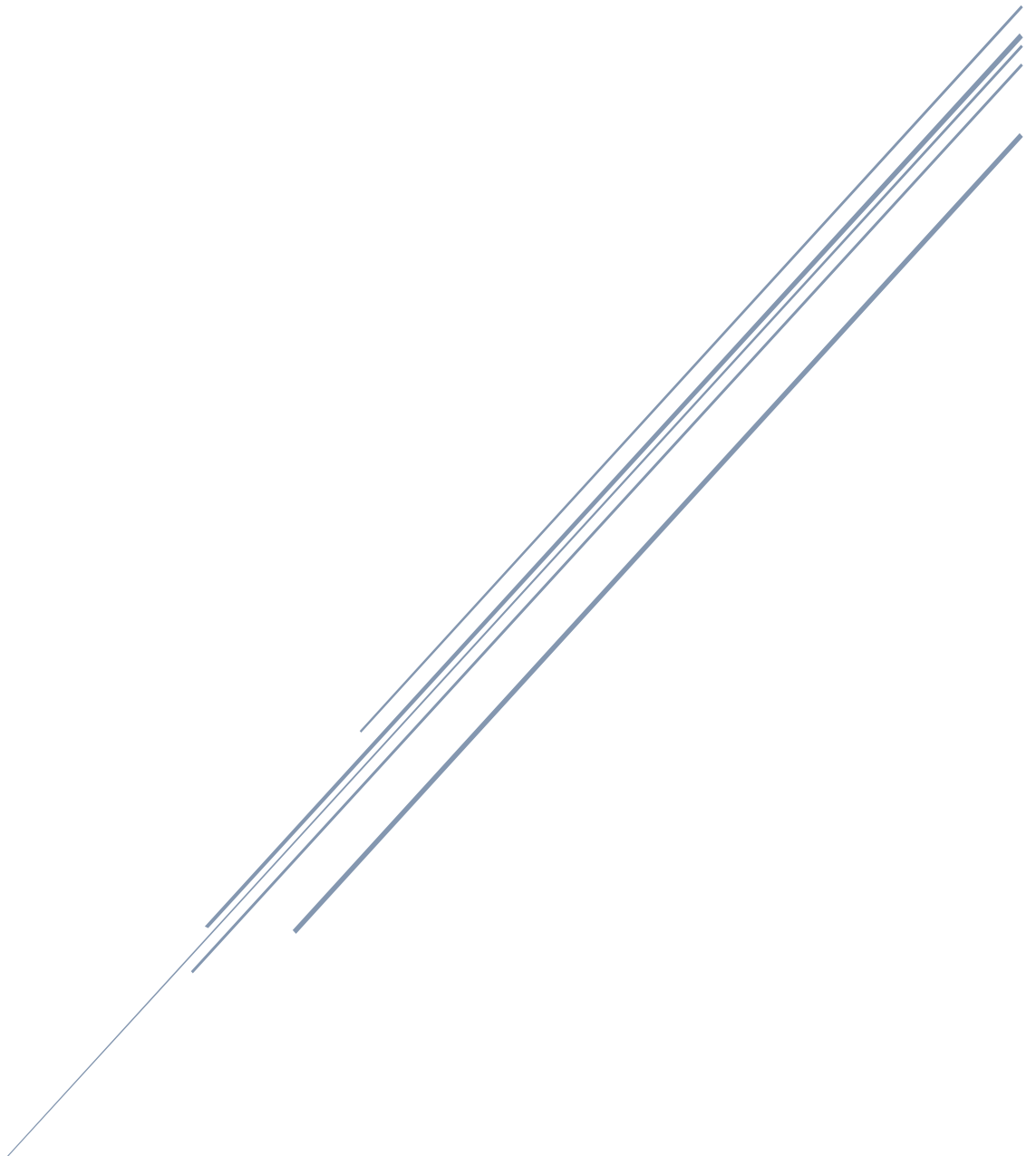# CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

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INTERNATIONAL

UNDERSTANDING THE DEBATES AROUND ANARCHO-CAPITALISM

Anarcho-capitalism refers to a political philosophy which calls for the abolition of the state and for the provision of law and order to be controlled by private companies in a free market. The term was coined by American libertarian economist Murray Rothbard, while Belgian political economist Gustave de Molinari is considered to be the first anarcho-capitalist. It has recently gained popularity with Javier Milei, who calls himself an anarcho-capitalist, winning the race to become the President of Argentina last month.

How does it work?

Traditionally, free market advocates have supported the private provision of most goods and services, except police and courts which, it was believed, could only be provided by the state. But anarcho-capitalists believe that private companies competing in a free market can provide policing and legal services as well, often far better than the state when it comes to quality and price. Just the way private companies today can offer better cars, telephone services, etc. at cheaper prices than the government, anarcho-capitalists argue, private companies can also provide a far better police and legal system.

It should be noted that in an anarcho-capitalist society, people would be paying private police and courts to offer them protection against crime and to adjudicate disputes with others. Anarcho-capitalists argue that private companies, which depend on customer patronage for their survival, would effectively serve the needs of their customers. This is in contrast to the current monopoly police and court system offered by the state that is funded using taxpayer money and characterised by delays and various inefficiencies. Since citizens often need to pay taxes regardless of the quality of the policing and legal services offered by the state, the police and courts are not accountable to citizens. Further, the quality of these public services is often quite low while their cost is significantly high. In an anarcho-capitalist society, on the other hand, customers who are unhappy with the services of a certain private court or police can stop paying them and switch to a competing court or police in the marketplace. In other words, competition would ensure that the quality of police and legal services is high and prices low.

An impractical ideology?

Critics of anarcho-capitalism, however, believe that services like police and judiciary cannot be provided by multiple firms within a single geographical region. They argue that this would lead to disagreement and conflict between different armed private gangs trying to protect the interests of their own paying clients and lead to chaos. Critics also point out that police protection and legal adjudication offered by markets would favour the rich and not the poor. They argue that the rich can easily get away with crime by paying a higher sum of money to the private police or courts and leave the poor without justice.

Anarcho-capitalists, however, deny both these claims made by their critics. Firstly, they point out that it would not be sensible for a private police or court seeking long-term profits to refuse cooperation with its competitors in order to shield a client (who perhaps has committed a crime). If a private police or court engages in such behaviour, it would meet resistance from its competitors who could refuse to cooperate with it in other cases. For example, if private police agency A defends a client who has committed assault against a client of private police agency B,

then B can decide to defend another client who has committed a different crime against one of A's clients. A will thus risk losing business from its other client to whom it is unable to deliver justice. So what is likely to happen, anarcho-capitalists argue, is that competing police and courts, trying to avoid a costly stalemate, would agree to play by a certain pre-approved set of rules when it comes to conflicts between their clients. What these common rules turn out to be will ultimately be determined by the competing demands of customers in the market.

Anarcho-capitalists also deny that the poor would be subject to injustice from the rich under anarcho-capitalism. They point out that, in the case of most goods and services sold in the market, the sellers get the majority of their revenue not from the rich but from the larger society. So, a private court or police firm is unlikely to favour the rich as it would then run the risk of losing the patronage of other poorer customers in the market. Further, anarcho-capitalists point out that the poor might actually have better chances of obtaining justice in an anarcho-capitalist society because private firms would try to satisfy sizeable market demand in the bottom of the pyramid. This is contrast to the current police and legal system backed by the state in which favours are doled out to groups based on their lobbying power.

David Friedman, Edward Stringham and Michael Huemer are a few contemporary anarcho-capitalists.

WHAT IS THE CONTROVERSY OVER GERMANY'S DEBT BRAKE RULE?

The story so far:

Germany's constitutional court on November 15 ruled unlawful a government move to reallocate €60 billion, unused from the sums initially earmarked for the pandemic emergency, to a "climate and transformation fund" (KTF). The coalition government led by Chancellor Olaf Scholz's centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) was in breach of the fiscal deficit limits enshrined in 2009 on two counts, the Karlsruhe court ruled. The first was the move to channel underutilised allocations from one sector to another and the second, the roll-over of debt from one fiscal year to the next. The judgment has reopened fissures in Mr. Scholz's fractious coalition, even within the SPD, where divergent views have been voiced on the budget brake rule.

What is the debt brake rule?

The debt brake rule, or the balanced budget rule, sets a cap on how much governments can borrow to finance various public projects. It restricts the federal government in Berlin from running a fiscal deficit in excess of 0.35% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and in effect prohibits the country's 16 regions from any deficit spending whatsoever. The measure was enshrined into law in 2009 by the grand coalition government of the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its sister party in the state of Bavaria the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the SPD, through an amendment to the German constitution. The budget brake is more or less the domestic version of the stringent borrowing and spending curbs built into the European Union (EU)'s Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) and the 2012 Fiscal Compact Treaty.

IS RUSSIA WINNING THE UKRAINE WAR?

The story so far:

It has been six months since Ukraine launched its much-anticipated counteroffensive with advanced weapons and training provided by the West. The Eastern European country, having

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failed to make any major breakthrough in the battlefield, is now scrambling for more military assistance. President Volodymyr Zelensky was in Washington earlier this week and is now touring European capitals to ensure that the aid keeps flowing in. Russia, on the other side, is keeping its defensive lines that cut across southern and eastern Ukraine more or less intact, and is on the offensive in parts, especially in Avdiivka in Donetsk. With hard winter approaching, Kyiv is looking for a new strategy to alter what Ukrainian Generals call a "stalemate" and recapture the territories lost to Russia (roughly 20% of Ukraine).

What happened to the counteroffensive?

In June, Ukraine launched its counteroffensive at three points on the about 1,000-km long frontline — two axes in the south towards Melitopol and Berdyansk and the third in the east towards Bakhmut in Donetsk, which Ukrainian troops had lost in May. The main focus, however, was on the southern front where Ukrainian soldiers wanted to quickly cut through Russia's formidable defence lines and link up with the Sea of Azov coast. This would have allowed Ukraine to cut off Russia's land bridge between the mainland and the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia annexed in 2014. If the land bridge is gone, the only link between Crimea and the Russian mainland would be the Kerch Bridge across the Strait of Kerch, which was attacked twice by Ukrainians since the Russian invasion began in February 2022. In the east, the calculation was that Russia's defence positions would be weak in Bakhmut where both sides suffered huge losses in the months-long battle.

Prior to the counteroffensive, Ukraine's western allies had supplied them with advanced weaponry, including missile defence systems, armoured vehicles, medium and long range rockets, and main battle tanks, besides artillery shells and ammunition. The U.S. and other NATO members also trained nine Ukrainian brigades, roughly 36,000 soldiers, in the basics of manoeuvre warfare. In August, Ukrainian troops made small advances in the south. When they captured Robotyne in Zaporizhzhia, it was hailed as a breach of Russian defences. But Robotyne turned out to be a killing hamlet for Ukrainians. Some of the elite Ukrainian troops suffered heavy losses in Robotyne, while the West-supplied weapons, including Stryker armoured vehicles and German Leopard tanks, were burned by Russian fire. In the following weeks, Ukraine found it extremely difficult to break through Russia's multi-layered defences, forget reaching the Sea of Azov. Ukrainian troops' attempts to advance were stopped in the huge minefields, and even minesweepers came under fire from Russia's attack helicopters. Russia's electronic warfare capabilities blunted Ukrainian response, while lack of sufficient air power exposed Kyiv's blitzkrieg strategy to counter attacks. Even after six months since the offensive's launch, the frontline has hardly changed.

How is Russia placed?

Russia, which was forced to retreat from Kharkiv and Kherson last year, seems to have taken an upper hand in the war ever since. After the initial Russian thrust into Ukraine met with strong resistance and the West swung back to help Ukrainian troops, President Vladimir Putin of Russia announced a partial mobilisation to draft and train some 3,00,000 troops. As the battle of Bakhmut, led by Wagner, lasted for months with tens of thousands of Ukrainian troops tied to the hopeless defence of the eastern city, Russia's regular soldiers were busy building strong defence lines along the frontline. Ukraine was supposed to start the counteroffensive earlier (it was called the 'spring offensive'), but Ukrainian Generals reportedly resisted the U.S. push to launch the attack, saying they weren't ready yet. By the time the attack started, the Russians were in a strong defensive position, their traditional forte. Compared to Ukraine, whose economy and military have been reliant on supplies and aid from the West, Russia has reinvigorated its military

industrial base, ramping up defence production. (If Russia manufactured 100 tanks a year before the war, now it is making 200 tanks, according to American officials).

Russia has also amassed drones (from Iran) and shells and ammunition (from North Korea) so that it can continue the war of attrition without any supply glitches. Western sanctions aimed at weakening Russia's economy and thereby its war machine have produced mixed results. The sanctions have clearly hit the Russian economy and damaged Russia's energy ties with Europe with long-term consequences. However, the West's move to put a price cap on Russian crude to limit Moscow's oil revenues has failed as Russia continues to find big markets. Russia has also seized the crisis to diversify its energy trade with China and India, two huge markets that are dependent on energy imports, emerging as the top buyers of Russian crude. Turkey, a NATO member, and Central Asian republics emerged as conduits for Russia's sanctions-proof trade with Asian markets. Therefore, Russia appears to be stable as of now, both in the battlefield and in the sphere of economy.

Is support for Ukraine waning in Western countries?

As Ukraine's counteroffensive faltered, the support it enjoyed in the West, especially in the U.S. came under growing pressure. Last month there were reports in the American media that the U.S. and the EU are now encouraging Kyiv to start talks with the Russians. Last week, Republicans blocked an emergency spending Bill in the U.S. Congress that would provide $50 billion in security assistance to Ukraine, which was an indication that the pro-Ukraine alliance at Capitol is fraying. The White House has said in unmistakable terms that Ukraine could lose the war if U.S. aid dries up. Opinion polls in recent months have repeatedly shown that U.S. public support for Ukraine is declining. Half of Republican voters now believe that the U.S. is providing "too much aid" to Ukraine. While Zelensky was visiting Washington, President Joe Biden said the U.S. would support Ukraine "as long as it can", markedly different from his earlier rhetoric that the U.S. would support Ukraine "as long as it takes". This puts Kyiv in a spot. The White House has signalled that it would make compromises with the Republicans on border policy (to crack down on immigrants) to pass the spending Bill. But even if this Bill passes, how long can Kyiv stay fully reliant on Western aid if it doesn't make any major battlefield breakthrough? There is also a growing uncertainty in the U.S. as the country goes to presidential elections next year. Donald Trump, Mr. Biden's main rival, has vowed to bring the Ukraine war to an end within days of assuming power. This should set alarm bells ringing in Kyiv if they have a long plan in their conflict with Russia.

What's next?

In his annual press conference held on Thursday, President Putin said peace with Ukraine will take place "only when we achieve our objectives". This means he is not in a hurry to hold talks. The Ukrainian side has also ruled out talks, for now. As winter is likely to freeze the frontline, Ukraine might attempt a new strategy to break the gridlock next year, while a more confident Russia seems to be readying for localised counteroffensives aimed at capturing more territories of the four Oblasts Mr. Putin has already annexed (Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson). While there is no end to fighting in sight, Ukraine's prospects are tied to the flow of aid from the West.

ROW OVER HATE SPEECH IN U.S. UNIVERSITIES

The recent controversy in U.S. universities revolves around university leaders facing criticism for their response to hate speech, particularly anti-Semitic and Islamophobic incidents. University of

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Pennsylvania President Liz Magill resigned after a congressional hearing where she, along with leaders from Harvard and MIT, was questioned about their universities' handling of hate speech. The hearing, led by Congresswoman Elise Stefanik, focused on whether university codes of conduct address calls for violence against Jewish individuals. The U.S. Department of Education is investigating anti-Semitism allegations at six other universities. Hate incidents often occur during public protests on campuses. Some universities, such as Harvard and Tulane, are implementing measures to address hate crimes, including increased security and anti-Semitism training. The broader issue involves balancing efforts to combat anti-Semitism with concerns about addressing Islamophobia, as highlighted by Palestinian students. The American Civil Liberties Union emphasizes that certain expressions, like "from the river to the sea," are protected speech under the U.S. Constitution, and there's a consensus that hate speech is only restricted when it poses a serious and imminent threat or pervasively harasses based on protected characteristics.

HOW WILL ELECTION BOYCOTT BY THE BNP AFFECT BANGLADESH?

The story so far:

On October 28, during a rally organised by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the chief Opposition party of Bangladesh, a fight broke out between the BNP cadre and law enforcement officials which led to the death of a policeman and incidents of arson. The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina responded by jailing most of the top Opposition leaders of BNP including Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir. This confrontation came in the backdrop of the long pending demand of the BNP to hold elections under a 'caretaker' government. It has refused to participate in any other election even as the Election Commission of Bangladesh announced the poll date for January 7.

Why is BNP boycotting the election?

BNP leaders have maintained that they will not participate in the election of January 7 as they do not feel the elections will be free and fair under the Awami League government. However, the party did not clarify how they hope this strategy of boycott would help them in attaining their goal of capturing political power in Bangladesh. The party has been out of power since it was defeated in the 2009 election, and considers its boycott of elections as a form of protest which may delegitimise the election of January 7.

While the BNP has a major street presence in Bangladesh, with active units in all the districts and subdivisions of the country, it is just one of the 14 parties that are boycotting the election while 26 others are participating. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been claiming that the poll will be legitimate as a lot of other political parties, including the Jatiyo Party (Monju), are expected to participate in the election. Critics have pointed out that apart from the Awami League, most of the parties in the fray are "small" indicating that they would not be in a position to throw a challenge to the ruling Awami League. Much will depend on PM Hasina's personal commitment to ensuring democratic participation even if the election is held without the BNP.

Will the elections be free and fair?

The Sheikh Hasina government has welcomed international observers to come and observe the election process for themselves. Foreign Secretary Masud bin Momen visited Delhi to interact with foreign diplomats and invited them to be present on ground in Bangladesh to witness the election assuring that the Government of Sheikh Hasina remains committed to conducting a free and fair

election. However, an election without BNP can not be described as a real contest as this would be a repeat of the 2014 elections when BNP did not participate. BNP has been demanding polls under a caretaker government but the Awami League has stated that the law does not permit that kind of arrangement.

The U.S. and the European Union among others have been increasing pressure on Bangladesh to hold a free and transparent election. This was opposed by Russia and China who have said that the U.S. is trying to meddle in the democratic process of another country. While India has maintained silence, it has indirectly conveyed it prefers the affairs of Bangladesh to be left to its own people.

How is a BNP-less election expected to affect Bangladesh?

Over the past fifteen years, BNP's top leaders like Tarique Rahman have been based out of the country. The party has been led by leaders like Alamgir, Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury and other members of the Standing Committee. However, overall, the party has been ceding space to the Islamist hardline when it comes to street presence. Its agitations have been taken over by Islamist hardliners like the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Islami Chhatra Shibir. There is fear that in the absence of the BNP, the Islamist groups of Bangladesh may step up to fill the void left by the party.

Will there be violence?

The government of Sheikh Hasina has been largely successful in maintaining peace and stability in Bangladesh so far. Some commentators like The Daily Star of Dhaka has predicted that the election is "all but doomed" but this is unlikely to trigger violence between the cadre of the two sides. There is however a danger of violence by Islamist organisations if things spiral out of control.

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NATION

EXPRESS VIEW ON MALDIVES AND INDIA: PATIENCE AND VIGILANCE

The Maldives government's decision to not renew the 2019 agreement under which India could conduct hydrographic surveys in the former's territorial waters is unfortunate. In the past, Indian vessels have conducted hydrographic surveys in Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, Sri Lanka and Tanzania. Male's decision appears to be a function of domestic politics rather than diplomatic or economic interest. The recently-elected government of President Mohamed Muizzu campaigned on an "India Out" plank.

In November, it "requested" New Delhi to withdraw its troops from the country and earlier this month, the country's Vice President Hussain Mohamed Latheef attended the Indian Ocean Forum organised by China while he skipped the Colombo Security Dialogue that involves India and other Indian Ocean states. The Muizzu government's decision to withdraw from the survey agreement, then, is a signal that Male is not toning down its anti-India stance, despite the recent meeting between Muizzu and PM Modi on the sidelines of the COP28 in Dubai.

The domestic politics of South Asian countries now have an outsize impact on their external orientation. Two factors are particularly salient in this respect. First, as the dominant economic and military power in the region, India's place, role and attitudes — often caricatures of them — make for easy political slogans. Second, China's growing influence in the region — and its willingness and ability to deploy resources — has given many countries a bargaining chip. The Maldives and Sri Lanka, for example, have leveraged their geographical advantage to play major powers against each other in an era of renewed geopolitical competition. In itself, this is understandable — nations great and small use the hand they are dealt to maximise their interests. What is unfortunate in the current scenario is Muizzu government's sacrificing of long-term common interests for short-term political gains.

New Delhi must be both patient and vigilant. It enjoys geographical advantages and historically has been close to the islands. Just 70 nautical miles away from the Indian coast, the islands face increasing threats from rising sea levels.

India must be prepared to lend a hand. However, New Delhi cannot no longer afford to simply rely on legacy advantages. It has to contend with China's growing interests in the region. India must tread the fine line between engagement and interference, doubling down on the former without being seen as doing the latter. It must draw red lines vis-a-vis China in the Maldives – on military presence, for example – while acknowledging that every country has nationalist sentiments. In essence, Delhi must play the diplomatic game with finesse, as so many rising powers have had to.

PRINCIPLED SHIFT

Two months after Israel's bombardment of Gaza residents in retaliation for the October 7 terror attacks by Hamas began, India joined its voice to the global call to stop the bombing, voting in favour of a resolution at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) along with 152 other nations. The resolution demanded an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, an observance of international humanitarian law, the unconditional release of all hostages, as well as "ensuring humanitarian access". India's vote was a shift from its previous vote at the last such UNGA resolution on October 26, when despite the death of 8,000 Gazans, India had decided to abstain from voting for a

resolution that called for a ceasefire. The government and the MEA explained this to be a matter of principle, as part of India's "zero-tolerance" approach towards terrorism, as the earlier resolution did not contain an "explicit condemnation" of the October 7 attacks. However, while the UNGA resolution passed on December 12 bears no direct mention of the terror attacks, India has voted in favour. Although the government has yet to detail the rationale, there could be several reasons: casualty figures have risen relentlessly, with 18,000 dead and the highest such toll of nearly 90 journalists. More than 80% of the entire population is homeless. Even the U.S., Israel's biggest ally, estimates that nearly half of the 29,000 air-to-ground munitions deployed by Israel thus far are "unguided" or indiscriminate missiles. Second, Israeli Defence Forces have gone far beyond their original mandate of eliminating Hamas capacity and freeing the hostages to a large-scale flattening of Gaza and forced occupation of more territory. More than 100 Israeli hostages remain in Hamas custody. Third, global opinion, including Indian public opinion, has moved decidedly from sympathy with Israel, to horror at the unfolding aftermath, and New Delhi could not have been immune to entreaties by Palestine and the Gulf States to take a relook at its vote, even as India stood isolated in South Asia and the Global South for its previous abstention.

It may be too early to see India's UNGA vote as a reversal of its earlier position and a reversion to its original position in the conflict, where it has traditionally called for peace. Much will depend on the role India chooses for itself in ensuring the ceasefire is effected and holds, given that Israel has already rejected the UNGA resolution. Having proven its credentials as a friend to Israel following the terror attacks, as well as the odium of enabling the civilian deaths, the Modi government must be more vocal in helping the Netanyahu government out of the strategic cul de sac it has bombarded its way into, one which could cause regional instability and insecurity for decades.

SURGE IN ILLEGAL INDIAN MIGRANTS CROSSING INTO THE U.S. FROM CANADA

A question that was raised in the Rajya Sabha a few days ago has put the spotlight on the issue of Indians illegally entering the United States. In his reply to a question, the Minister of State for External Affairs, V. Muraleedharan, quoted data from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection and said that U.S. officials encountered close to 1 lakh illegal Indian migrants just this year. This trend of thousands of Indians trying to enter the U.S. illegally is new; it has been seen in the last four years.

