movements without incurring a real transaction to take physical ownership of a particular stock as is done in an exchange. In simple words, it is gambling centred around stock price movements.

For example, an investor places a bet on a stock at a price point, say ₹1,000. If the price point rose to ₹1,500, he/she would make a gain of ₹500. However, if the price point falls to ₹900, the investor would have to pay the difference to the dabba broker. Thus, it could be concluded that the broker’s profit equates the investor’s loss and vice-versa. The equations are particularly consequential during bull runs or bear market.

The primary purpose of such trades is to stay outside the purview of the regulatory mechanism, and thus, transactions are facilitated using cash and the mechanism is operated using unrecognised software terminals. Other than this, it could also be facilitated using informal or



kaccha (rough) records, sauda (transaction) books, challans, DD receipts, cash receipts alongside bills/contract notes as proof of trading.

Where does it become particularly problematic?

Since there are no proper records of income or gain, it helps dabba traders escape taxation. They would not have to pay the Commodity Transaction Tax (CTT) or the Securities Transaction Tax (STT) on their transactions. The use of cash also means that they are outside the purview of the formal banking system. All of it combined results in a loss to the government exchequer.

In 'dabba trading', the primary risk entails the possibility that the broker defaults in paying the investor or the entity becomes insolvent or bankrupt. Being outside the regulatory purview implies that investors are without formal provisions for investor protection, dispute resolution mechanisms and grievance redressal mechanisms that are available within an exchange.

Since all activities are facilitated using cash, and without any auditable records, it could potentially encourage the growth of 'black money' alongside perpetuating a parallel economy. This could potentially translate to risks entailing money laundering and criminal activities.

What does the scenario look like?

An industry observer, on the condition of anonymity, confirmed to The Hindu that their clients, on entering the dabba ecosystem, were harassed by the broker's 'recovery agents' for default payments and refused payments upon profit.

Other than taxation, as per the source, what lures potential investors is their aggressive marketing, ease of trading (using apps with quality interface) and lack of identity verifications. Depending on the individual's trading profile, observable volumes and trends, brokers keep their fees and margins open to negotiation as well.

The source explained that the mechanism could potentially translate into ripple effects for the regulated bourse as well by inducing volatility when dabba brokers look to hedge their exposures (take position in an alternate asset or investment to reduce the risk/loss with the current position). It also contributes to the bourse losing out on volumes, "even though they may not be significant".

'Dabba trading' is recognised as an offence under Section 23(1) of the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act (SCRA), 1956 and upon conviction, can invite imprisonment for a term extending up to 10 years or a fine up to ₹25 crore, or both.

WHY HAVE KEY OIL PRODUCERS VOWED OUTPUT CUTS?

The story so far:

Major oil-producing countries including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, as well as Russia, have announced cuts in oil production that will start in May and last until the end of 2023. The announcement caused an instant uptick in prices of crude oil. On April 3, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), at its 48th meeting of the Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee, acknowledged the crude oil production cuts announced by major oil-producing countries. The OPEC+ countries include the 13 core members of OPEC and 10 other major oil producers. The new production cuts are in addition to those announced in October 2022.



Why are OPEC+ countries cutting crude oil production?

According to OPEC's official statement, the decision to cut crude oil production was aimed at supporting market stability. In February 2023, Russia announced it would cut crude oil production by half a million barrels a day after Western countries capped the price of its crude as a response to the war in Ukraine. Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said that cutting production would help restoration of "market relations", Reuters reported.

The G-7 bloc of advanced economies announced a price cap of \$60 per barrel for Russian crude oil in December 2022. "The G7 and all EU Member States have taken a decision that will hit Russia's revenues even harder and reduce its ability to wage war in Ukraine," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had said in a statement at the time. "It will also help us to stabilise global energy prices, benefitting countries across the world who are currently confronted with high oil prices," she added.

Moreover, recent developments in the banking sector in the U.S. and Europe, including the collapse of the Silicon Valley Bank and the turmoil at Credit Suisse, have fuelled the possibility of an incoming recession. In March 2023, oil prices slipped 1% to a two-week low, on speculation of a recession and therefore a reduction in oil demand. Experts believe that cutting production will lead to increase in costs of crude oil in the international market. A sudden jump in both Brent crude and the U.S. West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude prices — both leading global oil benchmarks — was observed in the wake of the announcement of the decision to reduce production.

According to Reuters, the production cut is also a way of punishing short sellers who bet on oil prices declining.

Are the output cuts significant?

As per the latest voluntary production adjustment, Saudi Arabia will be cutting 5,00,000 barrels a day; Iraq 2,11,000; United Arab Emirates 1,44,000; Kuwait 1,28,000; Kazakhstan 78,000; Algeria 48,000; Oman 40,000; and Gabon 8,000 barrels a day. These cuts are in addition to the two million barrels per day cut announced in October 2022. Russia had already announced a cut of 5,00,000 barrels a day, earlier this year.

