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INTERNATIONAL

HOW WILL BIDEN IMPEACHMENT HEARINGS IMPACT ELECTIONS?

The story so far:

Republican lawmakers, who have majority control of the U.S. House of Representatives, have moved forward with their plan to impeach Democratic President Joe Biden over unproven corruption allegations linked to the President's son, businessman Hunter Biden. The move is seen as an attempt by House Speaker Kevin McCarthy to score political points at the start of the election campaign cycle.

What is the political context?

The most significant factor that might have driven Republicans to seek the impeachment of Mr. Biden is the fact that his predecessor, Republican Donald Trump, was impeached twice. Mr. Trump was first impeached in 2019-20 over allegations of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress linked to his attempted coercion of the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy into conducting a criminal investigation of Hunter Biden. Mr. Trump's second impeachment, which happened in early 2021, stemmed from the serious charge of "incitement of insurrection" linked to his role in encouraging the January 6 attack on the U.S. Congress buildings. Now, Mr. McCarthy hopes to balance the score by chalking up an impeachment against Mr. Biden, perhaps in the hope of dampening voter support for Democrats next year and gaining political capital in a house that has not always offered Mr. McCarthy its robust support. If the Republicans succeed in the House, Mr. Biden would be the fifth President in U.S. history to be impeached, following Andrew Johnson in 1868, Richard Nixon in 1974, Bill Clinton in 1998 and more recently, Mr. Trump.

What are the political implications?

Mr. McCarthy's plan to move forward with the impeachment plan could, as he no doubt hopes it will, bolster the ranks of his supporters by pandering to the demands the Freedom Caucus, a hardline pro-Trump grouping in the House that did not easily back Mr. McCarthy's January 2023 bid to be the Speaker. But beyond this limited gain, Republicans face the risk of a voter blowback in the November 2024 election, as Democrats will likely link the failure to convict Mr. Biden, if at all he is impeached, to Republican partisanship and deference to the political agenda of Mr. Trump.

EXPRESS VIEW ON UN AND UKRAINE: BREAK THE IMPASSE

On Monday, the opening day of the UN General Assembly and a day before Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy addressed the gathering, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres made a plea. At the halfway mark, the deadline to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set in 2015 — global progress on ending poverty, addressing climate change and expanding rights — looks unattainable. By most estimates, only 15 per cent of the 169 SDG targets are on track. Guterres requested members to use the two-day summit to formulate a rescue plan. Unfortunately, on Day 2 at the UN, the conflict in Ukraine once again overshadowed all other concerns, including and especially of the Global South.

Nearly 600 days after Russia invaded Ukraine, the conflict is looking more entrenched and the lines between the US and the West, and Russia, China and its allies are sharper than before. Moscow's justification for the attack — that the expansion of NATO threatens its national security



— should now be a reason for it to seek a diplomatic solution: Finland (which shares a border with Russia) and Sweden have joined the alliance and with its assistance to Ukraine in terms of weapons, intelligence and operations, the Western strategic presence has grown. Isolated from its traditional partners, and dependent on China, Russia today is more diminished than it was before the invasion. Speaking at the General Assembly, Zelenskyy made an anguished cry against human rights abuses in his country. However, by closing the door to a compromise, by being more worried about “appeasement” than peace, the US president and Western leaders seem to have narrowed the room for a diplomatic settlement. Beijing has used the conflict to expand its influence, despite its growing economic woes.

India and some other developing countries have managed to walk a fine line since the invasion began. New Delhi has rightly called for peace, maintained its ties with Moscow, even as it expands its relationship with the US and the West. But the Ukraine war has caused worrying volatility in global supply chains for essential commodities like fuel and food. The resources of the West, Russia’s security and welfare of the world are all strained, thanks to this conflict, and the needs of the poor and vulnerable, and the majority of humanity that resides in the Global South, are seemingly on the back burner. This state of affairs points to the diplomatic failures of both sides since February 24, 2022. It is time for active diplomatic efforts to move beyond the current impasse. Else, the promise of the G20, for instance, and the hope behind the enumeration of the SDGs, will remain on paper for longer.

THE FRONTRUNNER

It was no secret that Mohamed Muizzu entered the Maldives’s presidential race only because former President Abdulla Yameen could not. In fact, local media often called him the opposition People’s National Congress- Progressive Party of Maldives combine’s ‘plan C’, after the Supreme Court barred Mr. Yameen from contesting, and party members ruled out Dr. Mohamed Waheed, another former President.

Nonetheless, observers in the Maldives knew that ‘Dr. Muizzu’ — he holds a PhD in civil engineering from the University of Leeds, U.K. — was the opposition’s most credible challenger to President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. He proved their assessment right, securing the highest share — of 46.06% — of the ballot in the September 9 elections, while Mr. Solih secured 39.05%. Since neither candidate got over 50% necessary for victory, the top two will face a run-off on September 30.

It was not an easy campaign for Mr. Muizzu. After the top court made clear Mr. Yameen could not run, the jailed leader, convicted on corruption and money laundering charges, asked his party to boycott the polls. However, with the party membership refusing, the opposition bloc had to swiftly find a candidate agreeable within the coalition, and formidable as an electoral rival to the incumbent. After considerable internal debate, Mr. Muizzu was named.

He had barely a month to campaign and convince the 5.2 lakh-strong country’s electorate of 2.8 lakh voters. But, he was no new face in Maldives politics. In 2021, Mr. Muizzu became the Mayor of capital Male, after beating the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party’s (MDP) candidate with a huge margin.

Prior to that, he served as the Minister of Housing twice, in the Cabinets of former Presidents Mr. Waheed and Mr. Yameen. While in the latter’s government, he oversaw the construction of the \$200-million China-Maldives friendship bridge, linking the capital to the neighbouring Hulhumale



island, where the country's main airport is located. Last month, while marking the fifth anniversary of the bridge's opening, Mr. Muizzu praised the "visionary leadership" of Mr. Yameen and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

His experience in dealing with housing challenges in the country, as a Minister earlier and Mayor now, gives him the insight and vocabulary to address mounting concerns over housing that many Maldivians are preoccupied with. His manifesto outlined a plan to allocate 65,000 flats in and around the capital, better electricity connectivity and water network, and enhanced infrastructure in the atolls located to the north and south of the capital.

'India out' campaign

Although he was left with little time ahead of the polls, it was not as if Mr. Muizzu had to craft a campaign from scratch. The Opposition had already built considerable momentum, chiefly from the "India Out" drive spearheaded by Mr. Yameen. A strong anti-incumbency sentiment against the Solih administration, amid allegations of corruption and repression, saw some voters grow sympathetic to the Opposition's critique of President Solih's "India first" policy, although they were well-aware of the obvious China tilt of Mr. Yameen's administration from 2013 to 2018. Seen through a geopolitical prism, the contest in the Maldives is an India-China one. Outside of it, the current dynamics reflect the churn that continues after the Indian Ocean Archipelago transitioned to democracy in 2008.

The outcome of the first round could be read as a "revolt against the government", according to U.K.-based Maldivian academic Ahmed Shaheed. Further, former President Mohamed Nasheed's decision to break away from the ruling MDP also impacted Mr. Solih's chances. "With Mr. Nasheed's split, the motherboard of the MDP was gone," observed Mr. Shaheed, a former Foreign Minister of the Maldives.

With just a fortnight left for the second round of the presidential race, both Mr. Solih and Mr. Muizzu are negotiating with the other contestants, seeking their support. Ahead of the first round of the polls, every opposition election poster and hoarding in capital Male, in the party's hot pink colour, screamed that Mr. Yameen is still boss. They foregrounded Mr. Yameen's image, placing photographs of Mr. Muizzu and his running mate behind his.

Now considered the frontrunner, Mr. Muizzu, 45, has vowed to double the salaries of the police and army, and defer their rent payments, among other fresh promises. In two weeks from now, it will be clear if they were enough to tip the electoral scales the second time.

PRACHANDA, THE US, AND CHINA

Prachanda will travel to China on an eight-day visit beginning Saturday — a trip that is seen as an effort to balance Nepal's relationship with its two large neighbours to the north and south. He had visited India at the invitation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi three and a half months ago.

The Prime Minister's visit to the US and China is taking place at a time when top leaders of all three major parties in Nepal, both in government and in the opposition, face public scrutiny and outrage for alleged corruption, and the government's authority and credibility has been eroded both at home and abroad.



Nepal and United States

Prachanda's role as the leader of the violent Maoist insurgency led to his being put on US global watch lists. He was given a restricted travel permit when he addressed the UNGA for the first time as PM in September 2008. However, the once strongly anti-US Maoist leader is now an important facilitator for American interests in Nepal, given the vital geostrategic location of the country, and the growing US interest in the region.

Prachanda played a key role in the February 2022 endorsement by Parliament of the \$500 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Nepal compact grant, ignoring China's disapproval. The US had warned that not meeting the deadline would lead to a review of bilateral relations, and Parliament's action was followed by a marked upswing in Nepal-US relations.

Prachanda aligned with the pro-India and pro-US Nepali Congress in the November 2022 election, and allowed Nepali Congress chief Sher Bahadur Deuba to persuade him to back the MCC. Nepal went on to side with the US in the UN in condemning Russia's war against Ukraine. However, in June 2022, the Deuba government backed away from the State Partnership Program (SPP) — involving cooperation with the US in training, disaster management, and education — amid fears that it would pull Nepal into an anti-China military pact.

In 75 years of the bilateral relationship, the US has played a major role in Nepal's health, education, and agriculture sectors, mostly through USAID. However, the MCC concept had split the political class, with many suspecting it was basically a security concept, the acceptance of which would impact Nepal's non-aligned foreign policy, and also annoy China.

Tightrope walk on China

The almost six-month economic blockade of Nepal by India from September 2015 onward gave China a fast track into the country. It intervened aggressively in Nepal's politics, and played a role in bringing the two communist parties, Prachanda's Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) and K P Sharma Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) together. Oli became Prime Minister after the elections of 2018, with the understanding that he would step aside for Prachanda in the second half of his five-year term.

Oli's tenure saw a massive shift in Nepal's relationship with India, China, and the US. With a strong sentiment against India in the country, Oli's government signed trade and transit agreements with China that gave Nepal access to the sea in the north. Even after Oli and Prachanda fell out — on issues including ratification of the MCC Nepal compact — China continued to make efforts for communist unity. On his visit to Nepal in October 2019, President Xi Jinping promised major investments in key areas including hospitality and tourism, energy sector — hydro and solar — as well as in post-earthquake reconstruction. He assured Nepal that China would always stand by its sovereignty.

China also asked Nepal to select projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and of a list of 35 possible projects, Nepal shortlisted nine: the Kerung-Kathmandu railway project feasibility study; the Tamor (762 MW) and Phukot-Karnali hydro projects (462 MW); the Galrchi-Rasuwarahi-Kerung 400 KV transmission line; Madan Bhandari University; Rasuwarahi-Kathmandu road upgradation; construction of Kimathanka line road; Dipayal road up to the China border; and Tokha-Bidur road along with tunnel.



But the Covid-19 pandemic put the projects on hold, and the endorsement of the MCC compact last year has changed Nepal's narrative about a development partnership with China. Prachanda and his coalition partners seem to be heeding the Indian and US warnings about a Chinese debt trap, and believe China should provide grants, rather than the soft loan mentioned in the BRI agreement signed five years ago.

"I will request China to have project grants to begin with," the Prime Minister had told some editors a couple of weeks before his departure for the US.

"Our challenge lies in convincing China that we are committed to our friendship with our neighbours and that the MCC is only a developmental project with no strategic or security significance," a senior diplomat had told The Indian Express earlier.

Government sources said Prachanda will also ask the Chinese to waive the more than \$215 million loan taken from the Exim Bank of China to build the Pokhara International Airport. The airport was opened earlier this year, but is lying idle for want of a profitable operational plan.

China is keen to enlarge its presence, investments and interests in Nepal to counter or neutralise the US and India in the country and region. It seems to have realised that depending solely on the big left parties, the UML and Maoists, had been a mistake, and is likely to expand its political outreach to other parties in the times to come.

Prachanda's role in the ratification of the MCC has alarmed the Chinese. But the way Nepal's governments have run foreign policy — seemingly putting personal and party interests above those of the country's — has caused significant disquiet among a large section of Nepalis as well. It must be noted that neither the MCC nor the BRI were debated in Parliament before the government signed the pacts with the respective countries.

View from New Delhi

India has burnt its fingers a few times in Nepal, and bilateral relations have witnessed major changes over the years. Some unique, fundamental features of the bilateral relationship are now in retreat.

Army chief General Prabhuram Sharma last week said the open border with India poses a threat to peace and law and order in Nepal. The Gorkha recruitment that independent India gave continuity to, is now a thing of the past. Disputes over the border keep arising.

India and the US agree that the coming together of the major communist parties would allow China greater leverage in Nepal. Leaders of India's ruling dispensation believe that India should support the US to contain China in Nepal, an admission of New Delhi's own diminishing clout and role in Nepal.

India will be closely watching Prachanda's visit to China, to see how warmly or curtly he is received, and how courageously or clearly he puts across Nepal's point of view during meetings with President Xi and Premier Li Qiang.



NATION

WHY LONDON'S INDIA CLUB, VISITED BY LEADERS LIKE NEHRU, MOUNTBATTEN AND VK MENON, IS CLOSING DOWN

Dr Rajendra Prasad, Lord Mountbatten, Jawaharlal Nehru, Dadabhai Naoroji were some of the club's prominent visitors. Journalist Chandran Tharoor, the father of Congress MP Shashi Tharoor, was one of its founding members. Here is its story.

London's India Club, a rest stop for Indians in the United Kingdom during the independence movement, is set to close down permanently on September 17 after decades of operations.

The restaurant served Indian food items and also functioned as a lounging club where those associated with India in the UK would often meet. Along with its historical associations, the fact that many of its interiors were largely unchanged over the years lent a sense of nostalgia to it. In its heyday, several politicians and leaders visited it, along with British people whose family members had worked in India during the colonial era.

However, it has been facing the prospect of having to shut shop for a while now because of multiple factors. Here is its story.

How India Club began

The club is located in the Strand Continental Hotel in London on a busy street. It was started in 1951 by the India League, a British organisation that started out as an advocate for Indian independence and self-rule (swaraj) and included members of the elite in British society. Later on, it hoped to play a role in furthering Indo-British friendship in the post-independence era. According to a PTI report, the India Club then quickly became a base for groups like the league, which were serving the Asian community.

"The Indian Journalist Association, Indian Workers Association and Indian Socialist Group of Britain were just some of the groups which used 143 Strand (the address of India Club) for their events and activities. The building was also a base for the new wings of the India League which ran a free legal advice bureau and a research and study unit from this address," says the club's website.

It adds: "At a time when the daily lives and experiences of Asians in Britain could be difficult, 143 Strand was a significant focal point for the subcontinent diaspora communities. For a generation of pioneering migrants, it was a home away from home."

Currently, apart from serving popular Indian food items such as dosas and curries, it holds discussion panels and film screenings as well.

Who visited India Club?

According to PTI, Smita Tharoor, the London-based daughter of one of the other founder members of India Club (journalist Chandran Tharoor), has been a regular visitor with her brother Congress MP Shashi Tharoor and other family members.

She said that Dr Rajendra Prasad, the first President of independent India, and Lord Mountbatten – the last Viceroy of India – were among its many distinguished visitors. An Architectural Digest



article said the club's walls are "lined with portraits of prominent Indian and British personalities who visited the club, including former Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the first British Indian MP Dadabhai Naoroji, philosopher Bertrand Russell, artist MF Hussain... and more."

VK Krishna Menon, the diplomat and former Indian Defence Minister, also had a role to play in the founding of the Club as one of the secretaries of the India Club. "Menon intended the India Club to be a place where young Indian professionals living on a shoestring could afford to eat, discuss politics, and plan their futures," noted Parvathi Raman, Founding Chair of the Centre for Migration and Diaspora Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), when she worked on the exhibition 'A Home Away from Away: The India Club' in 2019, curated by the UK's conservation charity National Trust.

Menon would also go on to become India's first High Commissioner in the United Kingdom.

Why is India Club shutting down now?

According to Reuters, Parsi-origin Yadgar Marker has been running the establishment with his wife Freny and daughter Phiroza since 1997 as the director of Goldsand Hotels Limited.

They launched a "Save India Club" public appeal and won an initial battle to prevent the building from partial demolition in 2018, when they were served a notice by the landlords to make way for a more modernised hotel. That year, the Westminster City Council rejected a planning application for this extension, saying giving the permission would lead to the loss of an important cultural and nighttime entertainment use space.

However, after the coronavirus-induced lockdowns in the UK hit many restaurants' businesses and the rents were hiked exponentially amid a cost-of-living crisis, running the India Club became unsustainable for its owners.

Manager Phiroza Marker told Reuters the India Club had experienced its busiest days this week and that she was looking for an alternative space nearby for the restaurant, "whose formica tables and mustard yellow walls give it the atmosphere of a colonial-era Indian coffee house."

WHAT IS DRIVING THE GLOBAL BIOFUELS ALLIANCE?

The story so far:

On September 10, on the sidelines of the annual G-20 summit in New Delhi, an India-led grouping came together to give impetus to the production and use of biofuels, an alternative to fossil fuels like petroleum and diesel. The grouping, called the Global Biofuels Alliance (GBA) would attempt to bring countries together to co-develop, accelerate technological advances in production processes, and advocate for the use of biofuels particularly in the transport sector. The three founding members, India, the U.S. and Brazil, were joined by Argentina, Canada, Italy and South Africa, who are also G-20 member countries.

What are biofuels?

The International Energy Agency (IEA) defines biofuels as "liquid fuels derived from biomass and used as an alternative to fossil fuel based liquid transportation fuels such as gasoline, diesel and aviation fuels."



Are biofuels an alternative to fossil fuels?

Experts in the field make a distinction between biofuels and sustainable biofuels. The former is derived from crops grown specifically to produce biofuels such as sugarcane, corn, or soybean, and the latter is from agricultural waste, used cooking oil and processed animal residues like fats. The former is colloquially referred to as 1G ethanol, or first-generation biofuel, and the latter as 2G, that is second-generation. This distinction has now come into sharp focus as climate change accelerates, with fears of threat to food security and increased loss of forests and biodiversity due to greater land required for farming. Estimates suggest that well over half of all vegetated land is under cultivation today, and that agriculture is one of the world's largest carbon emitters. The GBA has emphasised that its focus would be to develop 2G ethanol.

Why is there a renewed focus on biofuels?

With severe disruptions to global crude oil supplies following the Ukraine war, several countries have been scrambling to find alternatives to the import dependence on petrol and diesel. India, for instance, imports 87% of its crude oil, and it is the main reserve currency expenditure for the country. With transport accounting for about one-quarter of global carbon emissions, there have been renewed attempts to accelerate the decarbonising of this sector, with several countries announcing battery production and electric vehicle (EV) policies and legacy automakers entering the now thriving EV sector. But some modes of transport like aviation, shipping and long-haul trucking will find it harder to reduce carbon emissions than say, self-driven cars or motorbikes. It is here that some experts feel that 2G ethanol could be a valuable substitute.

Do biofuels aid energy transition?

Most biofuels today are blended with petrol or diesel at varying degrees. For instance, India blends about 10% of biofuels and has plans to double this in the coming years. While some experts feel that accelerating EV adoption and developing alternatives like green hydrogen must be the focus of the ongoing energy transition, others argue that 2G ethanol would soften the impending disruption. It would do so by allowing to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions even while stretching the life of internal combustion engines, giving time for automakers to develop robust alternatives, while increasing farmers' incomes and providing jobs.

What happens next?

The three founding members of the GBA produce 85% of global biofuels and consume about 81% of it. In line with the renewed push to enhance biofuel use and production, the U.S. announced its latest amended "Renewable Fuel Standard" to substantially increase the production of biofuels and substitute about 1,40,000 barrels per day of crude oil imports by 2025. Similarly, India had announced the setting up of 12 new refineries as early as 2018 with the aim to meet 20% ethanol blending by 2025. This becomes even more significant following India's announcement to become net zero (removing as much carbon from the atmosphere as human activity emits) by 2070. The IEA predicts that about two-thirds of the global biofuel demand will come from three emerging economies – India, Brazil and Indonesia, and that they have "ample domestic feedstocks, additional production capacity, relatively low production costs and a package of policies they can leverage to increase demand." However, it remains to be seen if this would indeed hasten decarbonising of the energy sector.



HOW WILL MIDDLE EAST CORRIDOR IMPACT TRADE?

The story so far:

At a special event on the sidelines of the recently concluded G-20 summit in New Delhi, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed to establish the 'India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor' (IMEC). Other than the two co-chairs of the event, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. President Joe Biden, the signatories included leaders of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the European Union (EU), Italy, France and Germany. The project forms part of the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII).

What is the corridor?

The proposed IMEC will consist of railroad, ship-to-rail networks (road and sea) and road transport routes (and networks) extending across two corridors. While the east corridor will connect India to the Gulf, the northern corridor will connect the Gulf to Europe. As per the MoU, the railway, upon completion, would provide a "reliable and cost-effective cross-border ship-to-rail transit network to supplement existing maritime and road transports routes".

It would enable the transportation of goods and services from India to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel and Europe, and back. The corridor is expected to increase efficiency (relating to transit), reduce costs, generate jobs, and lower greenhouse gas emissions. This in turn will translate into a "transformative integration of Asia, Europe and the Middle East." The MoU states that participants intend to enable the laying of cables for electricity and digital connectivity, as well as pipes for clean hydrogen export along the railway route.

The MoU points out that participants will "work collectively and expeditiously" to arrange and implement all elements of the transit route. These relate to technical design, financing, legal and relevant regulatory standards. A meeting is planned in the next 60 days to carve out an "action plan" with "relevant timetables".

How has it been received?

While Mr. Modi suggested the corridor "promises to be a beacon of cooperation, innovation, and shared progress," Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, said the corridor was "more than 'just' a railway or a cable, it is a green and digital bridge across continents and civilisations." She called it the "most direct connection" between India, the Gulf and Europe: with a rail link that would make trade between India and Europe 40% faster. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose country will be a part of the corridor, also welcomed the move.

On the other hand, with the corridor being suggested as a competitor for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the announcement did not draw enthusiasm from the Chinese media. An editorial in the Global Times highlighted doubts from Chinese experts about the project's credibility and feasibility. "It is not the first time for Washington to make empty pledges to various countries and regions," it read.

What geopolitics is at play here?

It has often been believed that China is utilising the BRI from the Indo-Pacific to West Asia to further their economic and political influence, particularly on sovereigns with relatively unstable economies. The Financial Times points out that, for the U.S., the project could also serve to counter



Beijing's influence "at a time when Washington's traditional Arab partners, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are deepening ties with China, India and other Asian powers." Professor Michaël Tanchum, Senior Fellow at the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, said in August 2021 that a corridor connecting India to Europe via West Asia and the Mediterranean region could serve as an "alternative trans-regional commercial transportation route" to the troubled Chabahar-based International North-South Transit Corridor. He said that from Mumbai, Indian goods shipped by this route could arrive on the European mainland in as less as 10 days — 40% faster than through the Suez Canal maritime route.

Professor Tanchum also observed that India's "careful cultivation" of a multilateral economic cooperation with such a corridor "was of paramount importance." According to him, "despite India's favourable demographics, geography and commercial transportation infrastructure are not alone sufficient to ensure that India will realise its potential as a Eurasian economic power." He further elaborated that, "commercial corridors only emerge where requisite large investments in port and rail infrastructure are coupled with an industrial base anchored in manufacturing value chains" — precisely the purpose of the present corridor.

How does this affect Israel and Gulf ties?

Saudi Arabia and Israel do not have diplomatic ties — primarily because of differences of opinion about the Israel-Palestine conflict. In fact, Israel has official ties only with Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco in the Arab region. In this light, the transit network which seeks integration on multiple fronts assumes particular significance.

The Financial Times learnt from a person briefed about the discussions, that the corridor's passage through Jordan and Israel could also support the Biden administration's effort to build on the recent normalisation of ties between Israel and several Arab states, including the UAE. This may push Saudi Arabia to follow suit and formalise ties. "China is one factor. The U.S. is also trying to refocus attention on the region, to reassure traditional partners and to maintain influence," the publication learnt.

With Saudi Arabia being the world's top exporter of oil and the UAE being West Asia's dominant finance centre, FT says that both are "seeking to project themselves as key logistics and trade hubs between east and west."

INDIA-MIDDLE EAST-EU CORRIDOR TO HAVE MULTIPLE ROUTES, BUT HURDLES REMAIN

Days after India, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other countries launched the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), officials said many of the details are still being ironed out, and multiple route options are being considered that will include ports such as the one at Haifa in Israel and Piraeus in Greece, The Hindu has learnt.

Among the ports that could be connected on the west coast of India are those at Mundra and Kandla in Gujarat, and the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust in Navi Mumbai. In West Asia, at least five ports have been shortlisted to be connected to the Indian ports which include those at Fujairah, Jebel Ali, and Abu Dhabi in the UAE as well as Dammam and Ras Al Khair ports in Saudi Arabia.

Apart from government-owned ports, the Mundra port and the Haifa port are privately controlled by the Adani Group, and have been highlighted in proposal documents that The Hindu accessed. The onward rail route connectivity from five ports in the UAE and Saudi Arabia stretching up to



the Haifa port in Israel will be a mix of already existing brownfield projects and fresh greenfield projects to connect missing links.

Official sources said that a study was conducted to establish the extent of already existing and under-construction railway lines in West Asia cutting across the UAE and Saudi Arabia, while missing links have been identified, which will need fresh construction. For instance, a 605-km network extending from the UAE's Fujairah to Ghuweifat on the Saudi Arabian border is under construction as part of Phase 2 of the Etihad Rail project, which aims at transporting freight and passengers.