The number of Indians attempting to enter the U.S. illegally. A decade ago, a little over 1,500 Indian illegal migrants were stopped by the U.S. border authorities. The number increased marginally in the following years but remained below the 10,000 mark till 2019. But since 2020, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of Indians trying to cross the border illegally with the figure touching 96,917 in 2023.

This surge in the number of illegal migrants gains prominence as the U.S. presidential elections are scheduled next year and illegal border crossings is one of the top issues for U.S. voters. Donald Trump, who is among the leading Republican presidential candidates, has blamed U.S. President Joe Biden for reversing many of his immigration-related policies.

In general, most illegal border crossings are reported from the southwest, i.e., the U.S.-Mexico border. In 2023, over 77% of all illegal migrants entering the U.S. were apprehended from the southwest border with the northern border — along Canada — accounting for roughly 6%. This was true of illegal Indian migrants too, but lately, an increasing number of them are choosing to enter the U.S. through the northern border. The number of undocumented Indians entering

through the northern border increased from less than 100 in 2014 to over 30,000 in 2023, almost matching the number of those who tried to enter from the southwest border.

While the number of Indians trying to cross illegally has increased, their share in the total number of such migrants is still nominal. In absolute terms, the majority of illegal migrants hail from Mexico. However, the country's share in total illegal migrants has seen a drop in recent years. India, despite the surge, accounts for only 3% of all illegal migrants trying to cross the U.S. border.

The entry of minors and their separation from families has been another thorny issue in the U.S. in recent times. A Trump-era policy had led to the separation of over 5,000 children from their parents who tried to migrate illegally. This is a policy which Mr. Trump still claims deterred many from illegally entering the U.S. While the majority of Indians who were apprehended by the border force are single adults, there has been a spike in the number of minors trying to cross the border. Accompanied Indian minors increased from just nine in 2020 to 261 in 2023. Unaccompanied children or single minors from India who attempted to illegally cross also increased from 219 in 2020 to 730 in 2023. Table 4 shows a breakdown of the number of illegal Indian immigrants to the U.S. by demography.

Last Friday, a federal judge had prohibited separation of minors from families for eight more years saying it was "simply cruel".

END THE UNCERTAINTY

The Madras High Court has demonstrated how the judiciary can provide succour to a person waiting for over 40 years to get Indian citizenship. In T. Ganesan vs The Government of India & Others, the Madurai Bench of the High Court, in its judgment on November 30, directed the authorities to treat the petitioner and his family as Indian citizens, thus extending to them relief measures that the Tamil Nadu government provides to repatriates from Sri Lanka. The 69-year-old petitioner, now a resident of a refugee camp in Karur, reached India in 1990 after having been issued an Indian passport in Kandy in August 1982 on repatriation under two bilateral treaties that concerned hill country Tamils or Indian Origin Tamils (IOT). He had approached the court as the authorities treated him only as a Sri Lankan refugee even though he is an Indian citizen. The government accepted the genuineness of his passport but doubted his identity because the photograph was the image of a "far younger" person. But the court rejected this position. Ganesan is not the only such person. The court has recorded that around 5,130 applicants (IOT category) have sought citizenship. In official data of March 2023, Tamil Nadu had about 91,000 refugees, with around 58,000 in camps.

This is not the first time that the Bench, especially Justice G.R. Swaminathan, has gone to the rescue of those in the camps. In the last 15 months, the judge had established that the petitioners concerned were Indian citizens, interpreting provisions of the Citizenship Act, and should be issued passports. Otherwise, the general legal position of the Union government is that every refugee is an illegal migrant though entitled to benefits. A DMK State government study found that nearly 8,000 refugees are eligible for Indian citizenship as they do not come under exclusions of the law. The Union government's stand has been that despite not being a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol, it adheres to the principle of non-refoulement. The government also favours the voluntary repatriation of refugees to Sri Lanka. This was a reason why the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 did not include Sri Lankan refugees. The Centre should ensure follow-up action on the DMK government's study. It should first identify those eligible for citizenship under the legal framework and ascertain their consent. For those who wish

to pursue higher studies or go abroad for a livelihood, permission can be granted if the applicant has no criminal record. The Union government should initiate talks with Sri Lanka on voluntary repatriation and a structured assistance programme worked out. A proactive approach should be followed to ensure that those tagged as refugees are able to lead a life of dignity.

ON LISTING OF CASES IN THE SUPREME COURT

The story so far:

Two letters written separately by lawyers, Dushyant Dave and Prashant Bhushan, addressed directly to the Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud and the Supreme Court Registry, respectively, complaining of "irregularities" in the listing of cases have sharply divided the Bar.

What did the letters say?

Mr. Dave, in his open letter to the Chief Justice, said cases, some of them involving human rights and functioning of statutory and constitutional institutions, had been suddenly "taken away" from Benches hearing them and listed before other Benches. He said matters, instead of remaining with the presiding judge of the Bench which earlier issued notice (first coram) had followed the puisne judge (second coram) when the latter started heading a new Bench in "clear disregard" of rules, procedure and established conventions. The senior lawyer said the Chief Justice as the 'master of the roster' should look into the issue.

The letter was penned a few days after Mr. Dave, on November 29, appearing before a Bench headed by Justice Bela Trivedi in a petition filed by the Tamil Nadu Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption concerning a fresh inquiry into corruption charges against former Chief Minister Edappadi Palaniswami in an alleged State Highway tender scam, questioned the move to take the case from a Bench led by Aniruddha Bose, before which it was listed previously. The Bench headed by Justice Trivedi, who was earlier the puisne judge in Justice Bose's Bench, dismissed the case on December 8.

Mr. Bhushan wrote his letter on the same day to the Registrar (Listing) of the Supreme Court. He focused on the journey of a batch of petitions filed by advocates and journalists who were charged under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) for their work and critical views about the state's response to the Tripura violence of October 2021. These petitions were earlier listed before a Bench headed by Justice Chandrachud, which had passed substantive orders to protect the petitioners from coercive action by the State. In October 2023, it, however, came up before a Bench of Justices Aniruddha Bose and Trivedi, which ordered the cases to be listed before the "appropriate Bench". However, instead of being listed before Justice Chandrachud again, the petitions came up on November 29 before the Bench headed by Justice Trivedi. When Mr. Bhushan pointed out to Justice Trivedi that the case had "departed from the normal course of listing" and should be referred back to the Chief Justice for appropriate orders on the administrative side, Justice Trivedi's Bench said the case was listed as per earlier orders and the petitioners were free to take action.

What do the rules say?

The issues highlighted in the letters are two. Firstly, the movement of cases, already listed and in which notices were issued by a Bench, to another Bench. Secondly, whether a case can "follow" a puisne judge when the senior judge, who was heading the court before which the matter was

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earlier listed, was still available. The two lawyers insist that the CJI, as master of roster who has administrative control over the allocation of cases, should respond.

The Supreme Court Rules of 2013 are silent as to the powers of the master of the roster to constitute roster, Benches and for allocation of cases. However, the Handbook on Practice and Procedure of the Court and Office Procedure on the judicial side published by the Supreme Court in 2017 explicitly says that the Registry functions on the general and special instructions and orders of the Chief Justice of India as regards allocation of work to a Bench and assignment of cases from one Bench, on account of non-availability, to another Bench.

Mr. Dave pointed to the section on 'cases, coram and listing' to note that once a case has been listed or notice issued or dismissed or disposed of or heard in part at admission hearing stage, it can only be listed before the Bench of the first coram and none other. Mr. Bhushan, in his turn, referred to Clause 15 of the 'Overview of the New Scheme for Automated Listing of Cases' published also in 2017, which noted that "subject to the orders of the Chief Justice of India, if the court directs listing or tagging with a matter pending in another court, and the matter is listed accordingly, the coram of the main matter, with which the matter is directed to listed/tagged, will prevail". He claimed that both Clause 15 and the procedure in the Handbook were "arbitrarily breached".

What has the Supreme Court said?

The SC has not officially responded to the letters. Supreme Court Bar Association president, senior advocate Adish C. Aggarwala, has written to the Chief Justice, expressing "shock" about Mr. Dave's open letter. He said the assignment of cases was not open to question on the judicial or the administrative side. The Supreme Court has in its judgment said the Chief Justice, as master of roster, occupied a position which is sui generis. It said the "entrustment of functions to the Chief Justice as the head of the institution is with the purpose of securing the position of the Supreme Court as an independent safeguard for the preservation of personal liberty. The oath of office demands nothing less".

OMINOUS, ANTI-FEDERAL

The Supreme Court verdict upholding the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status under Article 370 of the Constitution represents not merely judicial deference, but a retreat from the Court's known positions on federalism, democratic norms and the sanctity of legal processes. It is undoubtedly a political boost to the ruling BJP and an endorsement of its audacious move in August 2019 to strip Kashmir of its special status and bring it on a par with other States. However, it is also a verdict that legitimises the subversion of federal principles, fails to appreciate historical context and undermines constitutional procedure. The most potent attack on federal principles is the Court's unconscionable conclusion that Parliament, while a State is under President's Rule, can do any act, legislative or otherwise, and even one with irreversible consequences, on behalf of the State legislature. This alarming interpretation comes close to undermining a basic feature of the Constitution as enunciated by the Court itself and may have grave implications for the rights of States, permitting a range of hostile and irrevocable actions in the absence of an elected body. The government and its supporters have much to cheer about as the Constitution Bench has endorsed its stand and rejected strong arguments from the petitioners, especially the point that the government had acted in a mala fide manner by imposing President's Rule preparatory to the intended abrogation of special status without the need to involve any elected representative from J&K.

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The government had adopted a complicated process to give effect to the ruling BJP's long-cherished ambition of removing the State's special status. It had gone on to divide and downgrade it into two Union Territories (UT). It began with a Constitutional Order on August 5, 2019 applying the whole of the Constitution to J&K and changing some definitions so that the State's Legislative Assembly could recommend the abrogation instead of its now-dissolved Constituent Assembly, as originally envisaged in Article 370(3). Ultimately, the Court ruled that parts of the August 5 order were unconstitutional as they, in effect, amounted to amending Article 370 itself, which was impermissible; but, in a peculiar twist, it held the consequential notification on August 6 declaring Article 370 as valid and that the President was empowered to do so even without the legal underpinnings of the previous day's notification that sought to bolster the validity of the action. The President could remove the State's special status without any recommendation.

The Court has reasoned that the Constitution of India has been applied incrementally from time to time even after the Constituent Assembly was dissolved in 1957 and that the removal of special status is nothing but the culmination of the process of its integration. Even if this line of argument is seen as unobjectionable, the idea that in the absence the Constituent Assembly and in view of the subordination of J&K to the sovereignty of India, there is no fetter on the government's intention to hollow out its residual autonomy is opposed to all canons of federalism and democracy. There is no doubt that J&K is not vested with any sovereignty. The Court says Article 370 represents no more than a form of asymmetric federalism and that additional features — such as having a separate Constitution, residuary power of legislation and requirement of its consent to some legislative subjects before Parliament can make law on them — will not clothe it with sovereignty. All of this is true. But, how this can mean that historical obligations owed to it and promises made by constitutional functionaries can be blown away at the ruling dispensation's whim is beyond comprehension. Forgotten is the fact that the process of integration itself was by and large built on a constant dialogue between Kashmir's leaders and the Union government, the context and conditions in which it acceded to India, the terms of the Instrument of Accession and the progressive extension of constitutional provisions with the consent of the State government over the years.

The Court's failure to give its ruling on whether the Constitution permits the reorganisation of J&K into two UTs is an astounding example of judicial evasion. It is shocking that the Court chose not to adjudicate a question that arose directly from the use of Article 3 of the Constitution for the first time to downgrade a State. The only reason given is that the Solicitor-General gave an assurance that the Statehood of J&K would be restored. It is questionable whether a mere assurance of a remedial measure can impart validity to any action. At the same time, the Court upheld the carving out of Ladakh as a separate UT. On this point, the verdict is an invitation to the Union to consider creation of new UTs out of parts of any State. The Court's position that there is no limit on the President's power or Parliament's competence to act on behalf of the State government and its legislature is equally fraught with danger. In particular, the reference to "non-legislative" powers of the State Assemblies poses a significant threat to the powers devolved to the States. A future regime at the Centre could impose President's rule to carry out extraordinary actions through its own parliamentary majority that an elected government in a State may never do. The view that some of these may be restored by a subsequently elected government or House is of little consolation if actions taken under the cover of President's Rule cause great damage to the State's interests. This is a verdict that weakens institutional limitations on power, and, while rightly upholding Indian sovereignty over J&K, it undermines federalism and democratic processes to a frightening degree.

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EXPLAINED: KEY ASPECTS OF SUPREME COURT'S ARTICLE 370 VERDICT

The Supreme Court in a 5-0 unanimous ruling upheld the Centre's abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution on Monday. A Constitution Bench led by Chief Justice of India (CJI) D Y Chandrachud upheld the constitutional validity of the two Presidential Orders CO (The Constitution (Application To Jammu and Kashmir) Order) 272 and 273 of August 5 and 6, 2019 respectively by which the entire Constitution of India was made applicable to J&K, and all provisions of Article 370 were declared inoperative.

This is what the court said on four key issues in the challenge to the decisions of the government.

On the sovereignty of Jammu and Kashmir

The petitioners had argued that J&K retained an element of sovereignty when it joined the Indian Union in 1947. This arrangement, they argued, was distinct from the relationship with the other princely states that merged with India. The court examined the constitutional set-up of the erstwhile state to examine if it retained an element of sovereignty, which would allow Article 370 to operate in "unique circumstances".

First, it noted, Article 1 of the Constitution of India provides that India is a Union of States. Article 1 references "Part III states", and Jammu and Kashmir was listed as a Part III state (before 2019) in the First Schedule to the Constitution of India.

Second, Section 3 of the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir declared that Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India. The provision read: "Relationship of the State with the Union of India: The State of Jammu and Kashmir is and shall be an integral part of the Union of India." Section 147 of the J&K Constitution prohibited any amendment to Section 3.

The court held that these provisions contradict the argument that an agreement of merger was necessary for Jammu and Kashmir to surrender its sovereignty. It noted that when Yuvraj Karan Singh issued the Proclamation adopting the Indian Constitution on November 25, 1949, it effectively had the effect of a "merger" like any other princely state. "The declaration that the Constitution of India would not only supersede all other constitutional provisions in the State which were inconsistent with it but also abrogate them achieves what would have been attained by an agreement of merger," the CJI said in his opinion, written also for Justices B R Gavai and Surya Kant. However, Justice S K Kaul in his concurring opinion held that J&K retained an element of internal sovereignty despite Maharaja Hari Singh signing the Instrument of Accession (IoA) with India. He cited the recognition of this internal sovereignty in Article 370 when it recognised the Constituent Assembly of the State. However, this had no bearing on the final conclusions reached by Justice Kaul.

On whether Art 370 is temporary or permanent

A range of arguments were made before the Court on the permanence (or lack thereof) of Article 370. The petitioners argued that the provision could not be abrogated since it had attained permanence, and as the original part of the Constitution forms the basic structure, which cannot be tinkered with.

Senior advocate Kapil Sibal argued that since 370(3) prescribes the recommendation of the Constituent Assembly of the State (which has ceased to exist) as a prerequisite to abrogate Article

370, its abrogation is essentially infructuous. This means no constitutional means existed to abrogate Article 370 once the J&K Constituent Assembly had ceased to exist.

The opinions of both the CJI and Justice Kaul held that Article 370 was always meant to be a "temporary" feature.

Justice Kaul held that since Article 370 is meant to be a temporary arrangement, it cannot be said that the mechanism under Article 370(3) came to an end after the State Constituent Assembly was dissolved.

The CJI said that there were two aspects that showed the temporary nature of Article 370. First, it was intended as an interim arrangement until the Constituent Assembly of the State was formed since in the interim, there was needed a legal bridge between J&K and India. Once the J & K Constitution was enacted and it was adopted to be a part of India, this arrangement would not have been necessary.

Second, the provision was adopted because of the special circumstances in the state, which was experiencing war conditions.

On the legality of the abrogation of Article 370

The legal route for the abrogation of Article 370 was twofold. First, on August 5, 2019, then President Ram Nath Kovind issued CO 272, which amended Article 367 of the Constitution. Article 367 deals with interpretation of the Constitution, and the CO added a new meaning to "Constituent Assembly of Jammu and Kashmir" to mean "legislative assembly of Jammu and Kashmir.

Then, CO 273 was promulgated seeking the consent of Parliament (which had assumed powers of the J&K legislature) to recommend that "all clauses of the said article 370 shall cease to be operative".

While Justice Kaul upheld this process, CJI Chandrachud in his opinion said that the circuitous route of first changing the meaning of the Constituent Assembly of J&K was not needed. Essentially, after the Constituent Assembly of the state ceased to exist, the President could have always unilaterally abrogated Article 370.

"The power under Article 370 (3) did not cease to exist upon the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly of Jammu and Kashmir. When the Constituent Assembly was dissolved, only the transitional power recognised in the proviso to Article 370 (3) which empowered the Constituent Assembly to make its recommendations ceased to exist. It did not affect the power held by the President under Article 370(3)," the ruling stated.

On the action that was taken under President's rule

The petitioners had argued that the Union took "irrevocable" action without the state's consent when it was under President's rule. Here, the challenge was to the extent of powers that can be appropriated when Article 356 is in operation. Both the CJI and Justice Kaul cited the 1994 ruling in S R Bommai v Union of India that defined the contours of proclamation of President's rule. The Bommai ruling was a nine-judge Bench verdict that is binding on a smaller 5-judge Bench.

Relying on the Bommai ruling, the court said that the standard to decide the validity of the President's action was to see whether it was not "mala fide or palpably irrational", or that the "advisability and necessity of the action was not borne in mind by the President". The court also

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held that the petitioner and the Union government must show mala fides to the court. The ruling rejected the argument that irrevocable action being taken cannot be accepted as proof of mala fides.

WHAT WAS THE SR BOMMAI JUDGMENT, WHICH THE SC RELIED ON IN ITS ARTICLE 370 RULING?

In upholding the abrogation of Article 370, the Supreme Court on Monday relied heavily on its landmark 1994 judgement in SR Bommai v Union of India.

What is this case, and how does it relate to the J&K challenge?

The case

In Bommai, a nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court interpreted Article 356 of the Constitution to define the contours of proclamation of President's rule. Article 356 contains provisions "in case of failure of constitutional machinery in States", including that for the imposition of President's rule.

While all nine judges unanimously upheld the provision, the Court ruled that the President's decision would be subject to judicial review. Bommai is still the settled law on when and how President's rule can be imposed, and was invoked in recent cases challenging President's rule in Uttarakhand (2016) and Arunachal Pradesh (2016), both of which were overturned by the Supreme Court.

The background

In 1989, the Congress government at the Centre dismissed the Janata Dal-led Karnataka government by imposing President's rule.

After allegedly receiving 19 letters from MLAs withdrawing their support to Chief Minister SR Bommai's government, then Karnataka Governor P Venkatasubbaiah recommended to the President that he take over the state's administration. He cited two reasons. First, that Bommai did not command a majority and, hence, "it was inappropriate under the Constitution," for him to continue. Second, that no other political party was in a position to form the government.

This move, however, was extremely controversial. The SC ruling would later note that "the Governor did not ascertain the view of Shri Bommai" before making his report to the President. In fact 7 out of the 19 legislators who allegedly withdrew support to Bommai's government would soon make a U-turn, complaining that their signatures on the aforementioned letters were obtained by misrepresentation.

Thus, the dismissed chief minister moved the Karnataka High Court, which dismissed his challenge against the Centre. Then, on appeal to the apex court, a nine-judge bench was constituted.

The verdict

The SC unanimously held that the President's proclamation can be subject to judicial review on grounds of illegality, malafide, extraneous considerations, abuse of power, or fraud. While the President's subjective appraisal of the issue cannot be examined, the Court said that the material relied on for making the decision can be reviewed.

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

The verdict also made Parliamentary approval necessary for imposing President's rule. Only after the proclamation is approved by both Houses of Parliament can the President exercise the power. Till then, the President can only suspend the state legislature. If the Parliament does not approve the proclamation within two months, then the government that was dismissed would automatically stand revived.

The ruling also drew a redline for centre-state relationships.

"The fact that under the scheme of our Constitution, greater power is conferred upon the Centre vis-à-vis the states does not mean that states are mere appendages of the Centre," Justice Jeevan Reddy wrote in his opinion. "The Centre cannot tamper with their powers. More particularly, the courts should not adopt an approach, an interpretation, which has the effect of or tends to have the effect of whittling down the powers reserved to the states," he wrote.

The Bommai ruling, one of the first by the SC to scrutinise the conduct of the Governor's office, came at a time when President's rule was frequently imposed to dismiss state governments run by opposition parties.

According to research by Alok Prasanna Kumar, Senior Resident Fellow at Vidhi Karnataka, the imposition of President's rule drastically decreased after the Bommai verdict. Between January 1950 and March 1994, President's Rule was imposed 100 times or an average of 2.5 times a year. Between 1995 and 2021, it has been imposed only 29 times or a little more than once a year.

The Kashmir reference

A key question in the Kashmir case was whether Article 370 could have been abrogated when the state was under President's rule. The erstwhile state had been under President's rule since 2018, and the question before the court was whether the President could give consent to the revocation of J&K's special status.

Here, the Supreme Court relied on the Bommai ruling to hold that the actions of the President are constitutionally valid. The Court said that the Bommai ruling held that the actions taken by the President after issuing a Proclamation are subject to judicial review, but the judges had adopted varying standards to test the validity of the executive orders.

The Court cited two standards — one by Justice PB Sawant, and another by Justice Reddy. Justice Sawant had set the standard of whether the exercise of power was mala fide or palpably irrational, while Justice Reddy observed that the advisability and necessity of the action must be borne in mind by the President.

WHAT WAS KARAN SINGH'S PROCLAMATION OF 1949, CITED BY SC TO UPHOLD ABROGATION OF ARTICLE 370?

In upholding the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution on Monday (December 11), the Supreme Court ruled that Jammu and Kashmir did not retain an element of sovereignty or internal sovereignty after it joined the Union of India.

In his judgment (written for himself and Justices B R Gavai and Surya Kant), Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud recalled that in November 1949, Yuvraj Karan Singh, heir to the throne of Jammu and Kashmir, had issued a proclamation that reflected the "full and final surrender of [J&K's] sovereignty... to India."

What did the Supreme Court say?

On the question of "Whether Jammu and Kashmir retained an element of sovereignty or internal sovereignty when it joined the Union of India", the 'Essence of the Judgment' read out by the CJI in court said J&K "did not retain an element of sovereignty when it joined the Union of India". One of the reasons the court gave was as follows:

"On 25 November 1949, a Proclamation was issued for the State of Jammu and Kashmir by Yuvraj Karan Singh. The declaration in this Proclamation that the Constitution of India would not only supersede all other constitutional provisions in the State which were inconsistent with it but also abrogate them achieves what would have been attained by an agreement of merger. With the issuance of the Proclamation, paragraph 8 of the Instrument of Accession ceased to be of legal consequence. The 9 Proclamation reflects the full and final surrender of sovereignty by Jammu and Kashmir, through its sovereign ruler, to India — to her people who are sovereign."

What was the proclamation by Karan Singh?

Karan Singh's proclamation stated that the Government of India Act, 1935, which until then governed the constitutional relationship between J&K and the dominion of India, will stand repealed. "That the Constitution of India shortly to be adopted by the Constituent Assembly of India shall in so far as it is applicable to the State of Jammu and Kashmir, govern the constitutional relationship between this State and the contemplated Union of India and shall be enforced in this State by me, my heirs and successors in accordance with the tenor of its provisions," the proclamation said.

Also, "the provisions of the said Constitution shall, as from the date of its commencement, supersede and abrogate all other constitutional provisions inconsistent therewith which are at present in force in this State."

Why did Karan Singh make the proclamation?

Speaking to The Indian Express soon after the judgment, Karan Singh, now 92, said: "It was something which was required, I think, at that time for the country and the state and therefore in order to get rid of any ambiguity I issued that proclamation."