The U.S. called OPEC's decision "unadvisable". "Our focus is going to remain on making sure that energy markets are able to support a growing economy and keep prices down for Americans as they head to the pump," a White House official said during a press interaction.

How will it impact India?

According to the World Energy Outlook 2021 data, India ranks third in the world in crude oil imports after China and the U.S., while it ranks a distant 21 in crude oil production and 26 in natural gas production.

The disparity in the two rankings shows the country's increasing reliance on imports to meet its energy needs.

India's crude oil import from Russia touched new heights in February this year, reaching 1.6 million barrels per day. This was more than the combined imports from conventional suppliers like Iraq and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, supply from Iraq and Saudi Arabia touched a 16-month low.



Russia's increased share in India's crude oil import is a direct consequence of the fallout between Russia and western countries following its Ukraine invasion that began in February 2022.

The U.S. and countries in Europe decided not to buy crude oil from Russia in a bid to isolate the country on an international scale. The decision, however, provided India with an opportunity to buy Russian oil, reportedly at discounted rates.

6 GHZ SPECTRUM PITS WIRELESS TELCOS AGAINST FIXED-LINE BROADBAND ENTITIES

It's not often that we hear that a band of wireless spectrum is "close to our hearts" from the lectern of a hotel ballroom.

But the emerging interest in gaining access to the 6 gigahertz (GHz) band — which ranges from 5,925 to 7,125 megahertz (MHz) — is pitting wireless telecom operators against fixed line Internet Service Providers (ISPs), with both groups keen to lay claim to a band of spectrum that could enable the next generation of 5G, or WiFi — or as some modestly insisted, both.

The Broadband India Forum, which represents tech giants and some ISPs, on Tuesday held an event, sponsored in part by Meta, that advanced this demand. Delicensing the 6 GHz range would benefit fixed line broadband providers and software giants, as some of the latter try to get into the public WiFi hotspot space.

Spectrum worries

Telecom operators, meanwhile, worry that since India's mobile data consumption is growing so rapidly — having risen sixfold in 5 years as per a Nokia estimate — that they need to earmark further spectrum for licensed use on their networks. Newer WiFi routers in India largely use the 2.4GHz and 5GHz bands. As frequency increases, the range of the signal drops, but the bandwidth goes up significantly.

The WiFi 6E standard, launched in 2020, uses 6 GHz, enabling speeds upwards of 9.6 Gbps; and, 6GHz spectrum supports multiple devices on a wireless network more harmoniously than the 5GHz band, even on slower connections, enticing telecom providers and ISPs.

DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

EUROPEAN SPACE AGENCY SET TO LAUNCH JUPITER ICY MOONS EXPLORER (JUICE): WHAT IS THE MISSION ABOUT

The European Space Agency (ESA) is all set to launch the Jupiter Icy Moons Explorer, or Juice, mission on Thursday (April 13) from its spaceport in French Guiana on an Ariane 5 launcher. Planned to reach Jupiter in 2031, the mission aims to carry out a detailed exploration of the Solar System's largest planet and its icy moons, which potentially have habitable environments.

Juice has been constructed by an industrial consortium led by Airbus Defence and Space — a division of the Airbus group responsible for the development and manufacturing of the corporation's defence and space products — based on the parameters provided by the ESA.

Only two other spacecraft have ever examined Jupiter: the Galileo probe, which orbited the gas giant between 1995 and 2003, and Juno, which has been circling the planet since 2016. Notably, by the time Juice reaches Jupiter, another spacecraft, NASA's Europa Clipper, would already be orbiting the planet — scheduled to be launched in October this year, Europa Clipper would arrive at Jupiter in 2030 and aims to study its Europa moon.

What is the Jupiter Icy Moons Explorer (Juice) mission?

According to ESA's website, the Juice "will make detailed observations of the giant gas planet and its three large ocean-bearing moons — Ganymede, Callisto and Europa", by using remote sensing, geophysical and in situ instruments.

Scientists for quite some time have known that these three moons of Jupiter possess icy crusts, which they believe contain oceans of liquid water underneath, making them potentially habitable. Juice will help probe these water bodies by creating detailed maps of the moons' surfaces and enable the scientists, for the first time, to look beneath them.

Although the mission will examine all three moons, the main focus will be on Ganymede, as it is the largest moon in the Solar System — larger than Pluto and Mercury — and the only one to generate its own magnetic field. Juice, which will move into Ganymede's orbit after approximately four of arriving at Jupiter, will "use its suite of ten sophisticated instruments to measure how Ganymede rotates, its gravity, its shape and interior structure, its magnetic field, its composition, and to penetrate its icy crust using radar down to a depth of about nine km.," ESA said.