There is a missing link between Ghweifat and Haradh, which will need to be constructed. Further, Haradh and the Riyadh Dry Port are connected via rail and there is also an existing 1,242-km line from Riyadh to Qurayyat managed by the Saudi Arabia Railways.

"There is a missing stretch between Qurayyat in Saudi Arabia and Beit She'an in Israel which will have to be constructed," the official said. Of the total rail route length of 2,915 km stretching from the Fujairah port to Haifa, there are missing portions of 1,095 km, with work in progress on 536 km. Hence, 559 km still has to be constructed. Similarly, proposed rail routes from the Jebel Ali port to Haifa span 2,565 km, with 745 km lacking connectivity. Here, work is already in progress across 186 km.

Another route, the Abu Dhabi port to Haifa, runs across 2,449 km, with 629 km yet to be linked. On the fourth proposed route from the Dammam port to Haifa, via Haradh, which is 2,149 km long, 289 km is yet to be constructed, while for the rail route from the Ras Al Khair port to Haifa passing through Buraydh, 269 km of the 1,809 km is yet to be linked.

As per the preliminary alignment plans accessed by The Hindu, from Haifa in Israel, landing destinations for Europe include the Piraeus port in Greece, Messina in south Italy, and Marseille in France. Initial estimates suggest that developing each of these IMEC routes could cost anywhere between \$3 billion to \$8 billion, but officials say it is too early to peg costs.

West Asia, especially Saudi Arabia, has a huge role in IMEC where a railway corridor is being proposed to be built, Union Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said. "This will open up a new dimension in trade and transportation for the region. It is a very complex programme and will require everything to be brought to common standards. For instance, trains should run on the same gauge, similar technologies for engines should be used, dimensions of containers should be similar. Such important technical points have been outlined and preliminary alignments are being finalised, to achieve seamless transportation. However, it will take a lot of work to achieve this," he added.

While the IMEC has been proposed to counter the Belt and Road Initiative of China, Chinese presence cannot be wished away along the IMEC route, officials said. "This is because the Piraeus port is controlled by China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company which is a Chinese state-owned company. Also, Chinese companies such as PowerChina, China State Construction Engineering Corporation and so on have qualified for multiple packages for Phase 1 and 2 of Etihad Rail," a senior official from a public sector undertaking said.

Currently, all trade between India and Europe happens via the sea route, that passes through Suez Canal, controlled by Egypt.



“The all-sea route is convenient as we are assured that our cargo will land from point to point. It moves seamlessly without any obstructions. However, in the alternatively proposed IMEC, the number of times the cargo will get offloaded as it changes hands from ship to rail will increase the handling costs which include terminal-handling charges, container yard charges and so on. That seems like a bit of a challenge,” said Anil Devli, CEO of Indian Ship Owners Association .

The diplomatic sources said that Egypt, which could lose revenue if the Suez Canal is bypassed, could also raise objections to the plan. The IMEC MoU was signed by India, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the European Union, Italy, France and Germany, in the presence of all their leaders.

WINDS OF CHANGE IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

After decades of being ignored, it would seem that the Global South has come into vogue. At the G-20 summit in Delhi this month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said it was the Global South’s priorities that drove India’s Presidency, and with developing countries Indonesia, India, Brazil and South Africa as consecutive hosts of the grouping, the direction seems set. Earlier this year, PM Modi hosted a virtual summit for the “Voice of the Global South”, with about 125 countries included to seek their opinions on how to set those priorities.

“We, the Global South, have the largest stakes in the future. Three fourths of humanity lives in our countries. We should also have equivalent voice. Hence, as the eight-decade old model of global governance slowly changes, we should try to shape the emerging order,” Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, at the opening of the virtual meeting for the Voice of the Global South Summit in January. At the G-20 summit itself, the induction of the 55-nation African Union was seen as one of the substantial outcomes of the conference.

At last year’s Climate change conference, CoP 27 in Egypt, the proclamation of the ‘Loss and Damage fund’ was seen as a victory for the Global South, and in the upcoming CoP 28 in the UAE, the Global South will also drive conversations on mitigating climate change while keeping the development priorities of what was once called ‘The Third World’.

Outreach of the rich

Even at the G7 — the grouping of the world’s richest countries — Japan, as host this year, invited developing countries, including India, Brazil, Vietnam, Indonesia, Comoros and the Cook Islands, in what was seen as an outreach to the Global South. The BRICS summit in South Africa last month credited its expansion from five to 11 members to a pitch for the Global South. And this weekend, the G-77, the grouping of developing nations at the UN, held its high-level Summit in Havana, Cuba, putting the region centre-stage.

“After all this time that the North has organised the world according to its interests, it is now up to the South to change the rules of the game,” Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel said on Saturday, calling developing countries the biggest victims of the “multidimensional crisis” in the world, that stems everything from “abusive unequal trade” to global warming and climate change, according to international news agencies.

Speaking at the summit in Havana, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, said the “voice of the G-77 plus China will always be essential at the UN”, adding that it is necessary for the Global South to “champion a system rooted in equality... ready to reverse the injustice and neglect of centuries... and champion a system that delivers for all humanity and not only for the privileged.”



Informal grouping'

So what is the Global South, and how organised are countries in this 'informal grouping', that has for decades loosely referred to the developing, often deprived, former colonised nations around the world? By 1964, the developing world was already beginning to organise. In 1964, the Group of 77 (G-77) countries became signatories to a 'Joint Declaration' at the first session of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Geneva, becoming the largest intergovernmental organisation of developing countries.

Its mandate was to "articulate and promote their collective economic interests and enhance their joint negotiating capacity on all major international economic issues within the UN system". Today, the G-77, which has retained its name, despite multiple expansions across countries in Asia, Africa, South America, Caribbean and Oceania (or Asia-Pacific), includes 134 countries. Since China doesn't technically belong to the grouping, it is referred to as 'G-77+China' in most multilateral fora.

Ironically, the term 'Global South' is believed to have been coined in the U.S. In 1969, at the height of the Cold War, American anti-war activist Carl Oglesby, who campaigned against what he called the oppression by 'the North' (the US, Europe, Russia, etc.) of the 'Global South'. Oglesby, once the president of an organisation seen as subversive and radical, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), was a musician, an author and a professor, who had dropped out of college, protesting America's wars and discrimination.

In an essay about the Vietnam war, he wrote that "the North's dominance over the global South" was responsible for inequality in the world, and would cause future wars as well. The term seemed to stick, and in the early 1970s, discussions around organising countries of the Global South also resulted in the setting up of the UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) by the UN General Assembly in 1974. Its mandate: to coordinate South-South (between countries of the Global South) and triangular cooperation (with Developed countries or multilateral agencies), working in tandem with the G-77.

The 'Brandt Line'

The term Global South, however, was an inaccurate representation of the countries it was meant to represent — many like India are more broadly in the Northern Hemisphere, while some like Australia in the Southern Hemisphere, are bracketed with the Global North. In the 1980s, economists developed the 'Brandt Line', a curve that more accurately divided the world into the economic North and South.

Despite the organisations and studies, however, interest in the South declined in the first decades of the 21st century, particularly in countries like India and Indonesia that were seen as discarding their Third World origins for a place at the "high table" as they reformed and grew their economies. Many reasons are proffered for the revival of the Global South's cachet — the COVID pandemic and economic downturn that has affected South countries the most; and the war in Ukraine and western sanctions against Russia, whose combined impact has been felt across the developing world are chief amongst them.

As a result, the sense that the centre of gravity of global governance has now shifted Southwards is growing, as organisations like G7, G-20, BRICS, the EU, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Quad, the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum and global players all make their play for the Global South's participation in decision making.



THE INDIA-CANADA STANDOFF: WHAT LED TO IT, THE PROBLEMS IT RAISES

The story so far

It started after Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau dropped a bombshell allegation earlier this week, telling Parliament that it is possible the Indian government had a hand in the murder of a Khalistani separatist in Canada in June.

He said he had taken up the issue with Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit for the G20 Leaders' Summit on September 9-10. At their bilateral meeting in New Delhi, Modi had raised the concerns about pro-Khalistan elements in Canada.

The Ministry of External Affairs called Trudeau's accusation "absurd and motivated". It said he had made similar allegations during his meeting with the PM, which had been "completely rejected".

The diplomatic escalation happened quickly — and shows the seriousness of the crisis.

INDIA AND CANADA, IN NUMBERS

Canada took the first step, expelling an Indian diplomat posted in Ottawa. The official was identified as the head of the Indian intelligence agency, and his identity was revealed. India responded by expelling a Canadian diplomat based in New Delhi.

India then issued a travel advisory for Indian nationals travelling to Canada, as well as a caution for the Indian community in Canada. Students, professionals, and tourists were asked to be cautious because, the advisory said, the Indian community could be targeted.

On Thursday, India suspended visa services in Canada. E-visa services were stopped too, and Canadian citizens who apply from other countries will also not get a visa for India.

India asked Canada to cut the number of its diplomats in India, saying there are more Canadian diplomats in India than there are Indian diplomats in Canada.

The upshot

Let's parse through these developments.

First, Trudeau's allegation: "...Canadian security agencies have been actively pursuing credible allegations of a potential link between agents of the Government of India and the killing of a Canadian citizen, Hardeep Singh Nijjar."

Canada's Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly said: "If proven true, this would be a great violation of our sovereignty and of the most basic rule of how countries deal with each other."

Both statements suggest that the Canadian investigation is far from complete, and nothing is as yet "proven". It must be noted that it is unusual for the Prime Minister of a country to make a serious charge of this nature against a foreign government before it has conclusive proof.

Indian visa service in Canada shut down: what happens now?

New Delhi has in essence been accused of the extra-judicial killing of a foreign citizen in a foreign land. Only a fair, impartial, and credible investigation can establish the truth or otherwise of



Trudeau's allegation. If Canada can provide compelling evidence, it could potentially damage India's post-G20 reputation as a strong voice for democracy and a global consensus builder. But India remains innocent until proven guilty.

Canada has asked India to cooperate in the investigation. India has said it would "look into" any "specific information shared" by Canada.

But it has also called Canada a "safe haven" for "terrorists, extremists and organised crime". Such descriptions are usually reserved for Pakistan and Afghanistan, and it is rare for India to use them for a western democracy.

India has had diplomatic standoffs earlier — with the United States on the Devyani Khobragade issue, with Italy on the Italian marines issue, with Norway on the child services issue, and with Denmark over the extradition of the Purulia arms drop accused. But the current situation is qualitatively different and much more serious because of the nature of the allegation that Canada has made.

Khalistan problem

The crisis underlines the resurfacing of the problem of Khalistan in India-Canada relations after having gone under the radar after the 1980s. Over the past few decades, the challenges in the relationship were different — a low point came after the nuclear tests in 1998 when Canada, an advocate of nuclear non-proliferation, criticised India heavily.

The big issue for India is the safe haven that Canada has provided to separatist Khalistani groups, and what New Delhi sees as the Liberal Party's pandering to these groups for votes. Estimates suggest there are 20-25 constituencies where these votes are crucial — and that explains the Trudeau government's soft-peddling on India's concerns.

Jagmeet 'Jimmy' Dhaliwal, whose New Democratic Party supports Trudeau's minority government in Parliament, is viewed with suspicion by the Indian establishment for its pro-Khalistan sympathies — some in New Delhi even call him an activist.

Trudeau's visit to India in 2018 was seen as a diplomatic disaster after it was revealed that Jaspal Atwal — a former member of the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF), a pro-Khalistan outfit that was banned in Canada and designated a terrorist organisation in 2003 — was invited to two events organised for the visiting leader in Mumbai and New Delhi.

The invite to the New Delhi reception at the High Commissioner's residence was withdrawn after pictures of Atwal at the Mumbai party became public.

The so-called Khalistan "referendum", nudged along by Pakistani intelligence agencies, has been a major irritant in recent years. New Delhi objected to Canada permitting the secessionist "referendum" among the Sikh diaspora and warned against hate crimes — however, Canada chose not to act, citing freedom of expression and the right to protest.

Diplomats who have dealt with Canada say the country — which is home to large numbers of immigrants from various countries — is hostage to immigrant interests in its foreign policy. Thus, Ukrainian and Russian immigrants and refugees often shape Canada's Russia policy; Hong Kong and Taiwan immigrants shape its China policy; Jewish immigrants shape its Israel policy; Afghans influence its Afghanistan policy; and Sri Lankans influenced its Sri Lanka policy during the LTTE conflict.



These diplomats say the pro-Khalistan elements — who are actually a small minority in the Canadian Sikh community — have hijacked the Trudeau government’s India policy. Estimates suggest that of the about 20 lakh Indian diaspora, only about 8 lakh are Sikhs. Of which, Indian estimates say, only about 1% — 8,000-9,000 people — are pro-Khalistan radicals.

But this small population of Khalistanis control 12-15 gurdwaras, where they generate funds and organise political mobilisation by voting en bloc for Canadian political candidates. The constituencies in which they have a say are mostly in Brampton in Ontario province, and Vancouver and Surrey in British Columbia.

In geopolitics

Canada is an important strategic partner for major western powers — it is part of the G7 grouping and shares the table with the US, UK, Germany, France, Italy, and Japan. It also shares intelligence with the Five Eyes grouping — with the US, UK, Australia, and New Zealand.

All these countries are also close strategic partners of choice for India. India has the Quad partnership with the US, Australia, and Japan, and strong and growing bilateral ties with each of them.

The diplomatic standoff has put these countries in a spot — they don’t want to be in a position where they have to choose between Canada and India. The US, Australia, and UK have issued measured and nuanced statements; the rest haven’t responded yet.

In the end, Ottawa has a lesson to learn from some of these partners on how they have handled the Khalistan issue in their own countries — especially from the US, Germany, and Australia. In the UK, where pro-Khalistan groups have nuisance value, there is still work to be done.

But, right now, both India and Canada would have to address each other’s concerns so that the rhetoric can be dialled down.

SHUBH’S TOUR IN INDIA CANCELLED: WHY IS THE CANADA-BASED SINGER FACING THE MUSIC?

The upcoming tour of Punjabi singer and rapper Shubhneet Singh, popularly known by his stage name ‘Shubh’, was cancelled on Wednesday (September 20), days after he made headlines for his alleged support for Khalistan and separatists.

Ticketing platform BookMyShow, in a post on X, said: “Singer Shubhneet Singh’s Still Rollin Tour for India stands cancelled. To that end, BookMyShow has initiated a complete refund of the ticket amount for all consumers who had purchased tickets for the show. The refund will be reflected within 7-10 working days in the customer’s source account of the original transaction.”

The Canada-based singer was scheduled to perform in several cities, including Bengaluru, Delhi, and Kolkata over the next two months. He was also listed among the headliners of a cruise festival scheduled later this week aboard Cordelia Cruises in Mumbai.

The development came amid the ongoing protests, led by Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) – the youth wing of BJP – in Mumbai, against Shubh. One of the demands of BJYM was to cancel the singer’s tour and show. They had earlier written to the Mumbai police, asking them to register an FIR against Shubh “for waging war against Government of India and posting anti-government posts”.



What is the controversy over Shubh?

BJYM has alleged that on March 23, 2023, Shubh posted two stories on his Instagram account, which had a distorted map of India without Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab, along with the caption “Pray for Punjab”.

The memorandum submitted by BJYM to the Mumbai police stated that the intention of the singer was to show that Punjab is not a part of India and to propagate “Khalistani agenda”.

“Shubh is openly a Khalistani supporter and if he is allowed to hold a concert here, he will be influencing a lot of youth in Mumbai and our country to support his agenda...He has evidently proven that he is a pro-Khalistani activist and openly supports their agenda and [he] is also influencing the youth of the country to do the same and wage a war against the Government of India by posting such absurd and derogatory post about Government of India,” the complaint read.

BJYM President Tajinder Singh Tiwana told the media, “We won’t let singer Shubh perform in the auspicious land of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Mumbai. If no proper action is taken then the organisers will have to face our protests.”

What is the contentious social media post which has sparked outrage?

Shubh shared what was alleged to be a distorted map of India on Instagram in March, amid the police crackdown against self-proclaimed Sikh preacher and ‘Waris Punjab De’ chief Amritpal Singh and his associates. He posted the image after the Punjab government suspended mobile internet services across the state.

On Tuesday (September 19), illustrator and graphic artist Amandeep Singh, known by the pseudonym ‘Inkquisitive’, the creator of the alleged ‘distorted map’, said on X that Shubh had shared his artwork.

“It was a visual expression on a police man taking the plug out of Panjab due to the ‘blackout in Panjab’,” Singh tweeted through his X handle Inkquisitive.

Singh had earlier issued a clarification on Instagram after people questioned him in comments regarding the depiction of the map. He said it was “not done intentionally to provoke any sort of separate state agenda”.

“... apologies to those living in Jammu and Kashmir or any other big or smaller state not showcased. to those who may feel offended by feeling their hometown or land is not part of India, it is not my intentions [sic], far from it. If anything i was just keeping that side of the map unclear and dark as Punjab wasn’t lit up...my platform is always used to share topics (as much as my career allows me to) – on injustices around the world.”

The fallout of the controversy

Before the cancellation of Shubh’s “Still Rolling India Tour”, electronics brand boAt on Tuesday announced that it has withdrawn sponsorship of the tour, citing that it was “first and foremost a true Indian brand”.

In a statement, the company said, “At boAt, while our commitment to the incredible music community runs deep, we are first and foremost a true Indian brand. Therefore, when we became



aware of the remarks made by artist Shubh earlier this year, we chose to withdraw our sponsorship of the tour.”

According to reports, several celebrities and cricketers have unfollowed Shubh on social media, following the controversy.

The singer-songwriter is yet to comment on the matter. Earlier this week, he posted a cryptic story on Instagram of a picture of a mic with his song ‘Baller’ in the background.

Who is Shubh?

Hailing from Punjab and now settled in Canada, Shubh burst onto the scene with his breakout debut single ‘We Rollin’ in September 2021. His blend of catchy hip-hop and trap beats and fast lyrical flow, gained massive popularity as he released several hit singles such as ‘No Love’, ‘Elevated’ and ‘Baller’. He has over a million followers on Instagram and recently released another album ‘Still Rollin’, which featured the viral track ‘Cheques’.

‘SOCIALIST’ AND ‘SECULAR’: WHAT DO THESE WORDS MEAN IN THE CONSTITUTION, AND HOW DID THEY COME TO BE PART OF THE PREAMBLE?

Leader of the Congress in Lok Sabha Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury has claimed that the words “socialist” and “secular” were missing in the Preamble of the Constitution of India, the copies of which were given to MPs on Tuesday (September 19).

These two words were originally not a part of the Preamble. They were added by The Constitution (42nd Amendment) Act, 1976 during the Emergency imposed by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

The description of India as a “secular” country in particular, has been debated intensely over the past four decades; with critics, mostly on the Right, claiming that these “imposed” terms sanction “pseudo-secularism”, “vote-bank politics” and “minority appeasement”.

First, what is the Preamble of the Constitution?

Every Constitution has a philosophy. The philosophy underlying the Constitution of India was summed up in the Objectives Resolution, which was adopted by the Constituent Assembly on January 22, 1947. The Preamble of the Constitution puts in words the ideal contained in the Objectives Resolution. It serves as an introduction to the Constitution, and contains its basic principles and goals.

The Preamble of the Constitution that commenced in 1950 read:

“WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens:

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity;

and to promote among them all



FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the Nation;

IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-sixth day of November, 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION.”

So how did the words “socialist” and “secular” come in the Preamble?

Let’s look at the word “socialist” first.

Over her years in government, Indira had attempted to cement her approval among the masses on the basis of a socialist and pro-poor image with slogans such as “garibi hatao” (Eradicate poverty). Her Emergency government inserted the word in the Preamble to underline that socialism was a goal and philosophy of the Indian state.

It needs to be stressed, however, that the socialism envisaged by the Indian state was not the socialism of the USSR or China of the time — it did not envisage the nationalisation of all of India’s means of production. Indira herself clarified that “we have our own brand of socialism”, under which “we will nationalise [only] the sectors where we feel the necessity”. She underlined that “just nationalisation is not our type of socialism”.

And what about the word “secular”?

The people of India profess numerous faiths, and their unity and fraternity, notwithstanding the difference in religious beliefs, was sought to be achieved by enshrining the ideal of “secularism” in the Preamble.

In essence, this means that the state protects all religions equally, maintains neutrality and impartiality towards all religions, and does not uphold any one religion as a “state religion”.

A secular Indian state was founded on the idea that it is concerned with the relationship between human being and human being, and not between human being and God, which is a matter of individual choice and individual conscience. Secularism in the Indian Constitution, therefore, is not a question of religious sentiment, but a question of law.

The secular nature of the Indian state is secured by Articles 25-28 of the Constitution.

But wasn’t secularism already an integral part of the Constitution even before the 42nd Amendment?

Yes, in essence, it was always a part of the philosophy of the Constitution. The founders of the Indian Republic adopted Articles 25, 26, and 27 with the explicit intention of furthering and promoting the philosophy of secularism in the Constitution. The 42nd Amendment only formally inserted the word into the Constitution and made explicit what was already implicit in various provisions and overall philosophy of the founding document of the Republic.

In fact, the Constituent Assembly specifically discussed the inclusion of these words in the Preamble, and decided not to do so. After members such as K T Shah and Brajeshwar Prasad raised the demand to add these words to the preamble, Dr B R Ambedkar put forward the following argument:

“What should be the policy of the State, how the Society should be organised in its social and economic side are matters which must be decided by the people themselves according to time and circumstances. It cannot be laid down in the Constitution itself because that is destroying democracy altogether.”



Ambedkar also said: “My contention is that what is suggested in this amendment is already contained in the draft Preamble.”

Has this issue been discussed earlier too?

On several occasions, including, recently, in a petition filed by former BJP MP Subramanian Swamy in the Supreme Court last year, seeking the removal of the words “socialist” and “secular” from the Preamble.

Similar petitions have been filed earlier too. Other petitioners have argued that these words were never intended to be in the Constitution, and that such insertion is beyond the amending power of the Parliament under Article 368.

In 2020 BJP MP Rakesh Sinha moved a resolution in Rajya Sabha seeking to remove the word socialism from the Preamble, saying, “You cannot tie a generation to a particular way of thinking. Besides, the Congress party which ruled the country for seven decades has changed its direction from being socialist to welfare to neo-liberalism. Its new liberal policies adopted in the 1990s have negated its own earlier positions.”

Earlier in 2015, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting used an image of the Preamble of the Indian Constitution without the words “socialist” and “secular”, leading to some criticism. Then Union Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad had said, “Did Nehru have no understanding of secularism? These words were added during the Emergency. Now what is the harm if there is a debate on it? We have put before the nation the original Preamble”.

In 2008, the Supreme Court had rejected a plea demanding the removal of “socialist”. “Why do you take socialism in a narrow sense defined by Communists? In a broader sense, it means welfare measures for the citizens. It is a facet of democracy,” a three-judge Bench headed by then Chief Justice of India K G Balakrishnan had said. “It hasn’t got any definite meaning. It gets different meaning in different times.”

DHANKHAR HOISTS FLAG AT ‘GAJA DWAR’ OF NEW PARLIAMENT: THE SIX ENTRANCES OF THE COMPLEX, AND THEIR GUARDIAN ANIMALS

On Sunday morning, days ahead of the new Parliament building holding its first session, Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar hoisted the national flag at the Gaja Dwar of the building. We look at the significance of the Gaja Dwar, and what are the other dwars or entrances, in the new Parliament building:

Gaja Dwar

The new Parliament has six entrances, each signifying a different role. As per a government note on the Parliament art project, the sculpture of an elephant or Gaja has been installed to guard the entrance to the north, since the animal represents wisdom and wealth, intellect, and memory, and also embodies the aspirations of the elected representatives of the democracy.

According to Vastu shastra, the northern direction is associated with planet Mercury, which is the source of higher intellect. The Lord of the direction is Kubera, the god of wealth. Therefore, the Gaja is placed to the north.



Cultural symbolism

In fact, in the New Parliament Building, red sandstone sculptures of auspicious animals have been installed as 'guardian statues' on all the six entrances based on their importance in Indian culture, their aesthetic appearance, positive qualities, and the study of Vaastu Shastra, as per officials. The others are:

Asva: Asva or the horse standing alert and ready at the southern entrance is symbolic of endurance and strength, power, and speed, also describing the quality of governance.

Garuda: The eagle-like Garuda stands at the eastern ceremonial entrance, signifying the aspirations of the people and the administrators of the country. In Vastu shastra, officials say, the eastern direction is associated with the rising sun representing hope, the glory of victory, and success.

Makara: A mythological aquatic creature, the Makara combines the bodily parts of different animals, representing, unity in diversity among the people of the country.

Shardula: Another mythological creature, Shardula is said to be the most powerful, foremost of all living beings, symbolising the power of the people of the country.

Hamsa: The most important quality of the people of a democracy is the power of discernment and self-realisation born of wisdom. Reminding the people of this essential feature is the Hamsa, or swan, at the public entrance to the north east, as per the plan.

Ceremonial entrances

Out of these six entrances, three are designed as ceremonial entrances, to welcome special guests and to mark special events. These ceremonial entrances display Indian art, culture, ethos, and patriotism. They have been named as Gyan, Shakti and Karma, representing the Indian knowledge system, patriotism and artistic traditions, respectively.