The ambiguity was over whether J&K became an integral part of India after Karan Singh's father, Hari Singh, signed the Instrument of Accession (IoA) — the legal document that finalised J&K's accession to India. "My father signed the same instrument that all the other rulers signed… It did not then get integrated…in the sense that Sardar Patel integrated the others…so it always retained a measure of autonomy. Whether you can call that sovereignty or not, I don't know…that is a technical matter," Karan Singh added.

The Supreme Court's ruling is in line with what the Centre had argued during the hearing. The Union government had said the 1949 proclamation accepted the supremacy of the Indian Constitution and surrendered sovereignty to it, where the sovereign was 'We the people of India'.

HOW THE WORLD REACTED TO ARTICLE 370 ABROGATION, HOW SC VERDICT HELPS INDIA

The Supreme Court's seal of approval this week on the constitutional changes in Jammu and Kashmir evoked no major international reactions except from the usual suspects.

Pakistan refused to acknowledge the supremacy of the Indian Constitution over Jammu and Kashmir.

China said it did not recognise the "so-called union territory of Ladakh set up unilaterally and illegally by India", and the western section of the China-India border has always belonged to China.

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) reiterated its call to reverse "all illegal and unilateral measures taken since 5 August 2019 aimed at changing the internationally recognised disputed status of the territory".

New Delhi responded that the OIC speaks at the "behest of a serial violator of human rights and an unrepentant promoter of cross-border terrorism" — a clear reference to Pakistan.

Four years ago

PAK & MUSLIM WORLD: After the special status of J&K was removed and the state was divided into two UTs, Pakistan recalled its ambassador (India followed suit), and stopped bilateral trade, and train and bus services.

In the Islamic world, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) said the decision was India's "internal matter", and Saudi Arabia called for a "peaceful settlement (of the J&K issue) in accordance with the relevant international resolutions", but Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad criticised India.

WESTERN POWERS: In the days before August 5, 2019, when there was palpable tension in the erstwhile state and security was tightened, several Western nations advised their citizens to avoid travelling to the Valley.

After the changes of August 5-6, the United States was extremely careful and nuanced in its comments. It said it was closely following the developments, and noted their broader implications, including the potential for increased instability in the region. It expressed concern over detentions and restrictions in J&K, but also called on all parties to maintain peace and stability along the Line of Control, including "taking firm and resolute steps" to combat cross-border terrorism.

The European Union (EU) too, was measured: it called on India and Pakistan to reopen dialogue, and reiterated the grouping's backing for a bilateral solution on Kashmir.

RUSSIA: In what was seen as a ringing endorsement of New Delhi's action, Russia underlined that the changes were carried out "within the framework of the Constitution of the Republic of India". Moscow also stressed the "bilateral" nature of the J&K issue, and mentioned the Simla Agreement (1972) and Lahore Declaration (1999).

China & Pakistan

China expressed its displeasure, claiming that this move undermined its territorial sovereignty and expressing "serious concern" over the situation. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs responded by stating that India does not comment on the internal affairs of other countries and expects reciprocity.

Following this, India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar visited China and met with Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. During the meeting, Wang emphasized that maintaining peace and stability in the region was New Delhi's responsibility. Jaishankar, in his

public remarks, did not mention Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and stressed the need for both countries to manage their differences, emphasizing mutual sensitivity to each other's core concerns. This diplomatic exchange occurred in the context of Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi's visit to China, seeking support for Islamabad's bid to bring the matter to the UN Security Council. China attempted to raise the issue at the UNSC but faced opposition from the US, France, and Germany, with Poland, holding the UNSC Presidency, stating that a bilateral solution should be sought. An informal meeting on August 16 yielded no official statement.

India's diplomacy

India had reached out to both permanent and non-permanent members of the UNSC in the days after August 5. Then Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale briefed envoys in New Delhi, and Jaishankar rang some of his counterparts in UNSC countries.

In the third week of August, Prime Minister Narendra Modi told US President Donald Trump by phone that "extreme rhetoric and incitement to anti-India violence" by certain leaders in the region was "not conducive to peace" — a reference to Imran Khan of Pakistan, who had threatened to "teach Delhi a lesson". Hours later, Trump asked Imran to "moderate" his rhetoric over J&K.

Modi visited Biarritz, France on August 25-26 for the G7 summit, and held talks with French President Emmanuel Macron. Macron stressed no outside interference was warranted in J&K, and that no one should incite violence over this issue. Modi travelled to France from the UAE and Bahrain. In Abu Dhabi, he received the backing of Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and was honoured with the UAE's highest civilian award.

In September, Jaishankar toured Europe and the US, and India categorically told the international community that the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution was its internal matter, and advised the world to "accept the reality". On September 26, Qureshi boycotted a meeting of SAARC foreign ministers in New York for the duration Jaishankar was present. Qureshi later called the Indian minister names, but it was apparent that Pakistan's Interior Minister Brig. Ijaz Ahmed Shah (retd) had made the right assessment on September 13, when he said that "people (the world) don't believe us, and rather believe India".

Going forward

Fast forward to December 2023, and the endorsement from the Supreme Court has given ballast to New Delhi's global diplomatic strategy to communicate to the world that Kashmir is India's.

India's position that J&K is an "internal issue" with no external repercussions has been more or less accepted. The only two issues that major powers had flagged were that the human rights of the people of J&K, which includes the right to free and fair elections, should be protected and, a possible escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan should be avoided.

The challenge for New Delhi is to now work on these counts. The Supreme Court has asked the government to hold elections by September 2024. The international diplomatic community, which has been taken on tours of J&K by the government over the last four years, will be watching that space closely.

Pakistan is expected to hold national elections in February next year, just ahead of India's own elections in April-May. A window to move the ball in the direction of engagement could open up after that.

WELCOME DIRECTION

In its conclusion in the judgment that upheld the decision to abrogate the special status of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370, the Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court expressly directed that the Election Commission of India (ECI) must conduct elections to the Legislative Assembly of J&K by September 30, 2024. It is welcome that the Court has set a deadline to conduct the long-delayed elections in J&K, which has been under spells of Governor's Rule and President's Rule since June 20, 2018 and without a Legislative Assembly. But it is also incongruous that the judgment does not press the government to restore statehood to the bifurcated Union Territory, a promise that has been conveyed by the Solicitor General, but has yet to gain fruition. The Bench remarks that direct elections cannot be put on hold until statehood is restored but it could have directed the Union government to restore statehood and conduct elections by a specified date, as there remains no reason for the continuance of J&K as a Union Territory. Restoration of statehood is an important measure as this guarantees a degree of federal autonomy to the province, that should allow the elected government to be able to better address the concerns of the electorate than depend on the representatives of the Union government.

J&K remains among India's most conflict-prone regions partially due to historical reasons related to integration of the erstwhile princely State into the Indian Union and later due to accumulated grievances over the conduct of democratic processes in the erstwhile State. Even when periodic and regular elections were conducted during the height of the militancy, participation was limited in many parts of the Valley, denoting the disenchantment with the political system. But things took a change for the better since the early-mid 2000s when electoral participation improved and J&K's citizens began to partake in the democratic process to get their concerns addressed before agitations and protests — including by separatists — over security policies and the later steps taken by the Bharatiya Janata Party government led to the current state of affairs. In the last five and a half years, local government elections have been held with varying levels of participation indicating that the mood in the Valley has been against the measures that have been implemented since 2018. India's unique selling proposition as a leader in the Global South remains its robust conduct of formal democratic process and which in itself is important for conflict resolution in places such as Kashmir. Without political processes, a contestation of ideas and a sense that elected representatives can address the grievances of citizens, there cannot be any normalcy.

BEYOND JAMMU AND KASHMIR: WHY MANY STATES IN INDIA ENJOY SPECIAL PROVISIONS

Constitutionally, India's governance structure is quasi-federal. While in a unitary setup, the power to legislate is concentrated in the Centre, in a federal structure, the units that form the federation have varying degrees of autonomy and powers to conduct their affairs.

In the Indian context, while states do have autonomy, the Constitution tilts towards the Centre on certain areas, thus making it quasi-federal. The Seventh Schedule of the Constitution contains the Union, State and Concurrent lists that prescribe subjects that the Centre and states are empowered to legislate upon. For those in the concurrent list — which both the Centre and state can legislate upon — the Union law would prevail in case of a conflict between the law made by Parliament and the state legislature.

However, even in this quasi-federal structure that leans more towards the Centre, not all states are equal. India's plurality necessitates such an arrangement and the Constitution provides for

differentiated equality for states depending on various factors, ranging from the fiscal, political and the administrative. However, an argument is made against asymmetric federalism, that the so-called special statuses sow seeds of regionalism and separatism and that it impacts 'national integration.'

While Article 370, which formalised India's relationship with the state of Jammu and Kashmir, is touted as the most obvious example of asymmetric federalism in India, there are severl other states that enjoy varying degrees of autonomy and relationship with the Centre.

Not just Jammu and Kashmir

Right after Article 370, the Constitution creates special provisions for at least nine states, from Article 371A-I. All these exceptions are under a Section of the Constitution titled "Temporary, Transitional and Special Provisions", which indicates that these provisions would be operable till the crisis — either secessionist sentiments or war — ceases. However, despite the "temporary" tag, none of the provisions contain an explicit expiry date.

Nagaland and Mizoram, for example, enjoy a negotiated autonomy which was a political compromise between India and the Naga and Mizoram independence movements. Under it, Parliament can make no law that interferes with religious and social practices of Nagas and Mizos, or with the ownership and transfer of its land and natural resources.

In the case of J&K, the petitioners challenging the Centre's 2019 abrogation of Article 370 had argued that the special provision gives an element of internal sovereignty for the state which cannot be unilaterally taken away. However, a five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court, headed by Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud, ruled on December 12 that Article 370 is only a feature of asymmetric federalism, which is not the same as having internal sovereignty.

There are concessions made to states for reasons other than political necessities. Take for example Delhi. Article 239AA prescribes for a unique arrangement for the administration of the national capital. It is not a state under the First Schedule to the Constitution, yet has the powers to legislate upon subjects in the state and concurrent lists in the Seventh Schedule.

'PEOPLE CANNOT GO UNREPRESENTED': BOMBAY HC DIRECTS EC TO IMMEDIATELY HOLD BYPOLL FOR PUNE LOK SABHA SEAT

The Bombay High Court on Wednesday directed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to immediately conduct a bypoll for the Pune Lok Sabha constituency which became vacant after the death of MP Girish Bapat on March 29. The high court bench led by Justice Gautam S Patel quashed the certificate issued by the ECI not to hold a bypoll to the constituency.

The high court said that ECI had given a "bizarre" reason that its entire machinery was far too busy and has been busy since March 2023 in preparation for the Lok Sabha elections in 2024 to be bothered with the Pune bypoll.

"Business of ECI staff cannot result in citizens going unrepresented and that is unthinkable and it would amount to sabotaging entire constitutional framework, which we trust that is what even ECI did not want," the bench held.

"In any parliamentary democracy, governance is done by elected representatives who are the voices of people. If a representative is no more, another must be put in place. People cannot go

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unrepresented. That is wholly unconstitutional and is fundamental anathema to constitutional structure," the bench observed.

A division bench of Justice Patel and Justice Kamal R Khata was hearing a plea by Pune resident Sughosh Joshi against the ECI certificate. The plea was argued through advocates Kushal Mor, Shraddha Swarup and Dayaar Singla, who claimed that as per Section 151A of the Representation of People Act, 1951, the vacancy should be filled through a bypoll within six months; therefore the same should have been held by September 28.

Joshi claimed that the constituents had no voice in Parliament over the past few months, especially for issues related to significant delays in several developmental projects in Pune

The high court, on December 7, said it prima facie did not concur with the reasoning given by ECI that in case bypolls are held, the returned candidate would hardly have three-four months of work as MP and it would also affect the preparatory activities for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

"It is not for ECI to adopt a sliding scale and we find it unthinkable that several months could go past and then the entire constituency be told that now time does not remain and the constituency might as well wait for next general elections. We cannot possibly accept or contemplate this. Correspondingly, the duty of ECI is to ensure that an election is held and the seat is filled. ECI is not concerned whether returned candidates will be effective in the term that remains," the bench noted.

The fundamental principle in which the ECI must function is the right to representation, the court said, adding that it cannot let a constituency remain unrepresented beyond the prescribed period.

The bench also noted that the ECI's stand was inconsistent as it had itself held byelections for several Legislative Assembly constituencies and Lok Sabha constituencies since the Pune seat became vacant. "Neither administrative reasons nor burden on exchequer are reasons to refuse byelection," the bench noted.

It noted that the term of the Lok Sabha ends on June 16, 2024, and the Pune constituency became vacant on March 29, a little over a year, and ECI could not take exception of less than a year's time remaining for the term of the returned candidate.

"Only relevant date is the date on which vacancy actually arises. Any other date be either random or subject to some level of ad-hocism which is unacceptable. One can never predict with certainty the date on which the code of conduct will start operating or election results will be announced but the date of vacancy is written in stone and there can be no ambiguity," the bench said.

The high court allowed the plea and declared the certificate issued by ECI under clause (b) of the proviso to Section 151A of the Representation of People Act, 1951, to not hold bye-election as unconstitutional. Ordering immediate election, it asked ECI to forthwith refrain from acting on the impugned certificate.

CJI SEEKS REPORT FROM ALLAHABAD HC ON WOMAN JUDGE'S PLAINT

Chief Justice India D.Y. Chandrachud has sought a report from the Allahabad High Court after a woman judge from Uttar Pradesh wrote an open letter to him, saying she has suffered the "personal humiliation" of being denied a fair hearing on her complaint of sexual harassment at

workplace and has lost her will to live. The woman judge said she was sexually harassed by a district judge and his associates.

She said, in the letter circulated on social media, that she had complained to the Chief Justice of the Allahabad High Court and Administrative Judge, but to no avail. The Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) of the High Court took six months and "a thousand emails" to even start an inquiry into her complaint filed in July. The woman judge called the inquiry "a farce and a sham" in which the witnesses were the subordinates of the district judge in question. Her plea to the ICC to transfer the district judge during the pendency of the inquiry was not allowed. She said the High Court, on the judicial side, had already given a finding that the evidence in the case was tampered with.

Dismissed in 8 seconds

She said the Supreme Court at least should have heard her case. However, the top court dismissed her case in "eight seconds".

The case had come up before a Bench of Justices Hrishikesh Roy and Sandeep Mehta on December 13. The Bench had dismissed her petition, observing in its order that the ICC was "already in seisin of the case and a resolution is already passed which is pending approval of the Chief Justice of the Allahabad High Court".

"I felt like my life, my dignity and my soul have been DISMISSED. It felt like a personal humiliation," the open letter read.

"The enquiry will now be conducted with the district judge in control of all the witnesses. What justice will I give to others when I am myself hopeless? I have no will to live anymore. I have been rendered into a walking corpse in the last year-and-half," the letter said.

DO PREGNANCY TEST IN ALL POCSO CASES, SAYS KARNATAKA HC

The High Court of Karnataka has directed pregnancy test on every victim of rape and sexual offences under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, along with other mandatory medical examinations after registration of a first information report on the alleged offences.

This measure will help to ascertain, among other relevant medical conditions, the gestation period for termination of pregnancy at the earliest, the physical and mental status of the victim, the ability to undergo medical termination of the pregnancy, aggravating factors that will impinge upon the health and well-being of the victim, the Karnataka High Court said.

HADIYA, WHOSE CONVERSION WAS AT CENTRE OF DEBATE IN KERALA, SAYS SHE HAS DIVORCED, REMARRIED

Hadiya, whose conversion to Islam and marriage sparked controversy in Kerala in 2017, has announced in a video that she has divorced Shefin Jahan and remarried a person of her choice. A homeopathy doctor, Hadiya stated that she exercised her right, granted by the Constitution, to enter and exit marriages. She expressed confusion about societal reactions, emphasizing her ability to make decisions as an adult. Her father filed a habeas corpus petition in the Kerala High Court, claiming he couldn't trace her, prompting her video response. Hadiya did not disclose details about her new life partner and mentioned her move to Thiruvananthapuram after the

divorce. Hadiya's previous marriage faced legal challenges, including a Kerala High Court order annulling it, later overturned by the Supreme Court in 2018. The National Investigation Agency also probed whether her conversion to Islam was forced.

GOVERNOR THREATENS FINANCIAL EMERGENCY IN KERALA AS ROW WITH CM REACHES NEW LOW

The political tension between Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan and Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has escalated, with the Governor threatening to recommend the Presidential imposition of a financial emergency in the state. The recent incident involved alleged aggression by Students' Federation of India (SFI) (Communist Party of India (Marxist)'s student wing) activists towards the Governor's vehicle, leading to 19 arrests. Governor Khan accused the Chief Minister of orchestrating the attack, linking it to his request for a report on the state's financial situation following an affidavit about a "severe financial crisis." The Governor condemned the incident, while the Chief Minister asserted that the government was not obliged to answer every query raised by the Governor. The political standoff has triggered reactions from the BJP and Congress, criticizing the state government for perceived law and order issues. The SFI defended the activists' right to peaceful dissent. The situation reflects ongoing discord between the Governor and Chief Minister on various issues, including appointments and legislative delays.

WHY PARLIAMENT PASSED THE ADVOCATES AMENDMENT BILL, WHICH AIMS TO WEED OUT 'TOUTS'

On the first day of the Parliament's Winter Session on Monday (December 4) the Advocates Amendment Bill, 2023, was passed in the Lok Sabha. Introduced in the Rajya Sabha's Monsoon Session on August 1, the Bill was passed by the House two days later.

Aimed at weeding out 'touts' from the legal system, the Bill repeals the Legal Practitioners Act, 1879, and amends the Advocates Act, 1961, to reduce "the number of superfluous enactments in the statute book" and repeal all "obsolete laws".

Replying to a question on the Bill, Minister for Law and Justice Arjun Ram Meghwal said the Legal Practitioners Act was a colonial-era Act without any utility, adding that 1,486 such laws have been done away with since 2014.

Initiating the discussion, Congress MP Karti Chidambaram welcomed the Bill, saying, "Because of the asymmetry in our society in terms of education, access to people in authority and wealth, sometimes people do not know how to navigate the legal system…This is what is being exploited and some people step in as touts. Touts thrive because of the complexity in dealing with our legal system".

What does the now-repealed 1879 Act state?

The Legal Practitioners Act came into force in 1880, "to consolidate and amend the law relating to Legal Practitioners in certain provinces." The Act initially extended to areas in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Orissa, and Delhi. Any state government could, by notification in the Official Gazette, extend it to their states.

Section 2 of the 1879 Act defined the term "legal practitioner" to include advocates, vakils, or attorneys of any High Court. It also introduced a new definition of the term "tout".

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A "Tout" was defined as someone who procures, in consideration of any remuneration from any legal practitioner, the employment of a legal practitioner in any legal business; or one who proposes to any legal practitioner or anyone interested in any legal business to procure, for remuneration, the employment of the legal practitioner in such business.

Simply, a tout is someone who procures clients for a legal practitioner in exchange for payment. The definition also included people who frequented civil or criminal courts, revenue offices, railway stations, etc. for such procurement purposes

The Advocates Act of 1961 was passed in independent India to create a single Act to regulate the legal profession. This Act repealed a majority of the 1879 Act but left behind provisions relating to its extent, definitions, and powers to frame and publish lists of touts.

What is the Advocates Act of 1961?

The Advocates Act, 1961, was enacted to amend and consolidate the law relating to legal practitioners and to provide for the constitution of Bar Councils and an All-India Bar.

Before this, legal practitioners were governed by three Acts – the Legal Practitioners Act, 1879, the Bombay Pleaders Act, 1920, and the Indian Bar Councils Act, 1926.

Post-independence, a need was felt for bringing in changes in India's judicial administration. The Law Commission was tasked with preparing a report on reforms. In its 249th Report titled 'Obsolete Laws: Warranting Immediate Repeal', the Commission recommended repealing the 1879 Act. Additionally, the All-India Bar Committee made its recommendations on the subject in 1953. Taking these into account, the 1961 Act was passed.

What does the Advocates Amendment Bill, 2023, say?

The new Bill now amends the 1961 Act by inserting a new provision right after Section 45, which prescribes six months of imprisonment for persons illegally practising in courts and before other authorities.

The new provision, Section 45A, states that the Bill enables every HC and district judge to frame and publish lists of touts. However, no person's name will be included in any such list until they have had an opportunity to show cause against such inclusion.

Further, any authority empowered to make lists of alleged or suspected touts can send them to any subordinate court, which, after holding an inquiry into the conduct of such persons, will allow them an opportunity to show cause. After this, the lower court will report back to the authority ordering the inquiry.

If proven to be a tout, the person's name will be included in the list of touts that will be published by the authority and hung in every court. The court or judge may exclude any person whose name is included in any such list from the court's vicinity.

Additionally, this provision punishes anyone acting as a tout "while his name is included in any such list" with imprisonment up to three months, a fine that may extend to five hundred rupees, or both.

Section 45A of the new Bill is analogous to Section 36 of the 1879 Act. However, the 1961 Act did not include the provision. This is exactly what the new Bill sought to remedy.

Doing so would "reduce the number of superfluous enactments in the statute book," says the Bill's accompanying Statement of Objects and Reasons. Keeping in line with the government's policy of repealing all obsolete laws or pre-independence Acts that have lost their utility, and in consultation with the Bar Council of India, the government decided to repeal the Legal Practitioners Act and amend the Advocates Act.

EXPRESS VIEW ON NEW CRIMINAL LAW CODE: LAW AND LIBERTY

Four months after it first introduced three new pieces of legislation to overhaul the criminal justice system, the Centre this week placed revised versions before the Lok Sabha. The Bills — Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, to replace the Indian Penal Code; Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023, for CrPC; and Bharatiya Sakshya (BS) Bill, 2023, for the Indian Evidence Act are expected to be passed in this winter session of Parliament. India's severely clogged criminal justice system needs an update and the government's focus on this neglected issue is welcome. However, an overhaul of the three laws that have been the fulcrum of the justice system for over a century for common people is an enormous exercise that cannot be rushed.

The Centre first introduced the three sanhitas in August on the last day of the Monsoon Session. They were brought in through the supplementary list of business. Even stakeholder consultations before the introduction have largely been behind closed doors during the pandemic. While the Bills were reviewed by the Parliamentary Standing Committee headed by BJP MP Brij Lal, several Opposition leaders had flagged concerns that the review was being done in haste and questioned the choice of domain experts consulted. It is telling that according to the Standing Committee reports, it met over 19 experts — at least six have held positions appointed by the government in nine meetings over six days between September and October. Even as the Committee "welcomed the initiative of the government" in broad brushstrokes, it flagged some concerns on crucial issues including the wide scope of organised crime in proposed laws. However, the revised versions make no significant changes from the first version.

The new criminal law code makes some crucial changes. The Bills for the first time bring terrorism, corruption and organised crime under the ambit of ordinary criminal law. These aspects were reserved for stringent special legislation since they upend the general protections by reversing the burden of proof on the accused to restrict bail. Other changes, like extending the time limit for police custody from 15 to 90 days, raise concerns about personal liberty and misuse of police powers. The government's narrative of "indigenisation" and "decolonisation" is important, especially in criminal law where an ordinary citizen interacts most with the mighty state. The government told Parliament in August that three provisions in the IPC — sedition, criminalisation of homosexuality and adultery — had been repealed. However, the fine print shows that the offence of sedition, currently rendered inoperable by a Supreme Court order, has merely had a name change from "rajdroh" to "deshdroh". While adultery, which has been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, has not found a place in the BNS – rightly so — the total omission of Section 377 raises concerns. The Supreme Court in 2018 read down the provision as unconstitutional but only to the extent that it decriminalises consensual homosexual relationships. The provision is still helpful to tackle non-consensual acts, especially when rape laws continue to be gendered. In the coming days, the Bills must be debated threadbare and fine-tuned to address all concerns. They should not be passed in haste.