Another primary goal of the mission is to create a comprehensive picture of Jupiter by trying to understand its origin, history and evolution. Scientists believe that this would help them provide "much-needed insight into how such a planetary system and its constituents are formed and evolved over time, as well as revealing how possibly habitable environments can arise in Jupiter-like systems around other stars." Juice will also analyse the chemistry, structure, dynamics, weather, and climate of Jupiter and its ever-changing atmosphere.

Is Juice capable of detecting life?

As mentioned before, as the three moons, Ganymede, Callisto and Europa, are believed to hold immense amounts of water, which could be around six times more than the volume of water in Earth's oceans, there is a possibility that life is present on them. According to ESA, life on these moons could be in the form of microbes. "More advanced species might also be present, like the



ones we detect in deep-sea trenches and at hydrothermal vents on Earth, such as various kinds of coral, worm, mussel, shrimp and fish,” it added.

However, Juice isn’t equipped to detect life. What it is capable of is finding out whether there could be places around Jupiter, inside the icy moons, where the necessary conditions, such as water, biological essential elements, energy, and stability, to sustain life are present. Speaking to Space.com, Adam Masters, senior lecturer in space and atmospheric physics at Imperial College London and a member of the team that built one of the scientific instruments for Juice, said, “If life exists on these moons, we expect it to be in the water, and that’s very hard to access.” This is because, she added, it’s not yet possible to go very deep underneath the ice crusts, where life might be present.

ARCTIC SCIENTISTS RACE TO PRESERVE ‘ICE MEMORY’

Italian, French and Norwegian researchers have set up camp in Norway’s Svalbard archipelago in what they called a race against time to preserve crucial ice records for analysing past environmental conditions. They will extract ice in a series of tubes from 125 metres below the surface, containing frozen geochemical traces dating back three centuries.

Analysis of chemicals in deep “ice cores” provides scientists with valuable data about past environmental conditions. But experts warn that water from melting ice is leaking down and altering the geochemical records preserved in ancient ice beneath. Ice scientists “are seeing their primary material disappear forever from the surface of the planet”.

Carbon emissions

Human-caused carbon emissions have warmed the planet by 1.1 degrees Celsius since the 19th century. Studies indicate that the Arctic is warming between two and four times faster than the global average. One set of ice tubes will be used for immediate analysis while a second set will be sent to Antarctica for storage in an “ice memory sanctuary” under the snow, where the samples will be preserved for future generations.

The eight specialists have set up camp at an altitude of 1,100 metres on the crevasse-ridden Holtedahlfonna ice field and plan to start drilling on Tuesday, Ice Memory said. They will work for three weeks in temperatures as low as minus 25C (-13 Fahrenheit), cutting and pulling out a series of cylinders of ice, each one metre long and 10cm wide.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Antarctic circulation could slow by more than 40% over the next three decades, with significant implications for the oceans and climate. Such decline of the ocean circulation will stagnate the bottom of the oceans and generate further impacts, affecting climate and marine ecosystems for centuries to come.

Cold water that sinks near Antarctica drives the deepest flow of the overturning circulation — a network of currents that spans the world’s oceans. The overturning carries heat, carbon, oxygen and nutrients around the globe. This influences climate, sea level and the productivity of marine ecosystems.

According to a release, Matthew England, Deputy Director of the ARC Centre for Excellence in Antarctic Science (ACEAS) at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, says the modelling



shows that if global carbon emissions continue at the current rate, then the Antarctic overturning will slow by more than 40% in the next 30 years — and on a trajectory that looks headed towards collapse.

WHY HAS PARIS BANNED E-SCOOTERS ON ITS STREETS?

In a hotly debated referendum, Parisians on Sunday (April 2) voted to ban rental electric scooters from the streets of their city. While a total of 89 per cent of voters favoured the proposed ban, 11 per cent opposed it, according to DW. However, only 7 per cent of the 1.3 million eligible voters turned out for the referendum.

Speaking to the media after the result was declared, Paris' Mayor Anne Hidalgo said, "Parisians have massively expressed themselves against keeping shared e-scooters". She added, "They have given us a very clear roadmap, and we are going to abide by their decision."

The city will completely do away with these battery-powered devices by September 1, 2023 — the day by which the contract that allows three companies, Dott, Tier and Lime, to operate around 15,000 e-scooters in Paris will come to an end. The ban comes after months of intense debate on the subject as the number of accidents involving e-scooters or trottinette has continued to rise in the past few years.

Why has Paris banned e-scooters?

