



12th to 18th November 2023ax

CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

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INTERNATIONAL

A LONE VOICE

On November 7, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a censure motion against Rashida Tlaib, a three-term Democrat and the lone Palestinian-American in Congress, with a 234-188 vote. This is a rare event, as only 25 members have ever been censured in the House's history. The resolution, indicating significant bipartisan support, was moved by Republicans and concerned Tlaib's comments on Israel. Notably, 22 Democrats voted for censure, while four Republicans opposed it on free speech grounds.

This censure, just a step below expulsion, follows a previous attempt blocked a week earlier, which accused Tlaib of anti-Semitic activity and sympathizing with terrorist organizations. Tlaib, a Detroit-born lawyer and Congress member since 2009, is known for her stance on the Israel-Palestine issue, supporting a one-state solution and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel. Despite condemning the October 7 Hamas attack and advocating for equal worth of Israeli and Palestinian lives, her critics focused on a video she shared with the slogan "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free," seen by Israel as a call for its elimination.

Tlaib defended this slogan as an aspiration for freedom and coexistence, and highlighted its anti-colonial roots. She refused to retract her statements, leading to the censure motion. The House resolution accused her of defending actions by Hamas and spreading false narratives about Israel, charges she contested as dangerously conflating criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism.

The vote against Tlaib coincides with other controversial comments in Congress, including statements by Senator Lindsey Graham and Republican Max Miller regarding Gaza, highlighting the complex and heated nature of the discourse on Israel-Palestine relations in U.S. politics.

A PLAN TO JOIN THE RED SEA WITH MEDITERRANEAN — AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE SUEZ CANAL

It has been speculated that one of the reasons behind Israel's desire to eliminate Hamas from the Gaza Strip and completely control the Palestinian enclave is to give itself the chance to better explore a dramatic economic opportunity that has been talked about for several decades, but for which peace and political stability in the region is an essential prerequisite.

The idea is to cut a canal through the Israeli-controlled Negev Desert from the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba — the eastern arm of the Red Sea that juts into Israel's southern tip and south-western Jordan — to the Eastern Mediterranean coast, thus creating an alternative to the Egyptian-controlled Suez Canal that starts from the western arm of the Red Sea and passes to the south-eastern Mediterranean through the northern Sinai peninsula.

This so-called Ben Gurion Canal Project, which was first envisioned in the 1960s would, if it were to be actually completed, transform global maritime dynamics by taking away Egypt's monopoly over the shortest route between Europe and Asia.

However, any attempt to construct the canal would have to overcome gigantic logistical, political, and funding challenges which, in the current situation, makes it seem largely fantastical. We take a look at what has been proposed, and its implications, theoretically, on global trade and geopolitics.



But first, a look at the Suez Canal's salience.

When it opened in 1869, the Suez Canal revolutionised global maritime trade. By connecting the Mediterranean and Red Seas through the Isthmus of Suez, it ensured that ships travelling between Europe and Asia would not have to travel all the way around the continent of Africa. The canal cut the distance between London and Bombay (now Mumbai) by a more than 41 per cent.

Suez-Canal Shorten The Suez Canal shortened the distance between London and Bombay by well over 4,000 nautical miles (1 nm = 1.852 km)

In the 2022-23 fiscal year, around 26,000 vessels crossed the Suez Canal, accounting for approximately 13 per cent of global shipping.

The canal, however, has its issues.

First, the 193 km-long, 205 m-wide, and 24 m-deep Suez Canal is the world's biggest shipping bottleneck. Despite being widened and deepened over the years, it remains perennially congested, with long queues at either end. In March 2021, the mammoth cargo ship Ever Given got stuck in the canal, blocking passage for more than a week. It was estimated that the resulting "traffic jam" held up an estimated \$ 9.6 billion of goods every day.

Also, Egypt's control over the waterway has been a source of conflict for almost 70 years now. In 1956, after President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-70) decided to nationalise the canal, war broke out, with the UK, France, and Israel attacking Egypt in order to regain control.

The Suez Crisis ended in a military victory for the aggressors but an overwhelming political victory for Egypt, which kept control over the canal, which was shut for more than six months due to the conflict. This was also a pivotal moment in the Cold War, with Soviet threats of intervention key to stopping the allied aggression against Egypt.

The Suez Canal was also the focal point of both the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, and was shut from 1967-75.

The canal is, of course, critical to Egypt's economy. It collects all the toll revenue generated, in addition to the benefits it brings to its local economy. In the 2022-23 fiscal year, Egypt's Suez Canal Authority saw toll revenues reach a record \$ 9.4 billion — accounting for nearly 2 per cent of Egypt's GDP of \$ 476.8 billion, according to the World Bank.

Thus, for the West, a shipping lane through Israel would be ideal.

It remains unclear when the first concrete plan for the alternative was suggested. The documented evidence can be seen in a declassified 1963 US government memorandum. The memo called for the use of nuclear explosives to dig the canal through the Negev Desert in Israel.

"Another interesting application of nuclear excavation would be a sea level canal 160 miles long across Israel, connecting the Mediterranean with the Gulf of Aqaba (and thus the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean). Such a canal would be a strategically valuable alternative to the present Suez Canal and would probably contribute greatly to the economic development of the surrounding area," the memo reads.

The Ben Gurion Canal Project, named after Israel's founding father David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973), remains one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects ever planned on paper.



What has stopped Israel from constructing the canal?

First and foremost, such a project would be extremely complex and almost prohibitively expensive. The estimated cost of such a project may be as high as the \$ 100 billion, much more than what it might take to widen the Suez Canal and solve its traffic problem.

According to the previous cited memo, it was the cost of digging such a canal conventionally that made planners look at the nuclear option. Of course, the risk of nuclear fallout makes this option extremely risky as well.

Costs aside, the planned route of the Ben Gurion Canal is over 100 km longer than the Suez Canal, primarily due to limitations of the terrain and topography. Even if built, many ships might still favour the older, shorter route. Most importantly, however, a canal which will potentially transport billions of dollars worth of freight daily cannot run in land under constant military threat, from Hamas rockets or Israeli attacks.

BRIDGE TO NOWHERE

Two weeks after abstaining from a UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution that called for a ceasefire in the Israeli strikes on Gaza, India voted in favour of five of six annual draft resolutions at the UNGA's Fourth Committee that criticised Israel for increasing settlements in the Occupied Territories, was in favour of Palestinians' right to homes and property, and supported the UN Refugee and Works Agency (UNRWA) operating in Gaza. The official explanation of the votes as "routine" affirmation of India's traditional policy has only added to the confusion over the government's stand on the crisis. Its Explanation of Vote in the original UNGA resolution in October said that India could not vote for a resolution that did not include an "explicit condemnation" of the October 7 attacks by Hamas. However, none of the six resolutions, including one in which India abstained, that discusses investigating Israel for rights violations, actually referred to the October 7 attacks. These were instead identical to resolutions that India had voted for before, and neither India nor any other country at the Fourth Committee deliberations proposed amendments. The Israeli envoy, in fact, demanded a rejection of the "anti-Israel" resolutions as they did not contain references to the current situation. Cuba argued that the resolutions were important to vote for, but that they also did not contain references to the more than 11,000 Palestinians killed, including 4,000 children, and the displaced (nearly a million). India did not propose amendments, nor did any Indian diplomat speak, although a lengthier explanation may be expected when the resolutions are put to a vote by the UNGA next month — by which time more of Gaza would have been flattened.

At a time when every day counts, New Delhi appears unwilling to exert itself to making a difference. True, the government continues to hold its traditional stand on support for the Palestinian cause and a two-state solution (which it reaffirmed during the recent India-U.S. 2+2 Ministerial meeting), and that it "stands by" Israel, with "zero tolerance" for terror attacks. However, it has not joined the call for a ceasefire or explicitly asked for an end to the strikes on civilian targets, where Israel claims it is hunting for Hamas fighters and searching for hostages. Nor has it named Hamas for the terror attacks or changed Indian law, as the Israeli Ambassador to India called for, to designate Hamas as a terror group. More than a month after Israel's reprisals began, the government must explain its position on the conflict, including where, if anywhere, India could play a role in alleviating the situation. The upcoming Voice of Global South and G-20 virtual summits may present the opportunity to articulate options for ending the violence, recovering Israeli hostages, as well as post-conflict scenarios for Gaza and Palestinians. India's



voice, once known for being forceful and balanced on such issues, must not be replaced by an expedient silence.

BUILDING THE FLOOR

This week's summit meeting between U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping in San Francisco is unlikely to resolve any of the major differences that plague relations between the world's two biggest powers. It has, however, offered the promise of much needed respite for the world by stabilising a relationship that has recently been in free fall and brought growing concern. The summit, on the side-lines of APEC, yielded two significant takeaways. The first involved several concrete agreements, including to restart military-to-military direct dialogue and to discuss risk and safety issues involved with artificial intelligence. The second is what both sides have described as establishing a floor to the relationship. That was the goal when the two leaders last met in Bali in 2022. The Bali consensus was, however, blown away by the "spy balloon" incident. This time there is cautious optimism that this attempt at stabilisation has been built on more solid ground. But how long it will last remains an open question, especially with two potentially disruptive political events looming on the horizon. In January next year, Taiwan goes to the polls, and the outcomes could see a further ratcheting up of tensions across the strait. On Taiwan, both sides reiterated their stands, with China cautioning against interference, and the U.S. saying it opposed any change in the status quo. Meanwhile, the U.S. will, next year, go into election mode ahead of polls in November 2024, and campaign season inevitably brings heated rhetoric on China.

A longer term concern — and one that underlines the limits of this modest stabilisation — is a basic point of difference in how they see the future of their relations. As Mr. Xi put it, "the number one question" was whether they were "adversaries or partners". He criticised U.S. framing of the relationship as being fundamentally competitive, saying it would lead to "misinformed policy making, misguided actions, and unwanted results", and asked it to "refrain from flip-flopping, ... and crossing the lines" on issues including Taiwan and export controls. Mr. Biden, however, "emphasised that the U.S. and China are in competition" and described the immediate challenge as how to "manage it responsibly". These differences aside, one crucial point of agreement is the apparent realisation that high-level engagement and open channels are key in preventing competition from sliding into conflict. This offers clear lessons to the India-China relationship, as the crisis along the Line of Actual Control enters its fourth winter. Dialogue in and of itself is not a concession, and as the U.S. and China have realised, building a floor, when ties between major powers are at the risk of free fall, is the first step.

WHY IS THE AMNESTY DEAL BY SPAIN'S GOVT. CONTENTIOUS?

The story so far:

Spain's socialist (PSOE) government struck a contentious amnesty deal on November 9 with the hardline Catalan separatist party, Together for Catalonia, to enable another four-year term for caretaker Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez.

What is the deal about?

The chief of Together with Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont, Catalonia's former regional president and a Member of the European Parliament (MEP), is the unlikely kingmaker who could break the country's political deadlock since the inconclusive elections in July. A fugitive from the Spanish



justice system, now in self-imposed exile in Brussels, he faces six to 12 years in jail for an embezzlement charge linked to the failed Catalan referendum in October 2017 that was declared unconstitutional. Mr. Puigdemont has dangled the carrot of his seven seats in exchange for an amnesty for him and hundreds of others in connection with the secessionist agitation. The clemency legislation must be tabled in Parliament for Mr. Sanchez's investiture, but its approval is not a given.

Why is the amnesty proving divisive?

Mr. Sanchez views the offer of amnesty as a route to defuse the protracted crisis arising from the movement for an independent Catalan state. However, this move is the exact opposite of his earlier stance that a broad amnesty for the separatists was unacceptable. Moreover, in 2021, the Prime Minister controversially granted pardon for nine jailed separatists. The centre-right People's Party (PP) and the far-right Vox have dubbed the current deal as an opportunistic ploy by Mr. Sanchez to retain power.

Critics contend that the withdrawal of penalties against those involved in the unconstitutional referendum would undermine the principle of equality before the law. Spain has witnessed widespread protests which is a reminder of the outpouring of anger during the secessionist movement. The judiciary has voiced concerns over the move, with one judge even pointing to Mr. Puigdemont's association with Democratic Tsunami, a group engaged in violent activities, as amounting to terrorism.

Why not hold another election?

There is no certainty that another general election would produce a decisive outcome. Spain has come to exemplify the wider European phenomenon of post-electoral stalemate, underpinned by a steady erosion of the two-party system and the mushrooming of smaller parties on the extreme right and left of the political spectrum. Spain had gone into election mode twice in the space of six months, in December 2015 and June 2016. A second ballot had become inevitable only because a governing combination could not be established after the first vote. Consequent to the June 2016 ballot, there was relatively greater longevity of parliament but only in purely technical terms. The centre-right government of Mariano Rajoy was defeated in a vote of no confidence on corruption charges in June 2018, within two years of taking office. Mr. Sanchez then became Prime Minister, only to step down in February 2019, well before the end of the four-year parliamentary term, as he failed to secure the legislature's approval for the annual budget. Then, in a repeat of past events, Spain would hold elections twice in a single calendar year. The ballot in April failed to result in any government and led to the elections of November 2019. Negotiations following the second ballot led to the formation of the current coalition. Four months since the elections in July 2023, there is no clarity on the shape of Spain's next government. While the PP emerged as the single largest party in seats, it failed to garner the numbers even with the backing of Vox.

Will another Sanchez govt. rise?

Nothing is off the table. The PSOE government is currently allied with extreme left parties, including Basque and Catalan separatists. Although MPs from Together voted against the formation of the Sanchez coalition in 2019, they have since extended backing for crucial legislation. Given Mr. Sanchez's dealings with leftwing parties since 2018, concerns over the cost from collaboration with secessionist parties may be overblown.



WAR IN MYANMAR

A coordinated offensive by Myanmar's ethnic rebels against the junta in several parts of the country late last month is the clearest sign yet that the coup regime's hands are overstretched. The Three Brotherhood Alliance, a coalition of ethnic minority armed groups, has claimed to have made territorial gains on Myanmar's border with China and dozens of junta forces surrendering. Clashes have erupted in the restive Rakhine State, and Chin State that borders India. Faced with battlefield setbacks, the junta's response has been to carry out air strikes, causing heavy civilian casualties. In a rare acknowledgement of the challenges, Myint Swe, the military-appointed President, said recently that "It is necessary to carefully control this issue (rebel offensive)". When the military toppled the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021, its first step was to use force to establish order. It jailed most of the pro-democracy politicians, including Ms. Suu Kyi, and unleashed a violent crackdown on protests. Since then, over 4,000 civilians and pro-democracy activists have been killed by the military and some 20,000 people jailed, according to advocacy groups. The UN estimates that 1.7 million people have been forced out of their homes. But the junta's violence has done little in stabilising the country.

Myanmar has faced violence by ethnic minorities for decades. But in the past, the main political contradiction in Burmese society was the peaceful struggle by the pro-democracy movement, led by Ms. Suu Kyi. This time, the pro-democracy movement gave up the Suu Kyian model of peaceful resistance, formed an underground government, established a militia wing and joined hands with the ethnic rebels — an outcome the coup regime did not anticipate. Over two years, new political realities have emerged. The rebels have made substantial territorial gains and kept multiple fronts open, maintaining operational pressure points on the junta. The generals are also facing regional isolation, especially in ASEAN. The new rebel offensive and territorial losses point to the mounting woes of Gen. Min Aung Hlaing's regime. The junta does not have any easy options. A military solution looks improbable. The junta has not come forward for talks; but the rebels, led by a diverse new generation of leaders, have asked the generals to retreat from politics and then hold talks to find peace. They demand a federal democratic system with greater autonomy for ethnic minority regions. If the violence continues, especially in areas bordering India and China, it will have regional repercussions. Major regional players, along with ASEAN, should play a more proactive role to achieve a ceasefire in Myanmar, setting the stage for meaningful dialogue that is aimed at restoring democracy and freedoms.

RAJAPAKSA BROTHERS VIOLATED PUBLIC TRUST, RULES SRI LANKA'S SC

The Supreme Court of Sri Lanka ruled that the Rajapaksa brothers – Gotabaya, Mahinda, and Basil – along with other top officials, significantly contributed to the country's economic crisis, thereby violating public trust. These brothers held the top governmental positions of President, Prime Minister, and Finance Minister from 2019 until their removal following a mass uprising in 2022. The court's decision came in response to fundamental rights petitions filed by academics and civil society members. While the court acknowledged their role in the crisis, it did not order compensation to the petitioners but granted litigation costs. Post-crisis, Gotabaya Rajapaksa returned to Sri Lanka and resides in Colombo, Mahinda resigned as Prime Minister but remains in parliament, and Basil resigned from Parliament. This ruling underscores the judiciary's stance on holding high-level government officials accountable for national crises.



NATION

ON THE SUB-CATEGORISATION WITHIN CASTES

The story so far:

In an election rally in Telangana, Prime Minister Narendra Modi promised to look into the sub-categorisation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) to identify and help the most backward among them — a move that has been read as an attempt by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to woo the Madiga community. The Madigas are the most populous of all SC communities in the State but have claimed that their share of representation was being taken up by another SC community, the Malas.

Is sub-categorising legal?