EXPRESS VIEW ON PARLIAMENT SECURITY BREACH: PROTECT THE HOUSE

On Wednesday, December 13, two young men — Sagar Sharma and Manoranjan D — jumped into the Lok Sabha gallery, shouted anti-establishment slogans and opened canisters that let out yellow smoke. They were soon subdued by MPs and security. While panic gripped the House, outside it, Neelam Azad and Amol Shinde let out yellow smoke. The vapour turned out to be harmless. The perpetrators who engaged in the criminal, misguided attempt to hijack proceedings have been arrested. It is almost certain they will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. But what is most shocking about December 13 is the laxity, the failure really, of Parliament security and the intelligence apparatus. That the new building could be breached so easily, on the anniversary of the terrorist attack in 2001, brings up horrific scenarios of what might have been.

The Lok Sabha Secretariat has suspended eight security personnel. Yet, many questions remain unanswered. After the 2001 armed attack, a complete security overhaul including CCTV cameras, barricades and electric fencing were put in place in the old Parliament building. These measures are reportedly in place in the new structure as well. But the breach on Wednesday occurred from the visitors' gallery and the canisters in the shoes of the perpetrators did not set off metal detectors. The new Parliament has seen an increase in visitors without a commensurate increase in security personnel. The risks in the very structure of the new building — the reduced height between the visitors' gallery and the floor of the House — may need to be mitigated. The reports of the Delhi Police reviewing security arrangements after Khalistani separatist Gurpatwant Singh Pannu threatened an attack on the House make the lapse all the more perplexing. These issues — and many more — will have to be resolved by the committee set up by the Union home ministry under Anish Dayal Singh, DG, CRPF.

It is also important, amid the necessary conversation on its security, to remember what Parliament stands for. In the aftermath of the attack, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh asked "all MPs... to remain alert and exercise caution" while giving out passes. He also asked Opposition members not to "precipitate anarchy" because the Lok Sabha Speaker and the government had already begun inquiries. There is some merit, perhaps, in his words. The miscreants were indeed issued visitor passes by an MP. But the protection of the House must go hand-in-hand with its openness. Parliament is both of the people and for the people — it must remain open to them, as it has throughout the history of independent India. The suspension of 14 Opposition MPs for demanding — albeit in a noisy, perhaps even unruly manner — that the Home Minister answer for the security breach must be rethought. Just as the building that is a symbol of Indian democracy must be secure, so must also be the elected representatives who are its voice.

DECODE POLITICS: WHAT ARE RULES FOR PARLIAMENT VISITORS, WHAT GUARANTEES AN MP HAS TO GIVE

The two intruders behind the security breach in Parliament on Wednesday, on the 22nd anniversary of a terror attack on the House, were present in the Lok Sabha via a visitors' pass, issued to them on the request of BJP Mysuru-Kodagu MP Pratap Simha.

The entry of visitors in the House has now been suspended, though there is no official communication to this effect.

Rules of the House mandate security staff in the visitors' gallery to maintain a strict vigil and ensure that the visitors do not indulge in any misbehaviour, with jumping into the chamber of the House of course out of the question.

The Opposition has demanded action against Simha following Wednesday's incident.

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what do the rules say

Visitors' ("strangers" in parliamentary parlance) "admission, withdrawal and removal" is governed by Rule 386 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Lok Sabha, which states that "the admission of strangers during the sittings of the House to those portions of the House which are not reserved for the exclusive use of members shall be regulated in accordance with orders made by the Speaker".

Rule 387 gives the Speaker the power to withdraw "strangers" from any part of the House if he/she deems it fit.

What is the process of entry for 'strangers'

According to the "Practice and Procedure of Parliament" by M N Kaul and S L Shakdher, "a member can apply for the issue of visitors' cards only for those who are very well known to them personally".

Members applying for a visitor card are also mandated to provide a certificate which states, "The above named visitor is my relative/personal friend/known to me personally and I take full responsibility for him/her." Keeping security concerns in mind, visitors are also mandated to carry a photo identification.

According to the rules, the names of visitors are required to be given in full and not with initials. "The father's/husband's name of a visitor should also invariable be given in full and requests for admission cards to the public gallery should be delivered in the Centralised Pass Issue Cell (CPIC), preferable by 1600 hours on the working day previous to the date for which the cards are required," the rule states.

Are passes issued for a specific duration

The visitors' cards are usually issued to a member for a particular day for fixed hours. However, in exceptional cases, the rules permit the issue of two cards.

There is also a provision which allows members to apply for a visitor card on the same day in emergent cases when it is not possible for them to apply within the prescribed time limit. "In such a case, subject to accommodation being available, a card is issued from CPIC to a member on the following conditions: (i) Not more than four 'Same-day' Visitor's Cards are issued to a member for a particular day. (ii) The card is required to be collected by the member personally. (iii) The specific hour for which the card is valid is indicated on the card. (iv) Cards are made available for use at least two hours after the time of receipt of application…".

There are two types of galleries – public and Speaker's – in Lok Sabha. While a member can facilitate the entry of four people on a daily basis in the public gallery, he/she is entitled to facilitate the entry of two people in the Speaker's gallery. The names of the visitors for the Speaker's gallery need to be vetted by the Speaker.

The rules also do not allow members to press for the entry of their guests prior to the time indicated in the card.

Similar rules are in force for visitor entry into the Rajya Sabha. For the Upper House, visitor card applications for entry into the public gallery are required to be made by 3 pm on the working day

previous to the date on which the cards are required. Printed forms for the same are available for members in the notice office.

Under the regulations, a member can apply for a visitor's card for a person who is known to him personally or in select cases for those who have been introduced to the member by a person who is personally known to him. "It is in the latter class of cases that members are to exercise utmost care," the rules state.

The guidelines also advise members to bear in mind that they are responsible for any untoward incident or undesirable thing happening in the galleries as a result of anything done by holders of cards issued at the request of such members. "Cards for admission to the visitors' galleries are ordinarily issued for a single sitting and are available only for that sitting," the guidelines state.

"A card is ordinarily issued only for a period of one hour. These cards are not transferable and are ssued subject to the holder observing the conditions endorsed thereon," the rules state.

Security check

Regular bulletins issued by Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha secretariats inform members of the security procedures to be undertaken for entry of visitors.

According to guidelines, the Parliament security staff posted at the public gallery checking post will ensure that all visitors are searched/frisked through Door Frame Metal Detector/Hand Held Metal Detector (DFMD/HHMD).

The security staff is mandated to carefully check the visitor card and cross check it with the approved list in their possession.

"The Parliament security staff inside the public gallery will maintain a very close vigil on the visitors and ensure that they maintain silence and do not indulge in any kind of mischief or disturbance like shouting of slogan/attempting to throw leaflets/pamphlets or any other objectionable item or attempt to jump into the Chamber. Supervisor in the Gallery will take care of the seating arrangements of the visitors and the Security Assistants deputed in the Gallery will help visitors get acquainted with the use of headphones i.e., volume control and channels selector provided in the gallery," the guidelines state.

BAD PRECEDENT

The expulsion of Trinamool Congress Member of Parliament Mahua Moitra from the Lok Sabha by a hurried voice vote on December 8, based on a report of the Ethics Committee of the House, is bad in form and substance. It was not, however, surprising. By a 6:4 majority, including the vote of a suspended Congress MP, the committee recommended her expulsion, holding her guilty of 'unethical conduct,' 'breach of privilege' and 'contempt of the House.' These were charges raised by a Bharatiya Janata Party MP, who was in turn depending on the statement of Ms. Moitra's estranged partner. The committee cited in its report a precedent of the expulsion of 11 MPs in 2005 for a cash-for-query sting operation by a news platform. There was video evidence that established a strong case then, unlike the charges against Ms. Moitra. She shared her login credentials with businessman Darshan Hiranandani to upload Parliament questions, a fact she herself admitted. The committee conceded in its report that it had no proof of cash exchanges and its report called for "legal, intensive, institutional and time-bound investigation", into that aspect.

Nevertheless, it was emphatic in calling for her expulsion, and even labelled the sharing of her login credentials a criminal act.

The links suggested between Ms. Moitra's Parliament questions and the business interests of the Hiranandani group are frivolous. For instance, a question on steel prices or India's trade relations with Bangladesh is of interest to numerous business groups and consumers. The committee said it acknowledged the fact that several MPs share their login credentials with others, but went on to make a laboured case that Ms. Moitra had endangered national security. The argument that MPs have access to documents on the Parliament portal that are not in the public domain is a stretched one. In fact, there is no good reason to keep draft Bills secret. Bill drafts are meant for public circulation and debate before being brought to Parliament for discussion and voting. That there is very little of that happening these days is a sad commentary on parliamentary democracy. The report of the Ethics Committee also faced the same fate. The 495 page report was tabled and voted on the same day, rejecting the appeal of Opposition MPs for a more detailed discussion once Members had the time to read it in detail. The precedent that the majority in Parliament can expel an Opposition member on a dubious charge is ominous for parliamentary democracy. The expulsion of Ms. Moitra is a case of justice hurried and buried.

EXPRESS VIEW ON JNU'S NEW CODE OF CONDUCT: A CLAMPDOWN

The newly adopted motto of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi — Tamaso Ma Jyotirgamaya (darkness unto light) — encapsulates what one of India's finest public universities has always stood for: A spirit of enquiry, a space to find one's voice, and the freedom to speak up, in solidarity or protest, and be heard.

In an Idea Exchange with this paper last year, the university's vice-chancellor, Santishree Dhulipudi Pandit, iterated what distinguished JNU from other academic institutions: "It represents what I call the D-five: Democracy, Development, Difference, Dissent and Diversity", adding, that as an educator, she was not against any narrative as long as the courtesy of space was reciprocal across ideologies: "That's why I said I'm for dissent, difference and diversity."

Against this backdrop, the university administration's decision to penalise all forms of protest on campus comes as a distressing signal of clampdown on its already beleaguered intellectual culture. The recently approved Students' Discipline and Conduct Rule lists expulsion from hostel, rustication from the University and penalties up to Rs 20,000 — way more than the average fee of its post-graduate courses — for any form of protest within 100 m radius of any academic or administrative building on campus or even around faculty residences.

"Anti-national" slogans can draw a fine of Rs 10,000. Impromptu events such as freshers' welcome parties, that have not been sanctioned by authorities, stand to attract penalties to the tune of Rs 6,000 or community service.

The university administration's defence in the matter has been that the formalisation of penalties into legalese and fine-tuning of rules have been made in accordance with the Delhi High Court's directions; most rules have been in existence since the University's foundation in 1969. Even as the students' union has come out in protest and members of the university's Executive Council — that has supposedly formulated the regulations — have voiced their concerns, the VC has reiterated her commitment to student liberties.

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Yet, that reassurance seems to pale in the face of this proscription. A university is not merely a place of academic exchange, it is where darkness is illuminated in many other ways. It is a space that is both sanctuary and discomfort, pitting students against their own prejudices and revealing through friendships and antipathy, rebellions and solidarity the boundaries of their empathy for those radically different from them. To restrict that freedom is to consign them to a future of half-lights, dimmed by a fear of authority, settling for a life of conformity. JNU must live up to its commitment to knowledge without fear and alter its stand.

EXPRESS VIEW: BJP'S THREE NEW FACES AND THE 2024 STRATEGY

For the first time in two decades, Vasundhara Raje is neither chief minister nor CM-in-waiting in Rajasthan. Shivraj Singh Chouhan – the longest-serving BJP CM – will not return to the office he worked so hard to retain for his party in Madhya Pradesh. It is, of course, imprudent to write off stalwarts like Raje, Chouhan and Chhattisgarh's former CM Raman Singh. However, with the announcement of relatively unknown leaders as the CMs and deputy CMs in the three states, it is apparent that those who helped the BJP establish itself in these regions are making way for a new generation. Viewing this change of guard as an attempt to concentrate power with the central leadership – or cutting leaders down to size — would be an oversimplification. With the 2024 Lok Sabha polls on the horizon, the choice of CMs sends a clear message about the larger political strategy – and philosophy – of the Modi-Shah BJP.

Of the three, Vishnu Deo Sahai is perhaps the most recognisable figure – he is a former Union minister and has been president of the Chhattisgarh BJP. His elevation is being portrayed as an extension of the representation for the tribal community – after Droupadi Murmu became President of India – who constitute about 9 per cent of the national population. In MP, Mohan Yadav – three-time MLA and former state education minister – belongs to the dominant OBC community while his deputies, Rajendra Shukla and Jagdish Devda, belong to Brahmin and SC communities. In Rajasthan, CM-elect Bhajan Lal Sharma, a first-time MLA, is from the Brahmin community, while his deputies Diya Kumari and Premchand Bairwa are from the Rajput and Dalit communities. It seems the BJP has opted for a combination of caste and community appeal as well as regional balance within each state. But there is another factor at play – ideological loyalty. All three CMs are seen as being close to the RSS, and the Central leadership and are staunch supporters of Hindutva principles. The message for 2024, then, is this: The BJP will rely on the PM's mass appeal, its ideological roots and their fruits – the Ram temple and abrogation of Article 370 – and caste arithmetic on the ground. For the CMs, though, the priority must be governance, the general election notwithstanding.

Mohan Yadav perhaps has the biggest shoes to fill. Chouhan served as CM for the better part of two decades and took MP from among the least developed states to above the national average, especially in the agricultural sector. The challenge for CM Yadav is to replicate his predecessor's success in other sectors and ensure job creation. In Rajasthan, which has seen a growth in welfare schemes, balancing the former with fiscal prudence must be the focus for Bhajan Lal Sharma. Chhattisgarh too needs jobs and development – while remaining vigilant on the Naxal issue. To build their own legacy, the three CMs must now develop paradigms of governance.

NEW MP GOVT MUSCLES IN NOW, BUT POLITICS OVER MEAT RECENT FOR SANGH

Hours after taking oath as Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister, Mohan Yadav on Wednesday issued an order banning loudspeakers and DJs at religious gatherings and public places, and said shops

selling meat would now be subjected to "enforcement of guidelines". On Thursday, several shops in Ujjain saw action by authorities.

Earlier this month, hours after the BJP won the Rajasthan Assembly elections, videos of first-time MLA Balmukundachary railing against the sale of meat in his Hawa Mahal constituency in Jaipur went viral on social media.

These two developments are a continuation of a series of decisions and articulations made in the past few years in BJP-ruled states where the sale of meat has been exclusively picked out for regulation. Often these articulations have bordered on picking vegetarianism as a purer form of diet and singling out a particular community engaged in the meat trade. The decisions have varied from a ban on the sale of meat during Hindu religious festivals such as Navratri and around religious sites to removing eggs from midday meals of government schools.

Neither the BJP nor its ideological fountainhead RSS have historically had a problem with non-vegetarianism. In the past, the two organisations largely restricted their dietary abhorrence to beef. "Sangh has never promoted vegetarianism. You may see Sangh functions being served with totally vegetarian food but it has more to do with economics. Historically, Sangh was never flush with funds so relied on cheap vegetarian food for its functions. It slowly became a culture. But, a large number of Sangh leaders are non-vegetarian. Sangh believes the Hindu dharma includes the orders of both sattvic and tamasic," said Ratan Sharda, a lifelong RSS member who has written several books on the organisation.

According to Sharda, in general, the Sangh's stand on cow meat is clear: it should not be eaten. "But even there Sangh has made adjustments in the Northeast and certain other places. Sangh pracharaks who work in the Northeast, eat what the local people eat. In 1969, there was an RSS adhiveshan (session) in Assam and many local leaders who joined were beef eaters. There were murmurs within the organisation that these people could not be called Hindus. Guru Golwalkar, however, said they were all Hindus and might have resorted to eating beef because of economic reasons. He said they would come around with time. Sangh has had no argument with society over dietary habits," he said.

A senior RSS leader explained that barring beef, creating a nationwide cultural narrative over diet had been considered counterproductive for the organisation's expansion and the larger project of Hindu unity. "People of all hues come to the Sangh. In the coastal belt and states such as Kerala, everyone is non-vegetarian. Sangh keeps its dietary preferences in tune with the region it operates in. We never say one food is superior to the other. Within the Sangh there is never a debate on diet," he said.

Former RSS leader K N Govindacharya, however, said Sangh historically had had a problem with meat being sold in pilgrimage towns and around religious sites. "That is how Haridwar became vegetarian. There have been similar arguments for Mathura and Vrindavan. It was the responsibility of the government to ensure this, but there were lapses. But there is no blanket ban on meat-eating for Sangh," he said.

A senior BJP leader said the push towards vegetarianism in the large political narrative of the party was a recent phenomenon. The leader narrated an anecdote from a meeting of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the precursor to the party, held in Kolkata in 1954 following the death of its founder Syama Prasad Mookerjee the year before. Some 25-odd leaders were hosted by a local Jana Sangh functionary who wanted to serve non-vegetarian food for dinner in accordance with Bengali traditions. But, he was unsure of their dietary preferences. Since it was found impolite to ask this

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question publicly in a meeting, chits were passed around for people to tick mark their dietary preferences. "Only two turned out to be vegetarians," said the BJP leader.

RISE TO POWER

Anumula Revanth Reddy, a Congress leader who had spent his political career in the opposition, has become the Chief Minister of Telangana. He rose to prominence by defying odds and, despite facing legal challenges, emerged as a formidable political figure in the state. A first-generation politician, Revanth Reddy switched from the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) to the Congress in 2017. In the 2023 elections, he led the Congress to win 64 seats in Telangana, making history for the party in the region. Revanth Reddy's political journey reflects his resilience and determination to challenge the status quo.

EXPRESS VIEW ON MAYAWATI'S SUCCESSOR AKASH ANAND: OUT OF IDEAS

In 2008, Mayawati was unequivocal about at least one aspect of the future of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP): In her autobiography, Mere Sangharshmay Jeewan Ka Safarnama, she stated: "Whenever I will declare my successor, he will not be from among my... relatives." Much has changed since then for the BSP and its place in Indian politics. Sunday's announcement by the party supremo that Akash Anand, her nephew, will be her successor is symptomatic of the lack of political imagination that has accompanied and, to a large extent, caused the BSP's decline. It shows that the party is out of ideas.

Little is known about Anand other than that he studied in London before becoming a prominent face in the BSP in 2017. He has no mass base and by the cold logic of electoral arithmetic, has underperformed: Anand oversaw the BSP campaigns in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana and Chhattisgarh in the recently-held assembly elections. In Rajasthan, the party went down from six seats in 2018 to four; in both MP and Chhattisgarh, it went from two seats to 0 and, in Telangana, the BSP failed to open its account once again. This is in addition to the fact that the BSP has just one MLA in Uttar Pradesh — a state where it had a majority in 2007.

It is easy to forget how formidable a force BSP was in UP at its height. With Mayawati — a self-made Dalit woman leader — at the helm, it became a party that spoke for and to Dalits in the Hindi heartland. That Mayawati managed to form a social coalition between Dalits and Brahmins to shore up her base shows what the party was once capable of. The problem with the elevation of Anand, then, is not just related to notions of "dynasty". It is about a loss of political ingenuity. As the era of one-party dominance has re-emerged on the national scene, the BSP has been unable to find ways to attract voters. It has not been on the streets, even as other groups and leaders have agitated on issues of representation and dignity – from the anti-CAA protests to ones against anti-Dalit violence. It protests now only when Mayawati is personally attacked. Worse, it blames voters when it loses — as Mayawati did with Muslim voters after the 2022 UP elections. The BSP needs to introspect and change if it wishes to stay relevant. The task for Akash is cut out.

NETFLIX STOPS STREAMING UNCUT INDIAN FILMS GLOBALLY

The change in policy is significant for what was possibly the last streaming service in India that continued to show versions of Indian films before they went through the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), which has increasingly been removing political references, particularly those that are disparaging to the dispensation in power, from films.

The film Bheed, set in the pandemic, had voice-overs of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, as well as a host of other political references, a copy of the list of cuts from the censor board shows. These references were heavily edited at the CBFC's behest. Netflix chose to stream this version globally, instead of the version that the filmmakers had prepared. Now, that template is being applied to all Indian films, even in ways that go against Netflix's internal policy on some forms of censorship.

Films like Leo, starring actor Vijay, have been censored globally on Netflix, even though the film was released uncut in overseas markets. OMG 2, a film about sex education that was censored to remove depictions of actor Akshay Kumar as the Hindu deity Shiva even after being given an 'A' rating, was also released censored, leading the film's director to complain about Netflix's decision in interviews with entertainment publications.

Other streaming services have, with exceptions for the odd title, been doing this for a while. Netflix's move to this practice effectively hands the censor board indirect powers over what Indians see in films anywhere, even online, though its mandate is limited to cinemas and TV.

On top of shielding the public from political references, it has also been applying censorship on references to prominent business personalities: the film Japan, for instance, has a scene mentioning "Ambani [and] Adani", which the CBFC removed. Netflix is streaming the version without the names mentioned. Netflix and other streaming services have reportedly been applying intense socio-political scrutiny on original series that they commission. These practices are likely a result of the fear of online mobs and police action for any politically outspoken content: the Screenwriters Association said in a statement that streaming services and the film industry have forced writers, in signed agreements, to "indemnify producers if there is a socio-political backlash" to their work. Amazon Prime Video's head of originals, Aparna Purohit, had to face police summons after the 2021 political series Tandav, and had to issue an apology and received a stay on action against her in the Supreme Court.

But licensed content has escaped such similar scrutiny, as most films go through the censor board, which is run by the Union government. The Cinematograph Act and the IT Rules, 2021, which govern cinemas and streaming services, do not explicitly require streaming services to run the CBFC cut of a film online, but many OTT platforms do not take the risk of doing so. Netflix has been an exception.

Netflix chose to not respond to pointed queries on its changing censorship practices. "We have an incredibly broad range of Indian original films and TV shows, all of which speak to our long standing support for creative expression," the company said in a statement to The Hindu. "This diversity not only reflects our members' very different tastes, it also distinguishes our service from the competition."

The company had provided an identical statement to The Washington Post when it did a story on Netflix and Amazon's content policies in India.

BJP'S SOCIAL MEDIA SPENDING WAS FAR HIGHER THAN CONGRESS'S

Information on the Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) investigation into the expenditure on online advertisement campaigns by the BJP and the Congress in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Rajasthan.

It appears that the BJP's social media spending was significantly higher than that of the Congress in these states, based on the Meta Ad library archives.

Madhya Pradesh:

In the 90 days preceding the elections, the BJP's expenditure on online ads was ₹94 lakh, while the Congress spent ₹72 lakh.

However, in the last 30 days before the elections, the Congress spent nearly double the amount spent by the BJP.

Thematic analysis of ads showed that 30% of the BJP's ads focused on encouraging voters to vote for the party, while 27% were on the party's manifesto.

Almost 25% of the Congress's ads were based on their manifesto, and 19% were personal attacks on BJP leader Shivraj Singh Chouhan.

Chhattisgarh:

The BJP spent ₹79.7 lakh in the last 90 days leading to the election, while the Congress spent ₹4.7 lakh.

Among the top 10 spenders, six belonged to non-party and non-candidate campaigners.

Thematic analysis revealed that 42% of BJP's Chhattisgarh ads focused on seeking votes, followed by 19% on the party's manifesto and promises.

Most of the Congress's ads were against the BJP and its shortcomings (21%).

Rajasthan:

In the 90 days preceding the elections, the BJP's expenditure was much higher than the Congress, with ₹94 lakh for the BJP and ₹2.18 lakh for the Congress.

Thematic analysis showed that the BJP spent more than the Congress on ads with negative undertones, totaling ₹2.3 lakh-₹2.8 lakh.

These findings provide insights into the social media strategies and spending patterns of the BJP and the Congress in the mentioned states during the specified time frames. It's important to note that such analyses contribute to understanding the dynamics of political campaigns in the digital space.

ONLINE IMPERSONATION CASES TOUGHEST TO INVESTIGATE

The information you provided highlights the increasing trend of reported cybercrime cases in India, with a focus on online impersonation cases, which are considered among the toughest to investigate. Here are the key points from the details you provided:

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Cybercrime Cases in India (2022):

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) annual report for 2022 reveals a significant increase in reported cybercrime cases in India.

Telangana, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra recorded the highest number of cases, while Telangana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Goa had the highest cybercrime rates per lakh population.