Paris became one of the first cities in Europe to adopt e-scooters when it introduced them in 2018. Seen as a green alternative to cars, these micro-vehicles can be left anywhere by users and picked up with the help of mobile apps. However, trottinette soon ran into trouble as many Parisians complained that they are "an eyesore and a traffic menace", The Independent reported.

The backlash against e-scooters further escalated as they gained immense popularity among tourists. Critics allege that people are recklessly riding the battery-powered vehicles, flouting traffic rules and causing severe accidents.

This forced the local administration to come up with stringent regulations such as making designated parking zones, limiting the top speed and restricting the number of operators. But these measures didn't lessen the growing aversion towards e-scooters among Parisians as the number of accidents involving them kept rising. DW recently reported that Paris registered 459 accidents involving e-scooters or similar vehicles in 2022, three of them were fatal.

Meanwhile, operators such as Dott, Tier and Lime disputed these allegations and claimed that "more accidents come from bikes and privately owned scooters, not their rental ones, in part because rental scooters' top speed is limited at 12 miles an hour, and they automatically slow to less than 10 miles per hour in crowded streets.," The Wall Street Journal said in a report.

Experts also debate if the micro-vehicles are environmentally friendly at all. A 2020 BBC report pointed out that although e-scooters are "emission-free at the point of use, the process of manufacturing, moving and managing them results in greenhouse gas emissions – which increase if they have a short lifespan." Ultimately, in January, Mayor Hidalgo announced a referendum on banning e-scooters from the streets of Paris. According to reports, more than 103,000 of the city's 1.38 million registered voters cast their ballots and an overwhelming majority of them favoured banishing the micro-vehicles from Paris.



EXPRESS VIEW: TURNS OUT PLANTS SCREAM OUT IN PAIN TOO

For centuries, it was believed that the mandrake herb, known for its medicinal and psychoactive properties, is a magical plant which shrieks when it is uprooted. While the scream of the mandrake is mere legend, scientists have now discovered that plants do indeed emit screams when they are cut or are dehydrated. And unlike the mandrake's scream, which was believed to be fatal, the sounds that come out of plants when they suffer can only be heard by some animals and insects.

This difference may soothe the conscience of anyone who has callously let a potted ficus die or dismissed a neglected fittonia's droopy, yellowing leaves as "dramatic". But should it? Indeed, one would imagine that it's not just the chronic under-waterers and over-pruners who would feel unsettled by this discovery. All those committed to browbeating consumers of animal products into giving them up would now have to admit that even the plant-based alternatives they recommend aren't exactly consistent with the "cruelty-free" lifestyle.

Because, if plants too feel pain and thirst in the way that the so-called higher life forms do, then no choice — not vegetarianism nor veganism — is truly "cruelty-free". Telling someone to replace their actual steak with a "cauliflower steak" may once have been easy. But would that still be the case after knowing that the cauliflower wailed in pure agony when it was harvested? The moral high ground is starting to look like a more level place.

IACS'S NOVEL COMPOUND TREATS DRUG-RESISTANT KALA-AZAR INFECTION

Experimental work undertaken in mice has shown a novel quinoline derivative to be effective in sharply reducing the load of *Leishmania donovani* in both the spleen and liver of lab-grown mice. The highlight of the work carried out by researchers at the Kolkata-based Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (IACS) is the potential of the quinoline derivatives to treat drug-resistant leishmaniasis, also called kala-azar (black fever).

The work was published recently in the *Journal of Medicinal Chemistry*.

DNA architecture

The quinoline derivative is a potent inhibitor of an enzyme called topoisomerase 1 (LdTop1), which is essential for maintenance of DNA architecture in the parasites; this enzyme is distinct from the one found in humans. Poisoning of LdTop1 imparts a significant level of cytotoxicity to both the *Leishmania* parasites found in gut of sandfly vectors (promastigotes) as well as the form found in the infected humans (amastigotes) of both the wild type and the antimony-resistant isolates without inducing any lethality to human and mice host cells.

Kala-azar is a vector borne (sandfly) neglected tropical disease caused by the protozoan parasites of the genus *leishmania* that afflicts the world's poorest populations in over 90 countries. Current annual estimates of kala-azar are about 1,00,000, with more than 95% of cases reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) from India and other tropical countries, most importantly co-infection with HIV, which leads to an immunocompromised state.

The four States endemic for kala-azar in India are: Bihar (33 districts), Jharkhand (4 districts), West Bengal (11 districts), and Uttar Pradesh (six districts). The current treatment regimens against kala-azar use formulations that are toxic and induce high levels of drug-resistance.



“Since the enzyme is essential for parasite replication and transcription from DNA to RNA, inhibition of its activity leads to DNA torsional strain, degradation of the DNA, and ultimately parasitic cell death,” says Dr. Benu Brata Das, Professor at the School of Biological Sciences, IACS, and the corresponding author of the paper. “The host human counterpart enzyme is not sensitive to the selected antileishmanial-quinoline derivatives, and is well tolerated in mice and mammalian cell lines tested in our laboratory. This promises minimal side effects in patients.”