In the last two decades, multiple States like Punjab, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu have tried to bring in reservation laws at the State level in a bid to sub-categorise SCs and decide on a separate quantum of reservation for these subcategories within the umbrella of Scheduled Castes. However, all plans are held up in courts as the Supreme Court forms its larger Constitution Bench to decide the matter.

The issue first reached the courts when the Andhra Pradesh government in 1996 formed a one-man Commission of Justice Ramachandra Raju, which recommended sub-categorisation of SCs in the State based on evidence that some communities were more backward and had less representation than others. When the State government tried to implement this recommendation, the matter went to the judiciary, eventually making its way to the Supreme Court, which in 2004, held that the State did not have the power to unilaterally sub-categorise communities in the list of SCs or Scheduled Tribes (STs). The Constitution has provided that these lists can only be made by Parliament and notified by the President.

However, while hearing a challenge to Punjab's attempt at doing the same, a five-judge Bench headed by Justice Arun Mishra had held in a 2020 judgment, that deciding on the quantum of benefits in the lists of SCs/STs already notified would not amount to "tinkering" with it and that States could do it. Given the contradiction, the 2020 judgment has also been referred to the larger Bench.

How close have governments come?

Even as the question of whether SC sub-categorisation can be done is pending with the Supreme Court, the 2004 judgment had pushed the Union government to explore legal options for the same. It initiated dialogue with the Law Ministry and in 2005, the Attorney-General of India (AGI) had opined that it was possible to sub-categorise SCs. The AGI, at the time, had said that any such classification could be allowed only if there was "unimpeachable evidence to indicate a necessity" for it. The AGI had added that a constitutional amendment could be brought in to facilitate this. Based on this, the Union government formed a National Commission to look into the question of sub-categorising SCs in Andhra Pradesh and the then Cabinet recommended an amendment to Article 341 of the Constitution of India to allow for it. But both the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) had opined that a constitutional amendment was not necessary. They said that Article 16(4) of the



Constitution already provided for States to create special laws for any backward classes it felt was under-represented.

What have been the arguments?

From the Justice Raju Commission to the National Commission, the principal argument for sub-categorisation of SCs has been the graded inequalities among SC communities. The thrust of it has been that even among the marginalised, there are communities that have lesser access to basic facilities. As a result, the relatively more forward communities among them have managed to avail benefits consistently while crowding the more backward ones out. The solution, therefore is to sub-categorise the communities and provide separate reservation to the more backward communities within the reservation meant for SCs.

However, on the other hand, both the SC and ST Commissions have noted that allotting separate reservations within the categories would not really address the root cause of the problem. In an internal note prepared by the NCST, it had explained that the most backward SCs are lagging so far behind forward SC communities that a separate quota would not help. It said that the idea was to ensure representation at all levels. But given the disparity, even if posts were reserved at higher levels, these most backward SCs would not have enough candidates to be considered for it in the first place. Both the NCSC and the NCST had thus recommended that existing schemes and government benefits should first reach these sections before any sub-categorisation.

What next?

Legal experts have pointed out the necessity to have concrete data to support sub-categorisation. Senior Advocate Mohan Gopal told The Hindu, "There is nothing that prohibits the Parliament from being competent to do this. But what is primarily needed is concrete population numbers of each community and sub-community and their respective socio-economic data, which are the only thing that can provide a reasonable ground to decide how castes can be categorised, how much percentage should be given, etc."

SEARCH AND SEIZURE

The Supreme Court's direction to the Union government to frame guidelines to protect the interests of media professionals with regard to the seizure of their digital devices is a timely first step. Recent actions against journalists, whose laptops and smartphones were seized and searched, have sent a chilling message not just to the wider media fraternity but also to whistle-blowers and others who speak to journalists on the condition their identity will not be revealed. If a journalist's communication devices can be seized and their data examined on the flimsy grounds of allegations, it compromises sources and impedes news professionals' ability to do their job. In this way, it impinges on the freedom of the press and also strikes at the right to livelihood of journalists, as digital devices have become the critical tools of the profession.

The guidelines must ensure that law enforcement agencies are not permitted to seize or search devices without a prior judicial warrant, clearly laying out the information that the agency expects to find, rather than authorising an unlimited fishing expedition. Journalists must not be forced to incriminate themselves or their sources by being compelled to provide passcodes or biometric data. The guidelines must include protocols to safeguard the devices and the data, to ensure that it is not leaked or tampered with, or passed on to third parties, and that data irrelevant to an investigation is deleted in a timely manner. Technological interventions allow for the cloning of a



device, thus allowing journalists to continue their work and not depriving them of their own data for an unspecified period. Similarly, it is important to create a record of the device at the time of seizure to ensure that incriminating material is not planted on it during the investigation process. The Court, in its directive to the Additional Solicitor-General, indicated the need for a “balancing of interests”. Thus, the guidelines must be drafted in a transparent manner and involve public consultations. The Court referred to the fact that “privacy itself has been held to be a fundamental right”, indicating that this is an issue involving all citizens whose professional and personal lives are increasingly contained in a vulnerable hand-held device. Beyond these guidelines for media professionals, there is a need to update the laws allowing search and seizure by law enforcement agencies to take these new digital realities into account.

GOVERNOR R N RAVI’S OVERREACH IS UNABASHED AND STRIKING

In 1974, a seven-judge bench of the Supreme Court, in *Shamsher Singh v State of Punjab*, ruled that the governor of a state can act “only upon and in accordance with the aid and advice of their ministers, save in a few well-known exceptional situations”. Earlier this month, while hearing a petition from states including Tamil Nadu about governors neglecting their duties, the SC reiterated that “governors also cannot be oblivious to the fact that they are not elected representatives” and that their withholding assent to Bills passed by the Assembly is “a serious concern”. Only days later, Governor R N Ravi’s actions — he has withheld assent to 11 Bills passed by the state legislature — threaten to precipitate a constitutional crisis in Tamil Nadu. Ravi’s actions are part of a dismal pattern of blatant politicisation of the high constitutional office.

There are other instances as well of governors appointed by the BJP-led Centre over-reaching and interfering in the work of elected governments in states ruled by non-BJP parties. But Ravi has invited particularly unflattering attention to himself. Among the Bills, passed between January and April, stuck in the limbo of legal loopholes invoked by Ravi are those concerning the power of the state government to appoint university vice-chancellors, prohibition of online gambling, anti-corruption measures and legislation on the NEET. The Assembly has called a special session on Saturday to pass these Bills again, even as the larger questions sparked by Ravi’s actions are pending before the SC. He has courted controversy earlier by refusing to read out parts of the speech outlining the government’s view in the House. He has made statements denigrating the politics of the ruling DMK. He crossed the line again in July when he dismissed minister V Senthil Balaji — a decision he took back later. Even the state BJP unit has acknowledged that Ravi is wading into issues beyond his remit: “A Governor should not speak politics, it will set a wrong precedent,” state president K Annamalai said in July.

It could be argued that the office of governor has been denuded of independence and credibility over decades, and several governments at the Centre bear responsibility for that. Yet, even given this scarred record, Ravi’s conduct is striking for the manner in which it flies in the face of convention and propriety, court verdicts and the Constitution’s letter and spirit. It also calls for a course correction. First, he must give his assent to the Bills that are almost certain to be passed, once more, by the legislature. For its part, the Centre must step in, at the very least, to counsel and restrain.



WHY ARE IAS COACHING CENTRES BEING PROBED BY THE CCPA?

The story so far:

On October 23, the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) said that it was probing 20 IAS coaching institutes for making misleading claims in their advertisements and for unfair trade practices. Four of the 20 institutions have been slapped with a penalty of ₹1 lakh.

What has the CCPA observed?

Elaborating on the broader mechanism at play, Chief Commissioner at CCPA Nidhi Khare told DD News that every time the results of any competitive exam, including the UPSC Civil Services, are announced, coaching institutes would go on an advertising spree. Names and pictures of the top rankers are used in these ads to indicate their enrolment at the institute. However, they do not disclose the nature of the enrolment, that is, the course they might have pursued in the institute. UPSC CSE exams are conducted at three stages — prelims, mains and interview. CCPA has observed that most rank holders showcased in the advertisements only took mock interviews from these institutes. In fact, coaching institutes have been found to provide mock interviews free of cost, since it serves their own interests. This information is not disclosed in the advertisements, which ideally must include the course they enrolled for. Thus, it would qualify as deliberate concealment of important information and can be categorised as a 'misleading advertisement' under Section 2(28) of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019.

What is the ecosystem like?

UPSC recommended a total of 933 candidates post its CSE examinations in 2022. However, as observed by the CCPA, the total selections claimed by the institutes together being probed exceeded the recommendations— the cumulative count was over 3,500. This could also be because of multiple enrolments among students. At present, four institutes have been fined — Chahal Academy, IQRA IAS, Rau's IAS Study Circle and IAS Baba. While IAS Baba has received a stay on the notice from the Karnataka High Court, Rau's IAS has appealed against the order in the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission. Other coaching institutes currently being probed include Vajirao and Reddy Institute, KSG- Khan Study Group IAS, Apti Plus, Analog IAS, Shankar IAS, BYJU's IAS, Unacademy, Drishti IAS, Sriram's IAS, NEXT IAS, Yojana IAS, Plutus IAS, ALS IAS, Dhishti IAS and Vision IAS, among others.

During the probe, the institutes were given the opportunity to make their submissions against the allegations of exaggerated claims. Their submissions reveal some of the same concerns raised by the CCPA. For example, Khan Study Group claimed that 682 of the 933 selected belonged to their institute. However, their submission indicated that 673 students took only mock interviews. Vajirao and Reddy also professed about 617 selections — all of whom took the interview guidance programme.

What do we know about the overall coaching industry?

Manisha Kapoor, CEO and Secretary General at the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) told The Hindu that education has emerged as "one of the most violative sectors in advertising" in recent years. "Most violations would be in the areas of leadership claims, placement to best colleges, success assurances etc. While there is fierce pressure in education, misleading ads in the category often perpetuate the problem and end up targeting vulnerable students and parents," she says.



According to Pune-based consultancy Infinium Global Research LLP, the coaching class market in India is expected to reach about ₹1.79 lakh crore by 2030 and grow at a Compounded Annual Growth Rate of 14.07% over a forecast period of 2023-30. Categorising the market, it said that higher education holds the largest market share — of about 32.75% in 2022. With migration also forming a part of the landscape, the coaching centre system is further complimented by the demand for services such as rented accommodation and local tiffin services among other things.

ON BAIL, TRACKED BY SATELLITE: HOW GPS ANKLETS WORK

Earlier this month, a prisoner in Jammu and Kashmir was released on bail after he was tagged with a Global Positioning System (GPS) tracking device to monitor his movements. This is the first time in the country that a GPS tracker has been put to such use.

Ghulam Mohammad Bhat, who is accused of offences under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), was let out of jail after a special National Investigation Agency (NIA) court in Jammu upheld the prosecution's plea and ordered police to affix a GPS tracker anklet on his foot.

Bhat, an associate of late Hurriyat chairman Syed Ali Geelani, was arrested in 2011 by a joint team of Delhi Police and Srinagar Police from his residence in Srinagar. The police claimed to have recovered Rs 21 lakh, two cell phones and a paper containing some phone numbers, and alleged that Bhat was a hawala operator who used the money to finance separatists.

So, what is a GPS tracker, and how does it work?

A GPS tracker is a small, wearable device like the GPS collars that have long been used to monitor the movements of animals. The device provides the exact location of the wearer at all times, and allows law enforcement and security agencies to monitor his/ her movement in real time.

The device is tamper-proof, and any attempt at tampering with it sets off an alarm. It can also not be removed by the wearer or any unauthorised person without damaging it. The tracker can be put on the ankle or arm of a person. Thus, there are GPS anklets and GPS bracelets.

Where is such a device available, and how much does it cost?

GPS devices are very common these days, and some people put them on pets. The movements of wild animals such as rogue elephants in Kerala or the cheetahs in Kuno are monitored using these devices. Many new automobiles are equipped with trackers to ensure they can be traced if stolen; owners can also have them installed separately.

The quality and prices of the devices vary. It is possible to buy one online for around Rs 1,000.

But why has a GPS tracker been affixed on Bhat?

The prosecution wing of the J&K Police called for close monitoring of Bhat's movements during the period of his bail, and pushed for his tracking by GPS as one of the bail conditions.

Director General of Police (DGP) R R Swain, who also heads the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), the intelligence wing of the J&K Police, said GPS trackers could "help curb narco-smuggling and terror activities". Police would be able "to monitor whether the person who is out on bail is meeting an active terrorist, or someone to collect a narco assignment or terror funds, etc.", Swain said.



Is it common to use a tracker on a person who is out on bail?

GPS trackers are a precondition for bail in several countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Malaysia. Bhat's case is the first time this technology has been used in India for this purpose. J&K Police have indicated they might do it in the future as well.

What is the legal position on the use of this technology in this way?

The use of the GPS anklet on Bhat was sanctioned by a court. Human rights activists have, however, pointed to the absence of specific legal provisions allowing this. Ravi Nair of the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre said it is also "important to ask whether the security establishment has developed any standards and ethics in electronic monitoring".

Nair pointed out that "In the UK, electronic monitoring may be under the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act, 2011. In Malaysia, the legal frameworks on electronic monitoring have been developed by amending existing legislation and enacting new laws such as Prevention of Crime Act, 1959, Security Offences Act, 2012, Dangerous Drugs (Special Prevention Measures) Act, and the Criminal Procedure Code."

Backers of the use of GPS trackers argue they can make it a little easier to get bail under the stringent UAPA and give police the confidence to not oppose bail. Rights activists, however, say tracking a human being is a violation of their fundamental right to privacy.

Nair said that while the state seeks to maintain public security by tagging a person with a GPS tracker, the "fundamental rights of the people fitted with this device can't be taken away". According to Nair, the Supreme Court in 'Maneka Gandhi vs Union of India' (1978) ruled that the right to life includes the right to human dignity.

Also, Nair said, since surveillance raises concerns of over-regulation and infringement of human rights, it is necessary to have a system of informed consent and procedures to deal with unethical and illegal practices.

2020 AMSHIPORA 'ENCOUNTER': TRIBUNAL SUSPENDS CAPTAIN'S LIFE TERM, GRANTS BAIL

The Armed Forces Tribunal (AFT) has suspended the life sentence of an Army Captain, Bhoopendra Singh, who was convicted for a staged encounter in Amshipora, South Kashmir in July 2020, resulting in the death of three men. While his conviction remains, the tribunal granted him conditional bail and directed him to appear before its registrar regularly starting January next year. The tribunal emphasized that other punishments like cashiering will continue during the appeal's pendency.

Captain Singh was found guilty by an Army court in March for the murder of three laborers from Jammu's Rajouri district, who were falsely labeled as terrorists. The J&K Police's Special Investigation Team charged Singh and others for staging the encounter. The Army's Court of Inquiry also found evidence suggesting that Singh's troops exceeded their powers under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA).

In its 27-page order, the tribunal questioned the General Court Martial's (GCM) findings, citing issues with the evidence used and possible acquittal prospects. It pointed out that the GCM relied on inadmissible evidence and ignored various witness statements. The tribunal also found defects



and perversity in the GCM's findings and noted Singh's coerced statement during his Court of Inquiry, which violated the Indian Evidence Act.

Singh's lawyer highlighted that the tribunal's order does not equate to a clean acquittal but ensures Singh won't be in jail during the legal proceedings. The decision reflects the tribunal's view that the evidence and proceedings conducted by the GCM were insufficiently convincing to uphold Singh's life sentence, pending further appeal.

LIFE OVER DEATH

It is disappointing that the parliamentary committee that examined the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the proposed criminal statute likely to replace the IPC, has not made a recommendation to abolish the death penalty. Instead, the standing committee on Home Affairs, despite submissions from experts and jurists on abolition, chose to make a bland recommendation "that the matter may be left for the government to consider". Its observation is limited to a remark that it "has understood that the reason for a passionate argument against the death penalty is that the judicial system can be fallible and to prevent an innocent person from being wrongly sentenced to death". However, domain experts had made some persuasive submissions before the panel: that instances of trial courts awarding death were on the rise, whereas statistical trends showed that the Supreme Court of India was leaning away from capital punishment; that social scientists had demonstrated it had no deterrent effect and that global opinion was in favour of its abolition. The Court awarded the death penalty to only seven people from 2007 to 2022, while all death sentences were either set aside or commuted to life in 2023, as they did not fall under the "rarest of rare cases".

Members who added notes of dissent to the report also highlighted the argument that capital punishment has been shown to be no deterrent; that imprisonment for the remainder of the convict's natural life will be a more rigorous punishment and provide scope for reform; and that most of those on death row came from underprivileged backgrounds. They have also made the point that the three Bills proposing a new body of criminal law are substantially the same as the existing IPC, Code of Criminal Procedure and Evidence Act. If at all, Parliament moves to enact the draft Bills, with changes suggested by the parliamentary panel, it will be in the fitness of things if it is used as an occasion to reconsider the need to retain the death penalty. The BNS has defined 'life imprisonment' as a term for the remainder of one's natural life, and this should be the default alternative to death sentences. The case for abolition will gain strength if the trend of seeking premature release of life convicts on political grounds is arrested and life terms without remission become more common. Remission should be a humanitarian act and never a source of political controversy. Removing capital punishment from the statute book and introducing a rational and universal remission policy will be a substantive reform in the justice system.