'Cheating by impersonation by using computer resources' was the cybercrime category with the most reported cases.

Challenges in Investigation:

Online impersonation is identified as one of the toughest cybercrimes to investigate.

The lowest conviction rates were observed in cases related to online impersonation.

The analysis of police charge-sheeting rates and conviction rates for various cybercrime categories indicates generally low figures, posing challenges to law enforcement.

National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal:

The Home Ministry established the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal in 2019 to address the increasing cybercrime challenges.

A toll-free helpline number (1930) was set up to facilitate the lodging of cyber complaints.

Over 12.77 lakh complaints were registered on the portal till November 15, 2023.

State-wise Distribution:

Telangana had a notably high cybercrime rate, with 40 cybercrimes per lakh population, making it an outlier.

Karnataka followed as a distant second with a cybercrime rate of 18.6 per lakh population.

Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Telangana, and Karnataka collectively accounted for 70% of all cybercrime cases in 2022.

Investigation Challenges and Statistics (2022):

Many cyber cases remain unsolved due to the digital nature of the crimes, lack of witnesses, and difficulty in tracing the accused.

The police charge-sheeting rate for various cybercrimes, including OTP frauds, online banking frauds, and digital cheating cases, remained low in 2022.

Conviction rates were also relatively low, with 'cheating by impersonation' cases recording only a 17.3% conviction rate among completed trials.

Overall, the data suggests the need for enhanced cybercrime investigation capabilities, improved conviction rates, and strategies to address the challenges posed by digital crimes in India. The establishment of reporting portals and helplines is a step toward addressing these issues, but

ongoing efforts are required to strengthen cybersecurity measures and law enforcement capabilities.

ARE CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN ON THE RISE?

The story so far:

The crime rate may have declined in 2022 (258.1 per lakh population compared to 268 per lakh population in 2021), but crimes against women rose 4% in 2022 compared to 2021, according to the annual report of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) released on December 4.

What was the nature of the majority of crimes against women?

The majority of crimes against women were of cruelty by husband or his relatives (31.4%), kidnapping and abduction of women (19.2%), assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty (18.7%) and rape (7.1%). Further, 13,479 cases were registered under the Dowry Prohibition Act.

Activists and lawyers attribute this to a patriarchal society. "Despite high levels of education, male mindsets and societal attitude remain unchanged," says Supreme Court lawyer Shilpi Jain. According to women's rights activist Mariam Dhawale, India over the last few years has witnessed a strengthening of regressive value systems which women's movements had struggled to overcome for decades. "There is a glorification of anti-women practices," she points out. According to Jayashree Velankar, director of women's organisation, Jagori, "dowry or bride price both connote commodity status of women who are traded between families for their productive and reproductive labour. What we need is a strong political will, and not mere rhetoric, to bring in policies and programmes that will focus on creating conditions to elevate women's status."

What does an increase in the registration of crimes against women indicate?

The NCRB's report reveals that over 4.45 lakh cases of crimes against women were registered in 2022, equivalent to nearly 51 FIRs (first information report) every hour. The rate of crimes against women per lakh population stood at 66.4 while the filing of charge sheets in such cases was pegged at 75.8. The high crime rate is an indicator of the persistent "lower status and inequality" faced by women and girls, says Ms. Velankar. "Women and girls continue to be treated as permanent shock absorbers across class, caste and other axes. It is an outcome of reconstruction of patriarchy in the neo-liberal economy era," she says. According to Ms. Jain, the increase in crimes against women shows the attitude of Indian society towards women: "We claim to be very progressive but we are very primitive." The rise can also be attributed to the fact that though India has tough laws for protection of women, their implementation remains a challenge, she adds.

Retired IPS officer Meeran Chaddha Borwankar strikes a note of caution. "The NCRB report mainly shows that women feel confident to approach the police and get criminal cases registered," she points out. Increase in numbers, according to her, should not be equated with increase in crime. Take the case of Delhi. With 14,247 cases in 2022, Delhi recorded the highest rate of crimes against women in the country at 144.4 per lakh, way above the country's average rate of 66.4. Experts believe the higher numbers show that more cases are being registered in Delhi. In contrast, in many other parts of India, the registration of crime is low and the fear of the police high, says Vipul Mudgal of Common Cause India, an NGO. Women in many States, particularly in the rural areas, would not even visit a police station unaccompanied by a male relative, let alone register an FIR for sexual harassment or domestic violence, he says.

Ms. Borwankar feels that women in the capital are aware of their rights and therefore approach police stations more freely than in the hinterland. "At the same time, I am aware that the capital and most parts of north India is not considered safe for women especially at night."

What are the key laws for women's safety?

Some of the key laws for women's safety in India are: The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 and The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986. Experts say that implementation faces dual problems of shoddy investigation by police and time taken by courts to deliver justice. "The laws are good and were so even earlier. The problem is with policing," says Ms. Jain. There is a severe lack of police officers with requisite training for investigations. Most of the investigating officers are juniors with a poor pay scale. This hampers the actual investigation and preparation of chargesheets, she points out. When it reaches the courts, at trial courts which are the first step, the cases take four to five years. If there is an appeal, it takes another 10-15 years. Despite fast-track courts for looking into grievous crimes, the fact is they remain as slow as ever. There is no seriousness in dealing with the crime, adds Ms. Jain.

Another factor, according to Mr. Mudgal, is that while women police officers are involved in all crimes against women, their proportion in the force is dismal and the rate of their recruitment is very slow in all States without exception. This also causes disproportionate levels of workload on women police personnel leading to slower rates of charge-sheeting and convictions. According to a response provided by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in the Rajya Sabha in February 2023, the representation of women in the police force (as of January 1, 2022) remained at 11.7% of the total state police force. This puts undue stress on the limited workforce leading to a high pendency, experts point out.

LOK SABHA PASSES BILLS FOR WOMEN'S QUOTA IN J&K, PUDUCHERRY

The Lok Sabha on Tuesday passed two Bills to extend the provisions of the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, which grants 33% reservation to women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, to the Union Territories of Puducherry and Jammu and Kashmir. The debate in the House was, however, dominated by Supreme Court's verdict on Monday on Article 370.

Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai introduced the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation (Second Amendment) Bill and the Government of Union Territories (Amendment) Bill in the Lok Sabha.

"Provisions for providing reservation for women in the Legislative Assembly of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir are also required to be made by Parliament by amending the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019," said the Bill. The provisions for providing reservation for women in the Puducherry Assembly also need to be made by Parliament, the statement read.

National Conference's Hasnain Masoodi pointed out that while there was talk of representation, Jammu and Kashmir had no MLA since the last six years and that "four officers" were running the Union Territory.

MARATHA QUOTA: AS BACKWARD CLASS PANEL UNRAVELS, OPPOSITION ATTACKS SHINDE GOVT

The work of the Maharashtra State Backward Class Commission (MSBCC), to determine the social and educational status of different communities, as a first step towards fulfilling the Maratha reservation demand, is officially halted now.

The government has confirmed the resignation of its chairperson, Justice (retd) Anand Nirgude, after two other members of the total seven-member commission earlier put in their papers.

The likely delay in the panel's work coincides with increasing pressure by Maratha quota activists for reservation for the community. The leader of the protests, Manoj Jarange-Patil, who has given the government the deadline of December 24 to bring in reservation, is touring the state to rustle up support for the demand.

On Tuesday, Jarange-Patil, whose health has taken a beating over several hunger protests on the issue, was hospitalised.

An official of the state OBC Welfare Department said the government will appoint a new MSBCC chairperson at the earliest to ensure that the work on collecting empirical data on Marathas is not delayed.

However, Opposition parties have taken on the Shinde Sena-BJP-Ajit Pawar NCP government, accusing it of "hiding" Nirgude's resignation, even as the Winter Session of the Assembly is on.

Leader of the Opposition Vijay Wadettiwar of the Congress recently raised the issue inside the Assembly. Lok Sabha MP and Sharad Pawar NCP leader Supriya Sule accused the state government of not being serious about granting reservation to the Marathas as it had been "neglecting" complaints from the MSBCC.

While Justice (retd) Nirgude resigned from the post on December 4, the state government conveyed to the member secretary of the commission on December 9 that his resignation has been accepted.

Earlier, Balaji Killarikar, one of the two members of the commission who resigned, told The Indian Express that there was interference from the government in the working of the panel and differences with it over the selection of communities to be surveyed.

"Our opinion was that a survey of all communities, including OBCs, SCs and STs be done, as the results would be used to compare with that of the Marathas. The Supreme Court too had sought comparative data. Surveying only Marathas would not have given comparative data, and the Supreme Court would have again rejected the details," Killarikar said.

He added that there were divisions within the government at the top on the issue, with CM Shinde ready to conduct a large-scale survey of communities, but Deputy CM Devendra Fadnavis not in favour.

While Shinde is a Maratha, BJP leader Fadnavis is a Brahmin and has faced protests by Marathas who see him as opposed to the quota.

On Tuesday, Killarikar claimed that the government demanded that the affidavits to be submitted in various quota-related cases in the Bombay High Court, which were finalised by the commission,

should be checked by the Advocate General and the state. "It said that nothing should be mentioned in the affidavit that will land the government in trouble," Killarikar told reporters, as per PTI.

Fadnavis lashed out at Killarikar, calling his claims "politically motivated". Speaking Tuesday on resignations by the members of the panel, he said some of them had been given a "supari (contract)" by their political masters to delay Maratha reservation.

Speaking in Nagpur, where the Winter Session of the Assembly is on, he said: "Three political parties had appointed their workers as members of the commission. Researchers were to be made members of the MSBCC. When we (BJP-Shiv Sena) were in power (2014-19), we didn't appoint any political workers but researchers."

According to sources within the commission, the MSBCC was all set to "undertake the massive exercise of collecting data from every Maratha household in the state" and had prepared a questionnaire for the same.

CAN BIHAR INCREASE ITS RESERVATION POOL?

The story so far:

On November 17, the Governor of Bihar approved two laws increasing the quantum of reservations in jobs and education in the State to 75%, including 20% for Scheduled Castes, 2% for Scheduled Tribes, 18% for Other Backward Classes, and 25% for Extremely Backward Classes, and 10% for economically weaker sections (EWS). The two laws have once again sparked debate around the permissible limits of reservations in India, particularly in view of the "50%" limit prescribed by the Supreme Court of India in the Mandal Commission case (Indra Sawhney, 1992), as well as the court's emphasis on "adequate" representation of the oppressed classes as opposed to "proportionate representation".

What is the 50% rule?

The Supreme Court has historically maintained that reservations, whether in jobs or education, should not exceed 50% of the total seats/posts. In 1963, a seven judge bench in M.R. Balaji explained that reservations were in the nature of an "exception" or "special provision" under our constitutional scheme. Therefore, they cannot be provided for more than 50% of the posts or seats. Though this understanding of reservations changed in 1976 — with it being recognised that reservations are a facet of equality rather than an exception to it — the 50% limit has remained unaltered.

A nine judge bench in the Mandal commission case in 1990 reaffirmed the 50% limit and held that it is a binding rule, and not merely a matter of prudence. However, it is not a rule without exceptions. A State can exceed the limit in exceptional circumstances, that is, to provide reservations to communities which hail from far flung areas of the country and have been kept out of the mainstream of the society. This is not a geographical test but a social one. Besides, last year, the Supreme Court upheld the 103rd Constitutional Amendment which provides for 10% additional reservations to the EWS. This means, for the time being, that the 50% limit applies only to non-EWS reservations, and States are permitted to reserve a total of 60% of the seats/posts including EWS reservations.

What do laws in Bihar state?

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In January 2023, the Bihar government announced a caste based census/survey to be conducted across the State. The results of this Census were announced in October. Shortly thereafter, the two Bills (now laws) where introduced in the Legislative Assembly.

Two striking aspects of these laws deserve to be noticed. The first is the obvious breach of the 50% (now 60%) ceiling limit. If and when the laws are challenged in court, the government of Bihar will have to prove that there case falls within the exception carved out in the Mandal Commission case. That is, the communities to whom reservations have been granted hail from far flung areas or have been kept out of the social mainstream. The second is the justification offered by the State government for this breach. Chief Minister Nitish Kumar expressly stated on the floor of the House that the intent is to increase the quantum of reservations in view of the results of the caste Census. However, the Supreme Court has repeatedly held that the State cannot fix the quantum of reservation simply in proportion to the population of the reserved classes. This is because the only valid aim behind reservations is to secure "adequate" representation of the depressed classes, which is different from "proportionate" representation. Therefore, one major challenge before the State government will be to defend the motive behind the move.

Bihar is not the first to cross the line. Other States that have already surpassed the 50% limit, even excluding the EWS quota, are Chhattisgarh (72%), Tamil Nadu (69%, under a 1994 Act protected under the ninth Schedule of the Constitution), and several north-eastern States including Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland (80% each). Lakshadweep has a whopping 100% reservations for Scheduled Tribes. Previous attempts by Maharashtra and Rajasthan have been struck down by the courts.

What next?

The Bihar Government appears to be following the footsteps of other States that have already breached the 50% ceiling limit. It seems inevitable that the validity of the two Bihar laws will be carried to the Supreme Court, and the Court will be urged to reconsider the 50% ceiling limit entirely. It remains to be seen whether the court will be inclined to do so.

HAPPILY NEVER AFTER: BACHELOR BLUES IN BIHAR AS PRACTICE OF PAKADWA VIVAH PERSISTS

Two weeks into his job as a schoolteacher, Gautam Kumar, in his late 20s, from Maheya-Malpur village, Vaishali district in Bihar, was allegedly kidnapped from his place of work and forcibly married at gunpoint on November 29. The case, registered in the local Patepur police station, made national headlines. Allegedly abducted by three or four persons, who forced him into an SUV at gunpoint, Mr. Kumar was found by the police the following day. The woman's father, Rajesh Rai, too was married by abduction, the investigating officer of the case, also the station house officer, Mohammed Hasan Sardar, said.

Mr. Kumar is a victim of pakadwa vivah (marriage of a groom by abduction), a decades-old social evil that is also against the law. Bachelors, mostly in their 20s, and considered eligible in Bihar, can 'command' dowry of up to ₹25 lakh. The higher the caste and the better the job, the more the dowry.

According to State Crime Records Bureau, 7,194 forced marriage cases were reported in the State from January to November in 2020; up to 10,925 in 2019; 10,310 in 2018; and 8, 972 in 2017. Records for 2021, 2022, and 2023 are unavailable, say the police.

Mr. Kumar, who had recently passed the Bihar Public Service Commission (BPSC) examination, and was teaching at Utkramit Madhya Vidyalaya at Repura village, 5 km away from his home village, is scarred. "They've ruined not one but two lives," he said. His school-going sister added, "He has panic attacks, and wakes up in fright late at night." His mother, Asha Devi, wants her son to be transferred from the school, because the family that allegedly coerced him into marriage lives there. "He is not safe there," she said.

Mr. Sardar said, "We have lodged a case under IPC Sections 363, 365 (both kidnapping and abduction), and 34 (criminal act by several persons in furtherance of a common intention), against five named accused persons, including the girl's father and his two brothers. We've arrested Brij Bhushan Rai [one of the brothers] and sent him to jail. We will arrest the other absconders too, soon."

This comes against the backdrop of the November 22 Patna High Court annulment of a decade-old forced marriage of an Army man, on the grounds that the ritual of saptapadi (seven steps) around a fire considered sacred, had not been performed. As per the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, most weddings conducted under this law can be considered legal if there is a record of saptapadi being performed.

The Army man, Ravi Kant, a resident of Ravra village, Nawada district, recalls, "I was kidnapped from Ashok Dham temple in Lakhisarai district, where I had gone along with my uncle to offer prayers on June 30, 2013." He said he was taken to an unknown place at gunpoint and married to a woman. "I was threatened and beaten up by them, including the father of the woman Bipin Singh." He had been forced to apply sindoor (vermillion) on the head of the woman.

Unaffordable dowry

A combination of factors has resulted in pakadwa vivah. Bihar's per capita income for 2021-22 was ₹54,383, against the national average of ₹1,50,007, according to the latest Comptroller and Auditor General report. It is hard for many to afford the dowry demanded. Bihar has the lowest literacy rate in India with 61.8% compared to the national literacy rate of 74.04%.

A large number of such cases go unreported for fear of violence and societal pressure. Districts like Begusarai, Lakhisarai, Munger, Khagaria, and Nawada in the State are considered hotbeds of pakadwa vivah.

Several Bollywood movies like national film award (2007) winner Antardwand, comedies Jabaria Jodi, Atrangi Re, many television series like Sab ki Jodi Wohi Banata Bhagyavidhataa, and dramas like Ghar ek Sapna, Do Qadam Door are based on groom kidnapping and marriage.

WHAT DOES A SPECIAL PACKAGE MEAN FOR PVTGS?

The story so far:

On December 6, the Tribal Affairs Ministry told the Rajya Sabha that the population of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) was not in decline, citing information provided by the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India (ORGI). This was in variance with the State-wise Census data provided by the Ministry to a Parliamentary panel last year showing that the numbers of these tribal groups fell almost 40% in at least nine States and Union Territories in the first decade of this century.

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Who are the PVTGs?

Initially known as Primitive Tribal Groups, the PVTGs are defined by the government as tribal communities that show either a declining or stagnant population, use of pre-agrarian technology, economic backwardness, low literacy etc. They are found to be living in some of the remotest and most inaccessible areas in the country. There are 75 such communities which are spread over 18 States and Union Territories, according to government figures. A book, The Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in India: Privileges and Predicaments, published by the Anthropological Survey of India in 2016 and edited by K.K. Misra and others, says the highest number of PVTGs are found in Odisha (15), followed by Andhra Pradesh (12), Bihar and Jharkhand (9), Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh (7), Tamil Nadu (6) and Kerala and Gujarat (5 each). The rest, the writers said, are scattered in Maharashtra and West Bengal (3 each), Karnataka and Uttarakhand (2 each), and one each in Rajasthan, Tripura and Manipur. All the four tribal groups in the Andaman, and one in Nicobar Islands, are recognised as PVTGs. The last available Census that counted all 75 communities was from 2001, which put their total number around 27.6 lakh.

In the Introduction, Misra and Suresh Patil write that one of the reports of the Government of India reveal that most of these groups were small in number, had not attained any significant level of social and economic progress, and inhabited remote localities with poor infrastructure and administrative support, thus becoming "the most vulnerable sections" among the Scheduled Tribes, needing special attention.

What does the PM-JANMAN aim to do?

The Cabinet recently approved the ₹24,000 crore Pradhan Mantri-Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan after the Prime Minister announced the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups Development Mission early this year that would take basic facilities likes roads, power, homes, mobile connectivity, etc. to the most backward among the Scheduled Tribes, the PVTGs.

The first announcement of this package came early this year during the Budget Session, when Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced that a PM-PVTG Development Mission would be launched, for which the Government was planning a ₹15,000 crore expenditure, to be spent over a period of three years. Officials said the package has seen a massive contribution from the office of President Droupadi Murmu, who took a special interest in overseeing the plans.

How will it work?

The allocation cleared by the Union Cabinet on November 29 for this package stood at ₹24,104 crore out of which the central share would be ₹15,336 crore and the share for the respective State governments would stand at ₹8,768 crore. The government has said that as for the launch of the package, there were a little over 22,000 villages where PVTGs reside and where this will be implemented.

However, the implementation of the programme will be done through nine ministries, which will ensure that existing schemes are taken to these PVTG-inhabited villages. The targets that the government has set for itself are to build 4.9 lakh pucca homes, lay 8,000 km of connecting roads, link all households with piped water, set up 1,000 mobile medical units, construct 2,500 anganwadi centres, 1,000 multipurpose centres and 500 hostels, install mobile towers in 3,000 villages, and so forth. The plan also intends to set up vocational and skill training centres in 60 aspirational PVTG blocks and build 500 Van Dhan Vikas Kendras to help people trade in forest

produce, in addition to connecting 1 lakh of these households to an off-grid solar power system and bringing in solar street lights.

Out of the entire ₹24,000 crore allocation, more than ₹19,000 crore is to just build the pucca homes under the PM-AWAS scheme and lay 8,000 km of connecting roads, which will be implemented by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways. Senior officials in the Tribal Affairs Ministry told The Hindu that its own scheme for the development of PVTGs is just a small component of the PM-PVTG Mission. "The goals are to build roads, telecom connectivity, water and sanitation. The monies for these efforts will go into the Scheduled Tribe Component (STC) of these respective ministries from where it will be allocated for the development of these groups," an official explained. The Tribal Affairs Ministry's Budget Estimates for 2023-24 showed just ₹256.14 crore allocated for the development of PVTGs.

What are the challenges?

Ever since the announcement of the package, officials of the Tribal Affairs Ministry have been making contact with the 22,000 PVTG villages, in order to understand the needs of each of them. Many of the officers were sent on tours to assess the villages' needs, following which a detailed proposal was placed before the Cabinet, which cleared the initial estimates for the package in November.

However, even as the government proceeds to implement the project, the principal challenge facing it is the lack of current data, which has already been flagged by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment. While the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has said that it had started conducting baseline surveys to measure the progress of the campaign, it is yet to compile an accurate and current dataset of their populations. Even as per the population data submitted to the House panel last year, which was based on the 2011 Census, the government was unable to tabulate the population of PVTGs in Maharashtra, Manipur and Rajasthan. The current project is thus going ahead with the estimate that the PVTG population is "around 28 lakh". Further, the government has not yet made any results of the baseline surveys public. It told Parliament this week that no Census since 1951 had accounted for PVTGs separately and has not submitted any data on their socio-economic indices to the House panel either.

In 2013, a National Advisory Council (NAC) report on the state of PVTGs had recommended that as a first, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs should design and conduct a Census specifically for the PVTG communities to not just enumerate but also find out the status of education, health, and housing.

ISRO TO LAUNCH CHANDRAYAAN-4 TO BRING BACK SAMPLES FROM MOON IN 4 YRS: SOMANATH

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has planned to launch Chandrayaan-4 to bring back samples from the Moon in four years, said its chairperson S Somanath while elaborating on the space agency's Vision 2047.

The first module of the Bharatiya Antariksh Station — India's planned space station — that will be capable of conducting experiments with the help of robots will be launched by 2028.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had previously called on the space agency to set up a space station by 2035 and send a man to the Moon by 2040.

While these missions may seem far off, an experiment crucial for sustained human spaceflight will be "launched in the next three to four months," said Somanath during a lecture at Rashtrapati Bhavan Thursday.

The SPADEX experiment will demonstrate autonomous docking capability. Docking is a process where two spacecrafts are aligned in a precise orbit and joined together.

Explaining the mission, Somanath said: "Two satellites that are connected to each other will be launched, they will separate out, travel for a few kilometres, and then come back and connect."

While India successfully developed the lander and rover on-board Chandrayaan-2 and Chandrayaan-3 missions after Russia backed out, Somanath said that for a sample-return mission "we need much more technology than what we have developed for the landing."

He said work was on to develop technologies such as robotic arm to collect samples, mechanisms for docking in the Moon orbit and Earth orbit, transfer of samples, re-entry into the atmosphere without burning up — this will also be demonstrated by the Gaganyaan mission that will send astronauts to low Earth orbit and bring them back to Earth.

And while the ISRO recently demonstrated a trajectory to bring back a spacecraft from the Moon to Earth orbit using left-over fuel in the propulsion module, for a sample return mission the ascender module will have to collect the samples, come back to an orbit around the moon, and dock with another craft and transfer the sample, before it starts its journey back to Earth.

In Earth orbit, the spacecraft will have to dock with another module that will bring it to Earth. Just as with the Gaganyaan mission, the spacecraft with Moon samples will splashdown with the help of parachutes in the sea.

Somanath said that for sustained presence of Indians in space, ISRO is also working on developing an inflatable habitat module where the astronauts will be able to walk around and conduct experiments.

ISRO is also working on technologies such as satellites that will be able to re-fuel other satellites in space and ISRO Servicer Module that will be able to use robotic arms for maintenance of the modules and even replace modules when needed.