MP BIDHURI'S HATEFUL SPEECH STAINS HISTORIC SESSION IN NEW HOUSE. SPEAKER MUST SPEAK

The new beginnings made in the new Parliament during a special session, in which a historic piece of legislation was passed, were stained late evening in Lok Sabha on Thursday. A video has captured BJP MP Ramesh Bidhuri hurling communal slurs and abuse at a fellow MP, Danish Ali of the BSP, in the House, repeatedly. On full display for the nation is the ugliness of language and meaning, unvarnished bigotry and prejudice, appalling hate speech by an elected representative on the floor of the House. It is also a grave insult. Bidhuri's tirade insulted not his intended target, a "Muslim" MP, but the institution of Parliament itself, and the trust of those who voted for him and empowered him to speak as their elected representative. The day after, therefore, it is not enough that his remarks have been expunged from parliamentary records or that Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla has warned Bidhuri against a repeat performance, or that a senior minister, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, has expressed regret. His party, the BJP, which has sent him a show cause notice, must consider whether it wants on board a leader who gives the lie to its claims of "sabka saath... sabka vishwas", so flagrantly. In this Lok Sabha, MPs of non-BJP parties have been suspended on far thinner grounds, for much smaller violations. The Honourable Speaker needs to listen to that clip again and again.



Bidhuri's hate speech also touches off a deeper set of worries. Ever since the BJP-led government came to power at the Centre, these concerns have raised their head from time to time, and demanded a wider reckoning. They have to do with the climate of apparent impunity for minority-baiting and worse by those who belong to the ruling establishment, or are seen to be patronised and protected by it. Hearing after hearing, the Supreme Court has warned, advised, appealed, sought answers and explanations. Yet, too often, at the highest echelons of power, assertions of outright prejudice by those they call their own, have been met with a blind eye and/or a deaf ear. This draws unflattering attention, too, to the vigorous projection of India as an exemplar, abroad, of a diverse and inclusive democracy.

The BJP can no more turn away from the question Bidhuri has now resurrected and posed more starkly: Are there any political penalties for the kind of hate speech he made in the nation's highest forum of debate — or will he, too, get away with it? If government and politics is not just about the moment and the day, but also about memory and record, if it casts a longer shadow, the BJP must know that it can ill afford to remain silent. It must speak clearly to distance itself from Bidhuri, make an example of him. That will be the most effective way to underline that there is no place for hate in the string of recent successes that its government has presided over, which celebrate representation and excellence, from the Women's Reservation Bill to Chandrayaan-3.

PEOPLE COUNT

Census collects population data that is crucial to planning and development, and the exercise is rarely devoid of political intent or consequence. India has conducted the Census every 10 years since 1881, but in 2020, the decennial exercise for the 2021 Census had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions related to the pandemic have ceased and the state machinery is ready to start the exercise anytime, but the BJP government at the Centre continues to withhold political clearance. On September 20, Home Minister Amit Shah told the Lok Sabha that the Census will take place after the 2024 general election. That still avoids any clear mention of the date or year, allowing speculation about the government's intent. A possible reason why the Centre is eager to delay it until 2024 is the clamour for enumeration of caste, a question that the BJP is trying to evade. A Census after 2026 will become the basis of the next delimitation of Lok Sabha seats, which will involve inter-State redistribution of representation. The BJP may have incentives to wait until then. In the last few years, changes in the Citizenship Act, and conflict between some States and the Centre regarding the National Population Register (NPR), have further muddied the discussions on Census.

The proposed 33% reservation for women in Parliament and Assemblies is linked to the next Census and delimitation, which adds an additional import. The next one will also be the first digital census giving citizens an opportunity to "self-enumerate". During self-enumeration, Aadhaar or mobile number will be mandatorily collected. Around 30 lakh government officials including schoolteachers will be assigned as enumerators and each will be assigned the responsibility to collect details of about 650-800 people through both online and offline modes covering an estimated population of more than 140 crore. In normal course, completion of both the phases of the Census takes at least 11 months. Meanwhile, the quality and mechanism of population level data collection are evolving fast, thanks to technology. The Registration of Births and Deaths (Amendment) Act, 2023 that will come into effect on October 1 will help a centralised population register, electoral register, Aadhaar, ration card, passport and driving licence databases. The centrally stored data will be updated real time without human interface leading to addition and deletion from electoral roll when an individual turns 18 and after death, respectively. Rather than



trying to weaponize categorisation and counting of people, the government must take States and parties into confidence on all the issues around the Census.

EXPRESS VIEW ON ELECTION COMMISSIONER BILL: JUDGE, NOT SECRETARY

The strength and resilience of institutions in a democracy derive from both legal provisions and a climate of respect and reciprocity. In a time, therefore, when the executive armed with a large mandate does not hesitate to weaponize it against political opponents and unelected institutions, the legislative move to downgrade the status of members of the Election Commission is disquieting.

A Bill listed for discussion in the Special Session of Parliament proposes to do just that. Currently, the poll monitors are treated as equivalent to Supreme Court judges. But a clause in the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Bill, 2023, proposes to align the service conditions and salaries of the CEC and ECs with the Cabinet Secretary.

The issue is not so much about financial remuneration, but the signals that the Narendra Modi government intends to send out, when general elections are less than eight months away and a newly set up committee is examining the feasibility of the far-reaching and contentious proposal of holding simultaneous elections to state assemblies, local bodies and Parliament. By effectively demoting the ECs to the status of civil servants, the Bill limits their authority to discipline the political class, in case of violations, at a critical juncture. It is less than mindful, and respectful, of the poll monitor's delicate and difficult task – of upholding protocols and norms in a scrupulously non-partisan manner in a diverse and intensely competitive democracy.

Article 324 of the Constitution empowers the EC to be independent and bestows on it the enormous responsibility to “superintend, control and direct elections”. The Supreme Court has repeatedly upheld and shored up these powers. Of course, the EC was not always the formidable referee that it is now. It came into its own in the 1990s, when the then CEC, T N Seshan, forcefully asserted its constitutional role in enforcing the rules of the game.

Today the institution's well-deserved reputation for impartiality and fairness is an inextricable part of the legitimacy of India's political-electoral system. Admittedly, in recent times, the Commission has invited questions when it has not risen to its own high standards — for instance, in the alacrity with which it seemed to echo the establishment's narrative on revdis and put political parties on the mat on poll promises, its prevarication over halting the election campaign in West Bengal during the brutal second wave of the Covid pandemic till the Prime Minister had made his speech, or compliance with summons issued by a PMO official for an “informal interaction”. But those are aberrations in the arc of one of India's most trusted institutions.

The EC has earned national and international esteem for ensuring that the poor, marginalised and women vote freely, without fear. The new Bill errs by not recognising and acknowledging the EC's above-the-fray stature and role. The official argument that the “table of precedence” isn't changed doesn't wash. This isn't about who sits in which chair in which row at an official function, this is about protecting the commission's dignity and autonomy — critical to the health of a democracy. That's why the government should rethink.



SIMULTANEOUS POLLS: DO STATES HAVE A SAY?

The story so far:

The Union government on September 2 set up a committee under the leadership of the former President of India Ram Nath Kovind to look into the feasibility of simultaneous polls to State Assemblies and the Lok Sabha. The eight-member High-Level Committee is set to examine the 'one nation, one election' idea and make recommendations for holding simultaneous elections in the country. The Law Ministry has outlined seven terms of reference for the panel — one of them is to examine and recommend if the constitutional amendments required to facilitate simultaneous elections would require ratification by the States.

Which Articles deal with the process of amendment?

The Constitution was envisioned as a living document capable of morphing with the needs of the times. Article 368 governs the process of amending the Constitution. Constitutional amendments can take place through three different procedures.

The first is through a simple majority of those present and voting in each House of Parliament. That is, some provisions in the Constitution can be amended in the same way ordinary legislations are passed; it does not require a specific quorum. Such provisions are excluded from the purview of Article 368, thereby creating a separate category. Some examples include amendments contemplated in Article 4 (changes related to the organisation of States), Article 169 (abolition or creation of Legislative Councils in States), and para 21(2)13 of Schedule VI (provisions for the administration of Tribal Areas in the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram), among others.

For amending provisions not within the first category, Article 368 stipulates that they can be effected by a prescribed 'special majority,' wherein not less than two-thirds of the members are present and voting in each House of Parliament as well as by a majority of the total membership of each House. Although this requirement may be deemed as applicable only to the final voting stage, the Lok Sabha Rules prescribe adherence to it at all effective stages of the Bill — for adoption of the motion that the Bill be taken into consideration; that the Bill as reported by the Select/Joint Committee be taken into consideration in case a Bill has been referred to a Committee; for adoption of each clause or schedule, or clause or schedule as amended, of a Bill; or that the Bill or the Bill as amended, as the case may be, be passed.

A third category requires both a 'special majority' and ratification by at least one-half of the State legislatures. No specific time limit for ratification by the State legislatures has been specified but resolutions ratifying the proposed amendment should be passed before the Bill is presented to the President for his assent.

Which amendments require ratification by States?

The constitutional provisions that require ratification in order to be amended are specifically listed in the proviso to Article 368(2) and pertain to the federal structure of the Constitution. They are commonly referred to as 'entrenched provisions' and are as follows — if there is a change in the provisions regarding elections to the post of the President of India (Article 54 and 55); if there is a change in the extent of the executive power of the Union or the State governments (Article 73 and 162); if there is any change in the provisions regarding the Union judiciary or the High Courts. (Articles 124–147 and 214–231); if the distribution of legislative and administrative powers



between the Union and the States is affected (Article 245 to 255); if any of the Lists in the Seventh Schedule is affected; if the representation of the States in Parliament is changed (Article 82); and if Article 368 itself is amended.

For instance, the Constitution (One Hundred and First Amendment) Act, 2016, which introduced the Goods and Services Tax regime was ratified by more than half of the State legislatures before receiving the President's assent on September 8, 2016.

What were the debates regarding 'entrenched provisions'?

The Constituent Assembly debates show that Dr. B.R Ambedkar was in favour of the ratification by States for the amendment of certain constitutional provisions to ensure that the federal structure of the Constitution remains fundamentally unaltered. "...to say that even those articles of the Constitution which pertain to the administrative, legislative, financial, and other powers, such as the executive powers of the provinces should be made liable to alteration by the Central Parliament by two-thirds majority, without permitting the provinces or the States to have any voice, is in my judgment altogether nullifying the fundamentals of the Constitution," he said. Dr. Ambedkar cautioned that permitting all constitutional amendments to take place by a simple majority would defeat the principle of separation of powers among the three organs of the State.

Can a constitutional amendment be struck down if not ratified?

In *Kihoto Hollohan versus Zachillhu* (1992) popularly known as the Anti-Defection case, the constitutional validity of the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution inserted by the Constitution (Fifty-second Amendment) Act, 1985 was challenged on the grounds that the amendment was not ratified by the States. Though the Tenth Schedule was to deal with defection, it also purported to oust the jurisdiction of all courts by virtue of Paragraph 7. The amendment brought about changes with respect to the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court and the High Courts — one of the provisions that require ratification by half of the States. A Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court upheld the validity of the Tenth Schedule but declared Paragraph 7 of the Schedule invalid for want of ratification.

On July 20, 2021, the Supreme Court in *Union of India versus Rajendra N. Shah* struck down provisions of the Constitution (97th Amendment) Act, 2011 to the extent that it introduced Part IX B in the Constitution to deal with co-operative societies. The Court unanimously held that the amendment required ratification by at least one-half of the State legislatures as per Article 368(2) of the Constitution, since it dealt with an exclusive State subject — per Entry 32 in List II of the Seventh Schedule. The majority judgment invoked the doctrine of severability to make Part IXB operative only insofar as it concerns multi-State cooperative societies.

Can a State rescind its ratification?

There is no definite answer. There is no specific mention of it in the Constitution nor have courts in India dealt with this before. Moreover, since the prevailing constitutional practice makes ratification by at least half of all the States sufficient for compliance without requiring all States to consent, such a situation is unlikely to arise.

Experts argue that permitting the rescinding of a ratification not only creates confusion but also makes the amending process more rigid.

In the U.S., Article V, which is the corresponding provision in the U.S. Constitution, has been interpreted to mean that once a State has agreed to an amendment and communicated it to the



Secretary of State, it cannot rescind its ratification. However, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Chandler versus Wise* (1939) held that a State can ratify an amendment even if it has rejected it previously.

What has the Law Commission said?

In August 2018, the Law Commission of India, chaired by Justice B. S. Chauhan, released a draft report stipulating that simultaneous elections are not feasible within the existing framework of the Constitution.

It suggested that appropriate amendments have to be brought about in the Constitution, the Representation of the People's Act 1951, and the Rules of Procedure of Lok Sabha and State Assemblies before such a poll is conducted. Notably, the Commission highlighted that a constitutional amendment to this effect must receive ratification from at least 50% of the States.

However, experts have cautioned that bringing about such amendments as recommended by the Law Commission is not possible without infringing upon the federal structure of the Constitution.

According to P.D.T Achary, former Secretary-General of Lok Sabha, in order for simultaneous polls to take place all existing State Assemblies have to be dissolved, which currently have different tenures. This can be done in two ways— either the ruling government in the State recommends this voluntarily and the Governor gives assent, or there is a breakdown of constitutional machinery and the President gets involved through a recommendation of the Central government. However, since the latter is hardly likely for every State simultaneously, the only option left is for the Union government to amend Article 172 which stipulates that every legislative Assembly of every State, unless sooner dissolved, shall continue for five years from the date appointed for its first meeting.

Mr. Achary explains that such an amendment cannot be brought about without violating the federal structure, particularly in States ruled by the Opposition. "If you want to amend that provision so that State elections can be synchronised with Lok Sabha polls, Parliament cannot do so as it will be infringing on the federal structure of the Constitution. The Union government/Parliament cannot impose its will on States. The Union government can otherwise only get the States ruled by the BJP to voluntarily recommend the dissolution of the State Assemblies. But States ruled by the Opposition will not agree," he said.

AS PARLIAMENT TURNS 75, THE 'BACKBONE' THAT KEEPS IT GOING — ITS SECRETARIAT

We can look at the 75-year journey of our Parliament through many lenses. One could be statistical. Like the number of days that Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha worked, and the number of laws they made. Or, it could be about the Members of Parliament (MPs) whose debates shaped legislation, cornered the government and voiced the nation's conscience. But discussion about our Parliament's rich history can only be complete by highlighting the behind-the-scenes, painstaking work done by women and men of the Parliament secretariat.

This professional body advises presiding officers of the two Houses, provides MPs with information to aid their legislative interventions and ensures that the legislature functions smoothly. It has also been the custodian of procedure, precedent, legislative knowledge and their transfer across parliamentary terms. If Parliament is a body, the secretariat is its backbone.



A stand-off and closed access to visitor galleries

Vithalbhai Patel, who in 1925 became the first elected Speaker (then called the President) of the Central Assembly, championed the idea of a separate secretariat for the legislature. He believed that if the office of the Speaker had to work independently, it needed a staff directly under its control. Patel also pushed for a separate security establishment for the legislature. In 1929, after Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt threw bombs into the Central Assembly, the British administration wanted to place police officers to control access to the Parliament building.

Patel believed that Assembly precincts came under the Speaker's authority and that any interference by the government would be an affront to the power of the legislature's presiding officer. There was a stand-off between the Speaker and the administration. Patel closed access to the visitor galleries until the government agreed to place security arrangements under the Speaker's control. His perseverance created a separate office for the legislature in 1929, independent of and unconnected with the government.

By then, a cadre of specialised Parliament staff had started emerging as legislatures evolved in our country.

Perhaps the first set of such individuals were the parliamentary reporters. These individuals are responsible for accurately reporting legislative proceedings. They sit in the House, close to the presiding officer's chair. Within a few hours of the end of a parliamentary sitting, their work makes hundreds of pages of speeches of MPs, ministerial statements and observations by the Chair are made available to the public.

Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha rules of procedure require that the "Secretary-General shall cause to be prepared a full report of the proceedings of the House at each of its sittings and shall, as soon as practicable, publish it in such form and manner" as directed by the presiding officer. The rule's genesis lies in an 1861 communication from the Secretary of State for India to the Governor General.

DELIMITATION DEBATE: GENDER VS REGIONAL, CASTE IDENTITIES

An accelerating shift of political power from the southern States to the region above the Vindhyas was to be the central debate around the delimitation of Lok Sabha constituencies which is to follow the first census after 2026, but the proposed reservation of one-third of the seats in Parliament and Assemblies for women has added another power shift to the mix.

The next delimitation of Lok Sabha constituencies will hence involve two shifts — from the southern to northern and eastern States, and from men to women across the country. In the process, the serious concerns regarding the diminishing say of States that have stabilised their populations in the affairs of the Union could possibly be overshadowed by the countrywide unanimity on women's empowerment.

Population skew

If Lok Sabha seats were to be redistributed according to current distribution of the population, the northern States might have as many as 32 seats more, while the southern States might have up to 24 seats fewer. Kerala could lose six of its current 20 Lok Sabha seats and Tamil Nadu 11 of its 39, according to some calculations.



Delimitation of Lok Sabha constituencies was kept on hold until 2026 through a constitutional amendment in 2002 in the hope that population growth across the country will be even by then. “Northern States like Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have decennial growth rates of 12% to 15%, whereas, in the southern States, the decennial growth rates range between 6% and 10%. From 2011 to 2021 there was no levelling,” former Chief Election Commissioner O.P. Rawat points out. It also happens that population is growing faster in States that are BJP strongholds.

National parties such as the Congress, the BJP and the Left parties are less adept at handling mobilisations around caste and regional identities which fuel regional parties. They try to rely on pan-India identities such as religion, class and gender.

In fact, women’s reservation is one question that had the BJP, the Congress, and the Left on the same side for the past two decades or more. OBC politics-driven parties in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar that sought caste quotas within the proposed quota for women considered the entire move as an upper caste, upper class scheme to curtail their political power. That line of resistance to women’s reservation had limited logic, considering the fact that OBC representation is not dependent on reserving seats at all.

OBC politics

Though the Congress has now raised the demand it had rejected when in power, no party appears serious about pressing a demand for OBC quota within the women’s quota.

So the proposed expansion of women’s representation in lawmaking will weaken not only politics around regional identity, but also autonomous OBC politics in the Hindi heartland. The BJP had already subsumed caste identity politics within its Hindutva umbrella to a significant extent in the heartland. By championing women’s empowerment, it is seeking further reinforcement of its social base. The pan-national category of gender complicates the dynamics of caste and regional identity politics. For the BJP it is an additional layer to its politics of Hindu religious identity which also cuts across regions, caste and even gender.

WOMEN’S RESERVATION: SEEDS OF THE IDEA UNDER RAJIV GANDHI AND NARASIMHA RAO GOVTS

Issues relating to ensuring greater representation of women in politics had been discussed even prior to Independence, and in the Constituent Assembly. In independent India, the issue got momentum only in the 1970s.

In 1971, responding to a request from the United Nations for a report on the status of women ahead of International Women’s Year, 1975, the Union Ministry of Education and Social Welfare appointed a Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) to examine the constitutional, administrative, and legal provisions that have a bearing on the social status of women, their education, and employment — and the impact of these provisions.

The Committee’s report, ‘Towards Equality’, noted that the Indian state had failed in its constitutional responsibility to ensure gender equality. Thereafter, several states began announcing reservations for women in local bodies.

In 1987, Rajiv Gandhi’s government constituted a 14-member committee under then Union minister Margaret Alva, which presented the National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988-2000 to



the Prime Minister the following year. Among the committee's 353 recommendations was the reservation of seats for women in elected bodies.

These recommendations paved the way for the Constitution 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts, enacted when P V Narasimha Rao was Prime Minister, mandating the reservation of one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions and offices of the chairperson at all levels of Panchayati Raj institutions, and in urban local bodies respectively. In several states, seats were reserved for women within the quotas for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

First women's reservation Bill, brought by Deve Gowda Govt

The amendments to the Constitution were followed by demands for reservation in the legislature from several quarters. On September 12, 1996, the government of Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda tabled The Constitution (81st Amendment) Bill, which sought to reserve one-third of seats for women in Parliament and state legislatures.

Support for the Bill cut across party lines, and many MPs sought its passage unanimously, on the same day. However, other MPs, especially those belonging to the OBCs, protested strongly, either opposing the Bill, or seeking changes in it.

Uma Bharti, the BJP MP from Khajuraho, said: "My demand is that there should be reservation for backward-caste women also, as in the Panchayati Raj system. This should be incorporated in this Bill because women from the backward castes suffer the most."

The Prime Minister agreed that some of the issues raised by MPs could not be brushed aside, and told Parliament that he would call a meeting of leaders of all parties that same day. Deve Gowda's United Front coalition had parties with OBC support bases, including his own Janata Dal and Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party, and was supported from the outside by the Congress.

The Bill was sent to a Select Committee of Parliament headed by veteran CPI leader Geeta Mukherjee. The Committee, with 21 members from Lok Sabha and 10 from Rajya Sabha, had stalwarts including Sharad Pawar, Nitish Kumar, Mamata Banerjee, Uma Bharti, and the late Sushma Swaraj. The panel noted that seats for women had been reserved within the SC/ST quotas, but there was no such benefit for OBC women because there is no provision for OBC reservation. It recommended, therefore, that the government "may consider...extending...reservation to OBCs also at the appropriate time so that the women belonging to OBCs will also get the benefit of reservation".

The Bill was tabled in both Houses on December 9, 1996. But it was clear that the government had lost the will to push it through. On December 20, 1996, Mukherjee said in Lok Sabha: "Today is the last day of the (Parliament's Winter) session. Government must come out with a clear understanding of what they are going to do with the Bill."

The Gujral Govt made failed efforts to reach a consensus.

In April 1997, Deve Gowda was forced to resign by Sitaram Kesri's Congress, and Inder Kumar Gujral became Prime Minister. Two rounds of all-party meetings were held, but no breakthrough could be achieved. On May 16, 1997, when the Bill was taken up again, OBC MPs led the opposition.

Nitish, who had formed the Samta Party along with George Fernandes, argued: "Today, out of the 39 women members, only four belong to OBCs... The population of women is 50% and OBCs are



60%, but is anyone speaking for the OBC women out of the 50% women?" But the discussion could not proceed, and the House was adjourned sine die.

When Parliament met in its Monsoon Session, Prime Minister Gujral issued a "confession" on August 13, 1997: "My confession is that in every political party, there are two opinions. I will be letting down the individual members...if I tell you what they say when they come and talk to me. [But]...except the Left, there is division in every party."

On November 28, 1997, amid uproar over the report of the Justice M C Jain Commission that inquired into the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the Congress withdrew support from the Gujral government. With the dissolution of Lok Sabha, the women's reservation Bill lapsed.

Under Vajpayee, high-voltage drama and two failures

On July 12, 1998, soon after the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government took over, MPs including Mamata Banerjee, who had broken away from the Congress earlier that year, and BJP leader Sumitra Mahajan, disrupted proceedings in Parliament demanding the introduction of the women's reservation Bill.

On July 20, as Law Minister M Thambi Durai rose to introduce the Bill to reserve one-third of seats for women, RJD MP Surendra Prakash Yadav snatched it from his hand and, along with his party colleague Ajit Kumar Mehta, picked up more copies of the Bill and tore them up. Lalu Prasad and Mulayam Singh Yadav defended their actions.

While parties like the RJD and SP, and even OBC MPs from the BJP, opposed the Bill strongly, MPs such as G M Banatwala of the IUML, and Iliyas Azmi of the BSP demanded representation for Muslim women as well. In December 1998, Mamata caught SP member Daroga Prasad Saroj by the collar in order to prevent him from reaching the Speaker's table.

In April 1999, after Jayalalithaa withdrew support to Vajpayee's government, a vote of confidence was taken in Parliament, which the government lost by a single vote. Lok Sabha was dissolved, and the Bill lapsed again.

Vajpayee returned as Prime Minister after the elections of 1999, and the demand to introduce the Bill resurfaced. On December 23, 1999, during Parliament's Winter Session, Law Minister Ram Jethmalani introduced The Constitution (85th Amendment Bill) to give reservation to women amid disruptions. Several members including Mulayam and Raghuvansh Prasad Singh of the RJD protested strongly, saying the introduction of the Bill was illegal.

In April 2000, the Election Commission asked political parties their opinion on reservation for women. On March 7, 2003, Prime Minister Vajpayee made another attempt to build a consensus at an all-party meeting. He was not successful, and the NDA lost power in the elections of 2004.

Under UPA, Manmohan-Sonia efforts too were unsuccessful

On August 22, 2005, Sonia Gandhi convened a meeting to find consensus on the women's reservation Bill, which was attended by UPA constituents and the Left parties. Two days later, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met with leaders of the NDA and other parties. Three proposals relating to the women's reservation Bill were considered.

First, to re-introduce the lapsed Bill providing 33% reservation of seats for women. Second, to reserve one-third of seats for women, but to then increase the overall strength of the legislatures,



so that the actual number of unreserved seats do not decrease. And third, to implement the so-called “M S Gill formula” — the proposal of the Election Commission to make it mandatory for recognised political parties to field a minimum agreed percentage of women in elections to state Assemblies and Parliament.

On May 6, 2008, the UPA government introduced The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, 2008 in Rajya Sabha. The Bill, which sought to reserve one-third of all seats for women in Lok Sabha and the state legislative Assemblies, including one third of the seats reserved for SCs and STs, was referred to the Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice on May 8.

The Standing Committee gave its report on December 17, 2009, and the Manmohan Singh Cabinet approved the Bill on February 25, 2010. The Bill was passed by Rajya Sabha on March 9. However, due to differences within the UPA and even within the Cabinet, the Bill was never brought to Lok Sabha, and it lapsed with the dissolution of the Lower House.

Meanwhile, in May 2013, the Ministry of Women and Child Development constituted a committee on the status of women, which recommended: “Ensure at least 50 per cent reservation of seats for women in the Local bodies, State Legislative Assemblies, Parliament, Ministerial levels and all decision-making bodies of the government.”

BJP’s manifesto promise and push by Modi and Sangh Parivar

The BJP’s 2014 Sankalp Patra (manifesto) had said: “Women’s welfare and development will be accorded a high priority at all levels within the government, and BJP is committed to 33% reservation in parliamentary and state assemblies through a constitutional amendment.” The 2019 Sankalp Patra repeated the same words.