WHY ADULTERY WAS STRUCK OFF IPC, AND WHY A HOUSE PANEL WANTS TO MAKE IT A CRIME AGAIN

The Parliamentary Committee on Home Affairs has suggested that adultery should be re-instituted as a crime in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, the proposed law to replace the Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860.

The Parliamentary Committee adopted reports on the three Bills meant to replace the IPC, The Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), 1973, and The Indian Evidence Act, 1872, last week.



The panel headed by BJP Rajya Sabha member Brij Lal, which examined the Bills after they were introduced in Parliament this August, suggested more than 50 changes and flagged several errors in them.

What is the legal position on adultery now?

Until 2018, the IPC contained Section 497, which defined adultery as a criminal offence that attracted up to five years in prison, or a fine, or both. However, only men could be punished under Section 497, not women. The section read:

“Whoever has sexual intercourse with a person who is and whom he knows or has reason to believe to be the wife of another man, without the consent or connivance of that man, such sexual intercourse not amounting to the offence of rape, is guilty of the offence of adultery... In such case the wife shall not be punishable as an abettor.”

This was contrary to both the common understanding and the dictionary definition of adultery, which is simply voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person, man or woman, and someone other than that person’s current spouse or partner.

In *Joseph Shine vs Union Of India* (September 27, 2018), a five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court led by then Chief Justice of India (CJI) Dipak Misra, and comprising current CJI D Y Chandrachud, and Justices A M Khanwilkar, R F Nariman, and Indu Malhotra, unanimously struck down Section 497 of the IPC on grounds that included discrimination.

And what has the House Committee recommended?

The 350-page report on the BNS, 2023, which was adopted by the Committee on November 10, said that adultery should be reinstated as a criminal offence, but it should be made gender-neutral — that is, both men and women should be punished for it. The Committee recommended: “...This section only penalised the married man, and reduced the married woman to be a property of her husband... The Committee is of the view that the institution of marriage is considered sacred in Indian society and there is a need to safeguard its sanctity.”

In essence, the report has argued that Section 497 was struck down on grounds of discrimination, and making it gender-neutral would address this deficiency.

So what is the problem with this?

The discriminatory nature of Section 497, and its “manifest arbitrariness” in punishing only men for adultery, was just one of the grounds on which the court had struck down the provision. The judgment went much farther.

Section 497 was violative of Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Constitution (which protect the fundamental rights to equality, non-discrimination, and life respectively) the Bench ruled. The court underlined the autonomy of women as a facet of human dignity. Writing for himself and Justice Khanwilkar, CJI Misra declared that the husband is neither master of his wife, nor does he have legal sovereignty over her — and that “any system treating a woman with indignity ... invites the wrath of the Constitution”.

Also, adultery “does not fit into the concept of crime”, the court ruled. “We may repeat at the cost of repetition that if it is treated as a crime, there would be immense intrusion into the extreme privacy of the matrimonial sphere. It is better to be left as a ground for divorce,” the CJI said.



The judgment cautioned that “For any other purpose as the Parliament has perceived or may, at any time, perceive, to treat it as a criminal offence will offend the two facets of Article 21 of the Constitution, namely, dignity of husband and wife, as the case may be, and the privacy attached to a relationship between the two.”

Justice Malhotra, the only woman judge on the Bench, observed that Section 497 was “replete with anomalies” — for instance, an adulterous relationship would not be an offence if the married woman had her husband’s consent. Also, a wife could not prosecute her husband or his lover, even if they committed this offence. Justice Nariman pointed out that “ancient notions” of the man being the seducer and the woman being the victim, no longer applied.

Justice Chandrachud, who disagreed with the judgment of his father, former CJI Y V Chandrachud’s 1985 ruling in *Sowmithri Vishnu vs. Union of India*, which upheld adultery as a crime, described Section 497 as a relic of Victorian morality that “proceeds on the notion that the woman is but a chattel; the property of her husband”.

The court also struck down Section 198(2) of the CrPC to the extent that it applies to the offence of adultery under Section 497. Section 198(2) CrPC says that in certain cases, courts can take cognizance of a matter only if approached by an aggrieved party and, in cases of adultery, only the husband shall be deemed as “aggrieved”.

Can the Supreme Court’s decision in this case be undone?

A ruling of the SC is the law of the land. Parliament cannot simply pass a law that contradicts a ruling of the top court. However, it can pass a law that removes the basis of the court’s judgment. Such a law can be both retrospective and prospective.

In *Madras Bar Association vs. Union of India* (2021), an SC Bench of Justices L Nageswara Rao, Hemant Gupta, and S Ravindra Bhat said: “The test for determining the validity of a validating legislation is that the judgment pointing out the defect would not have been passed, if the altered position as sought to be brought in by the validating statute existed before the Court at the time of rendering its judgment. In other words, the defect pointed out should have been cured such that the basis of the judgment pointing out the defect is removed.”

MEN CALLED TO CAFES FOR DATES, MADE TO PAY INFLATED FOOD BILLS: NEW ‘DATING APP SCAM’ IN TOWN

In Delhi, a new form of online fraud involving dating apps has emerged, where men are lured to cafes for dates and then pressured into paying exorbitantly inflated bills. Key details from the incidents include:

Modus Operandi:

Men meet women on dating apps and are invited to cafes for a date. Once there, they are presented with highly inflated bills for relatively simple orders. Upon protest, they face harassment and, in some cases, physical and sexual assault, along with demands for additional money.

Recent Incidents:

An East Delhi man faced a bill of Rs 10,000 for a modest order and was assaulted, sexually assaulted, and blackmailed into paying Rs 8,000, along with handing over his car keys and phone.



A man from Noida lost over Rs 11,000 in a similar situation at a West Delhi café.

A Delhi-based journalist reported losing over Rs 15,000 on a date, sharing his experience on social media.

Police Action and Challenges:

Delhi Police arrested the café owner and two bouncers in connection with the East Delhi incident. They are investigating 5-10 complaints in East and West Delhi and collaborating with dating app officials to track the women involved.

Police face challenges in making immediate arrests, as the men technically paid the bills voluntarily and inflated pricing isn't grounds for arrest. The criminal aspect mainly revolves around the inflated bills.

Victims' Experiences:

Victims have shared experiences of being shocked by the exorbitant bills and facing aggressive behavior from café staff when they protested. In some cases, their dates were complicit in the scam, refusing to assist and even blocking them afterward.

Legal and Social Implications:

The incidents are complex because they involve inflated bills rather than traditional methods of fraud like forgery or account theft.

Complainants are often hesitant to contest the bills at the moment and only later realize they've been scammed. Some victims are reluctant to inform family members or pursue legal action due to social stigma or personal circumstances.

This scam highlights a concerning trend of exploiting online dating platforms for financial extortion and underscores the need for awareness and caution among app users.

CHALLENGING THE ELECTORAL BOND SCHEME

Political parties in India have traditionally been averse to any sort of public scrutiny of the sources and applications of their funds. The astronomical sums needed to finance their processes and operations cannot be raised from party cadres and altruistic donors. These can only come from Big Business, and as a quid pro quo.

Civil society has been campaigning for long to empower the voter by improving her access to background information on the candidates in the electoral fray, and to bring about greater transparency in the obscure domain of political funding. In this, the instrument of public interest litigation (PIL) has been deployed to good effect. The campaign is premised on the citizen's democratic right to information, which is integral to the fundamental right to speech and expression under the Constitution.

A veil over the corporate donor

The political establishment, on its part, has sought to undermine these hard-fought victories by legislative legerdemain and ingenious schemes fashioned to obfuscate the identity of corporate donors. The United Progressive Alliance government had devised the Electoral Trusts Scheme (2013) to create a smokescreen between political parties and their corporate donors. The

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National Democratic Alliance, the succeeding government, came up with a far more ambitious and ingenious Electoral Bond Scheme (EBS).

The guardrails designed to limit the influence of foreign money and big business in India's democratic polity were systematically demolished to prepare the ground for the introduction of the EBS in January 2018, which was touted as a sincere effort to clean up electoral democracy by incentivising political donations through banking channels.

To begin with, the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) was retrospectively amended through the Finance Act of 2016 to permit Indian subsidiaries of foreign companies to donate to political parties and save the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) from imminent disqualification for having violated the ban on acceptance of foreign contributions. This was followed by an overhaul of the regulatory framework comprising the Representation of the People Act (RPA), the Companies Act, the Income Tax Act and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Act through the Finance Act of 2017, despite strident protests from the RBI, the Election Commission of India (ECI) and Opposition parties. The device of incorporating the amending Bills in the Finance Bill effectively short-circuited the consideration of the legislative proposals by the Rajya Sabha and ensured their smooth passage.

Months before the EBS was promulgated, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) and Common Cause filed a PIL to challenge the constitutionality of the amendments made in the legal framework of corporate donations by the Finance Act of 2017. The petition contended that these amendments infringed the citizen's fundamental 'Right to know' under Article 19(1)(a), and were not saved by any of the permissible restrictions under Article 19(2). The vires of the amendment to FCRA effected through the Finance Act of 2016 were also impugned.

The gravamen of the petition was that the impugned amendments jeopardised the country's autonomy, militated against transparency, incentivised corrupt practices by lifting the caps on corporate donations and allowing contributions by loss-making and shell companies.

Consequently, the nexus between politics and big business was rendered more opaque. The instrument would enable special interest groups, corporate lobbyists and foreign entities to secure a stranglehold on the electoral process and influence the country's governance to public detriment. By relieving the political parties of the duty to disclose the particulars of their donors, the amendments eroded the ECI's constitutional role and deprived citizens of vital information concerning electoral funding. Further, the recourse to a money bill to amend the relevant laws subverted the legislative scheme envisaged in the Constitution.

Bonds, the favoured mode

Over time, electoral bonds have become the favoured mode of political donation. Bonds worth ₹13,791 crore have been sold in 27 tranches until July 2023. The ADR's research has shown that electoral bonds accounted for 55.9% of the donations totalling ₹9,188 crore received by 31 political parties. Unsurprisingly, the BJP got the lion's share of 74.5% of electoral bonds redeemed until 2020-2021. The INC was a distant second, at 11%, followed by the Biju Janata Dal, the YSR Congress Party and the Trinamool Congress.

It will be naive to believe that political parties depend on these inflows to meet their insatiable requirement of funds. The expenditure on the last general election to the Lok Sabha has been estimated at between ₹55,000 to ₹60,000 crore. Most dealings of political parties continue to be in cash, but the receipts from electoral bonds enable them to meet their transactions with the



formal economy, such as the costs of infrastructure expansion, equipment and publicity in the print, electronic and digital media. This gives them an enormous advantage over their rivals in influencing voter behaviour and electoral outcomes.

After an agonising six-year wait, the challenge to the constitutionality of electoral bonds is now approaching denouement. Meanwhile, a general election to the Lok Sabha and 30 elections to State Assemblies have been held. In most of these contests, the political formations in power have enjoyed the advantage of augmented inflow of corporate contributions, thanks to the EBS that inherently favours the incumbent.

The Supreme Court of India did not take kindly to the petitioners' repeated pleas to stay the impugned scheme, pending determination of the weighty issues raised in their petition. Rejecting the plea for interim stay, the top court in its order of June 23, 2021 posited that it was possible for a voter to pierce the scheme's veil of secrecy by tallying the expenditure on electoral bonds disclosed in corporate filings with the corresponding receipts in the audited accounts of political parties. One wonders how. Even if a determined voter had the capacity to scrutinise the returns of the suspect corporates and political parties, it would be pointless since the scheme does not require the donors and recipients to furnish disaggregated information regarding their electoral bond transactions.

Significantly, the government has also stressed the imperative of protecting donor anonymity, ostensibly to shield them from retribution by political rivals. The Solicitor General has argued that anonymity is central to their right to privacy, even though this fundamental right is not available to artificial legal persons. Over 94% of the electoral bond sales are in the denomination of one crore rupees — a sum beyond the capacity of individual donors. Moreover, particulars of individuals contributing ₹20,000 and above are duly disclosed in party accounts. Why must corporate donors receive greater protection?

The hope

The pendency of the PIL has been marked by rare interludes of activity and long stretches of somnolence. It is gratifying that the Constitution Bench, to which the crux of the PIL was referred, has expeditiously concluded the hearing. Having regard to the strength of the case against the Scheme and the Supreme Court's stellar record in expanding the scope of the right to freedom of speech and expression and empowering the voter to make an informed choice, one may hope that the next round of elections will be contested on a reasonably level-playing field.

BOTH CONGRESS AND BJP HAVE MADE RECKLESS ELECTION PROMISES

Wheat and paddy procurement at Rs 2,700 and Rs 3,100 per quintal, as against their respective minimum support prices of Rs 2,275 and Rs 2,200 fixed by the Centre. Annual income support of Rs 12,000 to farmers, twice that under the Centre's PM Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme. LPG cylinders at Rs 450 for poor households. These are assurances in the BJP's poll manifestos for Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, and advertised as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "guarantees". Although not as expansive as the "revadi" (freebie) offerings by the Congress — from farm loan waivers and 100 units of free electricity, to Rs 3,000 monthly allowance for unemployed youth — the BJP isn't far behind. In MP, it is already paying Rs 1,250 per month to women from poor families — the Congress has pledged Rs 1,500 — has promised one lakh government jobs over two years in Chhattisgarh and 2.5 lakh over five years in Rajasthan.



Simply put, with Lok Sabha elections only months away, the two main national parties are engaged in competitive populism. This fiscal race to the bottom is something one wouldn't ordinarily expect from the Modi-led BJP. The Modi government's first term was marked by a commitment to macroeconomic stability. The Centre's fiscal deficit averaged 3.7 per cent of GDP, compared to the 5.4 per cent during the last five years of the previous Congress-led regime. Even its welfare schemes focused on subsidised public provision of essential private goods and services such as bank accounts, toilets, housing and LPG, electricity and tap water connections. This New Welfarism, as the former chief economic adviser Arvind Subramanian termed it, differed from the open-ended subsidies and entitlement programmes — especially the National Food Security Act (NFSA) and MGNREGA — of the earlier government. The Modi government schemes emphasised targeted cash transfers, leveraging the JAM (Jan-Dhan accounts, Aadhaar and mobile numbers) of individual beneficiaries.

The Modi government's second term has seen the Centre's fiscal deficit average 6.6 per cent of GDP. Some of that has resulted from necessary Covid-induced relief measures and clearing of all outstanding subsidy dues. But there has also been a reversion to the old fiscal populism. Not only has the 5 kg/person/month grain entitlement under the NFSA been retained, the Modi government has slashed the issue price from Rs 2-3/kg to zero and extended it "for the next five years". The retail price of urea has been unchanged since November 2012, even as that of other so-called decontrolled fertilisers (besides petrol and diesel) has been brought back under control. If one adds the repeal of the farm laws, it's clear that reforms and fiscal prudence have hit political economy hurdles. It may not be advisable to expect any different till the next government comes in.

MADHYA PRADESH IN THE BOTTOM HALF OF ALL STATE-LEVEL RANKINGS

Ahead of the Madhya Pradesh Assembly elections on November 17, the state's economic, social, and environmental indicators show it lagging in the bottom half compared to other states. From 2015-16 to 2019-21, there has been minimal improvement in these indicators. For example, the percentage of stunted children slightly improved, but Madhya Pradesh still ranked 25th out of 30 states in 2019-21. Similarly, marginal improvements were seen in the percentage of girls/women attending school, the share of underweight children, and the infant mortality rate, but these were not substantial enough to significantly change the state's overall low rankings.

Comparisons with 2005-06 data reveal that while Madhya Pradesh no longer ranks at the very bottom for some social indicators, its overall progress has been limited. In terms of the Human Development Index (HDI), its rank slipped from 26th in 1990 to 27th in 2021 among Indian states. Economically, the state's performance worsened from 1993-94 to 2021-22, dropping in rankings regarding Per Capita Net State Domestic Product. Over half the state's population falls in the lowest two wealth quintiles.

In the manufacturing sector, only about 7% of the state's workforce is employed, contributing around 9% to the Gross Value Added, indicating a small industrial base. Educational indicators also show the state trailing, with a low Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education.

However, Madhya Pradesh fares better in environmental aspects, generating less hazardous and plastic waste compared to other states. The article also emphasizes the broader need for multi-party cooperation in environmental issues, such as addressing air pollution in Delhi, beyond just political blame games.



WIDENING DIVIDE

Six months after a violent conflagration set in motion an ethnic conflict in Manipur, little has changed in bridging the divide between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities and in reducing the hostility. Every few days there is a violent occurrence or a provocative move from partisans on either side of the conflict, which heightens tensions and widens the divide even further with nothing being done to reverse the course and bring back normalcy to areas most prone to violence. The announcement, on Wednesday, by the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF), which represents Kuki-Zo groups, that it is pursuing “self-rule” with a separate “chief minister” in districts dominated by the tribal community, points to yet another hardening of stances that has prolonged the conflict. Such a move, which has no legal basis, is also bound to enrage Meiteis, especially those whose key grievances include the special land ownership rights to tribals in the State’s hill districts. That the announcement came just a week after an Intelligence Bureau team and Ministry of Home Affairs officials held meetings in Churachandpur is an indication that the Union government is losing the plot in Manipur. The government has tried to keep a tenuous peace going by not enacting any change in the leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led State government even after its failures in maintaining law and order. A leadership change has been a key demand by the Kuki-Zo community representatives besides others. The Union government has meanwhile relied upon paramilitary forces to quell the violence in areas adjoining the Imphal valley and the hill areas. It has taken a recourse to provisions of Article 355 to maintain peace, despite denying its imposition in the State.