While the first module in 2028 can be launched with the existing rockets, he said, for building the entire space station a heavier launch vehicle will be needed. Somanath said ISRO was working on designing the Next Generation Launch Vehicle (NGVL) that will have a capacity to carry 16 to 25 T to low Earth orbit.

More importantly, ISRO is in discussion with NASA and the European Space Agency to build a common interface between the Indian space station and that of these countries. This interface will make joint work possible, said Somanath, indicating the possibility of collaborating with these countries for the space station. The current International Space Station has been built in collaboration with several countries and is likely to be de-orbited in 2030. The common interface will also allow the Indian module to go and dock with the ISS, he said.

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WHY DID MICHAUNG BRING SO MUCH RAIN?

The story so far:

On December 5, Cyclone Michaung (pronounced mig-jaum) made landfall over Bapatla in Andhra Pradesh, after a week-long journey over the Bay of Bengal that also brought heavy rains over north Tamil Nadu.

How did the cyclonic storm form?

On November 29, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) identified a well-marked low pressure area in the southwest Bay of Bengal. It was expected to become a depression by November 30, a deep depression on December 2, and a cyclonic storm by December 3. Thereafter, the IMD forecast that the system would move north towards coastal Andhra Pradesh, bringing rain to north Tamil Nadu on December 3 and 4. It was expected to make landfall between Nellore and Machilipatnam as a cyclonic storm by December 5. On December 2, it had come to within 400 km of Chennai and induced rain over the city's south. By December 3 morning, the system had become cyclonic, and received the name 'Michaung'.

How did Cyclone Michaung proceed?

As Cyclone Michaung approached north Tamil Nadu, Chennai, Kancheepuram, Thiruvallur, and Chengalpattu began to receive rain. The State government declared a public holiday in these areas on December 4 and 5 after the IMD forecast heavier showers.

By December 3, Cyclone Michaung was roughly 200 km east of the city and had slowed to 8 km/hr. By December 4 morning, it had moved to within 150 km, dumping a large amount of rain on Chennai with strong winds gusting up to 80 km/hr. It continued to stay close to Chennai on December 4 evening, with many areas in the city receiving more than 150 mm of rain in 24 hours. There were several reports of localised flooding and people stranded in places where the water couldn't drain, together with a city-wide power cut. The downpour ceased early on December 5 as the cyclone resumed its northward journey.

Did it intensify?

On December 4, the cyclonic storm intensified into a super-cyclonic storm. Tropical cyclones are 'engines' that use a warm sea surface as 'fuel'. As air moves over a warm sea, it also warms and accumulates moisture, and begins to ascend. In the process, it becomes cooler, which condenses the vapour and forms clouds. Condensation releases heat, which makes the air lighter and causes it to ascend further. As it does, the surrounding air moves in underneath, creating the surface winds associated with cyclones. This (simplified) process is the reason climate change has been conducive to cyclone intensification. Large water bodies absorb most of the heat of global warming. The intensification is also greater if the cyclone spends more time over water before landfall, as Cyclone Michaung did off the Tamil Nadu coast.

Why does intensification matter?

Cyclones draw heat from the sea and move it to the upper atmosphere, where winds carry it to the earth's poles. An intensifying cyclone will do this more powerfully.

A study published in May 2020 found that tropical cyclones with wind speeds upward of 185 km/hr had become 15% more likely since 1979. Cyclone Michaung's own intensification was also

assisted by the Madden-Julian oscillation (MJO), among other factors, according to an advisory from the Regional Specialised Meteorological Centre — Tropical Cyclones, New Delhi.

The MJO consists of a 'pair' of weather anomalies that move eastward around the world once every one to two months. The leading side imposes dry weather while the trailing side imposes wet (rainy) weather. The advisory said that on December 3, the MJO near Cyclone Michaung maintained favourable conditions for rain formation. Cyclone intensification complicates forecast models and allows storms to make landfall with more energy, move further inland, survive longer, and bring their on-ground devastation to previously 'inaccessible' areas.

What happened to Michaung?

Cyclone Michaung crossed over land just south of Bapatla district in Andhra Pradesh from 12.30 pm on December 5. It brought heavy rain and winds with a sustained speed of 90-100 km/hr as it crossed over, in the process uprooting trees and electric poles. At 3.30 pm on December 5, the IMD reported based on radar data that the storm had completed landfall. An hour later, an IMD bulletin said the storm system was moving north at 11 km/hr while weakening into a cyclonic storm over the next couple hours.

By 6 pm on December 6, the storm had devolved into a well-marked low pressure area.

INDIA'S EXTREME RAINFALL 'CORRIDOR'

The story so far:

The Indian monsoon has well-known features, such as the onset of the monsoon, the withdrawal, the active and break periods, and the low-pressure systems (or monsoon depressions). Every aspect of the monsoon has been affected by global warming. The total seasonal rainfall has also trended downwards for more than seven decades, due to the differential heating of the land versus the ocean due to global warming. However, this trend has been distributed unevenly through the monsoon season — as manifest in the longer duration but lower intensity of dry spells and the greater intensity of wet spells. While the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has made progress in forecasting extremes, multiple factors can combine to still produce devastating heavy rain events that remain hard to anticipate.

Where does extreme rain occur?

India's monsoon forecasts rely heavily on its relation to the El Niño and the La Niña phenomena, although this relation holds only about 60% of the time. We also know of other global relations but translating them to better predictions requires careful modelling experiments. Researchers are also continuing to search for additional process understanding, especially for high-impact extreme rainfall events. A new study (of which the author was part) has found that despite all these seemingly disparate changes in different aspects of the monsoon dynamics, a remarkable stationary element exists in terms of where the synchronised extreme rainfall events occur.

The so-called large-scale extreme rainfall events are actually simultaneous or near-simultaneous heavy rain episodes that are strewn across a 'highway' that extends from parts of West Bengal and Odisha to parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan. The most remarkable new finding is that this corridor has remained unchanged from 1901 to 2019. In the seemingly chaotic change in all aspects of the monsoon, such a trapping of the extreme events to a relatively narrow corridor is good news for

potential improvements in process understanding, which is bound to lead to better predictions of these sychronised extreme rainfall events.

What does this mean for the monsoon's stability?

Traditional statistical methods tend to miss the complex relations between multiple nodes of rainfall centres. Rainfall data from the IMD at a 25-km scale in latitude and longitude offers a rich field over which sophisticated network analysis can be applied to extract the nodes that have highest synchronicity in rainfall with other nodes near and far. This analysis — applied in this study — found that the most active nodes have followed this 'highway' for more than a century. The link lengths between nodes, or the scales of synchronicity, have remained nearly constant, at an average value of about 200 km.

We can use a popcorn and kettle analogy here to understand this better. Central India is the kettle that warms up from the pre-monsoon into the monsoon. The monsoon rainfall systems are like kernels of corn popping randomly across the kettle. But it turns out that the kernels are popping in a synchronous dance, in an indication that large groups of popcorn are jumping up at the same time.

An analysis of winds and other circulation features indicate that the monsoon domain has been unique in remaining fairly stable for the formation of these extremes despite the various kicks from all tropical oceans and from pole-t-pole.

What do the findings mean for forecasts?

Some researchers have said that stationary elements no longer exist in climate systems because of global warming. Yet the Indian monsoon continues to produce surprises in the way it is able to synchronise heavy rain events as well as stick to the 'highway' for such a long time. This is also the corridor for the monsoon depressions, which themselves have shown an increase at the 3- to 10-day timescales while decreasing at lower frequencies of 10-60 days. These changes are manifest in the active and break periods, as stated above. The main candidate for the geographic trapping of synchronised extreme rainfall is likely to be the range of mountains running along the west coast and across Central India.

This hypothesis needs to be tested in models, but its implications for improving forecasts of such events is undeniable. The finding also suggests that, in order to improve forecasts, increasing the model resolution and the computational cost may not be necessary. Instead, the focus can be on the dynamics of synchronisation.

The potential for reducing risk at the smaller scale from these large-scale extreme rainfall events, for agriculture, water, energy, transportation, health, etc., is also alluring. Fortunately, India is in a solid position vis-à-vis its modelling capacity and computational resources to fully exploit this potential.

CRUMBLING HILLS

Meghalaya, blessed by nature's bounty, has been at the receiving end of greed for the resources that lie beneath its land

Meghalaya, a small State in the northeastern region of India, has an abundance of coal and limestone. About 9% of the country's total limestone reserves are distributed across the State.

A land blessed by nature's bounty, the State has been at the receiving end of human greed for resources that lie beneath its land, with uncontrolled coal mining and illegal limestone mining. Limestone mining is carried out by open cast method both in large- and small-scale levels. Many of these are illegal. The limestone mined is used chiefly for manufacturing products such as cement, lime and edible lime.

Long line of trucks carrying limestone that is mined from Meghalaya go to Bangladesh, a country with which it shares a border.

The West Janitia Hills in Meghalaya are being denuded and the increasing heat of summers, loss of forests, and loosening of the soil add to a climate crisis. Unauthorised transportation of illegally mined coal and limestone continues in Meghalaya while roadside dumping of coal is a major source of pollution.

While rat-hole mining have destroyed the hills in West Jaintia, open quarrying for limestone and sand-mining have hit Meghalaya. The State government has urged the people of the Jaintia Hills to stop illegal rat-hole mining of coal.

Rampant lime stone mining and open quarries dot the once green landscape, contributing to the rapid decline of forests and leaving the hills barren. The disappearing hillocks threaten the existence of community forests in the areas where stone quarrying is prevalent. While frequent sand mining and quarrying activities continue on one side, blasting of rocks to access limestone has been an ongoing phenomenon for the past few years, and many of these happen along the highway.

Scientific studies reveal that loss of forest cover, pollution of water, soil and air, depletion of flora and fauna, reduction in biodiversity, erosion of soil and instability of rock masses, changes in landscape and degradation of arable land are some of the conspicuous environmental implications of limestone mining.

21-YEAR-OLD MAN WITH DOWN SYNDROME SCARES AWAY ROBBERS — WITH A TOY GUN

Earlier this month, two thieves broke into a house in Northeast Delhi and as they were looking around for things to steal, they came face to face with a young man — pointing a gun at them. Scared out of their wits, the duo made a hasty escape. Police Monday said the man, a 21-year-old with Down Syndrome, was playing with a toy gun and pointed it at the men when he realised they were not his parents.

According to DCP (Northeast) Joy Tirkey, they received a PCR call on December 6 at 4.23 pm of a burglary at a house. A police team reached the spot and on scanning CCTV footage, they found that on December 2 at 1.35 pm, two men had entered the house after breaking the front door's lock.

"A young man (with a genetic disorder) was at home at the time… He was playing with a toy gun, which he pointed at the accused. It appears they panicked and ran away," said the DCP.

The man's father, a senior government officer, alleged the burglars made off with Rs 2,000 kept outside. "The complainant and his wife were at work at the time and their son was alone at home. The accused first broke the lock of the house and then locked it from inside," said the officer.

Police said they took a Rs 2,000 note before they found the man playing with the gun. When the "latter realised they were not his parents, he pointed it at them", said the officer, adding that the toy gun looked like a real pistol.

The incident took place in less than a minute. The family has alleged that their domestic help was involved in the incident. Police said several teams have been constituted to identify the culprits.

A DECADE AND 4 DEADLINES LATER, INDIA SET TO ELIMINATE KALA AZAR THIS YEAR

After missing the deadline thrice, India is poised to achieve the elimination target for visceral leishmaniasis or kala azar this year with no block in the country reporting more than one case per 10,000 people.

In October, Bangladesh became the first country in the world to be officially validated by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for eliminating kala azar as a public health problem. India now needs to sustain its momentum over the next three years in order to receive the WHO certification.

"With the elimination target just a year away, the team started working rigorously after the pandemic. And, we started to see the results. We haven't seen more than one case per 10,000 population in any of the blocks since January this year," said Rajiv Manjhi, the Joint Secretary overseeing kala azar and other vector-borne infection programmes.

Kala azar is a parasitic infection transmitted by sandflies. It causes fever, weight loss, and spleen and liver enlargement. Left untreated, it can be fatal in 95% of cases.

India recorded 530 cases and four deaths due to the infection till October this year, compared to 891 cases and three deaths in 2022. There were 1,357 cases and eight deaths recorded in 2021. There were also 286 reported cases of post-kala azar dermal leishmaniasis (PKDL) till October 2023. Completely curing the skin condition is essential as it can act as a reservoir for the parasite.

In December last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a 'Mann ki Baat' radio broadcast that India was on the brink of eliminating kala azar after diseases such as smallpox, polio and guinea worm. From more than 50 districts across four states, the disease was found to be higher than elimination levels in just four districts in Bihar and Jharkhand. "I am sure the strength and awareness of the people of Bihar and Jharkhand will help the government's efforts to eliminate kala azar from these four districts as well," he had said.

India's first target year for kala azar elimination was 2010. This was later pushed to 2015, 2017 and 2020. There were three key interventions that helped India achieve the elimination targets this year, Manjhi said.

The first was ensuring effective indoor residual spraying. The sandflies that transmit the infection usually breed in the crevices of mud walls. Effective spraying can prevent breeding and reduce the spread of the disease. "Initially, when central teams checked houses, where indoor residual spraying had already been done, we still kept finding sandflies. This meant there was some deficiency in the mixing of chemicals or spraying. With Central teams as well as senior district officials monitoring the process, effective spraying was ensured," he said.

The second was reducing crevices in 'kuccha' walls to reduce breeding areas. "We started using Gerrard soil that is found in Jharkhand and neighbouring areas to plaster the walls and crevices. The soil does not come off easily and ensures that breeding doesn't happen," he said.

Under the third intervention, the ASHA (About Accredited Social Health Activist) network was tasked with ensuring that people with PKDL complete their treatment. While one intravenous dose of the antimicrobial drug amphotericin B is effective in curing kala azar, those with PKDL need to take the medicine Miltefosine for 12 weeks.

Dr Kavita Singh, South Asia Director at the not-for-profit research organisation Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDi), explained that compliance is poor because the treatment is long and many a times the patients are asymptomatic. She added that Miltefosine is also teratogenic — meaning it results in abnormal development of the foetus during pregnancy. The drug cannot be given to children and pregnant women. In fact, women shouldn't conceive while on the treatment and for three months after, she said.

One of the key challenges now would be to ensure strong surveillance to pick up even the few cases that come up. In addition, said Manjhi, there would be a need to monitor new areas. "While most of the kala azar cases in the country were reported from four states — Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal — sporadic cases from other states are also reported. We have to monitor states such as Uttarakhand that have a potential to become hotspots," he said.

Dr Singh said there was also a need to ensure availability of drugs such as paromomycin, used to treat those with HIV and kala azar. Kala azar has a tendency to relapse in HIV patients, she said, adding that second-line treatment, such as paromomycin along with amphotericin, is important.

Dr Singh said: "Although it is mentioned in the programme, the medicine is not really available in India. It can be procured from the WHO. But the effort needs to be made."

KIDNEY TRANSPLANTS IN INDIA: THE LAW, THE DEMAND, THE ALLEGED RACKETS

The government has ordered a probe into the findings of an investigation by The Telegraph published earlier this month, alleging that poor Myanmarese villagers were being lured into giving their kidneys to rich patients from that country, with the involvement of Delhi's Apollo hospital.

Organ donations and transplants in exchange for money are forbidden in India in order to protect poor and vulnerable donors from potential exploitation. Apollo has maintained that the transplants were performed only after receiving go-aheads from the authorisation committee, and a certificate from the Myanmar embassy certifying the donors as relatives.

Allegations of "kidney scams" have surfaced earlier too. Most alleged rackets rely on forged documents to establish a relationship between the donor and recipient.

India's transplant law

A transplant can be either from a pool of organs of deceased persons donated by their relatives, or from a living person the recipient knows. The Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act, 1994 allows living donations, in most cases, from close relatives such as parents, siblings, children, spouse, grandparents, grandchildren. Altruistic donations from distant relatives, in-laws, or long-time friends are allowed after additional scrutiny to ensure there is no financial exchange.

For living donations from close relatives, involving Indians or foreigners, documents establishing their identities, family tree, documents, and pictures proving the donor-recipient relationship, and documents to show the financial standing of the donor have to be submitted. Donors and recipients are interviewed to establish the relationship.

For donations from unrelated persons, documents and photographic evidence showing their long-term association or friendship have to be submitted along with all other documents. Such cases are examined by an external committee to guard against illegal dealings.

Offering to pay for organs or to supply organs for payment, initiating/ negotiating/ advertising for such an arrangement, looking for a person to supply organs, and abetting in preparing false documents is punishable by jail up to 10 years and a fine of up to Rs 1 crore.

Kidney among most targeted

One, the demand is very high. Every year, an estimated 2 lakh Indians reach end-stage kidney failure. All of them need either a transplant or regular dialysis, but only around 12,000 kidney transplants take place in the country every year.

Two, it is the cheapest and most accessible. A kidney transplant costs about Rs 5 lakh, which increases the pool of people who can undergo the procedure. More than 500 centres in India are trained to harvest or transplant kidneys, which provide more opportunities to people who want to undergo the surgery by getting around the law.

Three, the kidney is the organ that can survive the longest outside the body — 24-36 hours. In comparison, lungs remain viable only for 4-6 hours, and the liver for 8-12 hours.

Addressing supply gap

The pool of organs in India can be significantly increased by promoting deceased donations. Organs of only a small fraction of brain deaths are donated, even though they are the ideal candidates for organ donation.

To improve this percentage, the government has rolled out an Aadhaar-linked registry of donors so that their family members can be assured that it was their wish to donate if they die. Only 16% of the total transplants in the country use deceased organs. This, experts say, can be increased several-fold by increasing awareness. There is also a need to reduce the number of people who require organ transplants.

INDIA'S FIRST POMPE DISEASE PATIENT PASSES AWAY: WHAT IS THIS RARE GENETIC DISORDER?

Nidhi Shirol, India's first Pompe disease patient, passed away last month at the age of 24 years after battling the disease. She spent the last six years in a semi-comatose state. In 2010, her father Prasanna Shirol started the Organisation for Rare Diseases India (ORDI), the first NGO in the country for rare diseases. Here, he explains what the disease is, how common it is, and how it is diagnosed.

What is Pompe Disease?

Also known as Glycogen Storage Disease Type II, Pompe disease is a rare genetic disorder caused by a deficiency of the enzyme acid alpha-glucosidase (GAA). This enzyme is crucial for breaking down glycogen into glucose within the lysosomes of cells.

Its prevalence estimates range from 1 in 40,000 to 1 in 300,000 births. It occurs across diverse ethnicities and populations. The age of onset and severity can vary, leading to a spectrum of clinical presentations.

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How does Pompe disease affect an individual?

The severity of the condition and the progression of symptoms may differ among individuals. Some key symptoms are:

*Muscle weakness: Progressive muscle weakness is a primary feature of Pompe disease. It affects both skeletal and smooth muscles, leading to difficulties in mobility and daily activities. Weakness in the respiratory muscles can result in breathing difficulties, especially during physical exertion or even while lying down.

*Motor skill delay: Children with the disease may experience delays in achieving motor milestones, such as sitting, crawling, and walking. The degree of motor skill delay can vary, and some individuals may never attain certain motor milestones.

*Degenerative impact on bones: Prolonged muscle weakness and reduced mobility can have a degenerative impact on bones, leading to joint contractures and skeletal deformities.

*Respiratory complications: The weakening of respiratory muscles, including the diaphragm, can have an impact. Patients may experience shortness of breath, respiratory infections, and in severe cases, respiratory failure.

*Cardiac involvement: In some cases, Pompe disease can affect the heart muscles, leading to complications. Symptoms such as heart palpitations, fatigue, and chest pain, may manifest.

*Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy: Pompe disease can cause hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, characterised by the thickening of the heart muscle walls. This can lead to impaired heart functions and cardiovascular symptoms.

*Implications for daily living: Patients may face challenges in performing daily activities independently due to muscle weakness and respiratory limitations. Assistive devices such as wheelchairs and respiratory support equipment may become necessary.

How is Pompe disease diagnosed?

Diagnosing Pompe disease involves a multi-faceted approach.

Enzyme assays are conducted to measure the activity of acid alpha-glucosidase (GAA), the deficient enzyme. Genetic testing identifies mutations in the responsible GAA gene.

Clinical evaluations consider the patient's symptoms and medical history. Enzyme tests, often performed on blood or skin cells, provide crucial insights into GAA deficiency. Genetic analysis confirms the presence of specific mutations associated with Pompe Disease.

The combination of these diagnostic tools enables healthcare professionals to accurately identify and confirm the disease, helping achieve timely intervention and management.

Is Pompe disease curable?

While there is currently no cure for Pompe disease, there are treatment options available to manage symptoms and improve the patient's quality of life. Enzyme Replacement Therapy (ERT) is a standard treatment, involving the infusion of the missing enzyme to alleviate glycogen buildup.

74% INDIANS COULD NOT AFFORD HEALTHY DIET IN 2021: REPORT

More than 74% of Indians could not afford a healthy diet in 2021, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations said in a report on Tuesday.

In 2020, the percentage was 76.2.

In Pakistan, the figure was 82.2% and in Bangladesh, 66.1% of the population faced difficulties in finding healthy food.

Rising food costs, if not matched by rising income, would lead to more people being unable to afford a healthy diet, the report, "Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2023: Statistics and Trends", said.

"If food costs rise at the same time incomes fall, a compounding effect occurs that can result in even more people unable to afford healthy diets," it said.

The FAO report is a glimpse of the progress in meeting Sustainable Development Goals and World Health Assembly (WHA) global nutrition targets. It said that during the pandemic and the "5Fs" crisis – food, feed, fuel, fertilizer, and finance – the Asia Pacific region witnessed harrowing statistics.

"Even to date, the region is still suffering from some protracted effects. The latest statistics indicate that the region, with 370.7 million undernourished people, continues to represent half of the global total. Similarly, the Asia and the Pacific region accounts for half of the world's severe food insecurity, with more women than men being food insecure. Prevalence rates on stunting, wasting and overweight among children under 5 years of age, as well as anaemia among women of reproductive age, are still off the marks in terms of World Health Assembly global nutrition targets," the report said.

16% undernourished

It said that 16.6% of the country's population was undernourished. "The impacts of undernourishment extend beyond health and nutritional well-being to include economic and social costs," it said.

The region, according to the report, had a lower prevalence of both moderate or severe and severe food insecurity when compared with the world prevalence since 2015.

"Southern Asia showed higher prevalence of severe food insecurity compared with the other subregions, and it is in Eastern Asia where the lowest prevalence of severe food insecurity was observed. Compared with the world, Southern Asia had higher percentages for both moderate or severe and severe food insecurity since 2015," the report said.

It said that 31.7% of children in India under the age of five showed stunted growth. "Stunted growth and development are the result of poor maternal health and nutrition, inadequate infant and young child feeding practices, and repeated infections interacting with a variety of other factors over a sustained period," it said.

For wasting (low weight for height), India recorded the highest rate in the region, with 18.7% children under five facing this major health problem.

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"Reducing and maintaining childhood wasting to less than 5% is the WHA global nutrition target," the report noted, adding that 2.8% of children below five were overweight, another health risk.

It said that 53% of women aged between 15 to 49 in India had anaemia, which was the largest prevalence rate in the region in 2019. "It (anaemia) impairs health and well-being in women and increases the risk for adverse maternal and neonatal outcomes," the report warned. It also said that 1.6% of adults in the country were obese.

On exclusive breastfeeding among infants in the age group of 0-5 months, India had improved the prevalence with a percentage of 63.7%, which is higher than the world prevalence of 47.7%. India had the highest prevalence of low birth weight in the region (27.4%), followed by Bangladesh and Nepal.

ROAD FATALITIES RISE IN INDIA, DESPITE GLOBAL DROP: WHO

Road traffic deaths fell by 5% to 1.19 million annually worldwide between 2010 and 2021, with 108 United Nations member countries reporting a drop, the World Health Organization (WHO) said in a report. India, however, registered a 15% increase in fatalities.

The total number of road traffic fatalities in India went up to 1.54 lakh in 2021 from 1.34 lakh in 2010, the 'Global Status Report on Road Safety 2023' said.