Women have emerged as a significant constituency for the BJP, and the party has benefitted from the goodwill generated by women-focussed welfare schemes like the Ujjwala Yojna. The Sangh Parivar has identified women as an important section of the population: on Saturday, the RSS said in its Pune meeting that it is going to increase the representation of women in its organisations.

WOMEN’S SHARE IN ASSEMBLIES LESS THAN 10% IN 20 STATES

As per the 128th Constitutional Amendment Bill, 2023, or the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, a third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies is proposed to be reserved for women. However, the amendment to the Constitution comes with a caveat that it can be implemented only after a delimitation exercise — scheduled to be held in 2026 — has been completed, using data from the latest Census conducted after the passage of the Bill. This effectively pushes the earliest year of implementation to the 2029 general election.

After implementation, there should be at least 181 (approximately 33.3% of seats) women members in the Lower House. At present there are 82 women in the Lok Sabha which amounts to 15% of its members. The share of women parliamentarians has never exceeded the 15% mark in over 70 years of India’s electoral history. When considered as a share of total candidates who participated in the 2019 general election, their share is even lower at 9%. The share of women candidates has never exceeded the 9% mark ever.

In the case of the sitting State Legislative Assemblies, the share of women MLAs is far lower with just one State — Tripura— touching the 15% mark. Women members formed less than 10% of Legislative Assemblies in 20 States and Union Territories. This includes States such as Gujarat



(8.2%), Maharashtra (8.3%), Andhra Pradesh (8%), Kerala (7.9%), Tamil Nadu (5.1%), Telangana (5%) and Karnataka (4.5%).

In the 2023 election, Nagaland got its first two women MLAs. Mizoram too has not had a women MLA in the past seven Assemblies.

When seen across party lines, women form just 13.5% of sitting members of the largest party in the Lower House, the Bharatiya Janata Party. The highest share of women MPs in the Lok Sabha are from the Biju Janata Dal (41.7%) followed by the Trinamool Congress (40.9%). Similarly, a party-wise analysis of the State Legislative Assemblies shows that the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal had the highest share of women MLAs (15.3%) followed by the Congress in Chhattisgarh (14.7%). The Congress in Karnataka (3%), the Bharat Rashtra Samithi in Telangana (3.4%), and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu (4.5%) had among the lowest shares.

The share of women in India's Parliament is also among the lowest in the world. When compared with BRICS nations, including the new members, India has the second-lowest share (15%), just above Iran (6%). Over time, South Africa and Ethiopia have made giant strides in women representation in their national legislatures.

EXPRESS VIEW ON MUMBAI'S DISCONTINUED DOUBLE-DECKER BUSES: BUS WITH A VIEW

In a city that is not short of breathtaking views, one of the best was offered by a bus. Visit any of Mumbai's famous promenades to catch the many moods and hues of the Arabian Sea. Take in an unparalleled view of its green lungs, the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, and the concrete jungle beyond, by trekking up to Jambhulmal Peak. Zoom down the Bandra-Worli Sea Link to gaze upon Mumbai's imposing skyline. But few vantage points match the front window-facing seats on the upper decks of Bombay Electric Supply and Transport's (BEST) double decker buses. As the last of these red giants trundled off into retirement last week, their departure evoked a wave of nostalgia for the days when the double decker was the best way to experience a city on the move.

There are more efficient ways of getting around Mumbai. The suburban rail network offers greater reach and speed, while the growing Metro system promises far more comfort. Last-mile connectivity is better ensured by the numerous kaali-peeli cabs and auto rickshaws that ply across the city and its suburbs. BEST itself has been steadily replacing its older models with snazzy air-conditioned electric buses, and there are plans to build a whole fleet of double decker models, including open-deck buses for the popular Mumbai Darshan rides.

But sentiment is immune to arguments about efficiency, comfort and speed, and the end of the non-AC double decker is mourned by those who had come to view it as an integral part of Mumbai's identity. That seat on the upper deck offered a window for contemplation, a space in which to nurse a broken heart, maybe enjoy a moment of solitude or catch a quick nap as a breeze blew through your hair. You can't get that in a sealed-off AC bus.

KEEP CALM

India had its rain-wise driest August in a century this year. While scientists are yet to link this anomaly with the chaotic effects of climate change, it underscores the constant threat of disrupted weather, the resulting consequences for the economy, and the importance of climate mitigation. One of the more desperate, and dangerous, ideas to have emerged from this impetus is solar radiation management (SRM): to block some of the incoming solar radiation to cool the earth's



surface. SRM's dangers emerge from the fact that it interferes with natural mechanisms with unavoidable planet-wide effects. For example, if an SRM experiment by one country leads to more rain over the Horn of Africa than expected, it could trigger a locust swarm that eventually destroys crops in Pakistan and India. There is currently no mechanism that holds a geoengineering government accountable to consequences beyond its borders nor through which affected countries can appeal for restitution. There has also been little research on understanding how the world's myriad weather systems affect each other and their relative sensitivities to interventions such as SRM.

This is why the report of the Climate Overshoot Commission, released last week, calls for more research to close crucial scientific and governance gaps before any deliberations on the implementation of SRM-like technologies. The commission was constituted by geoengineering researchers to assess ways to accelerate emission cuts. But while the report is careful to acknowledge that the scientific community does not understand SRM enough to attempt a deployment, even in experimental fashion, it also argues for retaining SRM in the mix of potential climate mitigation solutions. This is buttressed by appeals to lack of time as the earth's surface is poised to warm past the 1.5°C threshold enshrined in the Paris Agreement in the next decade. This is a precarious suggestion because even less controversial, but nonetheless problematic, mitigation technologies such as carbon capture take resources, focus, and political will away from the most effective strategy — cutting emissions — and increase emissions limits. SRM will only amplify this dilution. The commission also errs by claiming to act for the interests of developing countries at a time when corporate and political actors have hijacked their 'room to develop' to pursue economic growth at the expense of climate justice. The enormity of climate change requires quick and decisive action, but when better solutions have not been implemented as well as they can be, and while there is still time to do so, it is disingenuous to contend that more high-risk solutions should remain on the table.

'OBLIGATION TO PROTECT WATER BODIES': WHY CRUISE BOATS HAVE BEEN BANNED IN MADHYA PRADESH

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) in Bhopal recently ruled that operating cruise boats in various water bodies of Madhya Pradesh was illegal and cannot be allowed to continue in violation of various environmental laws.

The NGT observed that the water bodies of MP are "for the benefit of the people" and the state is "under the obligation to protect", in its order passed on September 12.

The move has put a spanner in the works for MP's budding cruise ship tourism industry, a trend that has been quickly catching onto other states with large coastlines and inland rivers. The industry's most ambitious upcoming project is the luxury cruise on the Narmada River, which will cover three states, including MP, Maharashtra and Gujarat, plying from Barwani to the Statue of Unity in Gujarat.

What is the case?

Environmentalist Dr Subhash C Pandey filed an application before the NGT against the operation of the cruise in the Bhopal Upper Lake, as well as other water bodies in Madhya Pradesh.

The Upper Lake of Bhopal was created by constructing an earthen dam on the perennial River Kolans, a tributary of the Halali River. The lake accounts for more than 40% of the city's water



supply. About 45 hectare of the lake area on the southern bank of the lake falls in the Van Vihar National Park, a Wildlife Conservation Park notified under the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, the NGT said.

Pandey argued that the Upper Lake also has great importance as it has “more than 15 kinds of fishes and several vulnerable animals like turtles, amphibians and aquatic invertebrates and more than 2,500 migratory birds”.

Pandey also said that “even a small Cruise ship/boat carrying hundreds of passengers is comparable with a floating colony where volumes of waste is generated” and that it was “operating without statutory permissions.”

Why did the MP government see nothing wrong with cruise tourism?

The MP government argued that cruise tourism was part of the MP tourism policy, which had planned the development of tourism facilities near major water bodies.

The MP State Tourism Policy 2016 was formulated to also enable “socio-economic development, to generate employment opportunities,” the government added.

It also mentioned that the waiting lounge and jetty for boarding the passengers in the cruise at Bhopal was an artificial temporary construction designed in a manner “where no pollution will be caused to the lake” and that there “will be a zero discharge of sewerage and solid waste from the cruise ship”.

What is the cruise ship scene in Bhopal and where did it go wrong?

Currently, one large 80-seater cruise boat, eleven paddle boats, nine small motor boats, one large 20-seater motor boat, one large 10-seater motor boat and one water scooter operate at the lake, which is a popular tourist destination in the city.

In which areas of Madhya Pradesh does a cruise ship operate and are the conditions the same as in Bhopal?

The state is blessed with water resources, and its longest river Narmada, runs between Vindhya and Satpura ranges. Other major rivers of Madhya Pradesh are: Rivers Son, Shipra, Tapti, Mahanadi, and Chambal, and the Godavari Basin is also a small part of the state.

In Madhya Pradesh, a cruise ship used to operate in the Indira Sagar Dam and Omkareshwar Dam areas in the Khandwa region and Bargi Dam in Jabalpur, where all three cruises operate on the Narmada River.

The cruise ship also operates at Tawa Dam in Hoshangabad and in Gwalior’s Tigr Dam.

However, in contrast to Bhopal, the MPPCB found that the cruise ship destinations of Indira Sagar Dam and Omkareshwar Dam had “no impact on the water body.”

In the Indira Sagar Dam water body area, the Hanuwantiya island is spread over 98 km and is one of the largest water and adventure vacation destinations in MP.

The MPPCB stated that tourists from different parts of the world visit this event “for an array of adventure activities that involve Jet skiing, Motorboating, zorbing and banana riding.” The island



operates one 80-seater passenger cruise ship, five motor boats, two rescue boats, one 'Jal pari' Motor boat, two houseboats and two jets.

What about the other states?

According to the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, the largest river cruise in India is the MV Ganga Vilas cruise, a 51-day river cruise that passes through major cities like Patna in Bihar, Sahibganj in Jharkhand, Kolkata in West Bengal, Dhaka in Bangladesh and Guwahati in Assam.

The ministry stated that the "global river cruise market has grown at 5 per cent over the last few years and is expected to constitute 37 per cent of the cruise market by 2027."

Most of the river cruises in India are located in the Ganges river, Brahmaputra river cruise in the northeast, and the backwaters of Kerala.

Cruise ship services which mostly operate in the maritime are available in the ports of Mumbai, Cochin, Chennai, Goa and Vishakapatnam and the ministry is pouring in Rs 1,122 Crore to develop 13 port projects in the country to bolster cruise tourism.

NORTHEAST'S MITHUN GETS 'FOOD ANIMAL' TAG AND ITS MEAT A LEG-UP

Consumed for generations across many regions of the Northeast, work is on to help mithun farmers and tribal village communities benefit commercially from the sale and processing of mithun meat

The mithun, which goes by its scientific name *Bos frontalis*, is a ruminant species of the Bovidae family found in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram.

The slaughter of mithuns — an animal that has ritual significance and is also the state animal of both Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland — is traditionally reserved for special occasions, which has in present times come to also include feasts given by election candidates.

Traditionally, the mithun is semi-domesticated and is reared in a free-range forest ecosystem. The animal is usually let loose in a community forest and has rarely required shelter or supplementary feeding, except for salt. Since the soil in these parts is acidic and low in salt content, mithuns have an affinity for salt and are known to lick it off the hands of the farmers.

It was this "low input" cost that drew Mitra to the mithun's latent business potential.

"It has a lot of traditional economic value. Here is an animal that grows from 25 kg to 450 kg without competing for any food from the human basket and with no input. Except salt, it needs nothing else. I realised it had a lot of business potential and the potential to provide nutritional, livelihood and financial security," he says.

The mithun's striking resemblance to the cow has seen the animal attracting its share of political attention. In 2016, the then Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, Jyoti Prasad Rajkhowa, had referred to a mithun being slaughtered outside the Raj Bhawan, called it "cow slaughter", and invoked it as a sign of the "collapse of law and order" in the state to recommend President's Rule.

That same year, Mitra took an appointment with then Nagaland chief minister T R Zeliang to discuss how the mithun could be recognised as a food animal. He later made a presentation before the state Cabinet, and in 2017, the Cabinet under then CM Shurhozelie Liezietsu cleared the proposal, which the ICAR centre then sent to the Ministry of Agriculture.



Over the years, Mitra has also worked towards enabling farmers to take loans for mithun farming, and a mithun insurance scheme.

On September 1, ICAR launched the M-ANITRA app to register mithun farmers as “buyers” and “sellers” with the aim to help them do business at competitive prices. Apart from training farmers such as Kewiribam, the centre has also roped in other stakeholders to be involved in different parts of the supply chain.

As pickle, soups

Bhanu Pratap Singh, founder of the Guwahati-based start-up North East Farm Sales Promotion, is one such stakeholder who is working to market mithun products outside regions where it is traditionally consumed, and to promote it as “premium meat” by underlining its low fat content of 2-4% (it’s around 20 per cent for mutton).

“We have tested it by getting people in Kolkata, Delhi and Hyderabad to try it, and they liked it. So we have come out with six different products including vacuum-packed dry meat, pickle, ready-to-drink soup, ready-to-fry wafers and instant biryani. Now, with FSSAI approval, these can enter the mainstream food market. In the future, we want to promote it as premium meat in the Gulf and Europe, as an alternative to the buffalo meat that India exports,” he says.

As of 2019, there are around 3.9 lakh mithuns in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, and its conservation is an area of concern. However, Dr Girish Patil, the current director of ICAR’s Mithun centre, does not see efforts to promote the commercial sale of Mithun meat as being at odds with conservation.

“Although the mithun population saw a jump of 30% in the last livestock census, its population needs to be further hiked. These developments can actually serve as an incentive to increase the population. As demand for mithun products increases, there is likely to be a greater focus on the propagation and sustainable management of mithun herds... The animal also holds cultural and traditional value for many communities in the region for years. The economic incentive to continue raising the mithun could actually help preserve these practices,” he says.

CATS ARE HUNTING DOWN INDIA’S BIRDS: ARE WE PAYING ATTENTION?

On the basis of 30 million observations by more than 30,000 birdwatchers, the ‘State of Indian Birds 2023’ exercise recently concluded that birds in India are faring poorly. Among many factors, the report acknowledged a silent bird-killer lurking in India’s urban areas: cats.

Cats may seem to pale in the shadow of the threats posed by forest degradation, industrialisation, and climate change, but conservationists know better. In the U.S. alone, free-ranging domestic cats have been estimated to kill billions of birds every year.

One study found that cats may be the “single greatest source of anthropogenic mortality” for birds and mammals in the U.S. Worldwide, free-ranging domestic cats have caused or contributed to dozens of extinctions of bird species recorded in the IUCN Red List.

‘Landscape of fear’

While free-ranging dogs also harm wildlife, Dr. Kaushik said cats have retained the instinct to hunt through many years of domestication, even if they don’t need the skill anymore. Cats also can do



something dogs can't: "They can climb, so they can reach habitats such as the nests of canopy-dwellers."

Cat saliva is also more likely to contain bacteria (*Pasteurella multocida*) that are lethal to birds. So if the direct impact of an attack doesn't kill them, the bacteria will. Former urban wildlife rescuer Abhisheka Krishnagopal suspected that this could be why most cat-attacked birds reported to her didn't survive the trip to a treatment centre.

Cats also maintain a 'landscape of fear'. "This means that when cats are known to be in a particular area, the bird would avoid foraging or nesting there," Dr. Kaushik explained. "They end up investing time and energy to be extra vigilant and to find alternative areas. This affects them individually and on a population level."

Trap, neuter, return

Domestic cats (*Felis catus*) weren't always this widespread. Palaeogenetic studies have found that wildcats (*Felis sylvestris*) were probably first domesticated in West Asia some 10,000 years ago. They spread via sailing ships much later. Today, they are one of the world's 100 worst invasive alien species.

The proper way to deal with the cat problem has spiralled into a vicious debate in the west. Animal welfare groups usually advocate the 'trap-neuter-return' (TNR) policy, whereby stray cats or dogs are trapped, sterilised, and returned in the hope that this will reduce their populations. This is considered a humane approach because it could improve the quality of a cat's life as well.

The trouble is that cats are not easy to trap. And unless most of them are sterilised at once, the population will not decrease in a sustained way. This is why TNR programmes around the world have had limited success. Neutering is definitely needed, but this alone doesn't help," Ms. Krishnagopal said, "because free-ranging cats hunt every day, and birds take several weeks to raise a family, so it really takes a toll."

Data on cat-killed birds

Former director of the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Centre, Peter Marra, has critiqued policies such as TNR as being "dictated by animal welfare issues rather than ecological impacts". His study, published in *Nature Communications* in 2013, provided an exhaustive quantitative estimate of mortality due to cats in the U.S. He said that only a "concerted, nationwide effort to rid the landscape of cats" can help. This could include euthanasia. That this debate is yet to kick off in India is partly because there is nearly no data. With the State of Indian Birds 2023's unambiguous conclusion that India's bird diversity is in peril, ecologists like Dr. Kaushik have called for more attempts to quantify the risks posed by various threats, including cats. "We need studies from various habitats where we would expect high mortality because of free ranging cats," she said.

Empathy for stray cats

Meanwhile, there are measures pet parents can adopt to reduce the damage their animals are wreaking. For one, they can restrict their cats' outdoor movements. Dr. Kaushik's survey found that cats whose owners play with them tend to hunt less, as do neutered cats. Studies have also found that cats with more protein in their food are less inclined to hunt. She also recommended "reflective collars or collars with bells" to alert birds that a cat is nearby.



PROJECT CHEETAH, A YEAR ON

The story so far:

The first batch of eight cheetahs from Namibia arrived on September 17, 2022, officially launching Project Cheetah, India's cheetah introduction programme. An overview of the project as it completes one year.

Why have African cheetahs been introduced in India?

The goal of the introduction of African cheetahs is to "establish viable cheetah metapopulation in India that allows the cheetah to perform its functional role as a top predator and provides space for the expansion of the cheetah within its historical range thereby contributing to its global conservation efforts."

This effectively means that the project aims to enable cheetahs to establish themselves as viable and free-ranging populations in large unfenced wildlife reserves which are in turn connected by wildlife corridors to other unfenced reserves.

What is the status of the project?

In total, 20 adult African cheetahs have been imported so far. The first batch of eight cheetahs arrived on September 17, 2022 and another batch of 12 cheetahs from South Africa arrived on February 18, 2023. In late March 2023, one of the females gave birth to a litter of four cubs which were conceived in India.

After prolonged periods of quarantine which ranged from 50 to more than 70 days (the prescribed period of quarantine is 30 days), the cheetahs were released from their quarantine enclosures into larger holding enclosures, so that they could acclimatise themselves to the local habitats and environmental conditions. The plan was to first release male coalitions after about 1 to 2 months of them getting acclimatised in the larger enclosures. This was to be followed by the release of females, 1-4 weeks after the release of the males.

The release of the cheetahs to run free in the wild was delayed with the first cheetah being released after more than 100 days in the larger enclosure. So far, only 12 of the 20 cheetahs were ever released into the wild, with a few being brought back multiple times to the Kuno National Park (KNP), since the managers felt that the cats were moving into areas that may have posed risks for their survival.

Six of the cheetahs which came from Africa have died. Four while still in captivity and two in the wild. Four of the adult cheetahs are yet to be released to run free even for a single day. Additionally, three of the four cubs have died and the only remaining cub is being hand reared as its mother has rejected it.

Since the deaths of the three cheetahs in July-August, all 10 of the remaining free cheetahs have been captured and kept captive in enclosures for observation, removal of radio-collars and treatment. Safely capturing these cheetahs, especially a female whose radio-collar was functioning only intermittently, is no small feat and the efforts, skills, determination and dedication displayed by the field teams has to be appreciated.

Currently, from the available information, on the first anniversary of the project, all the surviving 14 adult cheetahs and one cub are in captivity and there is talk of them being radio-collared again



and released once the winter sets in. The project authorities are talking of additional sites being prepared for releasing the cheetahs such as the Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary and Nauradehi Wildlife Sanctuary, both in Madhya Pradesh. Gandhi Sagar is expected to be ready by the end of this year while Nauradehi is likely to be ready sometime in 2024. The project authorities are also talking of importing more cheetahs from Africa sometime next year.

Why did the cheetahs die?

There have been a variety of reasons and causes attributed to the deaths of the six adults and three cubs. Radio collars are not the underlying reason for the deaths of any of these cats, at least that is the officially stated position. One needs to determine if the African cheetahs are susceptible to certain insects and parasites in India, and if the collars provide a micro-environment conducive for these to thrive.

The first cheetah which died is said to have perished due to a renal condition. The question that arises is why the Government of India agreed to bring a cheetah which was sick and put it through more stress by transporting it and having it adapt to a new environment. One of the females died when authorities attempted to get the cheetah to mate inside the enclosure. Three of the four cubs born in India are reported to have died due to heatwave conditions. This raises more questions — if they were born in March 2023, that means the mating took place in India, in captivity; why then was there a rush to mate the cheetahs in captivity when it could occur naturally in a free-ranging environment after their release as prescribed in the Action Plan?

One of the males is reported to have died due to cardio-pulmonary failure but what caused it (the ultimate cause), has still not been determined. The last three deaths occurred during the monsoon. While there have been several conflicting reports regarding the cause of their deaths, no definitive cause has been shared in the public domain.

Even though the cheetahs were under constant monitoring, nine deaths have occurred. It is time the authorities reassess the approach and act decisively so that one can prevent such deaths, especially when the animals are in captivity. We also have to be cognisant of the effects of long periods of captivity on the fitness of these cats to be released to run free in the wild.

Were these mortalities expected?

The mortalities in captivity were not anticipated nor planned for. Similarly, the deaths of the three cubs during summer and the three adults in the monsoon were also not expected.

To add to the confusion, while conducting the Population Habitat Viability Assessments, the mortality rates of 15% for adults and 50%, 60% and 70% for cubs were used. However, now, project authorities are quoting higher values while discussing the mortalities that have occurred. This looks like an attempt to somehow justify that these mortalities were expected and within predicted levels.

What has been the impact of the project on the conservation of other endangered species?

Unfortunately, the very high-profile cheetah project has definitely distracted attention and probably also diverted financial resources from much needed conservation projects like the ones for the Great Indian Bustard and the translocation of Asiatic lions, to mention a few. Project Cheetah has also been called upon as a means to save grasslands and other open natural ecosystems. However, given the challenges that the cheetahs have faced in surviving even in



captivity and the lack of sufficient suitable habitats for them, using African cheetahs to conserve grasslands and grassland-dependent species is clearly a faulty strategy.

What are the lessons to be learnt?

Without proper and adequate habitats, there is no point in importing more cheetahs. Creating more glorified safari parks won't solve the issue. The real strategy lies in learning from past mistakes and focusing on the establishment of high-quality habitats covering at least 5,000 square kilometres before bringing more cheetahs. We cannot rely on simply importing more cheetahs to establish a viable population while neglecting its habitat requirements. The other weakness has been the lack of wider consultation and transparency. This definitely needs to improve.

WHY NIPAH VIRUS OUTBREAKS ARE OCCURRING ONLY IN KERALA

Since May 2018 when Kerala reported the first Nipah outbreak in Kozhikode district, there have been three more outbreaks of Nipah virus including the latest one in late-August 2023. For reasons still not known, three of the four Nipah outbreaks in Kerala in 2018, 2021 and 2023 have been in Kozhikode district; the 2019 outbreak was in Ernakulam district. Even five years after the first outbreak, and four outbreaks in all, it is still unclear why three of the four outbreaks have been in Kozhikode district in Kerala. Fruit bats that can cause Nipah virus outbreaks in humans are not restricted to Kozhikode district.

As per a 2021 study, Nipah virus was found to be in circulation in fruit bats (*Pteropus* species) in "many districts" in Kerala. An ongoing survey in 14 States by NIV Pune has found Nipah virus antibodies in fruit bats (*Pteropus medius*) in nine States, including Kerala, and the Union Territory of Pondicherry. While date palm sap was linked to Nipah virus outbreaks in Bangladesh, and pigs acting as intermediate hosts were responsible for Nipah outbreaks in Malaysia, the route of virus transmission from bats to humans has not been clearly established in Kerala.

The four outbreaks in five years may be because the virus has either become endemic in bats in Kerala or is a reflection of Kerala's superior healthcare system that thoroughly investigates undiagnosed fever cases for possible Nipah virus infection or both. However, with fruit bats positive for Nipah virus antibodies being found in other States, it is likely that Nipah virus infection and deaths may be going undetected in other States while they get picked up in Kerala, especially in Kozhikode district.

"Whenever we have undiagnosed fever cases, a team involving virologists is formed and we undertake a detailed investigation which helps us diagnose Nipah virus and other new virus outbreaks early. In other States, Nipah cases might be going undetected," says Dr. Anoop Kumar A.S., Director of Critical Care Medicine, North Kerala Cluster, Aster MIMS Calicut, Kerala. Dr. Kumar played a pivotal role in detecting the Nipah virus outbreak in Kerala in 2018 and 2023.

In the 2019 and 2021 outbreak, there was only a single case without any human-to-human transmission. "Nipah virus infection and deaths might have happened in different parts of India in people with undiagnosed fever, which might have gone undetected. Also, there is no Nipah testing facility anywhere in India except NIV Pune. Only Kerala screens for Nipah virus routinely in a molecular lab in Calicut Medical College," he says. "While other States may not be routinely sending samples for Nipah virus testing, we test for Nipah whenever there are cases with unusual symptoms. That might be the reason why Kerala is detecting Nipah cases."