This ploy has ostensibly been undertaken to retain the support of Meitei partisans who have refused to allow any change of leadership in the State government and also to address the Kuki-Zo people’s distrust of the State police. Yet, the outcome has been a sharpening of the divide with partisans on either side raging against these half-measures. In the absence of a clear détente and the beginning of a dialogue process to rebuild an enduring peace and fraternal relations between the communities that would facilitate the return of people, even sporadic incidents have exacerbated the situation, making peace-building daunting. Unless the BJP’s central leadership changes its stubborn strategy of maintaining a discreet silence while using administrative ploys to contain the conflict, the festering in Manipur is bound to continue.

EXPERT EXPLAINS: WHAT LED TO THE UTTARAKHAND TUNNEL COLLAPSE — AND HOW IT COULD HAVE BEEN AVOIDED

An under-construction tunnel on the Yamunotri National Highway in Uttarakhand’s Uttarkashi district collapsed at dawn on Sunday, trapping 40 workers inside. While an official report is awaited, Manoj Garnayak, a former project director at L&T and an expert in underground construction, explains how it could have happened — and how it could have been prevented.

What could have caused a part of the tunnel to cave in?

The failure (the section that has collapsed) is located around 200-300 metres from the mouth of the tunnel. It could have happened due to a loose patch (of rock), which wasn’t visible during the construction. The patch might have consisted of fractured or fragile rock, that is, rock with a lot of joints that may have made it weak.

Another reason could be the seepage of water through a loose patch. Water erodes loose rock particles over time, creating a void on the top of the tunnel, which can’t be seen. However, these



are only general principles, and we must wait for the results of a comprehensive investigation in this case.

What are the ways in which tunnels are excavated in rock?

There are essentially two ways: the drill and blast method (DBM), and by using tunnel-boring machines (TBMs).

DBM involves drilling holes into the rock and loading them with explosives. When the explosives are detonated, the rock breaks apart.

Building a tunnel with a TBM is more expensive than DBM, but much safer. TBMs bore the rock from the front (using a rotating head) while supporting the excavating tunnel behind the machine by installing precast concrete segments. In India, imported TBMs are used. Each of these machines can cost up to Rs 200 crore.

Does the method of excavation depend on the type of terrain?

A TBM can't be used to drill through very tall mountains. Creating a void through a 1,000-2,000-metre-high mountain by using a TBM leads to rock burst — when a part of the rock suddenly falls due to high stress.

TBMs are ideal when the rock cover is up to 400 metres tall. Underground tunnels for the Delhi Metro were dug using a TBM at shallow depth. On the other hand, in places like Himalays, including Jammu & Kashmir and Uttarakhand, DBM is usually used.

Is the Himalayan region too fragile to tunnel through?

Geologically speaking, the Himalayas are still young (they were formed between 40 million and 50 million years ago) and they are still growing due to the collision between the Indian tectonic plate and the Eurasian tectonic plate. There are some patches where the rock is indeed too fragile for a tunnel. But at other places, the rock is very good.

Also, tunnels do not destroy the ecology of the mountain or hill. Tunnel-building technology is around 200 years old and, if executed properly, tunnels aren't dangerous.

COMMUNITY RIGHTS AND FOREST CONSERVATION

The story so far:

The Forest Conservation Amendment Act of 2023 has received limited attention and little discussion about its impact on forests and its inhabitants. From the colonial forest law in 1865 to the Forest Conservation Amendment Act, 2023, more than fifteen laws, Acts, and policies have been formulated interlinking forests with legal and policy frameworks. However, there is little to no recognition of the rights of indigenous communities in these Acts, who are the rightful inhabitants of forest lands.

What is the new amendment?

At first glance, the amendment primarily aims to tackle the critical issues of climate change and deforestation's adverse effects, focusing on effective management and afforestation. The law further aims to determine how forests can be utilised for economic gain, and the manner in which it seeks to achieve this goal is outlined in the legislation. The primary method used to achieve this

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objective involves removing forests from the law's jurisdiction, thereby facilitating various forms of economic exploitation. As per the amendment, the forest law will now apply exclusively to areas categorised under the 1927 Forest Act and those designated as such on or after October 25, 1980. The Act will not be applicable to forests that were converted for non-forest use on or after December 12, 1996 and land which falls under 100 kilometres from the China and Pakistan border where the central government can build linear projects. To establish security infrastructure and facilities for surveillance, the central government is authorised to construct security measures in areas up to ten hectares. This provision also applies to areas (up to five hectares) which are designated as vulnerable. Within these regions, the government, with the necessary approvals, can implement security protocols as described above. Initiatives like ecotourism, safari, environmental entertainment, and more may be implemented in these areas. The main objective of these initiatives is to improve the livelihoods of those reliant on forest resources, a goal that has drawn criticism from tribal communities and human rights activists.

Why was the amendment brought in?

The Godavarman Thirumulkpad case, a prominent legal dispute that came before the Supreme Court in 1996, led to an interpretation of forest land in accordance with its 'dictionary meaning'. Subsequently, all private forests were brought under the ambit of the 1980 law. This has been a subject of debate as it was argued that the legislation primarily aims to restrict forest land from being used for various non-forest purposes, including the conversion of land for large-scale industries. The law has faced significant opposition, especially from private landowners, individuals, and organisations involved in forest conservation, for its perceived adverse impact on the country's industrial progress. In other words, the need to exclude forest land from the legal framework was mainly driven by the requirements of the industrial classes in the country. It is in this context that concerns regarding the Forest Conservation Act tend to resurface periodically, echoing the apprehensions of indigenous communities and human rights activists. These factors came to the forefront again when the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill was introduced in Parliament in March, triggering extensive discussions and debates. The Parliament then referred the Bill to a 31-member Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC).

What did the JPC recommend?

Of the 31-member JPC addressing the issue, only six individuals were from the opposition. The JPC submitted its report to Parliament on July 20, within three months. The critical comments from the committee members and public appear to have been largely disregarded; reduced to dissenting notes, holding a minority viewpoint on the Bill.

Therefore, the Bill successfully passed in both houses of Parliament without any substantial debates or discussions. There have been no collaborative discussions with the southern States concerning matters related to their specific geographical locations. A few days after the Act was enacted, the Odisha government revoked the "deemed forest" status in the State but had to later cancel the order due to public outrage and cited that it is waiting for detailed rules and guidelines from the concerned Central Ministry. If the government were to remove the forests from the purview of the Forest Conservation Act, it would effectively obstruct indigenous communities from asserting their rights.

What happened to the stipulation of 'prior consent'?

The Forest Conservation Act underwent important amendments in 2016 and 2017, which stipulated that prior consent from the tribal grama sabha was mandatory for any alterations to



forests for non-forest purposes. However, the recent revisions to the legislation have removed the necessity for such consent. Nevertheless, in this situation, State governments can proactively engage in specific activities within this framework through the inclusion of grama sabhas, particularly in matters of land acquisition for various purposes, by establishing State-level steering committees. But numerous State governments might hesitate on this aspect, as they hold a preconceived notion that Adivasi grama sabhas are 'anti-development,' and they fear that their decisions could hinder economically lucrative afforestation initiatives.

What is compensatory afforestation?

Compensatory afforestation, as outlined in the new legislation, encompasses various projects and schemes that can be undertaken by both private individuals and organisations (including large corporations) for afforestation or reforestation purposes. The Compensatory Afforestation Act encountered significant challenges in the past, primarily due to ambiguities in the original legislation and shortage of available land. The goal of the new amendment is to streamline the process. However, there is apprehension regarding the potential environmental implications of this amendment. The law mandates that for every parcel of land that is lost due to afforestation efforts, an equivalent amount of land must be afforested elsewhere. It does not specify the type of trees that should be planted, leaving room for discretion.

How does this affect the Forest Rights Act (FRA)?

The FRA has had notable impacts in various regions, such as the Mendha-Lekha in Maharashtra, Loyendi in Odisha, and Malakkappara in Kerala. Despite the initial enthusiasm, it appears that both the Central and State governments have become less enthusiastic about implementing the FRA in their States. Many consider the Act as an impediment to convert forest land for non-forest purposes. The State government and its bureaucracy hold the view that granting community rights under the FRA could weaken the State's authority over the forest. They anticipate potential legal challenges to any such endeavours. To navigate this situation, the government has opted to reduce or dilute the extent of forest areas, rather than amend the FRA, thereby limiting the potential for additional Adivasi claims. The amendment also fails to address the growing issue of human-animal conflicts in forest areas, particularly in the Adivasi hamlets of the Western Ghats region. This conflict not only endangers the livelihoods of the Adivasis but also poses a threat to wildlife.

What are the problems?

When examined superficially, the law appears to address issues without complications. However, once the law is put into practice, it presents substantial challenges to forest dwelling communities and government agencies. The concept of afforestation, which offers considerable financial incentives to private individuals and institutions for afforestation projects, fundamentally clashes with the idea of forest governance. Furthermore, it contradicts the concept of decentralised forest governance as forests in the country fall under the concurrent list. Such governance practices are against the spirit of federal norms. Moreover, defining strategic linear projects becomes exceptionally complex and vague. Unlike external security threats like border disputes and cross-border skirmishes, internal environmental security should also be considered a significant concern, especially in States that consistently face natural disasters. Regrettably, this priority is not guaranteed.



BRANDED, GENERIC AND THE MISSING INGREDIENT OF QUALITY

Many patients seek or solicit a second opinion in a medical shop — that of the seller. Any school finalist or school drop-out who can read a doctor's prescription in English or mysterious scribbling will do. It need not be a qualified pharmacist. Queries range from, "Is this medicine too strong?" "What is this medicine for?" to "Does it have any serious side-effects?" The replies are supposed to be pro bono or free under the guarantee that the prescribed medicines will be bought from the same medical shop. The prescription may have been written out by the most famous cardiologist, neurologist or gastroenterologist, but it is the verdict in the medical shop that is accepted without any doubt. The same person will not ask any questions at a bar counter or liquor shop on whether alcohol is injurious to health, or what the chances are of developing fatty liver, cirrhosis and liver failure. Nor will he ask the person at a shop selling cigarettes whether cigarettes will affect his lungs or cause cancer. In a supermarket, customers ignore the insecticide coating on vegetables and fruits and will never ask a question about safer alternatives.

Generic over brand

This is the reality of over-the-counter sales in India, where a salesperson can decide which brand of generic medicine (pharmacological compound) can be given to a patient. The prescribing doctor has no freedom to mention his favourite brand in which he has invested his faith in terms of quality. On August 3, 2023, the National Medical Council (NMC) directed all doctors to prescribe only generic names and not brand names which led to protests.

Brand names are shunned because many brands are costly. Generic names are much cheaper. In 1975, the Hathi Committee demanded that all brand names should be weeded out gradually. That only certain renowned and branded companies have quality is a myth propagated by the big pharma companies, with their expensive propaganda and unethical marketing techniques at work.

There is an alleged nexus between pharmaceutical companies and doctors who can be influenced to give in to unethical marketing and promotional offers or kick-backs. But the Indian Medical Association and allied professional organisations of specialists believe that improving access to affordable medicines is part of their ethical commitment to patients. A doctor's reputation on successful treatment depends on the reliability of the quantity and quality of the active pharmaceutical ingredient in a tablet, syrup or injection available in a pharmacy. But who will guarantee compliance with those quality parameters? Individual manufacturers? The networks of pharmaceutical industries, Indian standards and quality control? Price control authorities?

No compromise on quality

The prevalence rate of spurious and "not standard quality" medicines (NSQs), stands at 4.5% and 3.4 %, respectively, as shown by two national drug surveys in the last 10 years using thousands of samples from retail chemists across India. In safeguarding a patient and enabling complete healing, drugs must be 100% quality test-passed. Having even 5% of medicines failing to pass quality tests is simply unacceptable.

The government must ensure the quality of medicines produced, procured, and supplied through its Universal Health Coverage system as well as the private health-care network. For this, there has to be periodic lifting of samples for testing. Batches of medicines that fail the quality test must be banned, with punitive action taken against manufacturers. This will eliminate repeat defaulters



from the supply chain. The mechanism and systems are in place but are not implemented in earnest.

The Tamil Nadu Medical Services Corporation Limited's practice, where all supplied medicines are kept under quarantine stock till double blinded samples are cleared in quality testing by government and private sector laboratories, is worth replicating. It is only on receipt of a pass quality test report that stock entry is done.

Till such time as the government is able to make the assurance (with concrete evidence) that all medicines in the market are of standard quality, doctors should be allowed to use in their generic prescription, the name of the company (in brackets), in which the prescribing doctor has confidence in in terms of the quality of the medicine.

Without such a reliable assurance from the government, it does not have the moral right to enforce prescription only by generic name. Moreover, control over choosing the brand will pass on to the chemist, or, even worse, the half-knowledgeable sales boy who, it is feared, will decide the brand primarily on the basis of profits to be gained.

Other issues

The availability rate of all essential medicines must be above 90%. In a study of the availability of 50 essential paediatric medicines in Chhattisgarh, in 2010 — the first of its kind in India — my team calculated it to be only 17%. Non-essential vitamin tonics and cough syrups line the shelves in a pharmacy but there is no trace of the low profit-margin essential medicines. There must also be a ban on unscientific combinations of medicines — currently around 40% of the retail market in India.

To ensure affordable medicines for all under Universal Health Care, free medicines and free diagnostics are acceptable policy, but implementation needs to be monitored. The network of Janaushadhi kendras needs to be expanded. Approved norms of the profit margin for wholesale agents must be limited to 15%. For retailers it must be 35% over the ex-factory or manufacturer's selling prices (MSP) excluding transportation cost and VAT. Without these comprehensive measures, accessibility to cheaper medicines in India will be a mirage.

Following the Indian Medical Association's protest, the NMC has withdrawn the order on 'generic prescribing' since August 23, 2023. But this is only a case of one step forward but two steps back in moving to the goal of universal access to affordable generic medicines for all without brand names.

ADDRESSING POLLUTION SHOULD NOT BE ABOUT MUDSLINGING AND EMPTY RHETORIC

Rain and wind brought by the western disturbance in the run-up to Diwali had raised hopes that Delhi's residents would breathe a little easier after the festival. Delhi's AQI on the morning of November 12 was the lowest the city has experienced on Diwali in eight years. But the respite was short-lived. Levels of particulate matter soared in several parts of the city Sunday night as firecrackers were set off in defiance of a Supreme Court ban. At some monitoring stations, PM 10 levels were 15 to 16 times the 24-hour standard. The spike in pollution has sparked a familiar war of words between the BJP and Delhi's AAP government. Delhi Environment Minister Gopal Rai has accused BJP leaders and BJP-ruled states of "instigating" people to burst firecrackers in a "targeted manner". Leader of the Opposition in the Delhi Assembly, and BJP MLA Ramvir Singh Bidhuri, responded by criticising the Delhi government for its failure to impose the cracker ban.

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



In 2018, the SC directed the Delhi government to ban firecracker sales in the capital. This directive has never had the desired result. Rai has accused Delhi's neighbouring states, UP and Haryana, of non-cooperation. "If the BJP had banned firecrackers in UP and Haryana after the Supreme Court's order, pollution would not have increased in NCR," he says. It's well-known that pollution control measures in the capital have remained ineffective for want of a coordination mechanism between Delhi and its neighbouring states. That shouldn't, however, detract from the AAP government's own failures. Every year before the festive season, it issues appeals and sends out advisories. This is too little, too late. Requiring people to mellow down on festivities requires persuasion on a sustained basis — it should not seem akin to another emergency pollution control measure. Delhi's education department has enormous goodwill amongst large sections of the city's population. It needs to do much more than issue circulars to schools, on the eve of the festival, asking teachers to "sensitise" students about the ill-effects of crackers. Building an anti-pollution groundswell also requires engaging with RWAs. The Kejriwal government has scarcely undertaken any meaningful initiative in this respect.

MANY INDIAN CITIES RECORD PEAK POLLUTION DURING DEEPAVALI DAY

The analysis of particulate matter levels in Indian cities around Deepavali in 2023 reveals a significant spike in pollution, especially in PM 2.5 (particles with a diameter of 2.5 microns or less). This increase is primarily attributed to the burning of firecrackers during the festival.

Key Findings:

High Pollution Levels: In seven cities (Delhi, Noida, Gurugram, Lucknow, Ahmedabad, Chennai, and Kolkata), the PM 2.5 levels crossed the 500 micrograms per cubic meter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) mark around Deepavali. This indicates an alarming level of air pollution during the festival period.

While northern cities like Delhi, Noida, and Lucknow showed significant pollution spikes, cities like Mumbai recorded lower levels. Kolkata also experienced peak pollution on Deepavali.