EXPLAINED: WHAT IS THE NEW MALARIA VACCINE, HOW IT WILL HELP FIGHT KILLER DISEASE

The World Health Organisation issued a statement Tuesday welcoming a pilot project in Malawi of administering a malaria vaccine to children below the age of 2 years. A total 3,60,000 children across three African countries — Malawi, Ghana and Kenya — will be covered every year with the vaccine.

The vaccine has taken three decades to come to fruition, and is the first one ever against a disease that kills 4,35,000 people a year, most of them children. India ranks high in the list of countries worst affected by the mosquito-borne disease.

What is the RTS,S vaccine?

The vaccine has been developed by GSK — the company is donating about 10 million doses of the product for the pilot. It was created in 1987 by GSK, and was subsequently developed with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In 2014, the vaccine cleared phase III clinical trials which certified that it was both effective and safe for use in humans. According to a description from PATH’s Malaria Vaccine Initiative (MVI), “RTS,S aims to trigger the immune system to defend against the first stages of malaria when the *Plasmodium falciparum* parasite enters the human host’s bloodstream through a mosquito bite and infects liver cells. The vaccine is designed to prevent the parasite from infecting the liver, where it can mature, multiply, re-enter the bloodstream, and infect red blood cells, which can lead to disease symptoms”.

PATH is an international nonprofit team of innovators which advises and partners with public institutions, businesses, grassroots groups, and investors to tackle the world’s toughest global health problems, including malaria. MVI works with various stakeholders towards the development of a malaria vaccine.

In Phase 3 trials conducted in Africa between 2009 and 2014, children received four doses of RTS,S. The vaccine prevented four in 10 cases of clinical malaria; three in 10 cases of severe malaria; and six in 10 cases of severe malaria anaemia, the most common reason children die from malaria. There were reductions in overall hospital admissions and the need for blood transfusions. “We have seen tremendous gains from bed nets and other measures to control malaria in the last 15 years, but progress has stalled and even reversed in some areas. We need new solutions to get the malaria response back on track, and this vaccine gives us a promising tool to get there. The malaria vaccine has the potential to save tens of thousands of children’s lives,” WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

Why is malaria such a major global public health challenge?

Malaria is a potentially life-threatening parasitic disease caused by the parasites *Plasmodium vivax* (*P.vivax*), *Plasmodium falciparum* (*P.falciparum*), *Plasmodium malariae* (*P.malariae*), and *Plasmodium ovale* (*P.ovale*), transmitted by the female *Anopheles* mosquito.



Malaria, according to the WHO, remains one of the world's leading killers, claiming the life of one child every two minutes. Most of these deaths are in Africa, where more than 2,50,000 children die from the disease every year. Children under the age of 5 are at greatest risk from its life-threatening complications.

"Malaria is a constant threat in the African communities where this vaccine will be given. The poorest children suffer the most and are at highest risk of death. We know the power of vaccines to prevent killer diseases and reach children, including those who may not have immediate access to the doctors, nurses and health facilities they need to save them when severe illness comes," Dr Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa, said.

How badly is India affected by malaria?

India ranks very high in the list of countries with a serious malaria burden. In 2018, 3,99,134 cases of malaria and 85 deaths due to the disease were reported in the country, according to data from the National Vector Borne Disease Control Programme.

Questions are repeatedly asked about the veracity of the Indian data, with some reports suggesting India may be recording just 8% of the actual number of malaria cases. Between 60% and 80% of patients in the urban areas are treated by private doctors or health establishments, most of whom do not notify cases. Although malaria is a notifiable disease, it is only voluntary notification — there are no penalties for doctors or hospitals not doing so. However, there is, of late, renewed focus on case reporting.

Six states — Odisha (40%), Chhattisgarh (20%), Jharkhand (20%), Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram (5-7%) — bear the brunt of malaria in India. These states, along with the tribal areas of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, account for 90% of India's malaria burden.

What is the next step for the malaria vaccine now?

The pilot countries — Malawi is the only one that has actually started it; Kenya and Ghana will follow — were chosen after they responded to a WHO call for expressions of interest. Ten African countries were in the fray and these three countries were selected for their well-functioning malaria and immunization programmes, and for their areas with moderate to high malaria transmission. In the selected areas in the three countries, the vaccine will be given in four doses: three doses between 5 and 9 months of age, and the fourth dose around the child's second birthday.

Once the pilots have been completed, the WHO will review the results and come out with its recommendations for the use of the vaccine. For a country like India, the key question though is likely to be as much the efficacy of the vaccine as its cost.