Usually, people with Nipah virus infection present with encephalitic symptoms. But in the latest outbreak, patients presented with pure respiratory symptoms, not reported anywhere in the world before. “But we could still identify them as Nipah only because we have a high index of suspicion,” says Dr. Kumar. In 2018 and in 2023, the index case had died with encephalitis in 2018 and severe pneumonia in 2023 that went unnoticed. In 2018, a cluster formed and Nipah virus was diagnosed among three contacts who were admitted with unusual symptoms about two weeks after the death of the index case. “There was a [possible] index case, clustering and unusual symptoms seen in the contacts. There was a high index of suspicion and that led us to diagnose Nipah virus in 2018,” recalls Dr. Kumar. In the latest outbreak, there was a death in another hospital in Kozhikode city on August 30 and four of the family members developed unusual symptoms on September 9 and were admitted two days later at Aster MIMS Calicut. Nipah virus was diagnosed the very next day after admission.

“We noticed a clustering of cases after the death of the person. During a detailed history taking we came to know that the person who died had unusual symptoms. And the family was from a locality quite close (10-15 km) to the 2018 outbreak epicentre. There was a high index of suspicion of a new emerging virus or Nipah due to the combination of a [possible] index case, clustering of cases, unusual symptoms and proximity to the first outbreak epicentre. So we first tested for Nipah virus,” he says. At the time the deaths happened in the index case in 2018 and 2023, Nipah virus was not diagnosed. In 2019 and 2021, only a single case was detected (ending in death in 2021 unlike in 2019). This raises the possibility of several people getting infected with Nipah virus and even dying without a diagnosis in other parts of Kerala and other States, especially when only one or a few cases occur, he says.

EVASIVE NUTRITIONAL SUPPORT FOR TB PATIENTS

Undernutrition is the leading risk factor for TB disease. In 2019, Preeti Sudan, Secretary in the Health Ministry noted letter that undernutrition at the population level contributes to 55% of annual TB incidence in India.

A 2022 study noted that 45% of people in India are undernourished, accounting for nearly 1.2 million TB cases each year. Yet, nutrition support became a part of the national TB programme only in April 2018 when Nikshay Poshan Yojana — a direct benefit transfer (DBT) scheme for nutritional support to TB patients — was launched. Under this programme, ₹500 per month is credited into the account of a person with TB for the duration of treatment.

In September 2022, India launched another nutrition support programme called Ni-kshay Mitra to consented TB patients. And in 2022, Tamil Nadu became the first and only State to launch the Differentiated TB Care programme to reduce the mortality rate among TB patients. Severe undernutrition is one of the three parameters used for triaging TB patients at the time of diagnosis.

During triaging as part of the Differentiated TB Care programme, it became evident that 52% of notified TB patients in Tamil Nadu had undernutrition, and 25% had severe undernutrition. If undernutrition among TB patients is so high even in Tamil Nadu, the situation might be far worse in many northern States which have higher levels of undernutrition in the general population.

All the three initiatives provide nutrition support only to TB patients to reduce mortality and not to the family members also to prevent TB disease. The nutrition status of TB patients at the time of diagnosis is largely a reflection of the family’s nutrition level. The 2017 guidance document on



nutritional care and support for patients with TB in India had recommended that the family members are provided with a “food basket as they likely to be food insecure, chronically energy deficient and at high risk of contracting TB”. This is yet to become a reality.

The RATIONS trial in Jharkhand has underscored the importance of providing nutrition support to family members to prevent TB disease. In the trial, TB disease among household contacts was prevented in 39% (all forms of TB) to 48% (pulmonary TB) through nutritional support.

Nikshay Poshan Yojana

As per the India TB report 2023, of the 2.4 million notified TB cases, only 1.6 million (66%) received at least one month’s payment in 2022 under the Ni-kshay Poshan Yojana programme. There has been very little increase in the number of beneficiaries in the last three years. For instance, in 2021, only 62.1% of the 2.1 million notified cases in India received at least one payment. In 2020 too, only 62% of notified TB cases received at least one month payment.

A January 2022 retrospective cohort study carried out during January-September 2019 among 426 patients found that the assistance was not reaching the poorest among the poor who need nutritional support the most due to the lack of basic documents. The study also recorded a delay of 56 days to receive the first instalment. Also, 49% of patients received the last instalment after treatment completion. TB patients perceived the assistance provided under the Ni-kshay Poshan Yojana programme was “insufficient to buy nutritious food throughout the course of treatment”.

CENTRE FLOATS NEW SCIENCE AWARDS

Nearly a year after deciding to cut the number of prizes annually awarded by its Ministries, the Union government is set to institute the Rashtriya Vigyan Puraskar — 56 prizes to felicitate scientists, technologists and innovators. Akin to the prestigious Padma awards, these awards will not include any cash component; instead, they will likely bestow a certificate and a medallion on the awardee, sources told The Hindu.

According to the proposal seen by The Hindu, which is yet to be made public, the RVP will comprise three Vigyan Ratna, 25 Vigyan Shri, 25 Vigyan Yuva-Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar and three Vigyan Team awards.

Multidisciplinary prizes

These prizes will be awarded annually for physics, chemistry, biological sciences, mathematics and computer science, earth science, medicine, engineering science, agricultural science, environmental science, technology and innovation, atomic energy, space science and technology, and a 13th category, simply called “others”.

“It may be ensured that each domain may be represented. Adequate representation of women may also be ensured,” said the proposal forwarded by the Department of Science and Technology (DST) to the Union Home Ministry.

The 56 proposed awards are a stark reduction from the almost 300 science prizes that used to be given by Union Ministries.

In their previous avatar, the prizes also had a significant cash component. The Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar (SSB) awards, given by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) since 1958, now includes ₹5 lakh per winner, as well as a salary perk.

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



In fact, the government announced the names of 12 winners of the SSB awards just last week, after a year's delay. The National Technology Awards, given to teams by the Technology Development Board (a DST entity), also include cash prizes worth ₹25 lakh.

The new awards will also be open to persons of Indian origin (PIOs), though a maximum of one such may be awarded the Vigyan Ratna, while three PIOs each can be selected for the Vigyan Shri and the VY-SSB.

However, PIOs will not be eligible for the Vigyan Team awards.

The Vigyan Ratna awards shall be for "lifetime contributions along with excellence made in any field of science", the Vigyan Shri for "distinguished contribution to any field", and the SSB for "exceptional contribution by young scientists". The team awards shall be for three or more researchers who have made an "exceptional contribution as a team".

There are no age limits for any prizes except the SSB, for which recipients must be 45 years or younger.

Starting in 2024

The awards will be announced annually on May 11, which is National Technology Day, and will be awarded on National Space Day, August 23. These are the days on which India successfully conducted its second nuclear test in 1998, and then catapulted the Chandrayaan-3's Vikram lander on the moon this year.

The RVP awards, which will commence from 2024, will be given by the President or the Vice President, according to the proposal.

A committee will be constituted every year, comprising the Secretaries of six Science Ministries, up to four presidents of science and engineering academies, and six distinguished scientists and technologists from various fields. The CSIR will coordinate the administration of the awards process for two years, after which it will be taken over by the proposed National Research Foundation.

MADHYA PRADESH CM UNVEILS ADI SHANKARACHARYA STATUE AT OMKARESHWAR: ITS STORY, SIGNIFICANCE

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan unveiled the 108-foot-tall 'Statue of Oneness' of Adi Shankaracharya at Omkareshwar in the poll-bound on September 21.

The statue depicts Shankaracharya as a 12-year-old child when he is said to have visited Omkareshwar. The government has invested Rs 2,200 crore to develop the temple town located on the Mandhata island of Khandwa district, which will form an important tourism circuit, along with Ujjain, Maheshwar and Mandu religious towns.

Who was Adi Shankaracharya?

Adi Shankara, who is believed to have lived between 788 and 820 AD, was born in Kerala's Kaladi, situated on the bank of the Periyar River. He became a sanyasin at an early age and left his Brahmin household, where he is said to have made his way to Omkareshwar. Here, he studied under his guru Govinda Bhagavatpada and soon became a proponent of Advaita Vedanta, challenging prevailing philosophical traditions – including Buddhism and Jainism.



In his lifespan of 32 years, he is said to have visited all the important spiritual centres of the time — from Kanchi (Kancheepuram in Tamil Nadu) to Kamrup (Assam), and Kashmir and the Kedar and Badri dhams, as well as Sringeri, Ujjain, Kashi, Puri, and Joshimath.

He is said to have authored 116 works. The most notable among them are the commentaries on the 10 Upanishads, the Brahmasutra and the Gita.

Why is the Mandhata island considered an important religious destination?

The Mandhata island, nestled on the Narmada River, is home to two of the 12 Jyotirlingas – Omkareshwara (located on the south side of the island) and Amareshwara. The area is close to Mahakaleshwara Jyotirlinga at Ujjain, located 110 km to the northwest.

The island is dotted with Shaivite, Vaisnavite, and Jain temples dating back to the 14th and 18th centuries. The name ‘Omkareshwar’ is derived from the shape of the island, which resembles the sacred syllable ‘Om’, and its name means ‘the Lord of Omkara’.

Puranas say that Lord Shiva pierced the world as an endless pillar of light, called the jyotirlinga. There are 12 jyotirlinga sites in India that are considered a manifestation of Shiva. Besides Mahakal in Ujjain, these include Somnath and Nageshwar in Gujarat, Mallikarjuna in Andhra Pradesh, Omkareshwar in Madhya Pradesh, Kedarnath in Uttarakhand, Bhimashankar, Triyambakeshwar and Grishneshwar in Maharashtra, Viswanath at Varanasi, Baidyanath in Jharkhand, and Rameshwar in Tamil Nadu.

As far as the Jyotirlinga sites in Mandhata are concerned, there are three stories on its origin.

According to the first legend, the deity of the Vindhya mountain range, Vindya, worshipped Lord Shiva in order to atone for his sins. Impressed with this feat, Shiva manifested himself in the forms of Omkareshwara and Amareshwara. In the second story, King Mandhata performed such devoted worship that Shiva manifested as a Jyotirlinga and in the third tale, the danavas (demons) emerged victorious against the Devas (gods) and Shiva manifested as the Omkareshwar jyotirlinga to defeat the demons.

How was the project conceptualised?

On February 9, 2017, CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan announced the construction of a 108-foot-tall Adi Shankaracharya statue, a Shankar museum, and the Acharya Shankar International Institute of Advaita Vedanta, during a function in Omkareshwar.

Later that year, a metal collection drive was conducted in the state and the metal for building the statue was collected from people across more than 23,000 grama panchayats.

On June 4, 2022, Larsen and Toubro was awarded an Engineering Procurement, and Construction (EPC) contract to construct the Statue of Oneness. The Statue of Oneness is intended to endure for more than 500 years, while the museum building is designed to have a service life of 100 years.

What went into making the 108 ft statue?

The multi-metal Adi Shankaracharya statue is installed atop Mandhata Parvat hill, facing southwards towards the Narmada river. This statue stands atop a 54-foot pedestal, supported by a 27-foot lotus petal base which is made of red stone.



Weighing 100 tons, the statue was conceptualised by an Indian team of artists, sculptors and engineers, while the metal casting was done in China's Nanchang city and shipped to Mumbai through the sea route in several batches. The idol weighs 100 tons and has been installed on a 75-foot-high platform. It is made up of bronze that contains 88% copper, 4% zinc and 8% tin and its internal structure is made up of high-quality steel, officials said.

At the base of the statue is the Shankar Stambh, which features wooden domes and stone pillars with "carvings depicting 32 stories related to Acharya Shankar."

It is expected to join the ranks of India's most renowned statues, including the Statue of Unity in Gujarat, the Thiruvalluvar Statue and Lord Murugan Statue in Tamil Nadu, the Gommateshwara Statue in Karnataka and the Shiva statue of Murudeshwara in Karnataka.

What are the other projects?

The statue will be accompanied by Ekatma Dham, which will include the Advaita Lok museum, built to "showcase the life and philosophy of Acharya Shankar through exhibits reflecting the message of Advaita Vedanta," said a project official.

The Ekatma Dham will feature a mosaic of architectural styles, including "Nagara, Dravidian, Oriya, Maru-Gurjara, Hoysala, North Indian-Himalayan, and Kerala" styles. The museum will include a "3D hologram projection gallery, nine exhibition galleries, an indoor wide-screen IMAX theatre, and a cultural boat ride called Advaita Narmada Vihar, which will take visitors on an audio-visual journey through the teachings of Acharya Shankar and other Indian preceptors of Advaita", officials said.

The Acharya Shankar International Institute of Advaita Vedanta is being built to "promote the study and understanding of Advaita Vedanta" and will be spread across 22.1 hectares. The institute will have seven centres — four for research, a library, an extension centre, and a gurukul.

EXPRESS VIEW ON SANTINIKETAN'S WORLD HERITAGE STATUS: AT HOME IN THE WORLD

The UNESCO World Heritage tag for Santiniketan, the 41st world heritage site in India and the third in West Bengal, is enormously welcome. Efforts had been underway since 2010, the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore, to include the Birbhum town on the list, but its incorporation comes at a particularly poignant moment – when Visva-Bharati, the university that Tagore had set up, is beset by internal crises and buffeted by the winds of political change that seem to have affected most of the state's institutions of higher education.

Tagore's experiment with education in Santiniketan was entrenched in his belief that only a recognition of diversity could help one overcome the constraints of parochiality. He set up Patha Bhavan, a residential school, in 1901. Envisioned as a global gurukul, Visva-Bharati was set up in 1921, a year after Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement. Visva-Bharati marked an expansive imagination that could rise above the tides of nationalism sweeping through the country to work towards a common humanity.

In his letters and his writing, Tagore repeatedly expressed his dissatisfaction with the idea of a nationalism that hemmed people in, not just at home but also across the world, and that became, eventually, a vehicle of hubris. His idea of the university differed from the Western model — Santiniketan was built with the idea of breaking down walls and building bridges between the natural world and the world that existed beyond national boundaries; between teachers and



students; among colleagues and neighbours; a university town that operated on the idea of a foundational empathy. In his time, Santiniketan became a place where the world made its home in a nest, Yatra visvam bhavatieka nidam — Visva-Bharati's motto — unhindered by the territorial imagination of the nation-state.

But the Tagorean vision has been imperilled in recent years by walls closing in on Visva-Bharati — literally and figuratively. In 2017, Shiksha Sanskriti Utthan Nyas, the education wing of the RSS, called for the removal of Tagore's thoughts on nationalism from NCERT textbooks.

In 2020, the decision of the university administration to build a boundary wall around the campus to distinguish the university from its surroundings reinforced a disjunction from its original vision of openness. This refusal to engage with the world is not symptomatic of Visva-Bharati alone.

The acquisition of the World Heritage tag might, therefore, be the right occasion for introspection on why the tangible heritage of Santiniketan matters, and also how the legacy of its intangible heritage can be a roadmap for all universities.

GOLD HUNT

Delayed by a year owing to COVID-19 restrictions in China, the 19th Asian Games officially begin in Hangzhou on Saturday. First held in Delhi in 1951, the latest Asiad will have nearly 12,500 athletes, a lot more than the 11,000 at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021. Athletes in Hangzhou will be competing in 40 sports, including breakdancing and esports which will make their debut in the 16-day event. There are sports too such as xiangqi and go which could make many turn to search engines on the Internet. In a few sports, including hockey, archery, tennis and boxing, the Asiad will also offer Olympic qualification spots for Paris 2024. China is a giant, topping the medal table at the Games every time from 1982 when India hosted it for the second time, again in Delhi. At the last Asiad, in Jakarta 2018, China finished on top with 289 medals, including 132 gold, while Japan (205 medals) and South Korea (177) took the next two spots. Jakarta was a very fruitful Asiad for India as it finished with a record medal haul of 70 medals which included 16 gold. Expectations are high this time too with the Union Sports Minister Anurag Singh Thakur hoping for 100 medals and Indian Olympic Association President P.T. Usha — a medal machine herself at these Games in the mid-1980s — predicting a best-ever Asiad for the country.

With adequate government support, better facilities and many exposure trips abroad, India, with more than 650 athletes, does look strong. Athletics is the big hope once again. For the first time, India will go into an Asiad with an Olympic and World champion in javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra, and his battle with Pakistan's Worlds silver medallist Arshad Nadeem could be one of the highlights. Neeraj has made Indians believe that they could conquer the world and this could be the reason for three javelin throwers finishing among the top six at the Budapest Worlds where the Indian men's 4x400m relay team also made history by finishing fifth and bettering its own Asian record. A few weeks ago, Jeswin Aldrin and M. Sreeshankar were the number one and two in this year's world long jump list while triple jumper Praveen Chithravel was also on an impressive rung. But many of the Indian athletes did not live up to expectations in Budapest, and Hangzhou offers a chance for redemption. Hockey, where the Indian men and women's teams are the Asiad's highest ranked sides, offers hopes of bringing gold while cricket, where India is making its Asiad debut, shooting and badminton are among the sports that have raised hopes of a golden show.



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

EXPRESS VIEW ON US FED MEET: A LINGERING HIKE

In developed economies such as the US, UK and Eurozone, interest rates have either reached their peak levels, or are about to. Earlier this month, the European Central Bank hiked interest rates for the 10th consecutive time to its highest level since the Euro was launched. The ECB, though, has signaled that this would be the last rate hike for now. On Wednesday, the US Federal Reserve voted to keep its policy rate unchanged. The federal funds rate stands at 5.25-5.5 per cent. However, the projections accompanying the Fed meeting indicate the possibility of a rate hike this year — as per the Fed dot plot, 12 of the 19 members of the Fed Open Market Committee expect the interest rates to be hiked by another 25 basis points. And on Thursday, the Bank of England, in a split decision, voted to keep interest rates unchanged at 5.25 per cent. While a few more rate hikes may well be in the offing, the debate within these central banks is likely to now shift to how long interest rates will remain high for.

Considering that the process of getting inflation down towards central bank targets is taking longer than expected, there are indications that interest rates in these parts of the world are likely to remain higher for longer. In the US, Fed officials have now lowered their expectations of rate cuts next year. As per the Fed's forecasts, even as inflation is expected to moderate over the coming years, it is only expected to reach the Fed's target of 2 per cent by 2026. A similar scenario is likely to play out in other regions as well. In the Eurozone, inflation is estimated to remain above 5 per cent this year and the ECB expects it to fall to around 2.2 per cent only in 2025. In the UK, inflation fell to an 18 month low of 6.7 per cent in August. While the Bank of England expects inflation to fall sharply in the near term, upward pressure from higher crude oil prices remains.

On growth, the prospects of these economies vary. For instance, US Fed officials now expect GDP growth at 2.1 per cent, up from the earlier expectations of 1 per cent. Next year too, the economy is expected to outperform earlier expectations. However, forecasts for the Eurozone indicate weaker momentum this year and the next. The Bank of England is also less sanguine about the prospects of the economy. How growth and inflation evolve will determine the course of monetary policy action.

DIPLOMATIC TENSIONS: TRADE RELATIONS, AND INDIA'S AGRI IMPORTS FROM CANADA

Diplomatic tensions between New Delhi and Ottawa continued to escalate on Thursday (September 21), with India stopping visa services in Canada and Canada "adjusting its staff presence in India".

Amid the ongoing standoff, we take a look at India and Canada's trade ties.

India-Canada trade

India's total trade with Canada in the last (2022-23) financial year was \$8 billion — that's 0.7% of India's total trade (\$1.1 trillion) with the world. The share has remained this way at least for the past five years, even though the export and import numbers have gone up and down, especially during the Covid year.



Bilateral trade has also been fairly evenly balanced; in 2022-23, for instance, roughly \$4 bn of imports were matched by \$4 billion of exports even though India enjoyed a tiny trade surplus of \$58 million.

Among what India imports from Canada, three categories of goods dominate and account for 46% (that is, almost half) of the total import by value. These are:

1. Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes.
2. Pulp of wood or of other fibrous cellulosic material; waste and scrap of paper or paperboard
3. Edible vegetables and certain roots and tubers

The top three exports, on the other hand, accounted for only 30% of the total exports. These were:

1. Pharmaceutical products
2. Articles of iron or steel
3. Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof

The major agri imports from Canada

Canada is important to India as a supplier of two major agri-related commodities.

The first is muriate of potash (MOP), the third most consumed fertiliser in India after urea and di-ammonium phosphate. India's MOP imports totalled 50.94 lakh tonnes (lt) in 2020-21, 29.06 lt in 2021-22 and 23.59 lt in 2022-23, valued at \$1,212.67 million, \$990.84 million and \$1,405.31 million respectively. Canada's share in these was 16.12 lt (\$383.91 million) in 2020-21, 6.15 lt (\$185.13 million) in 2021-22 and 11.43 lt (\$680.40 million) in 2022-23. Canada was India's largest MOP supplier last year, followed by Israel, Jordan, Belarus, Turkmenistan and Russia.

The second major item is masur or red lentil. India is a significant importer of pulses, with masur being the biggest after arhar/tur or pigeon-pea. India's total masur imports stood at 11.16 lt in 2020-21, 6.67 lt in 2021-22 and 8.58 lt in 2022-23, valued at \$622.40 million, \$528.74 million and \$655.48 million respectively. Canada is India's largest masur supplier, followed by Australia. Masur imports from Canada stood at 9.09 lt (\$505.39 million) in 2020-21, 5.23 lt (\$408.89 million) in 2021-22 and 4.85 lt (\$370.11 million) in 2022-23.

Dal millers and traders are currently keeping a close watch on the ongoing India-Canada standoff, especially in case of any spillover to masur imports.

Masur has, in recent times, emerged as a substitute for arhar/tur similar to yellow/white peas vis-a-vis chana. In many hotels, restaurants, canteens and even homes, red masur dal is being used in place of yellow arhar, including for making sambar. This makes economic sense, especially when masur dal is now retailing at about Rs 100/kg, as against an average of Rs 160-plus for arhar.

Geopolitical worries apart, there are concerns over even the size of the masur crop in Canada. The 2023 crop now being harvested is pegged at around 15.4 lt, down from last year's 23 lt. It has already led to landed prices of imported masur climbing to \$760-770 per tonne, a jump of \$100 in the last one month.



Also, till 2017-18, India used to also be a heavy importer of yellow/white peas, which were a substitute for chana (chickpea). In 2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18, India imported 22.45 lt, 31.73 lt and 28.77 lt of yellow/white peas valued at \$831.96 million, \$1,205.58 million and \$921.10 million respectively. Again, Canada was the top supplier at 13.69 lt (\$503.20 million) in 2015-16, 17.29 lt (\$657.71 million) in 2016-17 and 11.70 lt (\$396.14 million) in 2017-18.

TESTING TIMES

India's goods exports shrank for the seventh consecutive time and the ninth time in 11 months this August, while imports surged to hit the highest level since March this year. At \$58.6 billion, inbound shipments were still 5.2% below last August's levels, but exports fell by a relatively steeper 6.9%, leading to a \$24.2 billion trade deficit — the widest since October 2022. Goods exports are now down 11.9% so far this year and imports have dropped 12.1%. Services exports for last month will be known later, but Commerce Ministry extrapolations suggest that this engine that has been resilient so far through the global economic turmoil, is also beginning to feel the heat. For now, the 0.4% drop expected in services exports in August is minor and with intangible imports also likely dropping at a sharper pace, this will not exacerbate the trade balance yet. However, shrinking services exports imply that their ability to bridge the goods trade deficits that were up sharply last year, will be restricted, thus raising the possibility of wider current account deficits from this quarter.

With global commodity prices rising around 12% from June levels to hit a 15-month high this month, the pressure on the goods trade deficit is likely to escalate, especially as oil and gems and jewellery imports have fallen less than their exports so far in 2023-24. In the first four months of this fiscal, about half the decline in outgoing shipments has been fuelled by petroleum despite volumes rising 6%, as prices fell 27%. This may change if global oil prices, which crossed \$90 per barrel over the past week for the first time since November 2022, stay elevated. Export volumes of as many as 13 major items rose between April and July, but their value had declined owing to lower prices. That is a good omen about demand for Indian goods amid the gloom, and the government believes rising commodity prices will help trade tallies. But they could also be a double-edged sword for India as its strategic gambit to import more Russian oil has turned less lucrative. Moreover, sticky inflation could further dampen demand, especially in key markets such as the European Union, which just hiked interest rates to a record high. Inflation reheated in the United States last month, but not enough yet to dent festive demand that may lift order books in coming months. That engineering goods, which account for a quarter of India's exports, clocked their first uptick after eight months in August, with half of the 14 key segments of exports growing — the best performance in nine months — is a welcome sign. India needs to do all it can to nurture precious green shoots and support exporters.

TRACKING INDIA'S GROWTH TRAJECTORY

The conventional way to assess a country's economic situation is to look at the quarterly (three-month) and annual (12-month) GDP (gross-domestic-product) growth rate and compare it to previous quarters as well as years. In the quarterly release of GDP figures by the NSO (National Statistical Office), the country's performance is likened to reviewing a report card of its economic performance. However, a critical difference between reviewing a report card and India's economic figures is that the latter tells a far more nuanced story.



The Q1 data covering the GDP growth rate from April to June of FY24 boasts a nominal growth rate of 8% and a real growth rate of 7.8%. The growth story currently posits that the numbers reflect an uptick in the agriculture sector growing at 3.5%, unlikely to be sustained due to pressure from the El Niño phenomenon, and the services industry, with financial, real estate and professional services growing at 12.2%. Moreover, there is also talk of sustaining a close to 6.5% growth rate for the current financial year. However, a closer look at the numbers provides a far more interesting interpretation of the growth.

Calculating GDP

The first factor to consider is that calculating the GDP growth rate involves many complex statistical choices and sophisticated statistical operations. One such decision the NSO made while conducting their research was to use the income approach of calculating GDP rather than the expenditure approach. The income approach involves summing up all national incomes from the factors of production and accounting for other elements such as taxes, depreciation, and net foreign factor income. The assumption generally is that both methods lead to similar results.