Amaravathi, Chennai, and Hyderabad in the south also witnessed pollution peaks during Deepavali. Bengaluru recorded high levels but did not break the year's record.

Other Pollutants:

Besides PM 2.5, other pollutants such as carbon monoxide, atmospheric ammonia, nitrous oxide (NO), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), PM10, and sulphur dioxide (SO₂) also exceeded their 24-hour limits on Deepavali day. For instance, NO levels in Delhi peaked at $140 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, exceeding the limit of $80 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$.

Health Implications:

Elevated levels of pollutants like NO₂ and SO₂ are linked to increased hospital admissions for heart and lung diseases, underscoring the significant health risks associated with such high pollution levels.

This analysis clearly indicates that Deepavali celebrations, particularly the use of firecrackers, contribute to a drastic increase in air pollution in many Indian cities, posing serious environmental and health challenges.



PROPOSED OTT LAW: CAREFUL, FOR CONTENT'S SAKE

On November 10, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting sought comments on the draft Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, which would bring traditional broadcasters as well as OTT content and digital news services under a single regulatory umbrella. This draft legislation proposes to replace the three-decade-old Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995. As the Minister for Information and Broadcasting Anurag Thakur said on X (formerly known as Twitter), it would “streamline” the regulatory framework for a broadcast landscape that has seen vast changes over the last couple of years, with the development of new platforms such as DTH, IPTV and OTT. The purpose of the new “dynamic” law would be to ensure “ease of doing business”, while promoting “technological advancement and service evolution”, he said.

For those who would be most affected including the general public that has come to rely on the new digital services not only as consumers of entertainment and information, but also as creators, the government’s invitation for feedback is an opportunity to deliberate on some of its key features. One welcome provision addresses the needs of persons with disabilities, with guidelines recommending subtitles, the inclusion of audio-descriptions in video content and translation into sign language, among other measures. Other provisions, however, raise concerns about content restriction. Among them is the requirement for “any person who broadcasts news and current affairs programs through an online paper, news portal, website, social media intermediary, or other similar medium...as part of a systematic business, professional, or commercial activity” to adhere to the Programme Code and Advertising Code. Inadequately defined phrases and words like “half-truths”, “good taste” and “decency” must not be carried into the new law. Also a matter of concern are the measures proposed to “strengthen the self-regulation regime”, as part of which a Broadcast Advisory Council will be set up. Five officers representing different ministries will join an eminent independent person with experience in media, entertainment and broadcast and five other domain experts in this Council. The new piece of legislation must, therefore, find ways to ensure the Council’s autonomy.

Any regulatory framework must be created keeping in mind the strengths of the Indian digital space — it has thrived on creativity and expression. It must also make sure that this space continues to generate lively engagement and debate, besides providing avenues of income for the many content creators who depend on it.

SCIENTISTS PULL PAPER FROM JOURNAL OVER ARUNACHAL MENTION

Scientists Mukesh Thakur, Lalit Kumar Sharma, and Avijit Ghosh recently withdrew a research paper from the journal Wildlife Letters due to a dispute over the mention of Arunachal Pradesh. The paper, focusing on the white-cheeked macaque, originally cited Arunachal Pradesh as the sampling site. However, the Chinese government, contesting this mention, pressured the journal to omit the reference, as it conflicts with China's territorial claims.

Wildlife Letters, an international peer-reviewed journal published by Northeast Forestry University in China, is subject to Chinese regulations, including adherence to the Chinese government's official maps and place names. Co-editor-in-chief Marcel Holyoak communicated this to Dr. Thakur, explaining that failure to comply could result in the withdrawal of Chinese funding and create problems for the journal's staff in China.

Dr. Thakur, a distinguished scientist with numerous awards and publications, resisted altering the paper. He expressed readiness to pursue legal action through international courts to resolve the



matter. He was also surprised by the lack of support from Indian scientists on the journal's board and those working at the journal's production house in India.

The ZSI Director, Dhriti Banerjee, commended Dr. Thakur for standing firm on the issue of India's territorial integrity. The white-cheeked macaque, initially discovered by Chinese scientists in South Tibet, was later reported by Dr. Thakur's team in Arunachal Pradesh through camera trapping and DNA analysis. The withdrawn paper discussed the hybrid origin of the species, exploring two paternal lineages.

This incident raises concerns about the influence of geopolitical issues on scientific research and publication, particularly in cases where territorial disputes are involved.

EDINBURGH TO KOZHIKODE: HOW KERALA GOT ONTO UNESCO'S CITY OF LITERATURE LIST

Over four days in the coming month of January, the Kozhikode beach will witness a sea of people braving the blazing sun to listen to some great minds, from across the country and overseas, speaking mostly on literature.

The seventh edition of the Kerala Literature Festival (KLF) should attract hundreds of thousands of book lovers, as in previous years. It will be the first since UNESCO named Kozhikode a City of Literature, a fortnight ago.

The massive attendance for the KLF — there was a five lakh footfall at the last edition, according to the organisers — has, in fact, become the most visible symbol of Kozhikode's love for literature. UNESCO's recognition is richly deserved by this historic city.

Kozhikode is India's first City of Literature. It was in 2004 that UNESCO launched the Creative Cities Network to promote cooperation among cities that have identified creativity as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development. Edinburgh was the first City of Literature.

Celebrating creativity

Besides literature, the UN agency also recognises cities for their association with other creative fields like film, crafts, folk arts and design. This year, Gwalior has been named a City of Music, an honour that was achieved before by two other Indian cities, Varanasi (2015) and Chennai (2017). A city has to submit a bid explaining why it deserves to be considered.

The Kozhikode Corporation acted, in all seriousness, on a suggestion by the Kerala Institute of Local Administration. A study was conducted by the students of Architecture and Planning at the National Institute of Technology, Calicut (the anglicised name of Kozhikode).

A study by a research scholar from Prague — the Czech city that got UNESCO's tag in 2014 — also helped. As did the presence of 500-odd libraries, several publishing houses as well as literature festivals like the KLF.

The city's love affair with letters becomes evident during the KLF. You will find large gatherings listening attentively to writers talking about their work or sharing their views on multiple topics during the hundreds of lively sessions over four days of the festival, the first edition of which was held in 2016.



You will also find the authors being treated like stars, with fans requesting them to pose for selfies or sign autographs, often on the books they penned. The KLF may have given Kozhikode a boost to its literary scene and the recognition from UNESCO may be an icing on the cake, but the city has always loved books and the men and women who write them.

Master storytellers

Kozhikode is home to one of the greatest writers of our time, M.T. Vasudevan Nair. It was also home to another much loved legendary author, Vaikom Muhammad Basheer. S.K. Pottekkatt, yet another master storyteller, also lived in this city.

Kozhikode also has a vibrant theatre tradition, best represented by the likes of K.T. Muhammed and Thikkodiyar. It has also produced one of Malayalam cinema's finest scriptwriters, Ranjith.

There have always been romantic notions about Kozhikode and its literature. Writer Anees Salim once ran away from home to Kozhikode so that he could become a disciple of Basheer. M.T.'s postal address is among the most famous ones in the city.

The world may know M.T. for his novels such as *Randamoozham*, *Asuravithu* and *Manju*, short stories like *Sherlock*, *Vanaprastham* and *Kazhcha*, and screenplays like *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha*, *Amrutham Gamaya* and *Panchagni*, but he has also been an exceptional editor of a literary magazine and has nurtured several new writers. That magazine, *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, is printed from Kozhikode.

The Kozhikode station of All India Radio has contributed significantly to the city's culture. The station boasted talents such as poet and lyricist P. Bhaskaran, composer K. Raghavan, author Uroob, poets Akkitham and N.N. Kakkad and Thikkodiyar.

Until UNESCO's recognition became national news, it wasn't literature, though, that people usually associated Kozhikode with. The city has been celebrated more for its love of music, football and food. Kozhikode has always offered a wide array of food, catering to different tastes. Some of its eateries are known well beyond the borders of Kerala.

The venue of the KLF, the Kozhikode beach, has also played host to some of the biggest singers of the country. Excellent crowds would turn up at the Town Hall or the Tagore Centenary Hall for shows featuring lesser-known or even unknown singers.

Kozhikode has produced some of India's finest footballers like Olympian Rahman and hosted several major tournaments in front of full houses. It also boasts of some of the most passionate fans of the beautiful game you would ever come across.

Thriving publishing houses

UNESCO's approval of Kozhikode should be seen from a wider perspective. It isn't the only city in Kerala that celebrates the written word. You would find serious readers across the State — in Thiruvananthapuram, Thrissur or Kottayam (the first town to become a 100% literate town in India in 1989, and the publishing capital of Kerala).

Even in this era of e-books and mobile phones, publishing thrives in Kerala. More and more books from Malayalam are getting translated. And the Malayali has welcomed warmly translations from all languages.



Marqueuz was once called the greatest novelist in Malayalam.

WHY A RAHMAN SONG FROM PIPPA HAS OFFENDED MANY IN BENGAL

Roy Kapur Films, the maker of a new Hindi-language film called Pippa, has apologised for any “unintended distress” that a song in the film, Karar Oi Louho Kopat, has caused. The song, written and composed by the Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam in 1922 as a rousing nationalist anthem against the British Raj, has been set to a new tune by A R Rahman for Pippa, which has been widely criticised in both West Bengal and Bangladesh.

The film, directed by Raja Krishna Menon, and starring Ishaan Khatter and Mrunal Thakur, tells the story of Capt (later Brig) Balram Singh Mehta, hero of the crucial tank battle of Garibpur, west of Dhaka, during the 1971 war with Pakistan. It premiered on Amazon Prime Video on November 10.

What have the film’s makers said?

The ‘Statement from the Team of Pippa’ posted on Instagram and X, clarifies that the “rendition of the song is a sincere artistic interpretation, embarked upon only after securing the necessary adaptation rights from the estate of the Late Mr Kazi Nazrul Islam”.

The statement records the filmmakers’ “deep respect for the original composition”, acknowledges the “emotional attachment that audiences may have” to it, and says that “if our interpretation has hurt sentiments or caused unintended distress, we offer our sincere apologies”.

So what is the song Karar Oi Louho Kopat about?

Karar Oi Louho Kopat was published in 1922 in the magazine Banglar Katha (Stories of Bengal), and was later included in Nazrul’s book Bhangar Gaan (Songs of Breaking Free). Nazrul wrote the song of revolution after the British threw Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das (1870-1925) in prison in 1922.

The refrain of the song is Karar Oi Louho Kopat/ Bhenge Phel Kor re Lopat, which translates to Break down those iron gates of prison, make them disappear. The song was first recorded in June 1949, sung by the folk singer Girin Chakraborty.

And who was Kazi Nazrul Islam?

Nazrul (1899-1976) was a Bengali poet, writer, and musician whose oeuvre, Nazrulgeeti (Songs of Nazrul), constitutes a musical genre that is perhaps second in popularity to only Rabindrasangeet, the compositions of Rabindranath Tagore. He enjoys iconic status in West Bengal, Bangladesh, and the Bengali diaspora around the world, and is revered as the national poet of Bangladesh.

Nazrul is known as the Bidrohi Kobi (Rebel Poet) because most of the more than 4,000 songs that he wrote and composed are songs of protest and revolution, which inspired the freedom fighters of Bengal in their struggle against colonialism and imperialism. In 1923, the British arrested Nazrul because of the strongly anti-British content of a magazine that he founded and edited.

What is the problem with Rahman’s rendition of Nazrul’s song?



The song in Pippa uses Nazrul's lyrics but with a tune that is different from Nazrul's iconic original version. This has offended many Bengalis who have reservations about alterations or improvisations in Rabindrasangeet or Nazrulgeeti, which are seen as part of Bengal's cherished cultural heritage and identity.

Many have described Rahman's version of the song as a light-hearted, folksy, romantic number, very different from Nazrul's rousing song of protest that was infused with intense patriotic fervour. Besides the rhythm and tune, Rahman has also changed the overall listening experience by introducing sounds of the flute and string instruments.

Painter Kazi Anirban, Nazrul's grandson, told reporters that his mother did give her consent to the makers of Pippa to use the song, but not to change the tune. "The way the song has been composed with the change in rhythm and tune, is shocking. This is not the song that Nazrul Islam composed. I don't want our family's name in the film's credits," he said.

Nazrul's granddaughter Anindita Kazi said: "As members of his (Nazrul's) family and lovers of his creations, we cannot accept this distortion. The song must be omitted from the film."

Anirban's mother, Kazi Kalyani, had given her consent for the use of the song in the film in 2021, months before she passed away. In their statement, Roy Kapur Films said the filmmakers had "faithfully followed both the letter and the spirit of the license agreement for the lyrics, as duly signed with Late Mrs Kalyani Kazi and witnessed by Mr Anirban Kazi".

"...Our agreement", the statement said, "permitted us to use the lyrics with a new composition".

Who specifically is protesting against the Pippa song?

Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin wrote on X, "A R Rahman changed the music of Bengali legendary poet, lyricist, composer Kazi Nazrul Islam's famous 1921's anti-British song 'Karar Oi Lauho kapat'. Bengalis are furious. They demand for stopping Rahman's remake and keeping the original music of the song."

Hindustani classical vocalist Pandit Ajoy Chakrabarty said: "I did not like it (Rahman's version). This is not expected from an eminent composer like him. This song bears a certain emotion for the Bengalis. A lot of research was required before working on this project."

Bengali singer Raghab Chatterjee attacked the Oscar-winning composer on social media. "Mr A R Rahman, India's most eminent music director has just released a song called Karar Oi Louho Kapat from the film Pippa. The most deplorable fact is that the song is not his exclusive property," he posted.

"Being a Bangali we have grown up listening to the epic song Karar Oi Louho Kapat by none other than Kazi Nazrul Islam. As a singer from Bengal I am not at all accepting the way Mr Rahman has tampered with the original tune and claims to be the composer of the song itself," Chatterjee said.

Veteran Bengali singer Haimanti Shukla expressed dismay at Rahman's improvisations. "He has no real understanding of Bengali music. This is clear from this recent controversy," she said.

Composer Debojyoti Mishra said, "We are all familiar with A R Rahman as a genius composer. Personally, he is a good friend of mine. However, it's distressing to discover that the iconic song of the legendary rebel poet and composer, Kazi Nazrul Islam, has been made this way. Like many others, I'm deeply shocked by this tragedy."



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

GROWTH DICHOTOMY

In September, the Index of Industrial Production or IIP rose 5.8%, almost half the 14-month-high 10.3% growth in August. Most economists anticipated a 7% to 8% uptick in the month that marks the onset of India's packed festive calendar. September's factory output growth was the slowest in three months, but also marked a 2.4% drop in production levels compared to August. Manufacturing led the decline, with year-on-year growth dropping from 9.3% in August to 4.5% in September and production volumes declining 2% month-on-month. In August, just seven of 23 manufacturing sectors had clocked a contraction but that list expanded to nine in September, with furniture dropping 20% and apparel production almost 18%. What is more worrying is that 12 sectors recorded a sequential decline in output this September, belying hopes that firms would ramp up inventories in anticipation of festive spending. Producers' lack of confidence in consumers' impulses is reflected in consumer durables and non-durables, which were up just 1% and 2.7%, respectively, on top of a 5.5%-plus contraction last September. Sequentially, consumer non-durables, what one may broadly consider as fast moving consumer goods involving smaller-ticket spends, were down 3.5% with the lowest output levels seen since November 2022. Electricity generation also fell 6.6% sequentially in September, perhaps due to the higher rainfall recorded over August.

On the whole, September's IIP takes average factory output growth to 7.4% in the second quarter, lifting the uptick in the first half of 2023-24 to 6%. This may still weigh in well with the central bank chief's hopes of Q2 GDP growth outpacing their official projection of 6.5%. But spliced up, the IIP indicates an asymmetry in the economy and a fresh fork lies in the road ahead. Consumer goods' output was just 0.3% higher than pre-COVID-19 levels this September, with durables being the only use-based segment to record a contraction so far this year. By contrast, output has been more resilient in investment-linked sectors such as infrastructure/construction goods and capital goods, up 12.1% and 6.7%, respectively, this year. Public capex on infrastructure sectors has surely lifted output of items such as steel and cement through the first half of the year, while high inflation has eaten into all but the high-income consumers' propensity to spend. Going forward, capex spends that have been front-loaded this year may moderate and additional revenue spends ahead of the Lok Sabha election are likely, especially with sensitive commodities such as fuel, urea and food facing fresh volatility in prices. That infrastructure and construction goods' output in September was the lowest since March 2023, suggests one growth tide may be ebbing, which makes the other, more fragile consumption story even more critical to watch.

FOOD FLUX

In October, India's consumer price inflation eased to a four-month low of 4.87%, while wholesale prices declined year-on-year for the seventh successive month by a minor 0.5%. Although only marginally lower than the 5% retail inflation in September, October's price rise pace — which is exactly the same as that in June — surely represents some relief for the third successive month from July's 15-month high pace of over 7.4%. Rural consumers still face a higher inflation of 5.1%, though. Core inflation, which excludes energy and food costs, has eased further and household services inflation dropped below 4% after several months above. The rise in prices of vegetables, which had surged over 37% in July, eased to 2.7% in October. However, the overall uptick in food costs for households stayed firm at 6.6%, virtually unchanged from September, as other essential edibles saw faster price hikes or remained at elevated levels. Some of these — like pulses (up

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



18.8%) and cereals (10.7%) — may be attributed to worries about the kharif output and uncertain rabi prospects as well as hikes in minimum support prices for crops. Pulses prices were up 19.4% at the wholesale level, signalling that more pass-through to retail prices is likely.