WHY A NON-INVASIVE TEST FOR ENDOMETRIOSIS IS TAKING SUCH A LONG TIME

Endometriosis is a painful chronic disease in which tissue similar to the lining of the uterus, or endometrium, grows outside of it. Despite its prevalence, popular awareness of endometriosis remains low even as its diagnosis is marred by experiences of medical misogyny and gaslighting.

This year, however, there may also be some (cautious) cheer: a U.S.-based company named DotLab has announced a blood test to reliably diagnose endometriosis. The significance of this technology is highlighted by the fact that people have to wait for 6.7 years on average for a diagnosis, even as



the number of people with endometriosis could be much higher than the estimated 190 million worldwide (about 42 million in India alone), due to the number of cases that go undiagnosed.

Why is endometriosis hard to diagnose?

Doctors often struggle to diagnose endometriosis because of its variety of symptoms, including pain during menstruation, urination, sexual intercourse, bowel movements, fatigue, and sometimes infertility. There are also no reliable non-invasive diagnostic tools (ultrasound can't accurately detect all forms of endometriosis). Laparoscopic surgery is required for a definitive diagnosis.

DotLab has said that its blood test is the first of its kind: a non-invasive method to accurately diagnose endometriosis.

This test relies on detecting microRNA, which are small, non-coding RNA segments that regulate gene expression. Many studies have identified microRNAs that are expressed differently in people with endometriosis. So, on paper at least, researchers can use these unique expression patterns as a sign of the disease. Currently, researchers are exploring the use of microRNA from saliva and blood as diagnostic biomarkers.

The blood test by DotLab is the product of a study (published in the American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology in March 2020) in which researchers identified blood-based microRNAs that were expressed differently in people with endometriosis, relative to a group of people who didn't have the disease.

The researchers then created an algorithm combining the expression values of these microRNAs to predict the presence or absence of endometriosis. They validated it with a different group of people and found that it was able to accurately identify those who did have endometriosis.

Is the new test available to use?

Ramanaiah Mamillapalli, a research scientist at the Yale School of Medicine who was involved in the study, cautioned that "this microRNA screen is at testing level only". Indeed, DotLab is actively recruiting people to participate in ongoing clinical trials expected to be completed by September 2024. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration hasn't yet approved the test.

The researchers also noted that while the test was able to accurately identify both mild and advanced endometriosis, it wasn't able to differentiate between the stage and the severity of the disease.

Abhishek Mangeshikar, director of the Indian Centre for Endometriosis, an "educational resource" for physicians and patients, agreed that the test could give a 'yes' or 'no' answer about whether someone has endometriosis – "but it's not giving you a status or a stage of the disease ... and which organs [could be] involved."

He also noted the importance of the test's sensitivity and specificity, found to be 83% and 96%, respectively.

Sensitivity refers to the test's ability to correctly identify the disease based on microRNA expression levels, i.e. its ability to identify true-positive results. Specificity is a measure of the test's ability to reliably say that some abnormal microRNA expression is the result of endometriosis, and not some other condition. It's the test's ability to avoid false-positive results.



Hugh Taylor, the chief of obstetrics and gynaecology at Yale-New Haven Hospital, said there is a way to improve these numbers: “There are thousands of microRNAs expressed differently in endometriosis, so we can use combinations to get a very specific disease signature.”

Dr. Taylor helped develop the test’s technique that DotLab has since patented.

SHARE OF PRE-HYPERTENSIVE TEENAGERS RISES ACROSS MOST STATES

In 22 of 28 States, the share of teenage girls (15-19 years) who had normal blood pressure (BP) decreased between 2015-16 and 2019-21, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data. The decrease was more pronounced in Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Telangana, Uttarakhand and Jharkhand. More importantly, in some States, the decline in the share of teenage girls with normal BP was steeper than the decline among older age groups.

According to the NFHS, BP is considered normal if systolic pressure is lower than 120 mmHg and diastolic pressure is lower than 80 mmHg. Those who had normal BP because they took medicines to control their BP were excluded from the analysis. Jammu and Kashmir was not included in the analysis as the State was bifurcated between the two NFHS periods. Only data for women were considered as fewer men participated in the NFHS than women.

In Chhattisgarh, in 2015-16, 81.9% of teenage girls had normal BP and 67.1% in 2019-21. This was a decrease of 14.8% points, the highest among all the States. In terms of the degree of decline, Maharashtra followed next (13.3% points between 2015-16 and 2019-21). Telangana was the only other State with a double-digit decline. In only six States — Assam, West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh, Tripura, Nagaland and Manipur — did the share of such teenage girls increase.

Though the decrease in the share of teenage girls who had normal BP was more pronounced in Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Telangana, the share was high to begin with in some north-eastern States. In Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, only 63% of teenage girls had normal BP in 2019-21 — the lowest in the country. Notably, the situation was better in the southern States where at least 78% of teenage girls had normal BP.