However, the expenditure approach dictates headline growth to be 4.5% rather than 7.8% which is a large discrepancy. Moreover, another essential statistical operation is the adjusting for inflation using the price deflator. Typically, the deflator is meant to adjust growth figures when they are overstated by inflation. In this case, deflation due to falling commodity prices, reflected in the wholesale price index, has worked to overstate the real growth. Furthermore, there is a base effect from the COVID-19 degrowth period, which continues to plague India's growth figures. Although less pronounced in FY24, the base effect has a role in comparative statistics due to sporadic growth in the years following FY20-21.

Additionally, one must consider whether the proposed, supposedly cooled, inflation rate calculated through the consumer price index can be sustained at current levels with the impending depreciation of the Indian rupee against the dollar due to capital outflow pressures resulting from the RBI's reluctance to raise interest rates. India is a net importer, and its most significant import consists of crude petroleum, whose price seems to be rising due to Saudi's \$100 per barrel push and rupee depreciation. The domestic consumption of diesel, a proxy for economic activity in India, fell by 3% in August, which, if sustained, does not paint a rosy growth picture for the coming quarters.

Revenue from taxes

Moreover, the government's tax revenue from direct taxes has weakened over the previous quarter while the indirect tax revenue remained strong, indicating a K-shaped pattern. The income streams from progressive taxation (more significant tax burden on those higher on the income ladder) seem to be a laggard compared to its regressive counterpart. A muted growth of direct tax collected in an economy boosted by the services industry is a statistical discrepancy which remains unexplained in the proposed GDP growth story. Direct and personal taxes should (in the absence of any significant policy changes) have grown closer to the nominal growth rate than it has currently. Narrowing revenue streams indicate forced austerity measures, as the government intends to control the budget deficit, and hence the interest rate. Therefore, growth in FY24 stemming from government expenditure seems to be a pipe dream.



A nuanced approach

In conclusion, after a meticulous analysis of India's Q1 FY24 economic transcript, it becomes palpable that the reported growth narrative might be somewhat overembellished. The divergence in growth figures brought forth by the income and expenditure approaches manifest a significant disparity, raising fundamental questions about the veracity of the promulgated optimistic narrative. Moreover, the underpinnings of this growth story, nuanced by inflationary adjustments and conspicuous fluctuations in tax revenue streams, signal a cautious trajectory. Additionally, the apprehensive outlook on the agriculture sector and potential fiscal constraints paint an arguably more restrained picture than initially portrayed. Therefore, it seems prudent to assert that India's economic performance, although showing signs of resilience, does not quite emerge as the unequivocal success story depicted in initial observations, urging a more nuanced and critical approach in assessing the trajectory ahead.

EXPRESS VIEW ON EPFO: TOPIC OF INTEREST

Over the years, there has been a growing mismatch between the surplus/deficit projected by the Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) when it announces the yearly interest rate and the actual deficit/surplus. During years of bigger surpluses, this may not cause financial issues.

For instance, in 2019-20, when the EPFO had announced an interest rate of 8.5 per cent, the actual surplus was Rs 954.62 crore, higher than the initial projection of Rs 700 crore. However, there is a cause for concern when there is an actual deficit as against the organisation's projection of a surplus.

For example, in 2021-22, against the projection of a Rs 450 crore surplus, there was actually a deficit of Rs 197.72 crore.

In July, the finance ministry had flagged this issue of the EPFO slipping into a deficit. And now, as reported in this paper, the Central Board of Trustees of the EPFO have been instructed not to declare the interest rate beginning from the ongoing financial year without the consent of the finance ministry, and to also examine the high interest rates announced by the organisation.

In the past, too, there has often been criticism of the EPFO announcing a higher interest rate that is not considered to be in line with the prevailing market scenario.

For instance, for 2020-21, it had recommended an interest rate of 8.5 per cent, when in comparison, the 10-year GSec yields had fallen to 6.23 per cent, and the SBI was offering 5.4 per cent on 5-10 year deposits. As a sizeable share of the funds with the organisation are allocated towards government/debt securities, paying its contributing members a higher rate — the 10-year GSec yield is currently hovering around 7.1 per cent — would entail investing in higher interest yielding bonds or increasing the allocation towards equities.

This shift in portfolio allocation would involve a change in the risk-reward profile of investments, and thus requires serious consideration. The EPFO's past investments in higher yielding securities of companies such as IL&FS, Dewan Housing Finance Corporation and Reliance Capital only highlight the risk this poses, and the need for carefully accessing such options.

Considering that the employees' provident fund forms an integral part of the social security framework in the country, it must adopt a cautious approach, even though its contributing members will be desirous of higher rates, and understandably so. It must carefully assess the risk-



reward matrix of its investment portfolio, taking care to minimise the risks as it pursues greater returns, while also aligning the interest rate with the broader market realities.

Alongside, the EPFO must not only be more careful in its assessment of its obligations, it should also be more transparent about its operations by releasing regular updates of its portfolio and investment decisions.

EXPRESS VIEW ON RBI PAPER ON OPS: UNDOING REFORM

The shift to the National Pension System in the 2000s was a major, hard-won fiscal reform. The move was supported by parties across the political spectrum. The process was initiated by the NDA under then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and the UPA government continued with it. Over time, most states shifted to the NPS, with only West Bengal and Tamil Nadu staying with the old pension scheme. However, it would now seem that the broad political consensus that led to this fiscally prudent decision has frayed. Several states such as Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, ruled by parties who are in opposition to the BJP at the Centre, have announced a shift back to the old pension scheme. Such decisions, driven by political motives, will benefit only a small section of the electorate, and will have adverse long-term fiscal consequences. As a new study by economists at the Reserve Bank of India says, this shift “will be a major step backwards undermining the benefits of past fiscal reforms and compromising the interest of future generations”.

Unlike the NPS which is a defined contribution scheme, the old pension scheme is a defined benefit scheme. In this framework, the benefits accruing to employees are marked out — for state government employees, the pension is fixed at 50 per cent of the last drawn salary. This places a significant fiscal burden on the government. As per the RBI study, the burden of switching back to this unfunded scheme would be roughly 4.5 times that of the NPS, “with the additional burden reaching 0.9 per cent of GDP annually by 2060”. Pensions already account for a sizeable share of state expenditure allocation. In 2022-23, states had allocated Rs 4.63 lakh crore for pensions, up from Rs 3.45 lakh crore in 2019-20. For all states and Union Territories, the allocations to pension were pegged at 11.8 per cent of the revenue expenditure. For some states it was significantly higher — for Uttar Pradesh it was 16.9 per cent, for Kerala 17.1 per cent, and for Himachal Pradesh 19.3 per cent.

While the move to the old pension scheme may lead to some gains in the short term, over time, the costs will be far greater, constricting the fiscal space available to the state governments. According to the study, the shift can “increase their fiscal stress to unsustainable levels in the medium to long-term”. And as the pension outgo increases, it “may compel the states to cut down their capital expenditure, affecting the long term growth prospects of the economy.” In the run-up to the national elections, while there may be a temptation to announce such populist measures, political parties of all ideological hues must shun such policies whose harmful effects will return to haunt.

DECLARE WILFUL DEFAULTERS WITHIN 6 MONTHS OF NPA TAG: RBI PROPOSAL

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Thursday proposed that lenders should classify a borrower as a “wilful defaulter” within six months of their account being declared a non-performing asset (NPA). The RBI did not earlier have a specific timeline within which such borrowers had to be identified.



The revision of norms comes after a review of the instructions and consideration of various judgments and orders from the Supreme Court and High Courts, as well as representations and suggestions received from banks and other stakeholders, the central bank said.

The RBI identifies wilful defaulters as those who have the ability to pay a bank's dues but do not or divert bank funds. While large defaulter means a defaulter with an outstanding amount of Rs 1 crore and above, and whose account has been classified as doubtful or loss, a wilful defaulter means a borrower or a guarantor who has committed wilful default and the outstanding amount is Rs 25 lakh and above.

"The lender shall examine the 'wilful default' aspect in all accounts with outstanding amount of Rs 25 lakh and above or as may be notified by the RBI from time to time, and complete the process of classification/ declaring the borrower as a wilful defaulter within six (6) months of the account being classified as NPA," the RBI's draft norms proposed.

It said the evidence of wilful default needs to be examined by an Identification Committee, to be set up by lenders.

In case of publishing photographs of wilful defaulters, lenders will have to formulate a non-discriminatory board-approved policy that clearly sets out the criteria based on which the photographs of persons classified and declared as wilful defaulters will be published.

The RBI also proposed that no additional credit facility be granted by any lender to a wilful defaulter or any entity with which a wilful defaulter is associated. The bar on additional credit facility shall be effective up to a year after the name of wilful defaulter has been removed from the List of Wilful Defaulters (LWD) by the lender.

"In addition, no credit facility shall be granted for floating of new ventures by any lender to a wilful defaulter or any entity with which a wilful defaulter is associated for a period of five (5) years after the name of wilful defaulter has been removed from the LWD by the lender," the RBI proposed.

As per the norms, wilful defaulters will not be eligible for restructuring of credit facility.

On liability of a guarantor, the draft norms said, "When a default happens in making payment or repayment by the principal debtor, the lender will be able to proceed against the guarantor even without exhausting the remedies against the principal debtor."

In cases where a lender has made a claim on the guarantor on account of the default made by the principal debtor, the liability of the guarantor is immediate.

"In case the said guarantor refuses to comply with the demand made by the lender, such guarantor shall also be considered for classification as a wilful defaulter," the RBI said.

The draft norms proposed that any account included in LWD, where the lender has entered into a compromise settlement with the borrower, will be removed from the list only when the borrower has fully paid the compromise amount.

It said that the lender should complete the investigation from a wilful default angle in every case before transferring the credit facility to other lenders or asset reconstruction companies (ARCs).



The RBI has sought comments on the draft master direction from various stakeholders by October 31.

BIMA SUGAM: IS IT A 'UPI MOMENT' FOR INSURANCE SECTOR, AND HOW WILL IT BENEFIT CUSTOMERS?

The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) claims that the proposed Bima Sugam is a “game changer” and a “UPI moment” for the insurance segment, with ambitions of becoming the largest online market for insurance products and services which has not been practiced anywhere in the world.

The proposed platform is expected to help customers identify the right scheme from a maze of hundreds of products and services, with reduced paperwork.

What's Bima Sugam?

It's an online platform where customers can choose a suitable scheme from multiple options given by various companies. All insurance requirements, including those for life, health, and general insurance (including motor and travel) will be met by Bima Sugam. This platform will help in the settlement of claims, whether it's health coverage or death claims, in a paperless manner on the basis of policy numbers.

Details about insurance schemes are expected to be stored in the platform through the insurance repository initially. This will be followed by a listing of policies.

The overall budget for Bima Sugam has been hiked to Rs 200 crore from around Rs 85 crore. IRDAI has appointed a committee for the creation of the platform and now plans to go for requests for proposals (RFPs) soon to appoint a service provider for the platform. The service providers will be the technological partners for creating and running a platform to provide all the services in one place.

What's its role and utility for customers?

The proposed platform would act as a single window for the policyholder to manage his/her insurance coverage. It will provide end-to-end solutions for customers' insurance needs i.e., purchase, service, and settlement in a seamless manner.

It will facilitate insurance companies to access the validated and authentic data from various touch points on a real-time basis. The platform will interface for the intermediaries and agents to sell policies and provide services to policyholders, among others, and reduce paperwork.

Commissions on policies are expected to come down, benefiting the customers. The cost of buying policies will come down, insurers say.

Currently, there are hundreds of insurance schemes in the life and non-life sectors. Customers have no idea who is offering the best deal and the pros and cons of different schemes. Bima Sugam will enable them to identify a suitable scheme for the customers in a single platform. They have to spend time talking to agents and visiting the websites of different insurers to select a suitable scheme.



Will the physical mode go away?

Customers will open an insurance account and the policies will be stored in this account, thus obviating the need for physical documents. Further, the paperwork involved in buying a policy will also come down. Settlement of claims and renewal of policies will also become faster as paperwork is reduced drastically, making it easier for the customers.

In short, identifying the right policy, buying it, settling the claims and renewals will be streamlined in online process. The process will be mostly on the lines of demat accounts and online trading in the case of stock markets.

What does the IRDAI say?

IRDAI says Bima Sugam is an electronic marketplace protocol which would universalise and democratise insurance. "This protocol will be connected with India Stack which is a set of APIs (application programming interface) that allows governments, businesses, startups, etc. to utilise the unique digital infrastructure to enable seamless delivery of services. It is envisioned that this e-Market place would enable and empower all insurance stakeholders across insurance value chain," says IRDAI Chairman Debasish Panda.

When is Bima Sugam supposed to be up and running?

IRDAI initially wanted the Bima Sugam to be up and running by January 2023 but postponed it to August 1. It has now postponed the implementation to June 2024. Life insurance and general insurance companies will own a 47.5 per cent stake each, while brokers and agent bodies will own 2.5 per cent each.

While industry observers say it's going to be a challenging job to implement the Bima Sugam as it has to be backed by technology and innovation, they say it will increase insurance penetration in the country. "It's a matter of great concern that 80 per cent of consumers acknowledge insurance's pivotal role in financial security, yet a staggering 94 per cent remain inadequately covered," said Mahesh Kumar Sharma, MD & CEO, SBI Life Insurance, which came out with a study on insurance penetration.

HOW BASMATI IN INDIA IS REAPING THE REWARDS OF RESEARCH

The work of scientists, especially in publicly-funded research institutions, is seen to seldom produce results on the ground. Not for nothing that when the Indian Space Research Organisation's Chandrayaan-3 lander touched down on the moon's surface, it fired the national imagination.

But there are also less heralded success stories of research with tangible impact. Among them is basmati rice, whose annual exports from India have soared, from 0.3-0.35 million tonnes (mt) valued at \$200-250 million to 4.5-4.6 mt worth \$4.7-4.8 billion, in the past three decades.

Much of this has been courtesy of scientists at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI) in New Delhi.

The first revolution

Till the late 1980s, Indian farmers grew traditional basmati varieties having tall plants (150-160 cm), prone to lodging (bending over when heavy with well-filled grains) and yielding barely 10



quintals of paddy an acre over 155-160 days from nursery sowing to harvesting. These included Taraori (also called Karnal Local or HBC-19) and Dehraduni (Type-3).

The breakthrough happened with Pusa Basmati-1 (PB-1), an improved variety released in 1989. Bred by a team of IARI scientists led by E.A. Siddiq, it was a cross between Karnal Local and Pusa-150, a high-yielding non-basmati line. With a plant height of 100-105 cm, PB-1 didn't lodge, yielded 25-26 quintals grain per acre and matured in 135-140 days.

IARI scientists, from the late 1960s when the legendary M.S. Swaminathan was its director, had sought to combine traditional basmati's unique grain attributes (aroma, non-stickiness and elongation upon cooking) with the high-yielding background of modern dwarf varieties. PB-1 grains had only mild aroma, but scored over Taraori in average milled rice kernel length (7.38 mm versus 7.15 mm) and elongation ratio on cooking (2 versus 1.95 times).

At the turn of the century, India was exporting 0.6-0.7 mt of basmati rice fetching \$400-450 million annually, with PB-1's share at roughly 60%.

The second revolution

PB-1 delivered a yield revolution and helped double India's basmati exports. But the real revolution came in 2003, with the release of Pusa Basmati-1121 (PB-1121).

PB-1121 yielded less (20-21 quintals/acre) with a slightly longer maturity (140-145 days). However, its USP was the grain quality: The kernel length averaged 8 mm that elongated 2.7 times to about 21.5 mm on cooking. A cup of milled PB-1121 grains gave 4.5 cups of cooked rice, as against 4 for PB-1 and 3.7 for Taraori.

The new variety's true potential was realised by KRBL Ltd. The company not only sourced PB-1121's seeds from its lead breeder Vijay Pal Singh for further multiplication and contract cultivation, but also created a special 'India Gate Classic' brand for what was billed as the world's longest rice grain. Since a few kernels could fill up whole plates, giving extra volume for the dollar, overseas buyers also lapped it up. KRBL did for PB-1121 what United Riceland had for the traditional Taraori variety, which it was exporting since the 1980s under the 'Tilda' brand.

Between 2001-02 and 2013-14, India basmati rice exports surged from 0.7 mt to 3.7 mt, and from \$390 million to \$4.9 billion in value terms. Over 70% of that was from PB-1121.

The third revolution

In 2013, the IARI, this time under its current director Ashok Kumar Singh, released Pusa Basmati-1509 (PB-1509). It yielded just as much as PB-1, with the milled rice length before and after cooking comparable to PB-1121's. But PB-1509's seed-to-grain duration was just 115-120 days.

Being an early-maturing high-yielding variety made PB-1509 advantageous for farmers, as they could now take an extra crop.

Satyavan Sehrawat, a farmer from Daryapur Kalan village in Northwest Delhi, sows the nurseries for PB-1509 in mid-May and transplants its seedlings a month later. After the mature paddy is harvested in mid-September, he plants a 70-75 day crop of either cauliflower or fodder maize yielding 125-150 quintals and 180-200 quintals per acre respectively. That still gives him the flexibility to sow wheat by early-December.



Other crop combinations being adopted by farmers after harvesting of PB-1509 include planting of a three-month potato crop in the first week of October, followed by sunflower, sweet corn or onion in early-January and maturing in 90-100 days.

Breeding for disease resistance

In the last few years, IARI scientists have focused on preserving the yield gains from their improved basmati varieties by incorporating genes for disease resistance.

PB-1121, for instance, has become susceptible to bacterial leaf blight. To control it, the scientists have sought to transfer genes from landrace cultivars and wild relatives of paddy that are resistant to this bacterial disease. Such genes have been identified through a technique called marker-assisted selection.

In 2021, IARI released Pusa Basmati-1885 and Pusa Basmati-1847. These were basically PB-1121 and PB-1509 having “in-built resistance” against bacterial blight as well as rice blast fungal disease. Both of them incorporated two bacterial blight-resistant genes Xa21 and xa13, derived from a wild rice species (*Oryza longistaminata*) and a traditional indica landrace (BJ1) respectively. They also carried two other genes Pi2 and Pi54 against blast, similarly sourced and transferred from an indica rice cultivar (5173) and landrace (Tetep).

In-built resistance to bacterial blight and blast through such marker-assisted backcross breeding means farmers no longer have to use streptomycin or tetracycline combinations and fungicides such as tricyclazole, azoxystrobin and picoxystrobin. Minimising the spraying of crop protection chemical also helps protect the premium value of Indian basmati in the global market.

Risk factors

There’s no minimum support price (MSP) for basmati paddy. Also, its rice is mostly exported with only a limited domestic market.

Thanks to the work of IARI scientists, basmati grain yields, at 25 quintals per acre, are only marginally below the 30 quintals for normal Parmal (non-basmati) varieties. At a market price of Rs 3,000/quintal (against the Rs 2,203 MSP for Grade A non-basmati paddy) and corresponding cultivation costs of Rs 30,000 per acre (Rs 25,000), basmati growers probably make more money.

But these farmers are also more exposed to the vagaries of the market and government policy with regard to exports. The recent restrictions – not allowing basmati shipments priced below \$1,200 per tonne – are only a pointer to that.

EXPRESS VIEW ON STOCK LIMITS ON WHEAT: GOING BACKWARDS

Indian farmers, according to the Agriculture Ministry, harvested a record 112.7 million tonnes (mt) of wheat in 2022-23. Government agencies bought only 26.2 mt of that crop, as against the all-time-high procurement of 43.3 mt two years ago. Together with the ban on wheat exports since May 2022, these should have translated into higher open market supplies, exerting downward pressure on prices. Yet, recent government actions suggest the opposite.

In June, stock limits were clamped on wheat, with wholesale traders and big chain retailers not being permitted to hold more than 3,000 tonnes. Late last week, this limit was further lowered to 2,000 tonnes “to ensure that no artificial scarcity of wheat is created in the country”. It raises the question: If domestic market availability based on official production estimates is more than

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



adequate, why should there be any “artificial scarcity” fears or need to prevent “hoarding and unscrupulous speculation” in the cereal?

The issue isn’t simply about government output data probably not squaring with ground reality that points to upward pressure on prices. Of greater concern is how government policy and approach towards agriculture has changed.

The Narendra Modi government, only three years ago, had passed the three farm reform laws. Not only were farmers granted the freedom to sell their produce anywhere and to anyone, private agri-businesses could also now purchase directly from them.

Today, in their place, there are export bans/curbs on wheat, non-basmati rice, sugar and onion, even as tur and urad pulses too have been brought under stock limits. If these weren’t enough, a floor price of \$1,200 per tonne, below which exports aren’t allowed, has been imposed on basmati rice that is hardly consumed by low-income households.

The farm laws may have been repealed following protests that largely resulted from poor communication. But the retrograde “supply-side” actions of the last one year or more cannot be blamed on the farm unions. Worry over food inflation becoming a potent issue in the run-up to national elections has led to the government disowning even the spirit of the farm laws.

Officialdom has been empowered to do whatever it takes in the name of fighting food inflation — regardless of the the long-term consequences. Will these incentivise agri-businesses to invest in warehousing and processing capacities or develop export markets for grown-in-India produce? The government needs to take a call on this — and also on whether it sees agriculture as a problem or an opportunity.

EXPORT BANS AND STOCKING LIMITS: ARE THEY WORKING?

A policy brief issued by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations said that the recent steps taken by the government to curb inflation, such as wheat and rice export bans and increasing export duties, were “knee-jerk approaches rather than a well-thought-out strategy”. It argued for a rational trade policy to contain food inflation which takes into account both consumers and producers.

In August 2023, retail inflation accelerated to 6.83%, which is higher than the ceiling of 6%. As food and beverages carries a 57% weightage in India’s retail inflation calculation, and food inflation was 9.94%, rapid acceleration in that segment had a severe impact on retail inflation.

To date, the Indian government has implemented a series of actions aimed at controlling food inflation such as prohibiting the export of wheat in May 2022 and halting the export of broken rice in September 2022. Additionally, in June 2023, the government imposed stocking limits on wheat traders and millers. In July 2023, an export ban was placed on non-basmati white rice, followed by a 20% export duty on parboiled rice. In August 2023, a Minimum Export Price of \$1,200 per tonne was set for basmati rice, along with a 40% export duty on onions.

Due to heatwaves, the production of wheat has suffered in the last two years. Wheat procurement by the government has also been low in the last two cycles. Wheat inflation was 9.22% in August. All this prompted the government to ban wheat exports in May 2022, argues the brief. “But this sudden ban on wheat exports, instead of bringing wheat inflation down, led to greater uncertainty in the market and wheat inflation surged to 15.7 percent in August 2022, when GOI also banned



exports of wheat flour (atta) products,” says the policy brief. Just before the harvest season, wheat inflation accelerated to 25.4% in February 2023. Following this, the government off-loaded wheat under the Open Market Sales Scheme at much cheaper prices and announced wheat stocking limits, says the policy brief. While these measures did bring down inflation, the report argues that the implications of such measures on farmers who bore the brunt have to be taken into account.

Data from the report shows that non-basmati exports increased from 1.38 MMT in FY20 to 6.40 MMT in FY23, by 363%. The report argues that in the fiscal year 2023, the per-tonne export value for non-basmati rice stood at \$344, falling below India's Minimum Support Price (MSP) for rice. This indicates that millers may be sourcing rice directly from farmers or that there could be an increase in rice supply due to potential distribution leakages from the expanded PMGKAY free rice programme.

In July 2023, when rice inflation was 13%, the government banned the export of non-basmati rice. Yet, inflation remained at 12.5%. Rather than imposing export duty and gradually increasing its impact, the government called for a ban which created panic among the African and Indian diaspora in the U.S., says the report.

42.3% OF GRADUATES UNDER 25 UNEMPLOYED, FINDS LATEST STATE OF WORKING INDIA REPORT

Even as the overall unemployment rate reduced to 6.6 per cent in 2021-22 from 8.7 per cent in 2017-18, over 42 per cent of India's graduates under 25 were unemployed in 2021-22, revealed the “State of Working India 2023” report by Azim Premji University's Centre for Sustainable Employment released on Wednesday. With regards to women's participation in the workforce, the report stated that after the coronavirus pandemic, 60 per cent of women were self-employed as compared to 50 per cent before the pandemic.

While this indicates an increase in women's workforce participation, it was accompanied by a decline in self-employment earnings, which in 2022 were only 85 per cent of what they were in the first quarter of 2019 reflecting the impact of distress induced by the pandemic.

Also, there has been an upward trend in intergenerational mobility, but the trend has been weaker for workers belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes categories as compared to workers belonging to general castes.

For unemployment based on education and age groups, the report stated that 42.3 per cent of graduates under 25 are unemployed whereas the figure stands at 21.4 per cent for those who have completed higher secondary education in the same age group. Notably, with lower educational qualifications, the rate of unemployment also decreased.

Speaking to The Indian Express, Rosa Abraham, co-author of the report and among the principal investigators for the India Working Survey, explained, “There are two things that are potentially happening here— one is of course that as a graduate your aspirations and ambition for the kind of work you want to do and the minimum wage you'd demand is much higher. So if the economy is not generating such jobs, they may choose to be unemployed.”

A second potential reason for this, according to Abraham, could be that those getting graduate-level education come from high-income households or with at least one parent with a good job. “For those kinds of young people, they have the luxury to stay unemployed. They don't necessarily



have to bring in money so which is why you see higher unemployment numbers for that category,” Abraham said.

With regards to intergenerational upward mobility, 75.6 per cent of SC/ST men in casual wage work also had sons involved in casual wage work in 2018. In comparison, the figure stood at 86.5 per cent in 2004, indicating that sons of casual wage workers belonging to SC/ST category have moved to other kinds of employment, most notably informal regular wage work.