The Monetary Policy Committee of the Reserve Bank of India, which meets early December for its next review, will not be too swayed by the October tidings. As per its 5.6% average inflation projection for this quarter, down from 6.4% in the previous quarter, November and December may well see an average inflation of 5.95%, fractionally short of the central bank's upper tolerance threshold. Excluding edible oils, whose 13.7% year-on-year drop in prices played a key role in moderating the Consumer Price Index, would have meant a 5.6% rise in prices. Base effects from last year, when the Ukraine conflict had spiked edible oil prices, will start to dissipate in coming months. Similarly, while the 6.8% inflation recorded in October 2022 helped cool price rise last month, those base effects will surely ebb this month. Retail inflation had eased to 5.88% last November, with the food price index rising just 4.7%, from 7% in the previous month. The perceived retreat of inflation last month thus may only be fleeting. Households that seem to have adjusted to the continuous recent rise in living costs, by pulling back on discretionary spends and downsizing essential consumption as per industrial output trends, are likely to remain cautious rather than loosen their purse strings anytime soon. For an economy whose resilience relies on its domestic demand buffer against global shocks, reluctant or budget-cramped consumers are the biggest headwind for policymakers to strive to address.

INDIA'S TRADE DEFICIT HAS A WIDER GAP

According to the official trade data released for October, India's trade deficit hit a record high in October. The merchandise exports grew by 6.29 per cent while the merchandise imports grew by 14 per cent. In absolute terms, in October, India exported goods worth \$33.57 billion while importing goods worth over \$65 billion. A trade deficit refers to the excess of imports over exports in a country that trades with the rest of the world. While any developing economy, such as India, typically has a gap between its exports and imports — with imports leading the exports — the quantum of this gap and what is causing it are key to reading trade data. The trade deficit should ideally not become too high, especially in relation to the overall size of the economy (read the gross domestic product).

On the export front, the increase in October should be seen as a welcome development given the rather anaemic performance of the country in this sector in the recent past. For instance, October is only the second month when merchandise exports have grown in the current financial year that started in April. If one takes the calendar year, October is just the third month when exports have risen. Leading the pack in terms of growth rate were drug and pharma exports, which grew by over 29 per cent in October to \$2.42 billion. Electronic goods, engineering goods and agricultural items also did well. But beyond the growth rate relative to October 2022, the picture changes somewhat. The fact is that in October 2021, India's exports stood at \$35.7 billion. That India's exports in October are roughly 6 per cent below what they were two years ago puts this latest increase in perspective. On the import front, the story is slightly different. Even though import growth has also been negative for India for the most recent months, yet in absolute terms, they have continued to grow from October 2021 (\$53.6 billion) to 2022 (\$57.9 billion) to \$65 billion now.

While both exports and import growth rates have either been negative or muted, October saw a massive divergence between the two trend lines. As a result, India's trade deficit at a monthly level has grown to \$31.5 billion in October — a record high. A big culprit has been the near doubling of



gold imports in October — from \$3.7 billion to \$7.2 billion. Even though it is only a monthly spike, a high trade deficit should always be monitored. That's because when India imports more than it exports, the domestic currency's strength relative to other currencies such as the US dollar takes a hit. A relatively weaker rupee further worsens the trade deficit because more rupees are required to buy the same set of imports in the future.

AS UNSECURED CREDIT RISES SHARPLY, RBI TIGHTENS NORMS ON PERSONAL LOANS, CREDIT CARDS

Indian banks have seen a sharp rise in unsecured loans — mostly personal loans and credit cards — that has outpaced the overall bank credit growth of about 15 per cent over the past year, catching the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) attention.

Risk weight refers to the capital banks keep aside as provisioning to cover any loan defaults. The latest RBI move is expected to dissuade banks from targeting high growth in these sectors as it will become costlier for banks to maintain high credit growth.

On October 6, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das cautioned banks and NBFCs about the high growth in the personal loan segments. It said certain components of personal loans are recording very high growth.

The RBI increased the risk weights for consumer credit exposure of commercial banks and NBFCs (outstanding as well as new), including personal loans, by 25 percentage points to 125 per cent. Housing loans, education loans, vehicle loans and loans secured by gold and gold jewellery are excluded from this hike.

The central bank increased the risk weights on credit card receivables by 25 percentage points to 150 per cent and 125 per cent for commercial banks and NBFCs respectively.

Credit card outstanding of banks had shot up by 29.9 per cent on a year-on-year basis to Rs 2.17 lakh crore as of September 2023.

The RBI also increased the risk weights on banks' exposures to NBFCs by 25 percentage points (over and above the risk weight associated with the given external rating) in all cases where the extant risk weight as per external rating of NBFCs is below 100 per cent. For this purpose, loans to HFCs, and loans to NBFCs which are eligible for classification as priority sector in terms of the extant instructions will be excluded, the RBI said.

In another significant move, the RBI said all top-up loans extended by banks and NBFCs against movable assets which are inherently depreciating in nature, such as vehicles, should be treated as unsecured loans for credit appraisal, prudential limits and exposure purposes.

Das had advised banks and NBFCs to strengthen their internal surveillance mechanisms, address the build-up of risks, if any, and institute suitable safeguards in their own interest. The governor had said: "The need of the hour is robust risk management and stronger underwriting standards."

The high growth seen in consumer credit and increasing dependency of NBFCs on bank borrowings were also highlighted by the RBI governor in the interactions with MDs and CEOs of major banks and large NBFCs in July and August 2023, respectively, the RBI said Thursday.

According to the RBI, banks and NBFCs should review their extant sectoral exposure limits for consumer credit and put in place, if not already there, board approved limits in respect of various



sub-segments under consumer credit as may be considered necessary by the boards as part of prudent risk management. In particular, limits should be prescribed for all unsecured consumer credit exposures. The limits so fixed should be strictly adhered to and monitored on an ongoing basis by the Risk Management Committee, the RBI said.

On November 7, the Centre for Advanced Financial Research and Learning (CAFRAL), set up by the RBI, had raised concern over the rise in the bank financing for non-banking finance companies. Following the market correction prompted by the IL&FS default and a brief pause due to the Covid-19 pandemic, bank financing for NBFCs has begun to rise again, it said. "This raises concerns about systemic contagion and underscores the need for tighter preventive measures to mitigate potential systemic fallout," CAFRAL said.

Outlier growth, warning signs

– On October 6, while unveiling the monetary policy, RBI Dy Governor J Swaminathan said over the last couple of years, growth in retail credit has been close to 30 per cent in most institutions and unsecured retail credit has grown by 23 per cent on an average. In comparison to a 12-14 per cent credit growth in the other segments, growth in unsecured retail credit looks to be an outlier.

Defaults in the credit card segment are rising. Gross non-performing assets in the credit card segment of banks rose by `951 crore to `4,073 crore in FY23 from `3,122 crore in FY22, according to the latest data obtained from the RBI under the RTI Act.

WEAKER RUPEE BUMPED UP INDIA'S H1 OIL IMPORT BILL BY RS 25,000 CRORE

Impact of the Indian Rupee's depreciation against the US Dollar on India's oil import and export trade.

Rupee Depreciation and Import Costs: The rupee depreciated by over 9% between April 2022 and September 2023, contributing to a significant increase in the cost of India's crude oil imports. This depreciation led to an increase of over Rs 25,000 crore, or 5%, in the crude oil import bill in the first half of the current financial year (FY24) compared to the same period in the previous year (FY23).

Global Factors Influencing Rupee Value: The decline in the value of the rupee was influenced by several global factors, including interest rate hikes by the US Federal Reserve, the Russia-Ukraine war, and general global economic uncertainty, which increased the demand for the US Dollar.

Impact on Petroleum Products Trade: While the value of petroleum product imports also increased due to the weaker rupee, the value of exports of petroleum products from India partly offset this impact. India, being a net exporter of petroleum products, benefited from the depreciation in terms of export value.

Oil Import and Export Figures: In the first half of FY24, India's crude oil imports stood at \$63.86 billion, equating to Rs 5.26 lakh crore at an average exchange rate of Rs 82.44 per dollar. If the exchange rate had remained at Rs 78.49 per dollar (the rate in the first half of FY23), the import cost would have been lower by over Rs 25,000 crore.



Refiners' Impact: The rupee depreciation impacted all Indian refiners, but the gains from petroleum product exports mainly benefited export-oriented private sector refiners like Reliance Industries and Nayara Energy. Public sector refiners had a marginal share in exports.

Net Impact on Trade: The net impact of the rupee's fall on India's oil and petroleum product trade (including both imports and exports) in the first half of FY24 vis-à-vis the previous year was nearly Rs 15,700 crore.

There is significant influence of currency exchange rates on the economics of oil trade, particularly for a country like India that heavily relies on oil imports.

EASING WHEAT PRICES, RISING RICE PRICES: WHAT'S BEHIND THEM?

Prices of wheat and rice have gone in opposite directions in the global market, one crashing and the other soaring.

Wheat prices at the Chicago Board of Trade futures exchange hit an all-time high of \$13.64 a bushel (\$501/tonne) on March 8, 2022. That was days after Russia invaded Ukraine, with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's Food Price Index (FPI) touching a record 159.7 points in March 2022.

Prices of wheat have since more than halved to \$5.75 a bushel (\$211.4/tonne). The FPI — a weighted average of world prices of a basket of food commodities over a base value, taken as 100 for 2014-16 — has also fallen to 120.6 points in October 2023.

The declines have been sharper for the cereals and vegetable oils price indices — from 170.1 and 251.8 points to 125 and 120 points respectively — between March 2022 and October 2023.

Situation in wheat

Wheat from Russia is being exported currently at \$227 per tonne free-on-board, i.e. from the port of origin. Ocean freight and insurance charges will take the cost at Indian ports to \$265-270 per tonne or Rs 2,200-2,250 per quintal. That's just under the Rs 2,275/quintal minimum support price declared by the Union government for the 2023-24 wheat crop that is being sown now.

After adding port handling-cum-bagging (Rs 200) and internal transport (Rs 100-150 from Tuticorin or Krishnapatnam), imported Russian wheat would cost Rs 2,500-2600/ quintal at any flour mill in South India. That makes imports feasible, relative to a year ago.

Easing wheat, rising rice International wheat and rice prices.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has projected the country's wheat shipments at a record 50 million tonnes (mt) in 2023-24 (July-June), up from 47.5 mt and 33 mt in the preceding two years. Higher exports from the European Union (31.9 mt in 2021-22 to 37.5 mt in 2023-24), Canada (15 mt to 23 mt) and Kazakhstan (8.5 mt to 10 mt) too, will more than offset the reduced quantities from Ukraine (18.8 mt to 12 mt) over this period.

At 21.88 mt on November 1 this year, wheat stocks in government godowns were marginally above the 21.05 mt a year ago, though way below the 41.98 mt for the same date in 2021. From April 2020 to December 2022, the government supplied 10 kg of free or near-free rice or wheat per person per month through the public distribution system (PDS). With stocks depleting, the



quota for PDS beneficiaries was cut — rather, restored — from this calendar year to the original 5 kg/ person/ month.

The government is at present channelling 1.2-1.3 mt of wheat per month (from 1.8-1.9 mt till last year) through the PDS. Simultaneously, in order to cool market prices, it has resorted to selling from the Food Corporation of India's (FCI) stocks. Such open market sales, at a minimum auction reserve price of Rs 2,125/ quintal, have increased from 0.2 mt to 0.3 mt per week from November 2023.

“Even if they step up the weekly open sales to 0.5 mt from January (2024), and maintain PDS supplies at 1.2-1.3 mt per month, FCI warehouses would have 7-7.5 mt of wheat stocks on April 1, which is close to the required minimum buffer of 7.46 mt for that date. By then, the new crop will also arrive in the market,” Kumar said.

It's tighter in rice

In wheat, the flexibility to import is an added comfort. It's another matter whether the government will allow imports, with national elections scheduled in April-May 2024. Any move to slash/ scrap the 40% import duty on wheat may face opposition from farmers across North and Central India.

In rice, even that limited flexibility for imports does not exist. This is because India is the world's No. 1 exporter of rice, its share in the global trade having ranged from 36.6% to 40.7% in the last three years, according to USDA data. The world's biggest exporter cannot also be an importer.

Unlike the situation in wheat, global export prices of rice today are higher than a year ago, or in March 2022. The reason is the restrictions India has put on exports. The Narendra Modi government has, since July 2023, banned exports of all white non-basmati rice. Only basmati and parboiled non-basmati rice shipments are being permitted, while being subjected to a \$950/tonne minimum export price (MEP) stipulation and 20% duty respectively.

India's position in the international rice market is similar to Indonesia's and Malaysia's in palm oil or Ukraine's and Russia's in sunflower. Supply disruptions from these large exporters tend to not only push up world prices, but to also produce a domino effect. India's rice export curbs have benefited Pakistan, which is expected to ship out 5 mt this year, much more than the 3.6 mt in 2022-23.

But the Pakistan government too, last week, fixed floor prices below which no rice can go out. These MEPs — from \$450/tonne on 100% broken rice to \$900/tonne on white, parboiled, and steamed basmati — are aimed at preventing domestic supply shortfalls.

Implications for inflation

India's cereal inflation averaged 10.65% year-on-year in October, based on the latest official consumer price index numbers. That was more than the 4.87% general retail inflation and the 6.61% annual rise in consumer food prices for the month.

Inflation in both rice and wheat are mainly a function of domestic production. While Russia's flooding the world with cheap wheat has made imports more economically viable, electoral considerations render it politically not-so-feasible.



It's quite the opposite in edible oils, where India meets roughly 60% of its consumption needs through imports. In the marketing year ended October 2023, vegetable oil imports reached an unprecedented 16.71 mt, as against 14.41 mt in 2021-22.

But the global price collapse — due to normalisation of supplies from Indonesia and Russia-Ukraine — led to the value of imports falling from \$19.60 billion in 2021-22 to \$16.65 billion in the 2022-23 oil year, according to the Solvent Extractors' Association of India. And retail edible oil inflation, not surprisingly, was at minus 13.73% in October.

The course of cereal inflation, by contrast, would be determined primarily by the size of the crops harvested by Indian farmers.

WHAT ARE ACTIVE AND PASSIVE EQUITY FUNDS — AND HOW MUCH INFLOWS DID THEY RECEIVE IN THE JULY-SEPT QUARTER?

Active equity funds are the flavour of the season for mutual fund investors. According to a recent study by Motilal Oswal AMC, during the July-September quarter (Q2), active equity funds witnessed net inflows of about Rs 74,000 crore with fund managers getting higher returns for investors through dynamic and active investing style. On the other hand, passive equity funds saw Rs 9,000 crore of inflows and arbitrage funds got Rs 29,000 crore.

What are active funds?

In an active fund, the fund manager is 'Active' in deciding whether to buy, hold, or sell the underlying securities and in stock selection. This fund relies on professional fund managers who manage investments. Active funds adopt different strategies and styles to create and manage the portfolio. They are expected to generate better returns (alpha) than the benchmark index. The risk and return in the fund will depend upon the strategy adopted, Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI) said.

How were the flows in the active equity fund in Q2?

The mutual fund industry recorded net inflows of approximately Rs 51,000 crore in Q2 of FY'24 and active equity funds led the way with net inflows of about Rs 74,000 crore, according to Motilal Oswal AMC. Investors continued to bet on active small cap funds, highlighting high investor risk appetite taking away around one-third of the Rs 33,000 crore net inflows, the study showed.

Within the Rs 42,000 crore net inflows into broad based equity funds, active small cap funds accounted for nearly one-fourth of the net inflows. Among active equity funds, the focused and ELSS (equity linked saving scheme) categories experienced the highest net outflows, totalling around Rs 2,000 crore.

The study reveals that active multi cap funds picked up steam with two NFOs garnering Rs 2,000 crore out of around Rs 8,000 crore net inflows in Q2 FY24. Active large cap funds saw net outflows to the tune of Rs 1,800 crore.

What are passive funds?

Passive funds – index funds and exchange traded funds (ETFs) – hold a portfolio that replicates a stated index or benchmark. In a passive fund, the fund manager has a passive role in the stock selection. Buy, hold or sell decisions are driven by the benchmark index and the fund manager/dealer merely needs to replicate the same with minimal tracking error.

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



How about flows into passive equity funds?

In the July-September quarter, inflows in passive equity funds were Rs 9,000 crore. On the passive side, equity claimed the lion share with around 78 per cent of net inflows, while commodities held an 18 per cent share. Investors flocked to passive large cap funds with the category receiving around 90 per cent of all net inflows. Other passive categories like mid and small caps also received high net inflows considering relatively small assets under management (AUM).

What should investors do?