Overall in India, in 2015-16, 80% of teenage girls had normal BP, which declined to 74% in 2019-21 — a decrease of 6% points.

EXPRESS VIEW ON MODERATE DRINKING RESEARCH: LET’S IGNORE IT

Modern life is too often a mechanical oppression,” Ernest Hemingway wrote to critic Ivan Kashin in 1935, “and liquor is the only mechanical relief.” Hemingway likely knew then, as all of us do now, that alcohol in excess is not the best thing for the body or soul, and it’s especially bad when you “write or when you fight”. But in the current age of scientism and “wellness”, even moderation isn’t enough. Researchers have studied over a 100 studies about alcohol consumption over the decades (the report was published in JAMA Network Open) and come to the conclusion that there’s no such thing as a healthy amount of alcohol.

Unlike tobacco or other psychoactive drugs, alcohol enjoys a certain social sanction. In fact, medical “facts” like a couple of glasses of wine, or the odd beer, are actually good for the health have been shared for years now. But now, that solace is gone. Imagine a world where the tedium of an official dinner, or the boring wedding of a faraway cousin has to be suffered through without the adequate lubrication. Or one where the quiet glass of wine after work, just to shift gears as



another day at the job you barely tolerate winds down, has to be measured against the depressing arithmetic of one's impending mortality.

But perhaps there's another way to look at the research's findings, which is to not look at them at all. There is little point in trying to show, for example, that the stress-relieving effects of a drink or two might end up helping certain conditions. The JAMA paper establishes that earlier studies that claimed health benefits for moderation were flawed. So be it. Better, then, to say maybe a drink or two does some harm — but sometimes, it feels good. And that's enough for one more round.

HOW IOC'S DECISION ON ARMY-LINKED ATHLETES CRIPPLES RUSSIA OLYMPIC HOPES

Fencer Sofya Velikaya is a two-time Olympic gold medallist in team sabre events, and has three individual silvers. In Tokyo, she was the flag-bearer of the Russian contingent. Paris would have been her fifth Olympics. But the two-time individual world champion and four-time European champion, one of the greatest fencers of this era, won't be competing at next year's Games.

For, Velikaya is a Captain with the Russian armed forces. And while there is still hope for some Russian athletes to compete in Paris, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) last week shut the door firmly on those who have links to the country's military.

In theory, this means nearly half of all Russian athletes at the Tokyo Olympics and almost all medal winners will be ineligible to compete in Paris — unless Russia stops its war in Ukraine.

EXPRESS VIEW ON SPORTSPERSONS BEING TROLLED ONLINE: IT POINTS TO A CYNICAL AND JOYLESS SPORTS VIEWING THAT SEE PLAYERS AS RACE HORSES

When Scottish shuttler Kirsty Gilmour opened up about receiving death and rape threats on social media from gamblers, she was echoing a daily reality of hundreds of athletes, across sports. Sportspersons from football to tennis to, in recent years, badminton, are bombarded with hate messages and outright threats by irate gamblers who lose money when these athletes end up on the losing side. There is a sense of helplessness, since athletes walk the tightrope of remaining accessible to genuine fans even as gamblers and incensed followers use the same access-ways to threaten them. Indian badminton stars this paper spoke to admitted it was almost a daily occurrence — win or lose — and there was no option but to ignore the bile, given that these were anonymous accounts and from various countries, making it impossible to pin down the culprits who hide behind nameless handles.

Sport is hard enough without having to deal with "fans" who believe they can troll sports stars for a poor day at work on social media platforms. The worrying trend holds the scary potential of sending athletes down a spiral of self doubt and dread, and authorities might need to do more than merely extend support. Tennis and football have been suffering the menace for a few years now, and that it continues despite measures like blocking means more young athletes will remain susceptible to being targeted. The abuse also gets personal, which adds to the dread of athletes. The trend is so pervasive that it also runs the risk of being normalised.

Trolling and threatening of athletes also points to how cynical and joyless sports viewing has become due to gamblers who, as Gilmour said, see athletes merely as race horses. Both legalised betting and the plethora of illegal gambling, and athletes' increasing reliance on social media to



engage with fans, means there are no easy answers to the menace. Losing is a daily reality of sport. Unfortunately, so is the hate that spews out from behind masks of anonymity.

WHY TWITTER HAS REMOVED THE NEW YORK TIMES' VERIFIED ACCOUNT BADGE

The New York Times has become the first major news publisher to lose its verification checkmark on Twitter, after the outlet said it will not pay the microblogging site a monthly fee to retain its badge. A number of other news publishers have also said they will not pay for verification, however, their checkmarks remain intact as of now.