Ten countries succeeded in reducing road traffic deaths by over 50%. These are Belarus, Brunei Darussalam, Denmark, Japan, Lithuania, Norway, Russian Federation, Trinidad and Tobago, the United Arab Emirates, and Venezuela. Thirty-five countries made notable progress, reducing road traffic deaths by 30% to 50%.

As of 2019, road crashes were the leading cause of deaths among children and youth aged five to 29 years, and were the 12th leading cause of deaths when all ages are considered. Two-thirds of deaths occurred among people of a working age.

In the past decade, a 5% reduction in absolute numbers of road traffic fatalities was accompanied with a growth in the global population by nearly 14 billion, or roughly 13%.

This translates into the road fatality rate declining from 18 per 1 lakh people in 2010 to 15 per 1 lakh in 2021, which represents a 16% decline in the road traffic death rate since 2010.

Vehicle growth

The report also noted that during the same period, the global motor vehicle fleet grew 160%. Therefore, annual fatality rates per 1 lakh vehicles fell from 79 deaths to 47 deaths, which is a 41% reduction.

The report shows that 28% of global road traffic deaths occurred in the WHO's South-East Asia Region, 25% in the Western Pacific Region, 19% in the African Region, 12% in the Region of the Americas, 11% in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, and 5% in the European Region.

"Nine in 10 deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, and fatalities in these countries are disproportionately higher when set against the number of vehicles and roads they have. The risk of death is three times higher in low-income than high-income countries, yet low-income countries have just 1% of the world's motor vehicles," the report said.

INDIANS VULNERABLE TO CLIMATE CHANGE-INDUCED HEALTH ISSUES

More than half of India's population, living in 344 districts, face high or very high health vulnerability induced by climate change. People are increasingly being exposed to the effects of climate change, such as prolonged summers, heavy and unpredictable rains, floods and droughts, and rising sea levels and melting glaciers. As a result, they fall ill more often, face a greater risk of future ailments, lose livelihoods, get pushed into poverty, and are forced to migrate. People fight and try to adapt to these changes and prepare themselves better for future events. Vulnerability is a vector produced out of the dynamics between exposure and sensitivity on the one hand and people's ability to adapt or fight on the other.

However, the same exposure may not have the same health consequences for everyone. People who are exposed to higher green cover, have better living conditions, education, secured work, better social safety nets and resilient health systems would be able to adapt to the changes and mitigate the consequences better. People who live on the margins, whose livelihoods are not secured, and who have to pay when someone in the family falls ill will be more vulnerable to these changes.

Though there are certain universal aspects of climate change, the nature of exposure is diverse and localised — within a State, different regions or districts have different levels of exposure. As consequences also vary, vulnerabilities differ. While there must be certain universal strategies, adaptation and mitigation efforts and strategies must be localised.

In a recent paper published in Climate Change, we draw on the vulnerability assessment framework introduced by the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to measure district-level exposures, sensitivities, adaptive capacities (ACs) and health vulnerabilities. We carried out our analysis for all 640 districts of India (Census 2011) and used 50 indicators — 14 for exposure, 20 for sensitivity, and 16 for ACs — from 8 national data sources to construct separate indices for each of the three vulnerability components.

Our findings suggest that 298 districts have high or very high levels of exposure. These districts house around 52% of India's population. Almost 30% of India's population living in 184 districts are faced with very high and high sensitivity. Around 153 districts, where a fifth of India's population lives, have moderate and low AC.

The study also helps us identify the underlying causes of vulnerability which is essential in formulating appropriate multi-sectoral policy responses. For example, increasing public expenditure on health could have a significant impact on reducing out-of-pocket expenditure. Results suggest that poorly developed primary healthcare remains a major factor for high vulnerability in some districts which report high infant mortality rates and poor child health indicators. Robust primary healthcare has shown promise in effectively addressing preventable causes of mortality and morbidity in many States such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Primary healthcare systems also have the potential to address the impending burden of non-communicable and communicable diseases, which is likely to aggravate as a result of climate change. By facilitating early disease diagnosis, primary healthcare can reduce the burden of high-cost tertiary care.

Addressing inequalities in the distribution of various social determinants of health could reduce health vulnerability. Providing sustainable livelihood opportunities, improving working

conditions, providing people with social safety nets, and improving the education status of the population and its employability could contribute to reducing sensitivity and enhancing ACs.

Tractable policy action needs a robust, dynamic data system. Our current health system data architecture is weak and incomplete. Institutions with access to data do not often collaborate or share data in public. People within the system hardly trust the data they themselves generate and rarely put the data to use. Further, there is limited compliance from the private sector and a lack of appreciation within policy institutions for evidence-based policymaking.

The climate crisis calls for a radical rethinking of the developmental paradigm. However, none of this can be achieved if institutions of local self-governance are not engaged with the climate and health agenda. The health system, too, should be made more accountable to the people.

Data show that 38 districts have very high vulnerability, 306 districts have high vulnerability, 278 districts have moderate vulnerability, and 18 districts have low vulnerability. The 344 districts with very high and high vulnerability house 56% of India's population.

States with districts in the top 10% vulnerability range are Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir, and Arunachal Pradesh. U.P. and Rajasthan alone have 37 and 15 districts, respectively, in the top 10% vulnerability range, M.P. has 3 districts, and Jharkhand and Haryana have 2 each. Punjab, Uttarakhand, J&K, Himachal, and Arunachal have one district each in this category.

SIBERIAN TIGERS' JOURNEY FROM CYPRUS TO DARJEELING ENDS INDIA'S 12-YEAR DROUGHT

Indian zoos' long wait for Siberian Tigers ended Saturday after two big cats brought from Cyprus as part of an exchange programme will find a home at Darjeeling's Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park .

Officials said the two Siberian Tigers arrived at Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose International Airport in Kolkata from Cyprus' Pafos Zoos on Saturday evening. From the airport, they were escorted to the Darjeeling zoo by a team from Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park and will reach their destination by Sunday. In exchange, the zoological park has sent two Red Pandas to Pafos Zoo.

According to authorities, the last Siberian Tiger in the country 'Kunal' died in November 2011 at the Nainital Zoo. He died at the age of 18 due to age-related ailments. He was brought to India at the age of three.

Zoological Survey of India's officer in charge (mammals) Mukesh Thakur said, "To my knowledge, there are no Siberian Tigers in captivity in the country."

The last Siberian Tiger at the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park died in 2007.

The male and female Siberian Tigers are one and a half years old. The Red Pandas sent to Pafos Zoo are six years (male) and two years old (female). The pandas were bred at the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park. Currently, the zoo has nine male and 15 female Red Pandas.

Established in August 1958, the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park is the largest high-altitude zoo in the country. It has been successful in conservation breeding of 10 animals including Red Pandas, Snow Leopards and Blue Sheep.

"As we have a male and a female Siberian Tiger now, we would try captive breeding in the zoo. We are currently running captive breeding programmes for a number of animals including the Red Panda and Snow Leopard," added Holeyachi.

Siberian Tigers are mainly found in parts of Russia and China and are distinguished from other tiger subspecies by their orange coat with black stripes and thick fur. Considered by many experts as the world's largest tiger, the male Siberian tiger can grow over 12 feet with a tail over 3 feet long and weigh over 400 kg. Their female counterparts are, however, smaller in size.

EXPRESS VIEW ON M S DHONI AND JERSEY NO 7: MAKING A LEGEND

No Indian cricketer will ever wear MS Dhoni's Jersey No 7 again. Just as they can't wear Sachin Tendulkar's 10. The Indian cricket board has decided to retire the number 7 after the same was done to Tendulkar's, a few years ago. It's probably the only denial of a privilege that no one — a player nor a fan — will ever take offence to. It starts as an emotional move from the players, picking a number usually for a sentimental reason. And then, when it transplants organically into the minds of the fans, it achieves iconic status.

Diego Maradona's No 10 and Paolo Maldini's No 3 were similarly retired in respect and love by their football clubs. The experience of a charismatic athlete changes people in many ways — turning them from keen sports watchers to unabashed fans. Wearing the same jersey number gives the illusion of being involved in a special bond with that player. Almost as if wearing a Tendulkar or Dhoni jersey can magically imbue the wearer with talent.

The sheer number of jerseys on adults with "18" and "45" (Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma's numbers) during the World Cup said much. Perhaps No 18 too will be retired when Kohli ends his career. Had Rohit Sharma won the World Cup as a captain, his number perhaps would have been retired; now one has to wait and watch.

What happens when someone new tries to wear the jersey number of a legend? For fans, it feels like a betrayal. The Indian all-rounder Shardul Thakur found that out when he made his ODI debut wearing No 10. Not just the fans, but even Rohit humorously trolled him, tweeting "it takes guts to don that number but clearly you are the best example of 'impossible is nothing'!" Soon after, the BCCI retired No 10. The erasure of a number from the professional world of athletes seems to be the final act in the myth-making of a legend. A number is folded away, a legend is immortalised.

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BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

AS PLI TAKES CENTRESTAGE, NEW INDUSTRIAL POLICY NOW ON BACKBURNER

A new industrial policy, which has been in the works for over two years and a draft of which was circulated for consultation in December last year, has now been pushed to the backburner with the government firmly placing its bets for now on its flagship production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme to drive up manufacturing and catalyse private investments.

The industrial policy, expected to be released this year, would have been the third such framework in the history of independent India, replacing the historic policy of 1991 that came in the backdrop of the balance of payment crisis, ushering in the liberalisation of the economy.

Economists said that while the PLI is incentivising and compensating for the disadvantages that exist in the economy for invigorating manufacturing activity, it may not be adequate to attract companies looking for an alternative to China amid the emerging geopolitical realities and the continuing challenges of high logistics costs, infrastructural bottlenecks and the lack of funds for MSMEs.

A government official, speaking anonymously, confirmed that the industrial policy is on the backburner, emphasizing the current focus on improving the manufacturing base through free trade agreements and the PLI scheme. The draft industrial policy, titled 'Industrial Policy 2022— Make in India for the World,' proposed significant measures, including the creation of a specialized Development Finance Institution (DFI) and a technology fund to support advanced technology companies.

Former chief statistician Pronab Sen suggests that the PLI is a partial solution, subsidizing select sectors to compensate for disadvantages. However, he emphasizes that to be a viable alternative to China, India needs to be made attractive to investors beyond the scope of the PLI.

The NDA government has announced PLI schemes for 14 sectors with an outlay of incentives worth over Rs 1.90 lakh crore. According to Crisil, the PLI scheme will account for 13-15 per cent of the average annual investment spending in key industrial sectors over the next three to four years.

The National Manufacturing Policy announced by the Union government in 2011 had set an objective of increasing the share of manufacturing in GDP to 25 per cent and creating 100 million jobs by 2022. The NDA government had reiterated the target of 25 per cent, even though manufacturing's share hovers around 17 per cent of GDP currently.

EXPRESS VIEW ON RBI STUDY ON STATE BUDGETS: STATE OF FINANCES

The Covid-19 pandemic adversely impacted the fiscal position of both central and state governments. The latter saw their combined fiscal deficit rise to 4.1 per cent of GDP in 2020-21, their debt-to-GDP ratio also went up, as their revenues came under stress, while the pressure to spend rose during this period. However, their fiscal position has since then witnessed considerable improvement, as outlined in a study by the Reserve Bank of India on state budgets. Alongside, states have, aided by the Centre, also tried to maintain a healthy momentum in their capital spending to provide the much-needed fillip to investment activity in the economy.

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As per the study, the consolidated fiscal deficit of states fell from 4.1 per cent of GDP in 2020-21 to 2.8 per cent in 2022-23. The deficit in 2022-23 was, in fact, lower than what states had pegged in their budgets as well as the revised estimates. For 2023-24, states have projected their deficits at 3.1 per cent. This, however, is lower than the limit of 3.5 per cent for the year, implying that states are not utilising the entire fiscal space available to them. For the current financial year, states had projected a healthy rise in their revenue receipts. However, data available for the first half of the year shows that their revenue growth has been slightly lower than what they had budgeted for. However, the study notes that while states' revenue expenditure has decelerated (committed expenditure which includes interest payments, pensions etc have been pegged at the same level as last year), capital spending continues to grow at a robust pace. Their capital outlay has risen by a staggering 52.6 per cent, aided by the Centre's assistance for investments. In the Union budget, the central government had provided for a 50-year interest-free loan to states for investments with an outlay of Rs 1.3 lakh crore.

The study, however, lists several challenges for state finances. For one, the decision of some to shift back to the old pension scheme will impose a fiscal burden. This will have implications for the space available to them to allocate more for capital spending. While overall, the fiscal position of states has improved, not all of them have seen such healthy improvements. In fact, some states continue to have significantly higher debt and deficit levels. In such states, as well as others, the inclination of political parties to announce fiscally imprudent schemes, especially in the run-up to elections, can only worsen matters. These need to be guarded against.

CONSUMERS HOPEFUL ABOUT INCOME, EMPLOYMENT BUT INFLATION A WORRY: RBI SURVEY

The latest surveys conducted by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) reveal that consumers in the country are generally optimistic about employment, income, spending, and the overall economic situation. However, concerns are rising regarding higher inflationary pressures on some major products in the coming year.

The current situation index (CSI) remained stable at 92.2, with higher pessimism on the current general economic situation and employment offset by a positive shift in sentiment on current income. Respondents are relatively positive about the prospects for the general economic situation, employment, income, and spending in the next year.

While confidence in general economic and employment conditions is slightly lower than in the previous survey, households' assessment of current earnings is at its highest level since July 2019, and expectations for future income have also improved.

However, consumers express negative sentiments about both current and future price conditions, indicating worries about inflation. The Households' Inflation Expectations Survey conducted by the RBI shows that a larger share of households expects higher inflation for both the next three months and the next year. The expected rise in price and inflationary pressures is anticipated across major product groups, including food and non-food products, household durables, cost of housing, and services.

The survey, conducted from November 2-11, 2023, covers 6,082 respondents, with a majority of female respondents. Expectations regarding overall prices and inflation over the next three months are more aligned with those of food products and services. For the next year, this

alignment is more pronounced, particularly in the prospects for food products and housing segments.

Despite a decline in households' perception of current inflation by 20 basis points to 8.2%, there are concerns about inflation risks, particularly in the food sector. The RBI Governor, Shaktikanta Das, mentioned in the monetary policy announcement on December 8 that the near-term outlook on inflation is uncertain due to risks to food inflation, which might lead to an uptick in inflation in November and December. The RBI projects CPI inflation to be at 5.4% for FY '24.

EXPRESS VIEW: THE COST OF SUBSIDIES

Retail prices of petrol and diesel haven't been revised upwards since May 22, 2022. Urea is being sold to farmers at Rs 5,628 per tonne since November 2012. Fertiliser companies haven't also been allowed to charge more than Rs 27,000/tonne for di-ammonium phosphate since April 2022.

Wheat and rice were being issued to public distribution system beneficiaries at Rs 2 and Rs 3 per kg respectively since July 2013 under the National Food Security Act brought in by the previous Congress-led United Progressive Alliance dispensation.

The current government under Narendra Modi has not only continued, but actually slashed these prices to zero from January 2023 onwards. The total subsidy spending on the three Fs – food, fertiliser and fuel – has gone up from Rs 228,341 crore to Rs 530,959 crore between 2019-20 and 2022-23. In 2013-14, the last financial year before the Modi government took over, the figure aggregated Rs 244,717 crore. The real spike has, thus, happened post the pandemic.

It isn't only the Centre. States, too, have substantially stepped up transfer payments through schemes rolled out in the last 2-3 years or less. Madhya Pradesh has budgeted Rs 8,000 crore in 2023-24 for the Mukhyamantri Ladli Behna Yojana (Rs 1,000 per month each to some Rs 1.25 crore women in the state) and Rs 3,230 crore for the Kisan Kalyan Yojana (Rs 4,000 annual payment to 80 lakh farming families, over and above Rs 6,000 under the Centre's PM-Kisan). The actual spend would be higher, given that the benefits under both schemes were enhanced (to Rs 1,250/month and Rs 6,000/year) by the ruling BJP just before the recent assembly elections. The Congress government in Karnataka has provided Rs 39,815 crore for its five pre-poll "guarantees" in the budget presented this July. The full-year cost will be much more.

There's no doubt that the above subsidies and transfer payment schemes – one can expect more in the run-up to the 2024 national elections – have helped poor and vulnerable households, especially during the Covid-induced economic crisis, and insulated most producers and consumers from the supply chain disruptions following the Russia-Ukraine war. But there are fiscal costs that neither the Centre nor states can ignore. The increasing share of government budgets going for transfers comes mainly at the expense of spending on education, health, environment, water supply, sanitation, agricultural research and extension.

These are public goods that add to human capital and boost economic productivity. Unfortunately, expenditures on them yield results only over the medium and long term. Voters want benefits that are immediate (cash transfers) and tangible (roads, bridges and other hard infrastructure). When governments too think that way, it is more than just a fiscal problem.

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ACCELERATION FORETOLD

November's resurgence in headline retail inflation, while clearly not unexpected after the RBI just last week predicted a likely 'uptick', is a stark reminder of the risks volatile food prices pose. While the National Statistical Office's provisional reading of headline inflation shows the Consumer Price Index rose by 5.55% year-on-year to a three-month high, from October's 4.87%, food price gains measured by the Consumer Food Price Index accelerated by a steep 209 basis points to 8.7% last month. Propelling the upsurge in food prices were cereals and vegetables, constituents of the 'food and beverages' subgroup, that logged 10.3% and 17.7% inflation, respectively. Cereals, that account for almost one-tenth of the CPI and logged double-digit inflation for a 15th straight month, also saw a month-on-month acceleration in inflation with rice, wheat, and the coarse cereal of jowar, a rural hinterland staple, all registering palpable sequential price gains. Vegetable prices were back on a boil with the year-on-year inflation rate surging by almost 15 percentage points from October's 2.8%. While price gains in the perishable tomato swung from two straight months of sizeable deflation to a more than 11% year-on-year rate of inflation last month, the extent of increase could be truly gauged from the fact that prices surged a steep 41% from the preceding month's levels, as per data aggregated on the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy's website. And the key masala essentials of ginger and garlic registered more than 100% rates of inflation for the seventh and third months, respectively.

From the TOP or tomato, onion and potato triumvirate of India's most widely consumed vegetables, onion prices remained the biggest source of concern as year-on-year inflation ballooned to 86%, from October's 42% pace, and the sequential pace swelled to 48%. With reports that inclement weather and depleting groundwater are likely to cause a near 25% shortfall in onion output during the key rabi season, the outlook for prices of the nutrient-dense bulb moderating in the near future appears bleak, the government's move to impose a ban on its exports notwithstanding. Only potato prices, which continued to remain in deflationary territory, offered some respite. Pulses and sugar are other areas of concern, with the first witnessing more than 20% inflation and the sweetener also experiencing an uptick in the pace of price gains to 6.55%. With sugar production also expected to take a hit due to lower rainfall, the number of supply-related challenges policymakers face to rein in price gains is rising. With the RBI having opted to refrain from raising rates for now, the onus is squarely on the government to help temper inflation, or risk suffering an erosion in broader consumption and economic growth.

FALLING BEHIND

The Monetary Policy Committee's decision to hold benchmark interest rates level, while raising its forecast for full-year GDP growth by 50 basis points and flagging food price shocks-induced volatility in inflation, is replete with the risk of policymakers falling behind the curve on anchoring inflation expectations. Notably, after observing that "uncertainties in food prices along with unfavourable base effects are likely to lead to" headline inflation quickening in November-December, and that "recurring food price shocks are impeding the ongoing disinflation process", the MPC has rather surprisingly opted to keep the RBI's repo rate unchanged at 6.5% for a fifth straight bi-monthly meeting. To be sure, retail inflation has moderated since the MPC last met in early October, with the headline reading softening by almost two percentage points, from August's 6.83% to 4.87% in October. But, by the MPC's own reckoning, that moderation may be fleeting, as price gains accelerate yet again in November and December, and with volatility in oil prices and financial markets, amid heightened global uncertainty, there are added risks to the outlook on prices. The RBI's latest 'Households' Inflation Expectations Survey', undertaken in November,

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reveals that most households expect faster inflation in the three-months- ahead and one-year-ahead time horizons, and at median levels of 9.1% and 10.1%, respectively, unequivocally underlining the fact that price gain expectations are still far from durably anchored.

The dissonance in messaging from the central bank is exemplified in the MPC's decision to upgrade its projection for real GDP growth in the fiscal year ending in March 2024 to 7%, from 6.5% as recently as in October. For this, it cites robust investment, besides continued strengthening in manufacturing, buoyancy in construction and a gradual rural recovery that it sees helping 'brighten the prospects of household consumption'. If the RBI's cumulative 250 basis points increase in the benchmark interest rate since May 2022 through to February 2023 and the subsequent retention of the 6.5% rate have not damped the growth impulses barring consumption, then it would indicate that consumption is still struggling to gain traction largely because, as Deputy Governor Michael D. Patra observed at the MPC's last meeting, "people are not increasing discretionary spending in view of high inflation". This seems to be borne out in the RBI's November round of its bi-monthly 'Consumer Confidence Survey', which showed consumers retained negative sentiments on both current and future price conditions. With policymakers only too well aware that sans price stability, as Mr. Patra noted, "the benefits of expanding GDP and employment will be frittered away by the erosion of purchasing power", the MPC has its task cut out.

WAGE PACT: BANKS TO SHELL OUT ADDITIONAL RS 12,500 CR A YEAR; IBA PUSHES FOR FIVE-DAY WEEK

Public sector banks will have to shell out nearly Rs 12,500 crore more a year as part of the new wage settlement agreed between the managements of state-owned banks and their employee unions. Nearly 7.56 lakh public sector banks, including State Bank of India, will now get 17 per cent annual increase in salary and allowances for the next five years.

The agreement was finalised after discussions were held between the Indian Banks' Association (IBA) representing managements of banks and the authorised representatives of workmen unions and officers' associations on wage revision for officers and workmen in banks, a joint memorandum signed by IBA and unions said. The total wage bill of SBI alone for FY23 was pegged at Rs 57,292 crore.

IBA has already recommended to the government for declaration of all Saturdays as holidays under the Negotiable Instruments (NI) Act for the banking industry in line with earlier negotiations with unions, according to the memorandum. If the government agrees to this proposal, banks will work only from Monday to Friday every week.

Many countries, including the US, follow the Monday-Friday working days for banks. Currently, bank branches in India are closed on second and fourth Saturdays every month.

IN RUN-UP TO LS POLL, INVESTMENT OF ₹50,530 CR. AT BUSINESS MEET GIVES NITISH SHOT IN THE ARM

In the run-up to the Lok Sabha election, the state of Bihar has received a significant boost with investment commitments totaling ₹50,530 crore at a business meet. The Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) were signed at Gyan Bhavan in the presence of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. The event marked the release of the Bihar Logistics Policy 2023, which aims to provide world-class infrastructure facilities for industrial and social growth.

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Major companies that committed to investments include Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (₹7,386.15 crore), Patel Agri Industries Private Limited (₹5,230 crore), Holtech International Inc. (₹2,200 crore), and Indo European Heart Hospitals and Research Institute Private Limited (₹2,000 crore). The Adani Group also pledged an additional investment of ₹8,700 crore in sectors such as cement manufacturing, logistics, and agro-industry.

This business summit, titled Bihar Business Connect, was the first of its kind, showcasing the state as a key business destination. In the past, investors approached the state indirectly through the Asian Development Research Institute. The event is seen as a success, especially after a business meet held at the Secretariat last year did not attract many investors.

The proposed investments come as a positive development for Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who has faced criticism from the opposition BJP over perceived development challenges in the state. The investment proposals provide an opportunity for Kumar to showcase significant economic growth ahead of the Lok Sabha election.

While the investments are seen as a positive development, there is criticism from the BJP, accusing the government of double standards for criticizing the Adani Group while accepting investments from it.

During the concluding session of the summit, Industries Minister Sameer Kumar Mahaseth highlighted three key needs for faster development in the state, including water management agreements with Nepal to prevent floods, special category status for accelerated industrial development, and inclusion in Special Economic Zones to boost economic development.