While active fund is suited for investors who wish to take advantage of fund managers' alpha generation potential, passive fund is appropriate for investors who want to allocate exactly as per market index.

As the fund manager manages the fund with active investing by studying the market forces and the economy, investors can hope to get better returns.

A QUICK GUIDE TO INVESTING IN GOLD THIS DHANTERAS

Planning to invest in gold this Dhanteras? From physical gold in the form of jewellery to digital investments via products such as Gold ETFs, or Sovereign Gold Bonds, here's a guide for you to take an informed decision before investing.

Buying physical gold

Gold has always been a means of liquid investment, against which one can also borrow money as mean of a loan. However, investing in physical gold comes with its challenges, especially regarding its storage and safety. Jewellers also levy labour charges when making gold jewellery, which you cannot recover when selling it. When buying jewellery, ensure that you weigh its value by weight and purity, as only 24 karat is considered pure gold. Also, note that the resale value of gold bars or coins may be higher than that of physical gold.

Gold ETFs (Exchange-Traded Funds)

Gold exchange-traded funds (ETFs) are a convenient avenue to invest in gold digitally. These are passive investments linked to the price of gold price and traded on stock exchanges. Here, one unit of a Gold ETF is equal to one gram of physical gold. These can be easily liquidated to buy physical gold at the prevailing market rate.

To invest in Gold ETFs, you only need to open a demat account. Gold ETFs offer many benefits such as allowing you to add gold to your portfolio without the challenges of investing in physical gold, and the potential of earning a profit when the price of the metal appreciates. This liquid, cost-effective investment is a popular choice for investors seeking long or short-term exposure to the gold market.

Gold Mutual Funds

Gold mutual funds are another convenient option to invest in gold for portfolio diversification. These are professionally managed funds that function by pooling money from multiple investors to invest in a variety of gold-related assets, such as gold mining stocks, bullion, and mining companies. Like Gold ETFs, they allow investors' exposure to the gold market without having to invest in physical gold.



Sovereign Gold Bonds

Sovereign Gold Bonds (SGBs) are another popular option to digitally invest in gold. SGBs are government securities issued by the Reserve Bank of India that are denominated in grams of gold and come with an interest of 2.5% p.a. Investors receive periodic interest and the principal amount at maturity, linked to the prevailing price of gold. Absence of storage challenges, capital appreciation linked to gold prices, and interest income are some benefits associated with SGBs. The minimum investment for SGBs is 4 kg for individuals and 20 kg for trusts and similar entities, but these limits may be revised by the government from time to time. However, before investing, you must also be aware that SGBs lack liquidity in the secondary market and have a fixed tenure. Also, the interest they offer is taxable.

Digital gold

This is another type of gold investment where you can buy gold in small denominations online. It allows investors to own a portion of physical gold that is stored in secure vaults. This investment also allows you exposure to the gold market without having to worry about the challenges that accompany physical gold investments. Many digital payment platforms and investment apps facilitate investments in digital gold.

What's the ideal strategy to invest?

Gold is an asset that has been trusted for ages for not just growing money but conserving it as well. If you seek risk adjusted returns, investing in gold can help mitigate your risk when the markets are volatile. The yellow metal makes for an ideal choice to diversify your portfolio, and investing in gold digitally may be the best way to go about it. If you prefer investing in physical gold, ensure you have a robust arrangement for storing it safely.

Given that gold has been one of the most-preferred commodities during times of global economic uncertainty, such situations closely influence the demand and price of gold. Considering the challenges associated with investing in physical gold, you may explore investing in Gold mutual funds, SGBs, or Gold ETFs. However, Gold mutual funds are not linked to the physical gold and allow a starting investment as low as Rs.1000 via SIP. But, regardless of whichever form you choose to invest in gold. It is advisable to restrict your exposure to 10% of your portfolio and diversify your investment for the best returns. You may also seek the advice of a professional financial advisor to understand the option that's best for you and invest in it based on your financial goals.

ADANI GROUP ADVISER ON GOVT. EXPERT PANEL RAISES EYEBROWS

The appointment of Janardan Choudhary, an adviser to Adani Green Energy Ltd. (AGEL), as a member of the Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) for River and Hydroelectric Projects, has raised concerns about a potential conflict of interest. This committee is responsible for providing independent advice to the Union Environment Ministry on the ecological impacts of large hydroelectric power projects.

Choudhary, a former Director (Technical) of the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Ltd. with a 36-year tenure, participated in the EAC's first meeting in October, where an AGEL project was evaluated. However, he reportedly refrained from participating in the session that focused on AGEL's 1,500-megawatt Tarali pump storage project in Maharashtra. The minutes from the



meeting show Choudhary was present on October 17 but absent on October 18, and they do not indicate that he recused himself from discussions about the AGEL project.

A senior official from the Environment Ministry noted that it is common for EAC members to have industry affiliations, as their experience is valuable in assessing project impacts. However, members are expected to declare any affiliations and recuse themselves from discussions where there is a conflict of interest, with such recusals usually noted in the meeting minutes.

Choudhary disclosed his affiliation with AGEL to the Environment Ministry before his EAC appointment, and he lists his role as a full-time advisor to AGEL on LinkedIn. The Environment Ministry has not officially commented on this matter. The main role of the EACs is to recommend actions to the Environment Ministry after evaluating the environmental impacts of project proposals.

OFFSHORE LEAKS TO CYPRUS CONFIDENTIAL, A DECADE OF OFFSHORE INVESTIGATIONS

Over the past decade, a series of investigations into data leaks from tax haven jurisdictions have been conducted, shedding light on tax evasion and offshore financial activities. Here's a summary of the key investigations carried out by The Indian Express in collaboration with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and other media partners:

Offshore Leaks (2013): Revealed data from 10 jurisdictions, including 2.5 million documents. This investigation exposed the names and offshore investments of 612 Indians.

Swiss Leaks (2015): Based on files from HSBC's Swiss private banking arm, it identified 1,195 Indian clients, significantly more than the number previously reported to the Indian government by French authorities.

Panama Papers (2016): Focused on 11.5 million files from the Panama-based law firm Mossack Fonseca, revealing shell entities used for fraud, tax evasion, and money laundering, with real owners hidden behind nominees.

Paradise Papers (2017): Utilized 13.4 million files from Bermuda firm Appleby and Singapore-based Asiaciti Trust, showing how companies and individuals evaded tax using offshore entities. A significant portion of these entities were controlled from India.

Mauritius Leaks (2019): Involved documents from law firm Conyers Dill & Pearman, exposing how multinational companies use Mauritius as a tax haven to avoid taxes in various countries.

FinCEN Files (2020): Released by BuzzFeed News, these files included suspicious activity reports (SARs) filed by banks to the US Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN), flagging potential financial crimes.

Pandora Papers (2021): Revealed banks' roles in helping customers set up offshore companies, with assistance from Panamanian law firm Alemán, Cordero, Galindo & Lee (Alcogal). It highlighted complex trust structures used for tax evasion and asset concealment by powerful individuals, including heads of state.

Cyprus Confidential (2023): The most recent, involving 3.6 million documents from six offshore services providers in Cyprus, providing new insights into offshore financial activities.



Each of these investigations has played a crucial role in unveiling the hidden world of offshore finance and has had significant impacts on tax laws and financial transparency worldwide.

SECRECY AND NO TAX — REASON WHY INDIANS LOOK AT CYPRUS

In a ground-breaking revelation, the 'Cyprus Confidential' report has brought to light the intricate web of offshore financial dealings through an extensive investigation into 3.6 million documents from Cyprus, known for its status as a tax haven. This investigation, a collaborative effort involving over 270 journalists from more than 60 media houses across 55 countries, was led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ).

The Investigation's Core Findings

The 'Cyprus Confidential' report unveils how wealthy individuals and business houses globally, including notable names from India, have used the tax haven of Cyprus for financial maneuvers. The investigation reveals the establishment of offshore companies and the acquisition of Cypriot nationality under the country's Golden Passport scheme, highlighting the allure of Cyprus's liberal tax regime and stringent secrecy laws.

India and Cyprus: A Tax Treaty Landscape

From an Indian perspective, the report is particularly telling. It underscores how Indian entities, while legally setting up offshore companies in Cyprus, might be circumventing tax obligations back home. This situation is framed within the context of India's double-taxation avoidance agreements (DTAAs) with Cyprus. These agreements, evolving through various phases since 2013, have oscillated between offering tax benefits and imposing stringent conditions to curb potential tax evasion.

Tax Benefits and Legal Implications

Cyprus offers a low tax regime, including significant exemptions for offshore companies and branches, making it an attractive destination for tax planning. However, the Indian tax authorities are vigilant against misuse of such agreements, with provisions to question and deny tax treaty benefits if found to be instruments of tax evasion.

Conclusion: A Call for Transparency and Regulation

The 'Cyprus Confidential' report is more than an exposé; it's a call for greater transparency and regulation in global financial transactions. While offshore investments are not inherently illegal, the report underscores the need for stringent oversight to prevent their misuse for tax evasion. It's a reminder that in the increasingly interconnected world economy, collaborative investigations like these are vital in maintaining fiscal integrity and accountability.

THE ECONOMY OF A WORLD WITHOUT WORK

At the recently concluded Bletchley Park summit on Artificial Intelligence (AI), in an interview with the U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, billionaire Elon Musk highlighted the disruptive potential of AI. Mr. Musk conceived of a future where AI would substitute for all human labour — both physical and cognitive — and hence individuals would face no pressing need for a job, but would only seek work for personal fulfilment.



While AI may substitute for certain jobs, it generates new jobs in turn, for instance AI programmers. A future where AI has eliminated the need for all forms of work is one where AI has become self-aware — where AI software can not only take on the task it was designed for, but can also design AI to undertake new tasks, and operate and maintain itself. Such a future may be theoretically possible, but practically improbable.

The need for work

A world without work may not be probable, but is it desirable? The history of economic thought reveals different ways in which a human's relation with work has been theorised. Here one looks at two thinkers with diametrically opposite views on the nature of work — John Maynard Keynes and Karl Marx. Keynes was a liberal thinker who extolled capitalism but wished to save it from its worst excesses. He believed that at its heart, work represented a form of drudgery, and a world in which the hours of work could be reduced was one that unequivocally increased welfare. Keynes theorised that technological change under capitalism would eventually lead to a reduction of working hours. Mr. Musk's comments can be seen as an extension of Keynes' thinking, where improvements in technological change, if taken to its theoretical extreme, could eliminate the need for work altogether, representing an unambiguous positive outcome.

Karl Marx had a more nuanced analysis. For him, the essence of humanity lies in our ability to materially manipulate nature; work therefore provides meaning to human life. The problem arises within the economic system of capitalism, as the product of human labour is not the labourers' to enjoy, but is seen as the property of capital to dispose of in the market for profit. Capitalism, in this reading, causes humanity to lose touch with the one activity that provides self-fulfilment. In contrast to Keynes' view, the elimination of work does not imply an elimination of drudgery, but the elimination of the only activity that gives human life meaning. In Marx's view, the ideal state is not one where AI replaces human labour, but where individuals can utilise AI to enjoy and elevate their work, without it being appropriated by someone else.

The impact of AI on the economy

One may disagree with Keynes' notion that decreasing working hours will always increase welfare, for the working world does provide valuable social networks for many. At the same time, one can critique Marx's view of humanity finding meaning through work, for it does not allow us to conceptualise any kind of future without work at the centre. Yet the views of the above thinkers reveal an important problem in the current discussions around AI — the neglect of the economic system. Assume a situation where AI has advanced to the point that it is capable of substituting all kinds of labour. Under our current system of capitalism, the only way an individual can access material resources such as food and shelter is through income derived from work. In such a system, a world without work does not imply a world without drudgery, but one where individuals who cannot find work cannot access basic resources.

One can make the caveat — as Mr. Musk has — that work would be available for those who desire it for personal reasons. However, in a capitalist world, labour has no choice but to seek out work if they are to feed and clothe themselves. The world as sketched out by Mr. Musk cannot emerge under modern-day capitalism.

A world without work

Imagine an economy where a part of the surplus generated in the productive sphere — where AI is the only productive factor — is transferred to human individuals to meet their basic needs.



There is nothing wrong, of course, with postulating such a world. But this is not a capitalist world. It is a world with very different institutional arrangements regulating production and distribution, one where a universal basic income is a major source of income and not wage labour. This throws up several important questions, such as what determines the amount individuals receive, what determines the division of the net product between those who own the machines and those who don't and what determines the division between future growth versus current consumption. More importantly, is our current society open to devising new institutional arrangements to bring such a future to fruition, given that the current system has led to the emergence of rising inequality and a powerful billionaire class?

A situation where AI reigns supreme may never come to pass, and one may dismiss this article as speculative fiction. Yet the world economy will face disruptions, and it is imperative for us to fully understand the nature of these challenges. The impact of technological innovations cannot be seen in isolation from prevailing economic institutions.

SAHARA GROUP CHIEF SUBRATA ROY DIES IN MUMBAI AT 75

A business baron who started off with a chit fund business in the late 1970s, Mr. Roy, at the peak of his success, headed an empire that included an airline, Air Sahara, television channels, finance and real estate entities, including the ambitious Amby Valley project near Lonavala in Maharashtra.

The Sahara group was once considered India's second largest employer after the Indian Railways, with a professed employee base of around 1.2 million, but ran into trouble with financial sector regulators over the business model of its finance entity that involved raising deposits worth thousands of crores from small-ticket investors.

On his death, the Sahara India Pariwar said: "It is with profound sadness that Sahara India Pariwar [group] informs the demise of our Hon'ble 'Sahasri' Subrata Roy Sahara. Sahasri ji, an inspirational leader and visionary, passed away on 14th November due to cardiorespiratory arrest following an extended battle with complications arising from metastatic malignancy, hypertension, and diabetes."

While Air Sahara, which began operations in 1993, was eventually sold off to the erstwhile Jet Airways, troubles of the Sahara group's finance business with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) had led to Mr. Roy spending time in prison before being released on parole. The group's battle with SEBI continues to fester.

Mr. Roy was admitted to Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital & Medical Research Institute on November 12, following "a decline in his health", the group's spokesperson said.



LIFE & SCIENCE

STARRY EUCLID IMAGES SPUR PROBE OF 'DARK UNIVERSE'

The European Space Agency (ESA), in collaboration with NASA, has unveiled the first images from the Euclid space telescope, aimed at exploring dark matter and dark energy, which are believed to constitute about 95% of the universe. These images, the sharpest of their kind, display the telescope's capability to observe billions of galaxies up to 10 billion light-years away. The images cover four regions, including the Perseus cluster and over 100,000 other galaxies. The existence of structures like the Perseus cluster suggests the presence of dark matter, which affects galaxy rotation and the formation of massive cosmic structures. Dark energy, a more mysterious concept proposed in the 1990s and linked to the accelerating expansion of the universe, was partially observed by the Hubble Space Telescope. Euclid will now create a 3D map of about a third of the sky to study these elusive components of the universe, enhancing our understanding of galaxy formation and distribution. The mission is planned for six years, with an additional six months of potential operation, and is positioned at the L2 point, a stable gravitational spot also occupied by NASA's James Webb Space Telescope. ESA also shared images of an irregular galaxy, thought to be a fundamental building block of the universe, and a spiral galaxy known as the "Hidden Galaxy."

NASA, ISRO PREPARE TO LAUNCH JOINT SPACE MISSION

The NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar (NISAR) mission, a joint venture between NASA and the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), is gearing up for its launch in early 2024. This ambitious project aims to deploy a low-earth orbit observatory to survey the Earth's land and ice-covered surfaces every 12 days, providing crucial data for understanding various planetary changes.

Key Features of the NISAR Mission

Launch Timeline: NISAR is scheduled for launch in the first quarter of 2024 from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre at Sriharikota on an ISRO Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle Mark-II (LVM-2). NASA's NISAR Project Manager, Phil Barela, mentioned that the mission is ready, pending completion of several critical tests, including vibration assessments.

Mission Duration and Objectives: The mission, with an initial duration of three years, will begin its Earth survey after a 90-day satellite commissioning period. It aims to provide consistent data on the planet's ecosystems, ice mass, vegetation, biomass, sea-level rise, groundwater, and natural hazards.

Advanced Technology: NISAR will be equipped with a synthetic aperture radar operating in two frequencies, along with an antenna reflector. This advanced technology sets NISAR apart from previous missions, offering a new level of capability in observing Earth's changes.

Craft and Operations: The satellite, about the size of an SUV and weighing 2.8 tonnes, will be solar-powered. Its spacecraft bus, a six-foot structure, will house command and communication systems, support the radar antenna reflector, and contain enough fuel for at least five years of operations.

Scientific Impact: According to NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory Director Laurie Leshin, NISAR's capabilities surpass those of previous missions, making it a significant advancement in Earth



observation. The mission will also play a crucial role in understanding carbon storage dynamics, the impact of climate change on ice sheets, and the interaction between sea ice and climate.

This collaborative mission between NASA and ISRO is set to provide unprecedented insights into Earth's environmental and geological processes, potentially extending beyond its initial three-year timeframe to capture multi-year changes on our planet.