The drop in this figure is more significant for the general caste category, from 83.2 per cent in 2004 to 53 per cent in 2018. “One heartening thing to see is that between 2004 and 2018, there has been an upward mobility trend. This is great to see but another thing is that this kind of upward mobility is far truer for general castes. It is still there for SC/ST but to a smaller extent,” Abraham said.

On caste-wise participation in the workforce, the report observed that while the share of SC workers in casual wage work has reduced significantly between 1983 and 2021, the reduction has been more significant for general caste workers. For instance, in 2021, 40 per cent of SC workers were involved in casual employment as compared to 13 per cent of general caste workers. Furthermore, around 22 per cent of SC workers were regular wage workers as opposed to 32% of general caste workers.

According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2021-22, the unemployment rate in India stood at 4.1 per cent for that period. The State of Working India report used various data sources like surveys conducted by the National Statistical Office including Employment-Unemployment Surveys and Periodic Labour Force Surveys along with the India Working Survey, which is a collaborative project between researchers at Azim Premji University, IIM Bangalore, and University of Western Australia.

“The report looks at the nature of economic growth in India. One thing that stands out is that economic growth has not guaranteed employment. With every percentage increase in GDP, the capacity to generate jobs has systematically declined,” Abraham said. She added that even when there has been movement of the labour force out of agriculture, workers have not been able to move into salaried employment, a trend that was present before the pandemic as well.

“What we do see at the global level, and especially in India, is that whatever salaried work is being generated has tended to be informal salaried work. You would think that salaried work should come with a contract and other benefits, but increasingly what we are seeing is that good salaried jobs are less and less prominent,” she said.

PM MODI LAUNCHES VISHWAKARMA SCHEME FOR TRADITIONAL ARTISANS AND CRAFTSPERSONS, URGES PEOPLE TO BE ‘VOCAL FOR LOCAL’

Stating it was the need of the hour that ‘Vishwakarmas’ are recognised and supported, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday launched the PM Vishwakarma Scheme for providing collateral-free loans and skills training to 18 categories of traditional artisans and craftspersons.

The scheme has a Rs 13,000 crore outlay over five years up to 2027-28. Speaking while inaugurating Yashobhoomi, or the India International Convention Centre at Delhi’s Dwarka, Modi also said that India is on its way to becoming a major destination for conference tourism and the new centre, along with the ‘Bharat Mandapam’, will be a medium for showcasing India of the future.



Noting the growing demand for handmade products, Modi said big global companies sublet their work to small enterprises. “This outsourced work should come to our Vishwakarma friends and they become a part of the global supply chain; we are working for this. That is why this scheme is an effort to take the Vishwakarma friends into the modern age,” he said at the inauguration event, which coincided with Vishwakarma Jayanti and his own birthday.

India’s current global share of conference tourism is only 1 per cent, Modi said, adding that international exhibition centres like Yashobhoomi and Bharat Mandapam will increase that share. “For artisans joining virtually from rural areas, I want to tell them that this centre is going to showcase your art in front of the entire world. It will play an important role in making India’s local products global,” Modi said.

He further said the dedication to ‘vocal for local’ is the responsibility of the entire country. “First we have to be vocal for local and then we will have to take the local global,” he added. The government at the Centre prioritises the “development of the deprived”, the prime minister said.

He also highlighted the ‘One District, One Product’ scheme and mentioned opening the banking channels for street vendors through the PM Svanidhi Scheme. “Modi stands for those who have nobody to care about them,” the prime minister said. He said that he was here to serve, give a life of dignity and ensure that service delivery happens without fail. “This is Modi’s guarantee,” an official statement quoting him said.

The PM Vishwakarma Scheme will allow artisans to attend a five-day skilling workshop, a voucher to buy toolkits, and the provision for guarantee-free loans of up to Rs 3 lakh.

Under the MSME Ministry, the PM Vishwakarma scheme is aimed at 18 categories of artisans and craftspeople like carpenters, boat makers, blacksmiths, potters, stone sculptors, weavers, and garland makers. For the skills development component, the scheme will host a 5-day training workshop for beneficiaries with a daily stipend of Rs 500. It will also provide them with a voucher of Rs 15,000 to buy toolkits necessary for their craft. “I request the artisans to buy only Made in India toolkits and from GST registered stores,” PM Modi appealed in his speech.

Under the financial assistance component of the scheme, beneficiaries would first be eligible for an interest-free loan of Rs 1 lakh, which they would have to repay within 18 months. Upon repayment, they would qualify for a second tranche of loan worth Rs 2 lakh at an interest rate of 5 per cent. Finance minister Sitharaman added that beneficiaries would also get a subsidy of up to 8 per cent of the interest amount. She added that the verification of beneficiaries would be done at three levels, which are the gram panchayat, district collector, and state levels. “There will be committees identifying these people and making the final list of beneficiaries,” she said.

Furthermore, the financial assistance component of the PM Vishwakarma scheme is guarantee-free. “When banks don’t ask for your guarantee, that is because Modi gives the guarantee,” the prime minister said.

Under the scheme, a concessional rate of interest of 5 per cent will be charged from the beneficiary with an interest subvention cap of 8 per cent to be paid by the Ministry of Micro Small and Medium Enterprises. The credit guarantee fees will be borne by the Centre. The scheme is expected to benefit about 30 lakh families of traditional artisans and craftsmen, including weavers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, laundry workers, and barbers.



The prime minister also pointed out the importance of artisans in modern times, observing that their craft continues to be relevant even as there is progress in technology. “No matter how much technology advances, these artisans will always be needed. These days, even with refrigerators, people prefer drinking from (earthen) pots,” he said.

Referring to the upcoming festivities in the country, such as Ganesh Chaturthi, Dhanteras, Deepawali and others, the prime minister urged people to buy local products, especially those to which the Vishwakarmas have contributed.

Alongside the scheme, PM Modi also launched postal stamps inspired by the scheme and a toolkit booklet for artisans written in various languages. He also awarded the PM Vishwakarma certificate to several artisans, including a tailor from Jammu and Kashmir, a boat maker from Kerala, a basket maker from Tripura and a blacksmith from Punjab. He also undertook a walk-through of the exhibition – Guru-Shishya Parampara and New Technology and inspected the 3D Model of Yashobhoomi. Earlier in the day, the Prime Minister inaugurated the extension of the Delhi Airport Metro Express line from Dwarka Sector 21 to a new metro station ‘Yashobhoomi Dwarka Sector 25’.

During his Independence Day address, Modi had said the Vishwakarma Yojana will be launched in the coming days. Following this, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, chaired by the Prime Minister, had approved the scheme aimed at benefiting individuals skilled in traditional craftsmanship.

In Budget 2023-24, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the PM Vishwakarma Kaushal Samman (PM VIKAS) Yojana for traditional artisans and craftspeople. “For the first time, a package of assistance for them has been conceptualised. The new scheme will enable them to improve the quality, scale and reach of their products, integrating them with the MSME value chain. The components of the scheme will include not only financial support but also access to advanced skill training, knowledge of modern digital techniques and efficient green technologies, brand promotion, linkage with local and global markets, digital payments, and social security. This will greatly benefit the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, women and people belonging to the weaker sections,” she had said.

WHY IS THE GOVERNMENT PUSHING FOR REGULATORY MECHANISMS FOR OTT SERVICES?

The story so far:

On July 7, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) invited responses to a consultation paper it released on a regulatory mechanism for over-the-top (OTT) communication services. The paper also mentions selective banning of these services. Since most stakeholders have submitted their responses to the regulatory body, as the submission date ended on September 1, it is likely to issue guidelines in the coming days on whether OTT services should be regulated or be let to continue to operate as it is.

What happened?

The discussion on the selective banning of OTT services came after a Parliamentary Standing Committee issued a notice to the Department of Telecom (DoT) to explore this option due to the unrest caused by these platforms which have mass reach and impact.



It is important to note that only OTT communication services like WhatsApp, Signal, Meta, Google Meet, Zoom, X, etc. were discussed in the consultation paper and not the 'content' OTTs such as Netflix, Amazon Prime etc. Content regulation is an altogether different subject and it comes under the ambit of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) and not the TRAI.

The TRAI has also asked stake holders to define OTT, and a proposal on cost-sharing mechanisms between Telecom Service Providers (TSPs) and OTT services.

What is the conflict between TSPs and OTTs?

Telecom Service Providers are of the opinion that OTTs should be regulated and charged because they use and thrive on the infrastructure built by operators over the years. Currently, they aren't.

"OTT communications services have led to erosion of revenues for the telcos. These platforms offer users an array of services, sending of Multimedia Messaging Services (MMS), instant messaging to voice and video calls, delivered over the internet. This circumvents the need for traditional telecom services, particularly voice calls and text messages, leading to a significant reduction in the revenue streams of telecom companies," responded the Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI), representing telecom players like Jio, Airtel and Vodafone Idea.

COAI argues, "OTT communication service providers neither contribute to the exchequer nor make investments like the TSPs in spread of network infrastructure in the country. The OTT communication service providers take a free ride on TSP funded networks without contributing to the setting up and maintaining digital infrastructure for access networks."

What is the demand?

"There should be a policy framework to enable fair share contribution from large OTT service providers to telecommunication network operators based on assessable criteria like number of subscribers or data usage. To ensure fairness and compensate for the increased data demands, it is justifiable for OTTs to pay a fair and reasonable fair share charge to TSPs," demanded the COAI.

The funds received by TSPs from OTTs will support the expansion of networks and enhance contribution to the exchequer, the COAI added.

Similarly, the Internet Service Providers Association of India replied, if OTT services are a substitutable service offered by licenced service providers, then such OTT services should be considered as the same services offered under the telecom licence granted by the Government.

That is, all such OTT services should be governed by the same set of rules irrespective of whether they are provided by an operator on its own network or through the internet.

What do others say?

The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) submitted that cost-sharing demands are often articulated through a model where the sending party network pays (SPNP) the network operator. It would essentially mean charging twice for the same service as consumers already pay TSPs for the data they consume. It would add a cost to accessing free or cheap content, a part of which will eventually be passed on to consumers, thus raising the cost of internet usage.

It also goes against the principle of net neutrality that states networks should be neutral to all the information being transmitted through it, said the IAMAI.



The Internet Freedom Foundation has also expressed apprehension for the proposal to selectively ban OTT services.

What is the argument for banning OTT services?

“OTTs obtain the location of the customers and can easily bar access. Once the OTT communication services are under license this barring will be much easier to implement. TSP’s networks are capable of selectively blocking the OTT subject to details like IP addresses provided by the Competent Authority,” the COAI points out.

Government should consider source-level blocking so that the desired outcome may be achieved without any significant difficulties, the COAI added.

The IAMAI believes that there is no need to implement additional regulations governing OTT services, or even a regulatory framework for the selective banning of OTT services. Similarly, the Broadband India Forum (BIF) firmly opposed any selective ban on OTT services as they are adequately regulated under the existing IT Act, 2000, Consumer Protection Act, 2019, and other associated Acts and Rules.

“We submit that the options for selective banning of OTT services should be explored and implemented. OTT providers should implement IT solutions that would allow them to swiftly suspend their services in case of an internet outage,” COAI observed.

WHY AKASA AIR IS FACING TURBULENCE, A YEAR AFTER ITS TAKE-OFF

After a dream run of nearly a year, Akasa Air appears to have hit a bit of turbulence. The fledgling budget carrier had been rapidly expanding its operations and network over the past year, which saw it becoming the fastest to get to a fleet of 20 aircraft, a prerequisite to mount international flights. While the fleet expansion has been impressive, Akasa Air, which was backed by the late billionaire investor Rakesh Jhunjhunwala, appears to be finding it hard to hold on to enough pilots to optimally operate its aircraft, at least for the time being.

Hit by a spate of resignations from pilots over the past few weeks, the airline recently sued some pilots for quitting abruptly without serving their regulation notice periods of six months. The carrier claimed that their sudden exit had led to numerous flight cancellations, resulting in operational losses and damage to its reputation. According to sources, over 40 pilots quit the airline in recent weeks and legal proceedings have been initiated against some of them.

Most of these pilots are understood to have accepted offers from Air India Express, which, like Akasa Air, operates Boeing 737 family of aircraft. Apart from seeking that these pilots be directed to serve the full notice period as mentioned in their contracts, the 13-month-old carrier has also sought crores of rupees in compensation from some of the pilots for loss of operational profits and damage to its reputation.

Akasa Air’s lawyers reportedly went to the extent of telling the Delhi High Court on Tuesday (September 19) that the airline was in crisis due to the pilots’ resignations, and might even shut down as a large number of flights are being affected due to the abrupt resignations. They reportedly informed the court that the airline was forced to cancel nearly 600 flights in August, and might be looking at up to 700 flight cancellations in September.



In August, Akasa Air's market share (by passengers carried) declined to 4.2 per cent from July's 5.2 per cent, pushing it below SpiceJet in the pecking order of domestic carriers. Akasa Air had overtaken SpiceJet in terms of market share in June and was ahead in July as well.

Late Tuesday, however, Akasa Air's Chief Executive Officer Vinay Dube assured employees that the airline was not going to shut down as it is on a strong financial footing and is geared to implement long-term growth plans. Dube also told the employees that Akasa Air currently has enough pilots at various stages of training to operate over 30 aircraft.

At the heart of the headwinds affecting Akasa Air is the scramble for pilots in India. While the newbie airline is trying to carve space for itself in India's booming civil aviation market, established players with deep pockets like IndiGo and the Tata group airlines are implementing significant fleet and network expansion plans of their own.

Air travel in India is soaring and is likely to rise significantly over the next few years, and demand for pilots, particularly experienced ones, is expected to skyrocket. Industry analysts foresee a severe shortage of experienced Indian pilots in the coming years, and smaller and newer airlines like Akasa Air could be relatively more vulnerable than large airline groups.

The Akasa court cases

As things stand, Akasa Air is understood to have filed two court cases. The first is in the Bombay High Court against the pilots who quit the airline without serving the regulation notice period of six months. In that case, the airline is seeking that the pilots must fully serve their notice period before joining another airline.

It is also seeking compensation from pilots for operational losses and damage to the airline's reputation due to the flight disruptions caused by their abrupt exits. According to sources, Akasa Air has claimed up to around Rs 22 crore per pilot in damages.

The second case is before the Delhi High Court, in which the carrier has sought enforcement of the rules stipulated by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) in 2017 mandating notice periods of six months for first officers and one year for captains. There is currently a question mark on their validity as a few pilot unions had moved court against the rules, and the cases are pending before the Delhi High Court.

This is understood to be the reason why the DGCA has been loath to directly intervene and enforce its norms in cases of disagreements over notice periods, even though Akasa Air is reported to have sought the regulator's as well as the aviation ministry's intervention in the matter.

Even as Akasa Air has dragged the pilots to court, many in the community are questioning the validity of the pilots' contracts with the airline, alleging that Akasa Air had in June unilaterally altered the pilots' salary structure, which they see as a breach of contract.

Dube has defended Akasa Air's decision to sue the pilots. In fact, he termed the decision as "employee-centric" with regard to the carrier's current workforce. "Some people have questioned whether it is employee-centric to seek legal remedy against former employees. Since these acts have caused disruption and disrespect to the great work done by our current employees, the most employee-centric thing we can do is to remain fiercely protective of your future and the promise we have made to our customers," Dube said late Tuesday in his e-mail to Akasa Air employees.



“After much deliberation, we have initiated legal remedy against this small set of pilots who have left without serving their mandatory contractual notice period. Their actions were not only in violation of their contract but also the country’s civil aviation regulation. Equally, this is deeply disrespectful to the hard work and utmost integrity that all of you have put in to build our wonderful airline,” Dube told employees.

Akasa’s captain crunch

With the domestic aviation sector turning into a duopoly of IndiGo and the Air India group, both of which have strong financial backing and large-scale networks, smaller and new players like Akasa Air could find it rather challenging to attract and retain the talent they require to grow and capture more of the third-largest and fastest-growing aviation market globally.

At a time when signs of pilot scarcity have begun to surface, smaller carriers are seen as particularly susceptible in the face of rising heat from the industry heavyweights.

Indian airlines, mainly IndiGo and Tata group carriers led by Air India, have nearly 1,500 aircraft on order, which are to be delivered over the next 10 years. Akasa Air is also looking to place a triple-digit aircraft order by the end of this year. This essentially means the country will need thousands of new pilots in that period.

For a standard narrow-body jet of the Airbus A320 family and Boeing 737 family, airlines need to have at least 12 pilots on average. For a wide-body aircraft, the number of pilots needed – captains plus first officers – is in the range of 20 to 30, depending on the range of the aircraft.

A steady supply of additional pilots to match new aircraft inductions is going to be a massive challenge. At the least, it could put additional pressure on the existing and slowly growing pool of pilots. And at the most, it could become a major impediment to airlines’ growth plans amid surging demand for air travel. And most certainly, the scramble for pilots among Indian carriers is only expected to intensify.

Currently, India is estimated to have over 9,000 pilots for a fleet of around 700 planes. Over the next few years, India might require close to 2,000 additional pilots a year to keep up with the expected pace of fleet expansion. But the DGCA currently issues less than 1,000 commercial pilot licenses a year. To make matters worse, the really acute shortage is foreseen for experienced pilots, or captains, who lead the crew and are in charge of the flight. It takes a few years for a pilot to be promoted to captain and the existing Indian airline ecosystem is estimated to produce less than 200 captains a year.

For Akasa Air, the biggest threat is from Air India Express, the low-cost airline of the Air India group, which now has significant financial muscle following the acquisition by the Tata group. With Air India Express and Akasa Air operating similar types of aircraft, it would be easier and quicker for either airline to onboard the other’s pilots. Among major Indian carriers, only Air India Express, Akasa Air, and SpiceJet operate Boeing 737 family jets. IndiGo, Air India, Vistara, and AIX Connect operate Airbus A320 family planes in the single-aisle jet segment.

In his recent e-mail to employees, the Akasa Air CEO described the issue of pilot shortage as something the airline industry “has faced for decades”, adding that the carrier is well-prepared for unforeseen circumstances and has adequate contingency management strategies in place.



LIFE & SCIENCE

NASA SHIFTS UFO DEBATE FROM SENSATIONALISM TO SCIENCE

Last week, lawmakers in the Mexican Congress heard testimony from individuals suggesting the possibility of the existence of extraterrestrials. These individuals hailed from Mexico, the U.S., Japan, and Brazil. Journalist José Jaime Maussan presented two boxes that encased what he claimed were mummies found in Peru, of beings that he and others considered “non-human beings that are not part of our terrestrial evolution.” Similar findings in the past and in the area turned out to be the remains of mummified children. Scientists have called Mr. Maussan’s claim fraudulent and said that the mummies may have been looted from grave sites.

Two days later, in an unrelated event, a NASA panel recommended in a report that the U.S. space agency increase its efforts to gather information on unidentified objects in the sky, labelled ‘Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena,’ or UAP, by the government, and play a larger role in helping the Pentagon spot them. More importantly, the report, the result of a year-long study, also found no evidence that past UAP observations concerned objects of extraterrestrial origin. “We want to shift the conversation about UAPs from sensationalism to science,” NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said last week.

Regarding the reliability of UFO/UAP sightings, the report said: “UAP data are rarely, if ever, collected in a concerted effort to understand the phenomenon; they are usually coincidental observations.” Curiously, such observations, collated by a self-reporting database called ‘The National UFO Reporting Center Online Database’ (NUFORC), have been confined mostly to the U.S. Of them, close to 90% are from the U.S. Most of the observations misconstrued natural phenomena or human-made objects that the observer was unaware of. The database also includes 479 self-reported observations of UFOs from India.

The session in the Mexican Congress took place two months after a similar one before the U.S. Congress, in which a former Air Force intelligence officer claimed that his country has probably been aware of “non-human” activity since the 1930s.

Another famous UAP reported in recent times is the so-called ‘GoFast’ video, recorded by navy aviators onboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt. It shows an object flying just above the ocean at great speed. The recent NASA study debunked this claim by using trigonometry to determine that the object was travelling at a normal speed and was probably drifting with the wind.

It is precisely to debunk such claims using science that the U.S. government has done a U-turn on public information on UAPs after decades of stonewalling and deflecting. The Pentagon has been actively investigating reported sightings in recent years by military aviators. NASA also named a new director of research into UAPs last week, Mark McNerney.

In fact, the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO), under the U.S. Department of Defence, has been investigating and debunking UFO sightings since 2022. AARO has classified UFO/UAP sightings between 1996-2023 based on altitude and morphology to streamline such observations. Of the more than 800 unclassified sightings collected by AARO thus far, only “a small handful cannot be immediately identified as known human-made or natural phenomena,” according to the NASA study.



MOONQUAKES – TESTAMENT TO LUNAR ORDEAL

An earthquake is caused when tectonic plates shift. But quakes themselves aren't restricted to the earth. For example, small tremors have also been detected on the moon. They aren't the handiwork of tectonic plates, however.

Instead, the moon is practically groaning from extreme temperature differences – from 121 degrees to –133 degrees Celsius, a breathtaking range of 250 degrees Celsius. The resulting strain leads to seismic activities called moonquakes.

They can also occur due to meteors striking the lunar surface. Indeed, the surface is pockmarked with thousands of craters – not surprising because the moon's lack of an atmosphere allows even small impacts to be powerful enough to deform the ground.

A study published earlier this month unearthed yet another cause. Researchers found that the Apollo 17 lunar lander module, launched in 1972, may also have triggered some tremors. Scientists re-analysed the data collected by its instruments using artificial intelligence. They found that the lander itself set off very feeble seismic movements on the moon as it adjusted to the natural satellite's drastic temperature changes.

As countries around the world – including India – plan to establish outposts on the lunar surface, studying moonquakes and their causes is crucial. If nothing else, it will help us build structures on the moon that don't topple if a lander descends nearby.

AN ANCIENT LANDMASS BROKE-UP, GIVING US PINK DIAMONDS

Scientists said on Tuesday they have found the “missing ingredient” for pink diamonds, some of the world's most expensive stones due their rarity and beauty, and the discovery could help find more.

More than 90% of all the pink diamonds ever found were discovered at the recently closed Argyle mine in the remote northwest of Australia.

But exactly why Argyle, which unlike most other diamond mines doesn't sit in the middle of a continent but on the edge of one, produced so many pink gems has remained a mystery.

In a new study published in the journal Nature Communications, a team of Australia-based researchers said the pink diamonds were brought to the earth's surface by the break-up of the first supercontinent around 1.3 billion years ago.

Hugo Olierook, a researcher at Curtin University in the state of Western Australia and the study's lead author, told AFP that two of the three ingredients for forming pink diamonds had already been known.

The first ingredient is carbon, and it must be more than 150 km deep. The second is just the right amount of pressure, to damage the otherwise clear diamonds. The missing ingredient was the event that sent the diamonds shooting up to the surface.

The researchers used a laser thinner than a human hair to probe tiny crystals in an Argyle rock sample supplied by the mine's owner, Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto.



By measuring the age of elements in the crystals, the researchers determined that Argyle was 1.3 billion years old. That lines up with the break-up of the world's first supercontinent, known as Nuna. In Nuna, "just about every single landmass on the earth was squashed together," Olierook said.

The immense pressure that twisted colour into the diamonds occurred during collisions between western Australia and northern Australia 1.8 billion years ago. When Nuna started to break up 500 million years later, it re-aggravated the "scar" from that event, Olierook said.

Magma shot up through this old scar "like a champagne cork going off", taking the diamonds along for the ride, he added.

Over the last 200 years, people have mostly looked for diamonds in the centre of massive continents. But knowing the "missing ingredient" for pink diamonds could assist future efforts to find the rare stones, Olierook said.

Old mountain belts marking Nuna's breakup near the edges of continents have the potential to be home to a new "pink diamond paradise", he said, naming Canada, Russia, southern Africa and Australia as possible locations.

CHINA, U.S. AND INDIA ABSENT AT U.N.'S CLIMATE AMBITION SUMMIT

The Climate Ambition Summit (CAS) in New York, as part of the United Nations General Assembly, that concluded on Thursday, was marked by the absence of major economies whose actions significantly influence the future of global emissions.

China, the U.S. and India — which collectively account for about 42% of global greenhouse gas emissions and are the top three emitters in that order — were all absent from the summit that was designed, according to the U.N., to "showcase leaders who are movers and doers ... and have credible actions, policies and plans to keep the 1.5 degrees Celsius goal of the Paris Agreement alive and deliver climate justice to those on the front lines of the climate crisis".

In the run-up to the summit, nearly 100 heads of state had written in response to a call from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to ramp up action to address the climate crisis. However, Only representatives from 34 states and seven institutions were given the floor on the day of the summit.

India's neighbours Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan were among the listed speakers and emerging economies such as South Africa and Brazil were also on the list. The European Union, Germany, France and Canada were also on the podium.

The criteria for countries to be considered for a speaking slot at the summit were that they would be expected to present updated pre-2030 Nationally Determined Contributions (as agreed in Glasgow); updated net-zero targets; energy transition plans with commitments to no new coal, oil and gas; fossil fuel phase-out plans; more ambitious renewable energy targets; Green Climate Fund pledges; and economy-wide plans on adaptation and resilience.

All the "main emitters" and notably all G-20 governments would be asked to commit to presenting, by 2025, more ambitious economy-wide Nationally Determined Contributions featuring absolute emissions cuts and covering all gases.



India last updated its climate pledges in 2022 of reducing emissions intensity — or the volume of emissions per unit of gross domestic product (GDP) — by 45% from 2005 levels by 2030, a 10% increase from what it agreed to in 2015.

Climate solutions

The government committed to meet 50% of its electric power needs from renewable, non-fossil fuel energy sources — up from 40% committed at the Paris agreement. It promised to create an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of Co₂-equivalent [GtCO₂e] through additional forest and tree cover by 2030.

“Our focus here is on climate solutions — and our task is urgent. Humanity has opened the gates to hell,” Mr. Guterres said in his address. “Climate action is dwarfed by the scale of the challenge. If nothing changes, we are heading towards a 2.8-degree temperature rise — towards a dangerous and unstable world.”