Twitter's new CEO Elon Musk had earlier said that from April 1, the company will start removing 'legacy' verified checkmarks from accounts that do not subscribe to Twitter Blue, the platform's subscription service introduced last year that essentially allows users to buy a verification mark.

Individual users must buy a subscription to Twitter's Blue service, which costs \$8 a month, to obtain the badge. Businesses that are currently unverified will have to pay \$1,000 a month if they want a gold check mark verifying their account. It was announced in March this year that users in India will have to pay Rs 900 per month for a monthly subscription, which would give them the Blue verified badge.

The subscription costs less on the web and is priced at Rs 650 per month. Twitter is offering an annual subscription on the web as well in India, which costs Rs 6800 per year or Rs 566 per month approximately.

Why was the New York Times' verification on Twitter removed?

It appears the Times lost its gold verification check sometime between Saturday night and early Sunday morning, a removal that may have occurred in response to a meme that was tweeted at Elon Musk. The publisher's account has more than 55 million followers.

An account shared a meme which said that the outlet has announced it will not pay for Twitter Blue, in response to which, Musk tweeted, "Oh ok, we will take it off then". In another tweet which Musk later deleted he said that there would be a "grace" period of a few weeks before the non-paying checks were removed, "unless they tell they won't pay now."

"We aren't planning to pay the monthly fee for check mark status for our institutional Twitter accounts," a New York Times spokesperson said in a statement. "We also will not reimburse reporters for Twitter Blue for personal accounts, except in rare instances where this status would be essential for reporting purposes."

To be sure, only NYT's official twitter account had lost its verification badge as of now, while other parts of the media organisation, like its Arts section and Opinion section, still have their blue or gold checks.

Who else won't pay for Twitter's verification?

The New York Times is not the only publisher that has announced not paying for Twitter's verification. The Washington Post, CNN, and the Los Angeles Times are among the major publishers that have decided the same. Not just publishers, but even the US White House will not pay to have its staff's official Twitter profiles verified. Celebrities like Lebron James have also said they will not pay for Twitter verification.



The Washington Post said it “will not pay for Twitter Blue service as an institution or on behalf of our journalists” because “it’s evident that verified checkmarks no longer represent authority and expertise”.

What does the change in verification mean for Twitter users?

Last week, Twitter released a part of its platform’s code, which according to some researchers revealed prioritised content posted by Twitter Blue users. This means that individuals who choose not to pay for Twitter Blue could become less visible on the site.

It may also become harder for most users to tell real people from fake accounts. If check marks are removed from the accounts of celebrities who are unwilling to pay for Blue, for example, it could become difficult to distinguish their accounts from impersonators.

Should you pay for Twitter Blue?

While bigger brands and major celebrities can still get their content noticed on the platform owing to the sheer size of their followers, smaller businesses that use Twitter to market their services and want their content to reach broader audiences could end up paying for the service essentially as an advertising expense.

According to a report by The Information, around 180,000 people in the US were paying for subscriptions to Twitter, including Twitter Blue, as of mid-January, or less than 0.2 per cent of monthly active users.

EXPRESS VIEW ON YOUNG WHITE-COLLAR WORKERS IN CHINA OPTING FOR BLUE-COLLAR JOBS: KARL MARX COULD HAVE PREDICTED THIS

Since Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, in China, “to get rich is not a crime”. Recently, though, young people who have not seen the horrors of the Great Leap Forward, the persecutions of the Cultural Revolution, and who came of age after the Tiananmen Square protests are reportedly realising that money can’t buy happiness, and even if you win the rat race, you’re still a rodent on a treadmill.

Since the late 1980s, China has seen over three decades of almost unprecedented growth and a burgeoning (upper) middle class. The broad contours of the work culture in companies were much the same as elsewhere — go for the money and promotions, put up with terrible work hours and often, toxic managers. An economic slowdown and the pandemic have meant that many young Chinese are re-evaluating their priorities. Trapped for months on end thanks to the “zero Covid” policy, they confess to feeling a loss of agency. Now, on social media, the stars are not dudes with big cars, but people who’ve given up success for the good life, shunning their white-collar jobs for blue-collar ones that allow a more sedate pace of work and more peace and happiness: A graphic designer becomes a dog groomer, a corporate honcho turns to waitressing.

The fact is that Chinese companies are hiring less as the economy slows down, at a time when there are more and more college graduates entering the workforce. Ironically, the “great resignation” could have been predicted by the Great Leaders of the People’s Republic if they returned to its theoretical roots. In classical Marxist theory, the worker is exploited — regardless of the colour of her collar — because that’s how profit and power are maintained. Of course, for now, it’s just the ones with the “good” jobs who are opting for a less hectic option. Resignations for happiness, as Marx would likely point out, speak of another kind of privilege.