CORRECTING HISTORICAL INJUSTICE THROUGH RENAMING IS FRAUGHT

The names of the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds are under a cloud. A report in The Guardian speaks of astronomers appealing to the International Astronomical Union, calling for a change in the names of the dwarf satellite galaxies over the Southern Hemisphere. Their reason: The man they are named after — Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan — was a violent colonialist, known for his repression of local communities in modern-day Guam and Philippines. As someone who had nothing to do with the discovery of the clouds, it is an ill-begotten honour, especially since indigenous people knew of and had their own names for the Magellanic Clouds.

The Magellanic Clouds are not the only things named after Magellan, the man credited with leading the first expedition to circumnavigate the world. In 1519, he led the Spanish expedition to the “East Indies”, discovering the Strait of Magellan, the channel connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. There are also the Magellan Telescopes, the Magellanic penguin, *Sphagnum magellanicum* (Magellan’s peat moss), to name only a handful of things. But they are also indications of the politics of naming — and renaming — and its power play.

The ‘Age of Discovery’ led to European nomenclature in diverse parts of the world, erasing regional cultures and contexts. Independence would lead to a renaming spree in an assertion of a national or local identity. The suggestion to rename the Magellanic Clouds is rooted in this politics of visibility. But it is also an exercise that needs careful maneuvering. In an era of majoritarian politics, engagement with history in all its messiness — its legacy of violence, injustice, progress or peace — is crucial for a broader understanding of events. Is renaming then another form of erasure or empowerment? Are there better ways to counter past prejudice? The answers might be worth looking for.

EL NINO TO BLAME? NOT YET SUMMER IN BRAZIL, BUT DANGEROUS HEAT WAVE SWEEPING THE COUNTRY

Brazil is currently experiencing a severe heat wave despite it still being spring, with temperatures soaring to record highs across various states. This extreme weather has led to serious health concerns and disruptions in daily life.

In Rio de Janeiro, the heat index, which factors in both temperature and humidity, reached a staggering 58.5 degrees Celsius (137 Fahrenheit) – the highest ever recorded in the city. This intense heat has forced street vendors to stop working due to health risks and has made life difficult for residents, especially those commuting in buses without air conditioning. The city's officials have issued health alerts, advising people to eat fruits and vegetables and to use umbrellas for shade.

In Sao Paulo, temperatures nearly reached record levels, hitting 37.7 degrees Celsius (99.9 Fahrenheit). Mato Grosso do Sul state recorded the highest actual temperature during this wave at 43 degrees Celsius (109.4 Fahrenheit). These extreme temperatures have increased the use of



fans, air conditioners, and dehumidifiers, leading to record energy demand and power outages in major cities like Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

The heat wave has also exacerbated wildfires in the Pantanal biome, a major tropical wetland. These fires have destroyed an area about the size of Cyprus, highlighting the environmental impact of the heat wave.

Climatologists note that the temperatures across South America are influenced by El Niño, a climate phenomenon that warms surface waters in the Equatorial Pacific. This year, the ocean temperature rose unusually quickly, indicating that the impacts of climate events are accelerating. In Brazil, El Niño typically leads to droughts in the north and heavy rainfall in the south, but this year's effects have been exceptionally severe.

COP28 IN DUBAI: WHAT TO EXPECT FROM CLIMATE MEETING

Current levels of collective commitment of nations to combat climate change — a result of decades of hard negotiations, meetings, studies, and noisy campaigns — are simply inadequate. So, what can we expect from COP28, to be held in Dubai from November 30 to December 12?

Context of the conference

The devastating impacts of climate change have been evident for several years now. This year is set to overtake 2016 as the warmest ever — and saw almost every month setting some or the other warming record. The World Meteorological Organisation says one of the next four years — perhaps 2023 itself — will almost certainly breach the 1.5 degree Celsius threshold.

Although temperatures have gone up rapidly, the global response to it has not kept pace. A latest assessment in the new synthesis report on countries' climate action plans, suggests that climate action agreed upon by countries so far would, in an optimistic scenario, result in just a 2 per cent reduction in emissions by 2030, from 2019 levels. A 43 per cent reduction, something that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) said was absolutely essential for the 1.5 degree Celsius goal, currently seems to be a pipe dream.

Another UN report, among several released around this time of the year, suggests that despite a swift rise in climate risks, the amount of money being made available to developing countries for adaptation measures was actually declining, and nowhere close to the scale of the requirement. Developing countries need at least \$215 billion each year to do meaningful adaptation work, but barely \$21 billion is actually flowing in, the Adaptation Gap report said.

The availability of financial resources is a perennial problem, particularly for developing and least developed countries, which face the maximum risk but are mostly dependent on financial flows from rich nations to fund their protective actions.

What can be done at COP28

Frankly, there is little that countries can do to stop the climate from deteriorating in the short term. Results of climate actions will be visible only over a longer period. For the time being, it is mostly about avoiding a situation that is entirely hopeless. Unlike last year, the Dubai conference is expected to deliver some meaningful outcomes in this regard.



Tripling of Renewable Energy

Currently, the total installed capacity of renewable energy across the world is a little less than 3,400 GW — the idea is to triple it by 2030. That would mean that nearly 70 per cent of all electricity in 2030 would be generated through renewable energy, instead of the 28 per cent now.

The International Energy Agency estimates that this single measure has the potential to avoid 7 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions between now and 2030, or about 1 billion tonnes every year on an average. This amount does not appear very big at first glance given emissions need to be nearly halved by 2030. But considering that all other actions, put together, will reduce emissions by just a billion tonnes by 2030, it is nonetheless an extremely significant step.

The proposal already has the endorsement of G20 countries, and with most other countries lending their support — 60 of them did it explicitly last week — it is likely to find a place in the final outcome of the Dubai meeting.

Delivery of \$100 billion

This figure has been doing the rounds for more than a decade. Rich countries have promised to mobilise (at least) this much in climate finance every year from 2020 — a promise they have not met.

This year, developed countries are likely to finally claim to have delivered on their promise — never mind that \$100 billion sounds like pocket change in comparison to trillions of dollars that are now estimated to be required for climate action. While meeting this goal would still be an achievement, the real challenge would be making progress on finalising a new amount, over and above the \$100 billion figure, that has to be raised every year, starting next year.

Money for Loss and Damage Fund

The creation of a loss and damage fund was the only saving grace for an otherwise disappointing climate meeting in Egypt last year. The fund, meant to provide financial help to countries damaged by impacts of climate change, had been a long pending demand. It was created last year, but no one put money into it. The Dubai meeting is likely to see some money flowing into the fund, enough to signal to the small island countries — the biggest potential beneficiaries of this fund — that their concerns are being addressed.

Global Stocktake

As mandated by the 2015 Paris Agreement, the findings of the first stocktake exercise is supposed to be presented at this meeting. Countries are supposed to assess where they are in the fight against climate change, and what needs to be done in the next five year period to make this fight more effective and potent. The stocktake exercise has been carried out over the last one year, and its findings would inform the discussions taking place in Dubai.

Phase-down of Fossil Fuels

This is something that is likely to come up repeatedly at the Dubai meeting but remains contentious. Countries still do not agree to a scheduled phase-down or phase-out of fossil fuels, particularly coal, over which deep divisions exist. This is one matter that is unlikely to be solved in Dubai.



YAWN ONE, YAWN ALL

Q: Why is a yawn contagious?

A: Yawning is considered as a form of expression indicating boredom or a break in our train of thought. For many, it is relaxing or may occur in response to seeing someone else yawn. Nobody knows why one person yawning can cause others to yawn.

Scientists say that the question can also be asked of our primate relatives. They have presented evidence that yawns are contagious among monkeys, particularly with individuals of similar age and social status. This contagion is interpreted as a synchronisation of activities “due to the imposition of wake-sleep rhythms on different individuals and to the attention they devote to each other”.

A yawn should be in the process of decreasing arousal, according to them. If observed by other animals and if the observer’s arousal level becomes synchronised, the observers will also yawn as a result. Accordingly, the yawn should be a sufficient but not a necessary condition to elicit yawns from other group members.

Watching somebody taking a nap, in other words, might also induce a state of declining arousal and trigger yawns. One would expect observed yawns to be a more powerful stimulus, because another’s yawns might precipitate the observer attending to muscular tension in the facial muscles that can be dissipated by the yawn’s stretch. In addition, one might expect observed stretches in general to be contagious.

Yawns may thus be a particularly obvious example of the general behavioural synchrony of interactants.

NOT UNIQUE

Like humans, are rats capable of imagination?

Researchers at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute’s Janelia Research Campus have found that animals also possess an imagination. The researchers developed a novel system combining virtual reality and a brain-machine interface to probe the rat’s inner thoughts. They found that like humans, animals too can control their brain activity to imagine places and objects that aren’t right in front of them, using their thoughts to imagine walking to a location or moving a remote object to a specific spot. Like humans, when rodents experience places and events, specific neural activity patterns are activated in the hippocampus, an area of the brain responsible for spatial memory. The new study finds rats can voluntarily generate these same activity patterns and do so to recall remote locations distant from their current position. This ability to imagine locations away from one’s current position is fundamental to remembering past events and imagining possible future scenarios.

HOW WAS THE FIRST VACCINE FOR CHIKUNGUNYA APPROVED?

The story so far:

On November 9, the world’s first vaccine for chikungunya was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the U.S. The vaccine has been developed by European vaccine manufacturer Valneva and will be available under the brand Ixchiq, and has been approved for

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administration in people who are 18 years or older, and are at increased risk of exposure to the virus. It was approved using the Accelerated Approval pathway, which allows the FDA to clear certain products for serious or life-threatening conditions based on evidence of a product's effectiveness that is likely to provide clinical benefit.

What is chikungunya?

Chikungunya, is characterised by severe joint pain and impaired mobility, and comes with fever. It is a viral infection (CHIKV) transmitted primarily by the *Aedes aegypti* and *Aedes albopictus* mosquitoes and has been described as “an emerging global health threat.”

The WHO fact sheet says Chikungunya is prevalent in Africa, Asia, and the Americas; but sporadic outbreaks have been reported in other regions. Since 2004, outbreaks of CHIKV have become more frequent and widespread, partly due to viral adaptations allowing the virus to be spread more easily by the *Aedes albopictus* mosquitoes. The joint pain is often debilitating and varies in duration; it can last for a few days, but also be prolonged over months. Other symptoms include joint swelling, muscle pain, headache, nausea, fatigue and rash. While severe symptoms and deaths from chikungunya are rare and usually related to other coexisting health problems, it is believed that the numbers are generally underestimated, because chikungunya is often misdiagnosed as dengue or zika, as symptoms can seem similar. As of now, there is no cure, only symptomatic relief, with analgesics to help with the pain, antipyretics for the fever, rest, and adequate fluids.

Prevention includes mosquito control activities, primarily falling under public health outreach and routine civic maintenance. Individuals are also advised to use medicated mosquito nets and ensure that there is no water stagnation in any containers at home, in order to prevent the breeding of mosquitoes.

What is the vaccine composition?

Ixchiq is administered as a single dose by injection into the muscle. It contains a live, weakened version of the chikungunya virus and may cause symptoms in the vaccine recipient similar to those experienced by people who have the disease. Its safety was evaluated in two clinical studies conducted in North America in which about 3,500 participants, 18 years of age and older, received a dose of the vaccine with the other study including about 1,000 participants receiving a placebo. The most reported side effects by vaccine recipients were headache, fatigue, muscle pain, joint pain, fever, nausea and tenderness at the injection site.

The effectiveness of the vaccine was based on immune response data from a clinical study conducted in the U.S. in individuals 18 years of age and older. In this study, the immune response of 266 participants who received the vaccine was compared to the immune response of 96 participants who received the placebo. The level of antibody evaluated in study participants was based on a level shown to be protective in non-human primates that had received blood from people who had been vaccinated.

What role will the vaccine play?

Peter Marks, director of the FDA's Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research, added in the statement, “Today's approval addresses an unmet medical need and is an important advancement in the prevention of a potentially debilitating disease with limited treatment options.” Hopefully, inspired by the fast-track pathway drawn up by research into COVID, this approval will fast track



the roll out of vaccines in countries where chikungunya is more prevalent, including Brazil, Paraguay, India (as per the National Centre for Vector Borne Diseases Control, India had 93,455 suspected chikungunya cases until September in 2023), and parts of western Africa.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF FUNCTIONAL FOODS

Functional foods, often regarded as foods that provide health benefits beyond basic nutrition, are increasingly recognized for their role in promoting health and preventing diseases. A recent paper highlighted by a 2023 article emphasizes the health benefits of almonds, which, along with other dry fruits like cashews, raisins, walnuts, dates, apricots, and pistachios, offer significant nutritional value. These foods, along with 'wet fruits' like bananas, grapes, guavas, oranges, and mangoes, were recognized for their health benefits as early as 100 BC by the sage Charaka, a pioneer in Ayurvedic medicine.

Functional foods include not just fruits but also grains and seeds like oats, millets (bajra, ragi, jowar), and soya proteins. They are defined as foods providing additional physiological benefits to the consumer, extending beyond mere nutritional support. The National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) in Hyderabad, India, provides periodic reports on the nutritive values of Indian foods and recommends healthy diets for adults and children. These recommendations include a variety of both dry and wet fruits, as well as nutritionally valuable foodgrains.

Incorporating functional foods into a daily diet is beneficial for maintaining health. A balanced diet should ideally include not just staple grains like rice and wheat but also millets. When preparing curries, the inclusion of spices such as turmeric, cinnamon, ginger, and garlic is recommended, along with moderate amounts of butter and ghee. Curd is noted for its antioxidant properties, and moderate consumption of coffee and tea is encouraged due to their antioxidant content. Children should consume plenty of milk, while adults can limit their intake to about three cups per day. Additionally, for non-vegetarians, eggs, fish, chicken, and mutton are suggested as they are rich in valuable minerals and fats.

In summary, a healthy diet should be diverse, incorporating a variety of functional foods, including both dry and wet fruits, grains, dairy, and, for those who consume it, meat. This approach not only provides essential nutrients but also contributes to overall health and well-being.

NOW, A SIMPLE URINE TEST CAN PREDICT HEART DISEASE AND TREAT IT EARLY

Usually heart failure, or congestive heart failure, develops when your heart cannot pump enough blood that is required for your body's needs and is a consequence of a long-time stress on the heart caused by either prolonged hypertension, diabetes or a stiffening of the heart walls. But since it happens over time you may not know a tipping point. Now latest research in The European Journal of Heart Failure has shown that a urine test and its deranged markers may help detect potential heart failure in high-risk patients and resort to preventive methods early enough. The findings are not exactly new but because the study involved a large sample size, it establishes the validity of a urine test to detect heart disease early.

WHAT ARE URINE MARKERS?

The study found that people with consistently high levels of urinary albumin excretion (UAE) and serum creatinine were at a higher risk of developing heart failure. All that the



researchers analysed were urine-sample data from nearly 7,000 Dutch participants between 28 and 75 years of age over 11 years. Those with elevated levels of only UAE had an increased risk of dying from all causes.

This also establishes the link between kidney dysfunction and heart failure. Healthy kidneys help maintain a healthy balance of chemicals in the blood. Part of their role in filtering the bloodstream is to ensure that albumin, the most common large-sized protein circulating in your system, does not enter your urine. It is common for tiny sodium or glucose molecules to be present in the urine but not albumin. So if this is present in the urine, it means that the kidney is not functioning properly and its filtration system has been breached. Serum creatinine means the kidneys are unable to flush out waste. Both of these indicate a cardio-renal syndrome, whereby a chronic problem in the heart or kidneys could affect the dependent organ equally. So if the heart is unable to pump enough blood, then the kidney functioning gets affected, or if there is kidney damage, then it impacts the heart. That's why the albumin-creatinine ratio becomes important to ensure both organs are treated early enough.

SO WHAT ARE SAFE LEVELS?

The urine albumin-to-creatinine ratio (UACR) should be below 30 mg/g. The normal UACR value is less than or equal to 17 mg/g in men but in women, the level is observed to be higher, ranging around 25 mg/g. A ratio less than 30 mg/g is considered mild, 39 to 300 mg/g poses a moderate risk to the heart and more than 300 mg/g indicates a serious threat to the heart.

HOW ARE KIDNEY AND HEART FUNCTIONS RELATED?

Both the heart and kidney can have individual problems and impact the other organ. But sometimes both can have separate problems. A heart attack or failure may decrease the blood supply to the kidney, putting pressure on it. But the moment the heart improves, the kidney follows suit. Sometimes kidney diseases, like Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD), overwork the heart as it needs to pump harder to get the blood to help the diseased kidneys. This elevates blood pressure (BP) and can cause heart disease. CKD can also accelerate atherosclerosis or plaque deposition in the heart arteries. That's why cardiologists check creatinine if you are diagnosed with blood pressure and hypertension rather early. This is done to ascertain the exact cause of your blood pressure as drugs given to lower it, when you have kidney dysfunction, can impair kidney functioning further. You may be given another kind of blood pressure medicine that can help decrease or stop you from losing albumin in your urine. Even if you have normal blood pressure, you may still be told to take one of these types of medicine besides being advised a low salt, sodium meal.

Now cardiologists can recommend the urine test to measure the urine albumin and creatinine ratio and assess where your heart and kidney stand, and advise corrective steps and medication.