OVER 75% OF EUROPEAN BUMBLEBEE SPECIES THREATENED

More than 75% of European bumblebee species may be threatened in the next 40-60 years according to worst-case-scenario projections of bumblebee populations, according to a paper published in Nature.

Degradation of habitats and alterations of climate due to human activity are identified as key drivers of these estimated population declines.

The findings underscore the importance of climate change mitigation policies to protect bumblebees.

Key drivers of wildlife

“Our results underline the critical role of global change mitigation policies as effective levers to protect bumblebees from manmade transformation of the biosphere,” the authors write. Around 90% of all wild plants and most crop plants benefit from pollination by animals. The bumblebee (*Bombus*) is a genus of bees considered to be especially important for the pollination of crops in the cold and temperate regions of the northern hemisphere.

Human-generated transformations of natural habitats and increases in temperature are implicated as key drivers of wildlife collapse; understanding the trajectory of insect populations is important for devising conservation efforts.

Guillaume Ghisbain from Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium and others quantify past, present and future ecological suitability of Europe for bumblebees. Observational data cover the periods 1901-1970 (past) and 2000-2014 (‘present day’), and projections are made up to 2080. Around 38-76% of European bumblebee species currently considered as non-threatened are projected to see their ecologically suitable territory shrink by at least 30% by 2061-2080.

In particular, species from Arctic and alpine environments may be at the verge of extinction in Europe, with an expected loss of at least 90% of their territory in the same period. The authors report that parts of Scandinavia may potentially become refuges for displaced or threatened species, although it remains unclear whether these regions may be affected by human activity-driven changes.



OLDEST YET FOSSILS OF A PLANT-EATING DINOSAUR FOUND IN RAJASTHAN

In a paper published recently in Scientific Reports, scientists from IIT Roorkee have characterised dinosaur fossils from the Middle Jurassic period, found in the Thar desert near the Jaisalmer Basin by the Geological Survey of India. They discovered that they had uncovered remains of a sauropod dinosaur, which is the same clade as the long-necked herbivores in Jurassic Park – only these happened to be the oldest known fossils of this particular kind of sauropod.

Belonging to the family Dicraeosauridae and from the superfamily Diplodocoidea, these fossils are the first dicraeosaurid sauropods to have been found in India. And at 167 million years old, they are the oldest known diplodocoid fossils in the world. The scientists named the dinosaur *Tharosaurus indicus*, with *Tharo* deriving from the Thar desert; *saurus* from the Greek 'sauros', or lizard; and *indicus* from its Indian origin. The fossils were found by Triparna Ghosh, Pragma Pandey, and Krishna Kumar from the Geological Survey of India.

India has also been home to a few early, more primitive sauropods, like *Kotasaurus* and *Barapasaurus*. They were both discovered in the Kota Formation, a geological rock unit in Telangana, from the Early Jurassic period. "We have extremely primitive sauropods, and now we have a dicraeosaur, which is more evolved," Dr. Datta said. "When we see this in conjunction with the arrangement of the continents in the Middle Jurassic, things start to get interesting."

Importance of Indian landmass

Some 167 million years ago when *Tharosaurus* lived, India was not where it is now; it was part of a group of continents in the southern hemisphere with Africa, South America, Madagascar, and Antarctica, together called Gondwanaland. "Considering the fact that we already have more primitive sauropods in India and now the oldest diplodocoid, it is highly likely that India was the site of radiation of these diplodocoid dinosaurs to other parts of the world," Dr. Datta said.

The scientists reasoned that these diplodocoid sauropods could have originated in India during the Middle Jurassic period and used the land connections at the time to migrate to Madagascar, Africa, and South America. After that they could have made their way to North America and the rest of the world.

Another piece of evidence that supports their theory was that diplodocoid fossils in other continents like Africa, the Americas, and Asia come from a younger geological interval. This increases the possibility that the Indian landmass was the site for the *Tharosaurus*' early radiation.

That along with the fact that archaic sauropod fossils from during the start of the Jurassic period –like of *Kotasaurus* and *Barapasaurus* – were also found in India suggests that this diplodocoid group of sauropods could have evolved and originated in India.

"This discovery of a new dinosaur from the Middle Jurassic in Rajasthan should not be seen in isolation; it must be looked at in conjunction with previously discovered dinosaurs in India," Dr. Bajpai said. "Together, the record from India suggests that the Indian landmass was one of the most important places for the early evolutionary history of sauropod dinosaurs."



EXPLAINED: HOW SCIENTISTS ARE PLANNING TO 'RESURRECT' THE EXTINCT TASMANIAN TIGER

Scientists in the US and Australia have embarked on a \$15-million project to resurrect the thylacine or Tasmanian Tiger, a marsupial that went extinct in the 1930s, using gene-editing technology. The ambitious project aims to reintroduce the animal to its native place Tasmania to revive the region's lost ecological balance.

Announced by the Texas-based Colossal Biosciences, which is also behind the Wolly Mammoth resurrection project announced last year, the project will be conducted with the partnership of the Thylacine Integrated Genetic Restoration Research Lab at the University of Melbourne. The initiative is supported by many, including actor Chris Hemsworth, an investor of Colossal.

Interestingly, this is not the first attempt to revive thylacines. In 1999, an Australian scientist, Dr Michael Archer, embarked on an unsuccessful journey to resurrect the animal using cloning technology from a perfectly preserved specimen in a museum.

So, what are Tasmanian Tigers and how did they become extinct?

Tasmanian Tiger (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*), the only animal in the Thylacinidae family to survive in modern times, was a marsupial mammal that raises young ones in a pouch.

Even though the species earned its nickname Tasmanian Tiger because of the stripes along its back, it was a slow-paced carnivorous that usually hunted alone or in pairs at night. The sharply clawed animal had a dog-like head and ate kangaroos, other marsupials, small rodents, and birds.

Once widespread in the grass and woodlands of continental Australia extending north to New Guinea and south to Tasmania, the animal's fate changed after the European Colonisation of Australia.

The animals were reported to have eaten poultry of farmers, and were killed following official authorisation. In 1830, Van Diemens Land Company announced a bounty on the animal. Years later in 1888, the Tasmanian Parliament itself passed an official bounty of 1 pound on thylacines.

A series of photographs by naturalist Harry Burrell published in the 1920s showcasing thylacines catching poultry and other birds also explains the unpopularity of this animal among the public, even though the authenticity of these pictures was questioned later.

Apart from this, competition with another animal, the Dingo, is also considered a reason for its extinction.

The last wild thylacine was killed between 1910 and 1920. Following this, the Australian government declared the thylacine a protected species in July 1936. But two months after the announcement, Benjamin, the last captive animal, died at the Beaumaris Zoo in Hobart. The official declaration of the animal's extinction was in the 1980s.

The animal was at the top of the food chain, and hence played a significant role in balancing the ecosystem of its habitat by removing the weak animals and maintaining species diversity. Also known as the apex predator for the same reason, its disappearance from the food chain resulted in Trophic Downgrading — causal degradation of an ecosystem that occurs when higher trophic level animals are removed from the food chain, resulting in loss or exponential growth of other species.



Trophic Downgrading also results in disruption of biogeochemical cycles, wildfires, growth of invasive species, and carbon sequestration, among other effects.

As the thylacine was the only apex predator in its ecosystem, its absence impacted the Tasmanian Devil, which was almost wiped out by a facial tumour disease. The thylacine would have prevented this by removing sick and weak animals from the ecosystem, which would have eventually controlled the spread of the transmissible diseases.

The resurrection process

Even though the last living thylacine died over 86 years ago, many embryos and young specimens of the species have been preserved.

For the de-extinction project, the scientists led by Dr. Andrew Pask, a professor of Epigenetics Biosciences at the University of Melbourne, will be using a genome sequenced from a DNA extracted from a 108-year-old specimen held at Australia's Victoria Museum.

This genome will be compared with the closest living animal of the species– the fat tailed dunnart — to identify all the differences. Once all the differences are identified, scientists will engineer the living cell's DNA where it is different, essentially engineering the extinct species back.

“Once we have the engineered cells, we use stem cell technologies and cloning techniques to turn those cells back into a living animal. While all of these technologies already exist, this is the first time they will be developed for marsupials,” Pask told Indianexpress.com.

The fat-tailed dunnart is a mouse-like species in the Dasyuridae family in Australia. With an average body length of 2.4–3.5 inches, they are one of the smallest carnivorous marsupials.

According to the Colossal, de-extinction will not be complete until the success of the rewilding process – reintroducing the animal to its native habitat — which will ‘stabilise the fragile ecosystem of Tasmania.’

“The thylacine is a great candidate for de-extinction because it only went extinct in 1936 due to human hunting and the ecosystem we are looking to return it to is still intact. Furthermore, we have incredible tissue samples and genomes assembled as well as many additional pelts that are being sequenced for population genomics studies,” Ben Lamm, CEO and co-founder of Colossal said.

Even though the team hasn't set a timeline for the project, it is expected to take much less time than the de-extinction of Woolly Mammoth, considering the gestation of elephants is longer than Dunnarts.

Lamm said the process of the rewilding project needs to be carefully studied, and executed in collaboration with local governments, conservation groups, rewilding experts, ecologists, and indigenous people groups.

“We have started conversations with leading rewilding and conservation groups in Australia and Alaska as well as consultants that work with the local indigenous people groups in both Australia and the broader Arctic circle,” he said.

However, amid praises, many scientists have also raised concerns about the practicality of the technology.



“De-extinction is a fairytale science,” Associate Professor Jeremy Austin from the Australian Centre for Ancient DNA told The Sydney Morning Herald.

“It’s pretty clear to people like me that thylacine or mammoth de-extinction is more about media attention for the scientists and less about doing serious science,” he said.

De-extinction technology; possibilities and challenges

De-extinction, or resurrection biology, is the method of creating a species that went extinct or is endangered, in order to revitalise ecological diversity and balance shattered due to reasons ranging from biodiversity loss to climate change. While cloning is the most widely used method of de-extinction, genome editing and selective breeding are also considered effective ways.

The Pyrenean ibex, a subspecies of Spanish ibex, was one of the first extinct animals that have been resurrected using somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT), even though the baby Ibex died minutes after its birth from lung defect.

Apart from Colossal’s project to resuscitate Woolly Mammoths and thylacines, a cooperation between the Dutch Foundation partnered with multiple universities, called Tauros Programme, is currently working to breed a cattle species similar to the extinct wild ancestor of domestic cattle, aurochs.

Other candidates for de-extinction are Maclear’s rat, an extinct large rat species endemic to Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean, the passenger pigeon, a type of migratory bird in North America, and the quagga, which is a subspecies of plains zebra.

One of the challenges of de-extinction is that reintroducing the species to its former habitat may make it an invasive species, which will also impact the balance of the current ecological system.

EXPRESS VIEW ON GOOGLE’S AI INTEGRATION: CHATBOT IN INBOX

Having played catch-up on AI since OpenAI’s low-key but hugely successful launch of ChatGPT in November last year, could tech behemoth Google finally sprint ahead? ChatGPT was an instant hit and captured users’ imaginations. The response to Google’s own AI-powered chatbot, Bard, hurriedly released in March this year, was much less enthusiastic — a factual error about the James Webb Space Telescope in the very first demo caused the stock of Alphabet, Google’s parent company, to drop by 7 per cent. With the announcement that it is integrating Bard, much improved since, with its popular products such as Gmail, Docs and YouTube, Google hopes to regain some of its lost sheen.

The “trailer” shared by CEO Sundar Pichai as part of the announcement makes a compelling case for this move. Want to plan that long-pending trip with your college friends? Just ask Bard to make an itinerary, with all the relevant flight and hotel information pulled up from Google’s own products. Need highlights from a client’s feedback email? Use Bard to look through Gmail. Other AI-powered chatbots, including ChatGPT and Microsoft’s Bing, can perform similar mundane tasks, but the fact that Google already dominates so much of the digital landscape makes it that much easier for Bard to take over.

It’s also this dominance of the market that might make the average user wary. Even notwithstanding the impact that Google’s ongoing antitrust trial in the US might have on its image — remember the PR crisis that was Meta’s 2021 whistleblower hearing? — concerns regarding



privacy are bound to raise their heads. Data, after all, is the magic ingredient needed to train AI to perform more and more tasks on humans' behalf. In allowing an AI chatbot to be integrated into every segment of their digital lives, from work to leisure to personal relationships, how much control will users be ceding to it? That's the question.

WHAT IS WHATSAPP CHANNELS, THE LATEST FEATURE LAUNCHED BY META

In the week since its launch in India, WhatsApp Channels, a new feature by Meta, is gaining popularity. Prime Minister Narendra Modi joined Channels on Tuesday, and by Wednesday, had over a million followers. According to Meta, Katrina Kaif, Akshay Kumar, the Indian Cricket team, Diljit Dosanjh, and Vijay Deverakonda are among some Indian celebrities to launch their WhatsApp Channels.

What is WhatsApp Channels?

Meta says WhatsApp Channels is “a private way for people to receive updates that matter to them, right within WhatsApp.” While WhatsApp is a popular messaging tool, the latest feature aims to expand the platform's use case, as it lets users follow updates from people and organisations they are interested in without leaving the app.

The feature is essentially a one-way broadcast tool that will share updates on a new tab called Updates, which is separate from the users' chats. It is to be noted that the former Status tab has been entirely replaced by Updates. However, WhatsApp shows the circular Status updates on top of the Updates page.

Meta has said that it will roll out WhatsApp Channels over the next few weeks in over 150 countries, including India. Users will be able to follow channels that are automatically filtered based on their country. They can search channels by name or category. Users will also be able to view channels that are new and popular based on followers, and based on how active they are.

Is WhatsApp Channels safe to use?

Meta claims its aim is to “build the most private broadcast service available”. The company has said the personal information of both admins and followers is protected and who people choose to follow is private. Channel followers' phone number and profile image will not be shown to the admin or other followers.

Updates shared on a channel will be saved for only 30 days.

Admins will have the ability to block screenshots and forwards from their channel. The platform has also made it possible for admins to decide who can follow their channel and if they want their channel to be visible in the directory.

Who can create a WhatsApp Channel?

Although WhatsApp has begun rolling out the feature, it isn't available to everyone yet. For now, WhatsApp wants you to join a waitlist and it will notify you whenever WhatsApp Channels are available to you.

One can share text, images, videos, stickers, and links on their channel, and followers can use emojis to react. Although some features are similar to WhatsApp, it is to be noted that channel updates are one-way broadcasts and not conversations.



How to create a WhatsApp Channel?

After Meta makes WhatsApp Channels available to you, head to the Updates tab and tap on the plus sign opposite to Channels. Select Create Channel, click Continue, and tap through the on-screen prompts. Add a Channel name, which you can change anytime. Add a channel description and icon, and click on Create Channel.

A lot of iPhone users may not be able to see the Updates tab on their WhatsApp even after updating their devices to iOS 17. In that case, restarting the device is recommended.

KEEPING IT AT BAY

A healthy lifestyle that involves moderate alcohol consumption, a healthy diet, regular physical activity, healthy sleep and frequent social connection, while avoiding smoking and too much sedentary behaviour, reduces the risk of depression, new research has found (Nature Mental Health). To better understand the relationship between these factors and depression, the researchers turned to the U.K. Biobank. By examining data over a nine-year period, the team was able to identify seven healthy lifestyle factors linked with a lower risk of depression. Of all of these, having a good night's sleep made the biggest difference, reducing the risk of depression by 22%. Frequent social connection, reduced the risk of depression by 18% and was the most protective against depressive disorder. Moderate alcohol consumption decreased the risk of depression by 11%, healthy diet by 6%, regular physical activity by 14%, never smoking by 20%, and low-to-moderate sedentary behaviour by 13%.

WHO RELEASES REPORT ON GLOBAL IMPACT OF HIGH BP

Approximately four of every five people with hypertension are not adequately treated, but if countries can scale up coverage, 76 million deaths could be averted between 2023 and 2050, the World Health Organization (WHO) said in its first-ever report on the global impact of high blood pressure on Tuesday.

Hypertension is the most important risk factor for death and disability in India, according to a paper in The Lancet, regional health (Southeast Asia), published late last year. It adds that less than one-fourth of hypertensive patients in India had their blood pressure under control during 2016-2020. Though this rate has improved from the previous years' figures, substantial differences exist across regions.

The Lancet paper says the 2019-20 National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) reported a hypertension prevalence of 24% in men and 21% among women, an increase from 19% and 17%, respectively, from the previous round (2015-16). The India Hypertension Control Initiative, a large-scale hypertension intervention under the National Health Mission, has been recognised for its positive work done within the primary healthcare system.

The WHO report states that hypertension affects one in three adults worldwide. This common, deadly condition leads to stroke, heart attack, heart failure, kidney damage and many other health problems. The number of people living with hypertension (blood pressure of 140/90 mmHg or higher or taking medication for hypertension) doubled between 1990 and 2019, from 650 million to 1.3 billion. Nearly half the people with hypertension globally are currently unaware of their condition. More than three-quarters of adults with hypertension live in low- and middle-income countries.



Ways to beat

Recommending ways to win the race, the world organisation states that lifestyle changes such as eating a healthier diet, quitting tobacco and being more active can help lower blood pressure. Some people may need medicines.

“Prevention, early detection and effective management of hypertension are among the most cost-effective interventions in health care and should be prioritised by countries as part of their national health benefit package offered at a primary care level. The economic benefits of improved hypertension treatment programmes outweigh the costs by about 18 to 1,” notes the WHO.

“Hypertension can be controlled effectively with simple, low-cost medication regimens, and yet only about one in five people have controlled it,” WHO director-general said.

Studies have shown that excess salt consumption (over five grams a day) is responsible for 17%-30% of hypertension. While member States are required to achieve a 30% relative reduction in mean population intake of salt by 2025, India is yet to implement many components of WHO’s prescription to cut down salt intake. A study in four Indian States published in 2021 found high salt and sugar content in packaged food items. Making front-of-pack nutrition labelling mandatory, encouraging reformulation of foods to cut down salt, and raising awareness in people to reduce salt intake should be urgently undertaken. India has, however, done well in improving blood pressure control in people with hypertension through the novel India Hypertension Control Initiative (IHCI). Launched in 2018, the IHCI has successfully enrolled 5.8 million hypertensive patients for treatment in 27 States, as of June 2023. Importantly, 48% of patients enrolled at primary health centres and 55% at health wellness centres achieved blood pressure control as of March 2021. It is now important to greatly increase the number of hypertensive people on treatment and keep blood pressure under control.

HOW A TINY WEARABLE IS ALL A 35-YEAR-OLD ENGINEER NEEDS TO TRACK HER BLOOD SUGAR, INSULIN AND LEAD AN ACTIVE, SUGAR-FREE LIFE

Thirty-five-year-old Sakshi Gurtu likes to wear a slightly oversized T-shirt over her multi-pocket jeans. That’s because it helps her tuck in a little device called an insulin pump which delivers the hormone through a thin tube that goes under her skin. “It feels like a part of my body now,” says the Pune-based engineer, who has been living a normal life while managing her Type 1 diabetes for 17 years, a condition where the body loses the capability to secrete the insulin hormone responsible for maintaining blood glucose levels. “It is a lot about self-monitoring and measuring my life every moment. But this pump keeps me relaxed,” she adds as she goes out for her daily walk. With taboos around life-long use of insulin injectables, Sakshi has not only reclaimed her life but is now married to a work colleague.

How does this device help her and many like her? “It leads to better control of HbA1c (average blood glucose over three months) and can deliver insulin easily and accurately. Most importantly, its use provides more flexibility to meals, exercise and your daily schedules. It’s wearable and fuss-free,” says her treating doctor and uncle, Dr Subhash K Wangnoo, head of the Apollo Centre for Obesity, Diabetes, and Endocrinology (ACODE). At present, Sakshi has to calculate the amount of insulin she needs based on the readings from her continuous glucose monitor — a sensor placed just under the skin that can tell her about the ups and downs in her blood glucose levels through the day. She pushes a button, without pricking, to administer the insulin. Some of the latest insulin pumps are tubeless, and some can interact with the glucose data obtained from a continuous



glucose monitor to adjust insulin doses automatically. She plans to switch to the newer AI-enabled one that integrates the pump with the continuous glucose monitor, allowing the machine to calculate the amount of insulin needed on its own. Insulin pumps are now being used as a convenient intervention by even those with severe manifestations of Type 2 diabetes (a lifestyle condition where the body might produce insulin but the cells become resistant to the hormone and is not enough to tackle the glucose levels).

HOW NANDINI, 14, GOT HER LIFE BACK DESPITE HER CANCER PAIN: SHE NOW LAUGHS, CHATS AND HAS HER FAVOURITE FOOD

Fourteen-year-old Nandini Chaturvedi from Madhya Pradesh's Singrauli district is enjoying her favourite food, gets chatty and perky and flashes a warm smile when we meet her. She misses school though. That's where she would meet her friends and romp around the playground. But it has been more than a year since she hasn't met them. Over the past year she has been battling terminal cancer and extreme pain that had bound her to bed. But now, with palliative care at the cancer centre, AIIMS, Delhi, she is happy she can talk to them, engage in banter with her family at home and feel more whole than broken in the time she has left.

"Palliative care is medical caregiving aimed at optimising quality and dignity of life, mitigating pain and helping patients and family deal with a seemingly intractable situation with positivity. One of the challenges with terminal diseases is managing the expectations of the families and making the patients as comfortable as possible. Doctors are trained to treat patients, but they are not taught how to accept that someone is likely to die and ensure they die with dignity," says Dr Sushma Bhatnagar, who heads the cancer centre at AIIMS and has been working to promote palliative care in the hospital. More than the pain-relieving medication, she and her team work on building trust with the family, reconcile with a possible outcome and build awareness on maximising the shared time they all have with terminal patients. Now Nandini's family's goals have changed. Initially, they wanted her to get better, walk and go back to school. They wanted her hair to grow so she could go back to tying ponies or plaits that she loved. Now, they want her to remain free of pain so that she can savour the food she eats, have a good night's sleep and keep smiling for as long as she can. AIIMS is training doctors in 100 districts in North India so that sick patients do not have to travel far to access palliative services. Even Nandini, who has been receiving chemotherapy every 21 days since her treatment started in January, has to travel from Singrauli.

HOW NANDINI BECAME PAIN-FREE

Last August, Nandini reported sharp pain in her left leg, which progressively worsened and crippled her. It was at AIIMS that she was detected with cancer in the left thigh bone. Her doctors knew that her prognosis was not very good. While the treatment continued, the palliative care team at the hospital stepped in to address her pain and to counsel the family on the possibility of her death. When none of the oral morphine pills worked, they gave her a strong, intravenous pain medication. "We broke the cycle of her pain. While she was not disease-free, she was pain-free. And that is very important for the patients as well as their family members. The AIIMS palliative care team uses a scale to quantify the pain of their patients – 0 being pain-free, 4 to 6 being moderate and 7 to 10 severe. At any stage of pain treatment, the first step is to prescribe the most common painkillers available. If the pain persists, a not-so-strong opioid is added to it. The third step on persistence of pain is to add a high potency pain killer. Then we prescribe an intravenous painkiller. Nandini's pain was at level 10," says Dr Bhatnagar. There are alternate pain therapies, too, like transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) or massage for lesser thresholds.

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



CONVINCING THE FAMILY: PRACTICAL DISEASE MANAGEMENT AND DIGNITY OF LIFE

The most important part about palliative care is to communicate with families about the possibility of death, accepting it and then planning to make the most of the time they have with their patient. “Any false hope leads to unnecessary therapies and health expenditure. We need the doctors to give a realistic picture to the patients and their family members and have conversations about how to make the patients as comfortable as possible. It is a group decision and determination to stay together without the isolating and cold confines of a hospital. If you see the ICUs in the cancer department, we do not see a single death there except for the unexpected ones. We counsel our patients to go home and spend their remaining time with family members instead of being restricted to the ICU where family members are not allowed most of the time,” says Dr Bhatnagar.

After staying at AIIMS for a couple of days to help doctors adjust her pain medication, Nandini’s parents take her home. They stay in touch with AIIMS doctors on the phone and bring her when the pain becomes unmanageable again. “It is a day care procedure, and we usually return the next day. This time, however, the pain that had subsided since her treatment at AIIMS, came back. She was back in her bed. She could not eat or speak. Now she is fine again,” says her mother Uma Chaturvedi.

HOW CAN THE AIIMS OUTREACH PROGRAMME HELP?

AIIMS is now extending palliative care training to doctors, nurses and staff at healthcare facilities across 100 north Indian districts as part of the Government’s district-level palliative care programme. The shift will be from just disease management to post-disease rehabilitation and extension of quality of life. “First, we will be generating awareness of what it is, then we will be preparing the staff and teach them how to help families and patients come to terms with the most important component of palliative care, which is acceptance,” says Dr Bhatnagar, who is part of the training project in collaboration with the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

The focus will be on communication. “We will train them how to talk to patients and families, explain the prognosis, counsel and prepare them. Then they will get to the physical part of the pain management module. They will be taught to grade pain and to resolve it by incrementally switching to more potent pain killers. The healthcare workers will be taught about educating the people on the use of morphine that also has high chances of addiction. I have had family members of patients who die bringing back leftover morphine. That’s because from the beginning itself we tell patients and their families about the dangers of the drug. They are taught not to share the prescription,” says Dr Bhatnagar. If district hospitals are empowered to manage pain on their own, then patients and families can resolve so much of their emotional, physical and financial stress.

While palliative care is mostly associated with cancer and death, Dr Bhatnagar says that it doesn’t always entail end-of-life care. “Sometimes you need pain management for chronic conditions such as heart, kidney, or lung diseases,” she says, adding that she is working on promoting palliative care for other ailments as well.