Sandeep Poundrik, Additional Chief Secretary of the Industries Department, emphasized that setting up industries in Bihar is made easy due to the presence of a ready market, raw materials, infrastructure, workforce, and government support. The government also offers attractive subsidies and incentives through various industrial policies. Pranav Adani, director of Adani Enterprises, expressed the group's commitment to investing in Bihar, citing the group's previous investments in the state and plans for further expansion, including a new cement industry.

FOOD VERSUS FUEL: WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH CENTRE'S ETHANOL BLENDING SCHEME

After banning sugar exports, the Centre has taken the next step towards augmenting domestic availability – restricting diversion of the sweetener for ethanol production.

On December 7, the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution directed all mills and distilleries not to use sugarcane juice/syrup for making any ethanol "with immediate effect".

Ethanol is 99.9% pure alcohol that can be blended with petrol. The ethanol blended petrol (EBP) programme has been a significant accomplishment of the Narendra Modi government. The all-India average blending of ethanol with petrol has risen from 1.6% in 2013-14 to 11.8% in 2022-23.

Alternative feedstocks

Key to this has been feedstock diversification.

Ethanol – or even 94% pure industrial-grade rectified spirit and 96% extra neutral alcohol for potable liquor – is normally made from so-called C-heavy molasses. Mills typically crush cane with 13.5-14% total fermentable sugars (TFS). Around 11.5% of it can be recovered from the juice as

sugar. The uncrystallised, non-recoverable 2-2.5% TFS goes into C-heavy molasses. Every tonne of this liquid, containing 40-45% sugar, gives 220-225 litres of ethanol on fermentation and distillation.

But mills, instead of recovering 11.5% sugar, can extract just 9.5-10% and divert the balance 1.5-2% TFS to an earlier 'B-heavy' stage molasses. This molasses, having 50%-plus sugar, yields 290-320 litres of ethanol per tonne. A third option is not to produce any sugar and ferment the entire 13.5-14% TFS into ethanol. From one tonne of cane, 80-81 litres of ethanol can thus be obtained, as against 20-21 litres and 10-11 litres through the B-heavy and C-heavy molasses routes respectively.

The increase in India's ethanol production happened largely after 2017-18, when mills started making it from B-heavy molasses and concentrated sugarcane juice/syrup (Table 1). In addition, new substrates – surplus rice from the Food Corporation of India's (FCI) stocks, broken/damaged foodgrains, and maize – were used. Grains contain starch, which has to be converted into sucrose and simpler sugars (glucose and fructose) before their fermentation by yeast. The longer process notwithstanding – molasses already have fermentable sugars – ethanol yields from grain are higher, at 380-480 litres per tonne.

The real fillip to EBP programme came with the Modi government paying mills more for ethanol produced from feedstocks other than C-heavy molasses. For 2022-23, the ex-distillery price of ethanol payable by state-owned oil marketing companies (OMS) was fixed at Rs 49.41 per litre if made from C-heavy molasses, but at Rs 60.73, Rs 65.61, Rs 58.50, Rs 55.54 and Rs 56.35 if from B-heavy molasses, sugarcane juice/syrup, surplus FCI rice, broken/damaged grain and maize respectively. In previous supply years (December-November) till 2017-18, the OMCs paid a uniform price for ethanol irrespective of feedstock.

Tarun Sawhney, vice chairman and managing director of Triveni Engineering & Industries Ltd (TEIL), credits the EBP programme's success to the differential pricing policy.

TIEL's distilleries in Uttar Pradesh run on multiple feedstocks – B-heavy molasses during the cane crushing season (November-April) and grain in the off-season (May-October). The latter mainly comprised FCI rice, the supply of which was stopped from July 2023 on concerns over depleting stocks. The company, then, switched to damaged/broken rice and maize sourced from the open market at higher prices. The Centre, on its part, also raised the procurement price of ethanol produced from damaged grain and maize to Rs 64 and Rs 66.07 per litre respectively in August.

"The government's ethanol policy has been very supportive, especially with regard to pricing and use of alternative feedstocks. The EBP programme no longer relies on a single feedstock or crop. Earlier, 100% of ethanol was from sugarcane-based feedstocks (it fell to 76% in 2022-23). I see that share dropping below 50%, and correspondingly going up for grain, in the coming year," said Sawhney.

Not so sweet

The December 7 directive is, nevertheless, a setback for the industry – more so for companies such as Balrampur Chini Mills, Shree Renuka Sugars, Ugar Sugar Works and Nirani Sugars, which have set up capacities to produce ethanol directly from cane juice/syrup.

The OMCs had floated a tender for the supply of around 825 crore litres of ethanol for 2023-24, translating into a 15% blending target. In the first cycle of bids early last month, they received

offers for some 559 crore litres, out of which ethanol produced from sugarcane juice/syrup accounted for 135 crore litres. The December 7 order could impact the bulk of the latter supplies, leading to stranded capacities.

The Centre has, for now, stated that the supply of ethanol from B-heavy molasses against "existing offers received by OMCs...will continue". However, it is yet to announce prices for ethanol from various feedstocks payable to mills in 2023-24. This is despite the ethanol supply year being moved from December-November to November-October now, closer to the sugar year from October when mills commence crushing.

Sugar supply concerns

The reason for the Centre's seemingly going slow on ethanol blending is simple. The 2022-23 sugar year ended with stocks of just over 57 lakh tonnes (lt), the lowest since the 39.4 lt of 2016-17 and way below the record 143.3 lt of 2018-19 (Table 2).

Six-year-low opening stocks apart, there is uncertainty over production for the current 2023-24 year itself. The National Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories has estimated this year's output at 291.50 lt, down from 330.9 lt and 359.25 lt in 2022-23 and 2021-22 respectively. Maharashtra and Karnataka are expected to record particularly sharp declines, on the back of subpar rains and low reservoir water levels in their major cane-growing areas.

The December 7 order is likely to result in roughly 15 lt of additional sugar, which would have otherwise gone for ethanol production through the cane juice/syrup route. This extra sugar coming into the market will, more than boosting physical availability, help douse any bullish price sentiment.

The latest decision, taken together with the ban on sugar shipments since May 2023, makes one thing clear. When it comes to domestic supply over exports, consumers over producers and food over fuel, governments privilege the former. This government even more so.

LIFE & SCIENCE

CAN CHATGPT, THE CHATBOT DEVELOPED BY OPENAI, REPLACE HUMAN THERAPISTS?

An OpenAI officer came under fire on X (formerly Twitter) in September for comparing her conversation with ChatGPT to therapy, despite admitting she had never experienced therapy before.

Lilian Weng's X bio said she worked on AI safety at the start-up behind the viral chatbot while the company website noted she worked on Applied AI Research. "Just had a quite emotional, personal conversation w/ ChatGPT in voice mode, talking about stress, work-life balance. Interestingly I felt heard & warm. Never tried therapy before but this is probably it? Try it especially if you usually just use it as a productivity tool," she posted on X on September 26.

Just a day earlier, OpenAI said it had upgraded ChatGPT with voice and image capabilities, allowing users to chat with it, share photos, and listen to responses. The voice mode feature is now open to all users. OpenAI suggested that people could use this upgrade to settle family dinner table debates or even have a bedtime story read to them.

Ms. Weng was criticised for seemingly promoting ChatGPT as a tool capable of providing therapeutic services, especially after admitting that she was not qualified to comment on the therapy experience. Others accused her of coming under the ELIZA effect. A day later, Ms. Weng posted that people's interactions with AI models differed and that her statements were her personal opinion. Even so, the OpenAI employee is far from the only person who has turned to ChatGPT — the world's fastest growing consumer app earlier this year — to find solutions for their mental health challenges or even just a "warm" listener.

What is the ELIZA effect?

ELIZA effect is the phenomenon in which people think computer programs or similar systems have become capable of human emotions or functions because of the way they respond to user input. It is named after a 1960s computer program which also responded to users, albeit with very basic sentences that echoed their original words. This program was credited to MIT professor Joseph Weizenbaum.

A user who receives responses from ChatGPT may believe that they are having a meaningful or mutually beneficial interaction that is somehow comparable to a human conversation, rather than seeing ChatGPT as a large language model simply generating data. This is an example of the ELIZA effect.

The Hindu tried out the free ChatGPT version with the voice mode, where users could choose from friendly male, female, and gender-neutral voices in order to get spoken answers. After complaining via the ChatGPT app that the user was suffering from a cold, a voice named "Ember" was sympathetic and suggested home remedies such as warm soup, before offering to help with more specific symptoms.

Knocking at the digital door

Many people worldwide turn to the internet to seek out health information privately, according to Jim Downs, historian and author of the book Maladies of Empire: How Colonialism, Slavery, and War Transformed Medicine. "Web-MD and other online resources, like ChatG[P]T, allow for an

anonymity that many patients desire to avoid the stigma of being labelled unhealthy or sick. Historically, patients have feared clinicians pathologising their behaviour, bodies, and, even, their identities," Mr. Downs said.

However, AI chatbots may not be ready to bridge this doctor-patient divide. Researchers have claimed that AI chatbots largely generate results which favour India's privileged castes and economic classes while possibly excluding marginalised communities, reported Reuters in September. In the healthcare sector, ChatGPT was shown to generate false results claiming there were physiological differences in Black people's bodies when compared to other races, per a study in the Digital Medicine journal.

Looking back, Mr. Downs explained that fields such as epidemiology (the study of diseases and how they affect groups of people) largely emerged from slavery or colonialism, with doctors studying the spread of diseases in subjugated populations — such as Indians under the British rule in the 19th century. "This same pattern applies to the birth of psychology as a field. It emerged from specific historical case studies that articulated Indian and other people of colour throughout the world as inferior to white Europeans," Mr. Downs said.

He pointed to scholar Sunil Bhatia's book Decolonizing Psychology, which explores how early psychology was based on unscientific ideas of white supremacy over colonised Indians. Mr. Downs stressed on the importance of including multiple cultures and complex identities when recognising health conditions even today. "Therefore, we need to be suspicious of AI generated understandings of health and illness because they may propagate Eurocentric understandings of medicine that fail to recognise the cultural specificity of the people of India and in other cultures around the world," he said.

RACE OF CHATBOTS

For a year now, Google has been playing catch-up with OpenAI. Since the release of ChatGPT marked a momentous occasion in what has become the age of AI, the lumbering search giant was seen scrambling to put their next foot forward. Google, a company that was aggressive in releasing AI research but slow at releasing tools to the public, had been outmanoeuvred by a nifty startup. The threat of the AI chatbot was great enough for CEO Sundar Pichai to pull the fire alarm and declare a 'Code Red' situation at the company. Founders Sergei Brin and Larry Page came out of retirement at Mr. Pichai's behest.

After reports of delays and a long wait, Google released their new AI model Gemini on Wednesday. And now was as opportune a moment as any. A couple of weeks ago, OpenAI had been caught in a board coup that had ended up temporarily ousting CEO Sam Altman. Google was certainly looking to capitalise on the ripple of uncertainty that had shaken up its competitor.

Google's treasure trove of multimodal data from search and YouTube had come to its rescue. Gemini had been trained to learn about the world like a baby — changing our perception of what a large language model is supposed to be. It didn't just read data and seemingly regurgitate it; it could understand what an image or an audio was. This multimodal ability was a much rounder way of "intelligence".

Where the standard approach to build multi-modal models usually means training the different components for different modalities, Gemini was trained on multiple modalities from the ground-up. Because of this Google termed Gemini "natively multimodal".

Impressed reactions

Demo videos of the model drew impressed reactions. There were things Gemini was seen doing in the videos that we haven't seen any AI model do as yet. Like it could figure out that a dot-to-dot picture was a crab even before it had been finished, or even track a ball of paper from under a plastic cup and spot sleight-of-hand tricks.

Unlike most models which are trained on graphics processing units or GPUs, Gemini was trained using Google's in-house designed tensor processing units or TPUs, which bodes well considering the overarching GPU shortages that plague most companies building their own AI models.

Gemini comes in three sizes meant for a range of platforms — Nano was designed for on-device tasks like summarising text and making suggestions in chat applications; Gemini Pro was the model currently underlying its AI-powered chatbot Bard; and Gemini Ultra, the multimodal version, will be released sometime next year once trust and safety checks are completed. The model will be made available to developers through Google Cloud's API from December 13. Gemini is also the most product-oriented than most models in the market as it is enmeshed in the Google ecosystem.

Some digging into Google's claims revealed some more truths. Wharton professor Ethan Mollick demonstrated that ChatGPT could comfortably replicate some of the tasks that had initially seemed impressive in the Gemini demo, like analysing an image step-by-step. Another associate professor from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Dimitris Papailiopoulos, tried 14 examples of multimodal reasoning that the Gemini research paper had presented, on ChatGPT-4. GPT4V got 12 of these instances right with a couple of responses even better than Gemini's.

Google also admitted that the demo videos were edited to shorten the response time. Inquiries made by Bloomberg revealed that the seemingly flowing conversation between Gemini and the user in the video had been an inserted voice. In reality, the prompts were made via text while the model was shown images consecutively. The embarrassing gaffe made in the live demo during Bard's release was something that the company desperately would have wanted to avoid. But despite the caveat of good marketing, Gemini has shifted AI in a direction more expansive that just a talking chatbot.

CLOUD GIANT AWS GOES ALL IN ON AI RUSH OFFERING GENERATIVE AI TOOLS

Amazon Web Services, the U.S. retail giant Amazon's profitable cloud computing arm, signalled that it is going all in on the Artificial Intelligence bandwagon, telling a crowd in Las Vegas of 50,000 visiting developers and customers that it was now offering generative AI tools to make writing code and using its services more accessible with chat-like interfaces with enterprise users.

(Amazon's consumer-facing products like the Amazon Echo smart speaker don't yet widely have the kind of capabilities it is now rushing to deploy for its enterprise clients.)

AWS is a giant in cloud and hosting, an industry that supports the bulk of the parts of the Internet aside from access providers, providing people who want to host websites and run services online the resources and tools to do so. As a dominant player over decades, it is a key driver in the hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue that Amazon rakes in each year. In Hyderabad and Mumbai, the firm operates two clusters of data centres, serving the local market in India. It has committed to invest $12.7 billion in the country by 2030.

The announcements that most excite its customers were in full supply across the firm's keynotes in November: improvements that would let customers save on costs and do more with what they have, and launching new services that some of them have long been asking for. But the emphasis on AI reflects increasing pressures on corporate leaders in the cloud space to fulfill demand for applications of rapidly increasing complexity. The firm announced Amazon Q, an enterprise chatbot along the lines of similar products by ChatGPT maker OpenAI and the search giant Google. The product would help with coding and working with AWS products, but also hook into companies' own systems, while keeping sensitive information within businesses inaccessible to unauthorised personnel.

Under scrutiny

Some of those claims of confidentiality have since come under scrutiny, as internal messages by AWS employees appeared to show data leaks in testing, according to correspondence leaked to the technology news site Platformer. In any case, the service remains in preview mode, and is not yet launched fully.

These announcements come with Amazon's heavy investments in AI, such as a $4 billion investment in Anthropic, a San Francisco based "AI safety and research company," whose technology Amazon is leveraging for some of the products it announced at the event. The firm is also investing in partnerships such as with the graphics card maker NVIDIA to create purpose-built chips that can be used in server farms like the ones operated by AWS.

And the rush to develop this technology is driven not just by the companies that are pouring unprecedented levels of money and resources into developing AI tools, but from firms of all sizes keen to trim their expenses on automatable tasks.

"Organizations of all sizes are getting going with generative AI," Adam Selipsky, AWS's CEO said in his keynote. "They want to take the momentum that they're building with early experimentation and turn it into real world productivity gains."

WILL AN AI CANVASSER DECEIVE VOTERS?

Daniels, who lost to Perry by less than 10 points last year, hopes a new weapon will help her underdog candidacy: Ashley, an artificial intelligence campaign volunteer.

Ashley is not your typical robocaller; none of her responses are canned or pre-recorded. Her creators, who intend to mainly work with Democratic campaigns, say she is the first political canvasing device powered by generative AI technology. She is capable of having an infinite number of customized one-on-one conversations at the same time.

Ashley is one of the first examples of how generative AI is ushering in a new era of political campaigning in which candidates use technology to engage with voters in ways increasingly difficult to track. To some, it is an exciting new tool for conducting high-quality conversations on a large scale. Others worry this will worsen disinformation in the polarized landscape of American politics already battling "deepfakes".

Over the weekend, Ashley called thousands of Pennsylvania voters. Like a seasoned campaign volunteer, Ashley analyzes voters' profiles to tailor conversations around their key issues. Ashley always shows up for the job, has perfect recall of all of Daniels' positions, and does not feel dejected when she's hung up on.

"This is going to scale fast," said 30-year-old Ilya Mouzykantskii, the London-based CEO of Civox, the company behind Ashley. "We intend to be making tens of thousands of calls a day by the end of the year and into the six digits pretty soon. This is coming for the 2024 election and it's coming in a very big way. ... The future is now."

For Daniels, the tool levels the playing field: as the underdog, she is now armed with another way to understand voters better, reach out in different languages (Ashley is fluent in over 20), and conduct many more "high bandwidth" conversations. But the development worries many, including OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, who testified in Congress in May that he was "nervous" about generative AI's ability to compromise election integrity through "one-on-one interactive disinformation." The technologyhas become so good at realistic conversations that in recent months people have fallen in love with, and declared themselves married to, AI-powered chatbots.

Mouzykantskii said he is fully aware of the potential downsides, and does not intend to take any venture capital funding which might entice him to prioritize profits over ethics.

And like OpenAI, he is setting up an unusual governance structure: a committee empowered to force him to publicly disclose anything of concern about the company. Civox has decided to give Ashley a robotic-sounding voice and disclose she is an AI, despite not being legally required to do so.

Mouzykantskii and his co-founder Adam Reis, former computer science students at Stanford and Columbia Universities respectively, declined to disclose the exact generative AI models they are using. They will only say they use over 20 different AI models, some proprietary and some open-source.

Thanks to the latest generative AI technologies, Reis was able to build the product almost entirely on his own, whereas several years ago it would have taken a team of 50 engineers several years to do so, he said.

EXPRESS VIEW ON AI-GENERATED VAN GOGH: ZOMBIE VINCENT

In fantasy stories involving magic, gods, elves and dwarves — as well as most religious and other per-science worldviews — there is one surefire way to distinguish between good and evil, priests and sorcerers. The downfall of many a character begins with the quest for immortality (remember Voldemort) and ends with necromancy. The message is simple: Let the dead stay buried. But then, what chance do archetypes have against the desire to stay relevant in the age of AI? None at all, it seems, going by the latest Vincent van Gogh exhibit at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

"Bonjour Vincent" features a ghoulish, AI-generated van Gogh. Engineers have fed the software facts about the artist from early biographies, as well as training it on over 900 letters by him. A facsimile of the artist can now answer questions about his life, thoughts on his suicide and "mental health issues". In his time, of course, things were both worse and more evocative – the inevitable darkness that gripped him was "melancholy", Greek for the black bile, that consumes so many. But the problem with AI van Gogh isn't just the lack of pathos, or even its limited knowledge. It is that necromancy, aided by technology, threatens a fundamental dialectic of life and art — between the finite and infinite, death and immortality.

Vincent van Gogh was a genius. Vincent van Gogh is dead. There was a time when only the former was debatable. Those who loved his work would read about him and try to discover the creative genealogy, and how life affects art, of the paradigm he set. The artist lived on through his work,

for posterity. Now, he may well be reduced to the same order of things as the chatbot people complain to when their midnight junk food delivery is running late.

INNOVATION OR SAFETY? HOW DELHI DECLARATION FOUND MIDDLE PATH BETWEEN PROMOTION AND REGULATION OF AI

The Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI), an alliance of 29 members, has unanimously adopted the New Delhi declaration underscoring the need to mitigate risks arising from the development and deployment of artificial intelligence (AI) systems, and promoting equitable access to critical resources for AI innovation, including computing and high-quality diverse datasets.

The declaration stands out as a contrast from the agreement signed at the United Kingdom AI Safety Summit at Bletchley Park, Buckinghamshire, a month ago, where countries had committed to first tackle the risks emanating from AI systems.

The New Delhi declaration has attempted to find a balance between innovation and the risks associated with AI systems. While it is largely upbeat about the economic benefits that AI can bring, it also flags issues around fairness, privacy, and intellectual property rights that will have to be taken into consideration.

What does the GPAI New Delhi declaration on AI say?

"We recognise the rapid pace of improvement in advanced AI systems and their potential to generate economic growth, innovation, and jobs across various sectors as well as to benefit societies," the declaration said.

The declaration said that a global framework for use of AI should be rooted in democratic values and human rights; safeguarding dignity and well-being; ensuring personal data protection; the protection of applicable intellectual property rights, privacy, and security; fostering innovation; and promoting trustworthy, responsible, sustainable, and human-centred use of AI.

GPAI members also promoted equitable access to critical resources for AI innovation including computing, high-quality diverse datasets, algorithms, software, testbeds, and other AI-relevant resources. The declaration also agreed to support AI innovation in the agriculture sector as a new "thematic priority".

It said that the GPAI will pursue a diverse membership, with a particular focus on low- and middle-income countries to ensure a broad range of expertise, national and regional views, and experiences based on shared values.

Senegal, a current member of the grouping, was elevated to the steering committee of the GPAI.

How does the New Delhi declaration contrast with the Bletchley declaration?

While the GPAI New Delhi declaration addresses the need to tackle AI-related risks, it largely supports innovation in the technology in various sectors, including agriculture and healthcare. The essence of the declaration can be summed up as follows: AI is inherently good and is a catalyst for economic growth, but some harms need to be mitigated along the way.

By contrast, the declaration that was signed at the UK AI Safety Summit last month put security and safety risks related to AI in the centre of the discussions. At the Bletchley Park meeting, 28

major countries including the United States, China, Japan, the United Kingdom, France, and India, and the European Union agreed to sign on a declaration saying global action is needed to tackle the potential risks of AI.

The declaration noted the "potential for serious, even catastrophic, harm, either deliberate or unintentional, stemming from the most significant capabilities of these AI models", as well as risks beyond frontier AI, including those of bias and privacy. "Frontier AI" is defined as highly capable foundation generative AI models that could possess dangerous capabilities that can pose severe risks to public safety.

So, has India been changing its position on the regulation of AI?

Even as India looks to unlock the potential economic benefits of AI systems, it's own thinking on AI regulation has undergone a significant change — from not considering any legal intervention on regulating AI in the country just a few months ago, to now moving in the direction of actively formulating regulations based on a "risk-based, user-harm" approach.

At the inaugural session of the GPAI Summit on Tuesday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi flagged the dual potential of AI — while it can be 21st century's biggest development tool, it can also potentially play a very destructive role — and called for a global framework that will provide guardrails and ensure its responsible use.

In April, the Ministry of Electronics and IT had said it was not considering any law to regulate the AI sector. Union IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw had said that although AI "had ethical concerns and associated risks", it had proven to be an enabler of the digital and innovation ecosystem.

However, after deepfakes of a number of popular personalities got mainstream traction, the IT Ministry began to talk of a concrete legislative step to tackle AI-based misinformation. Vaishnaw said that it could either be a new law, or an amendment to existing rules.

Part of this shift was also reflected in a new consultation paper floated by the telecommunications regulator Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) in July, which said that the Centre should set up a domestic statutory authority to regulate AI in India through the lens of a "risk-based framework". The paper had also called for collaborations with international agencies and governments of other countries to form a global agency for the "responsible use" of AI.

WHAT ARE FSB'S CONCERNS ABOUT CRYPTO ASSET INTERMEDIARIES?

The story so far:

Published last month, the international Financial Stability Board (FSB)'s latest report on crypto-asset intermediaries sought measures to enhance cross-border cooperation and information sharing among local authorities. This is to effectively regulate and address gaps in multi-function crypto-asset intermediaries (MCIs) operating globally. Specifically referring to the FTX collapse in November 2022, it highlights potential risks associated with MCIs that combine different activities within the platform.

How does the report define MCIs?

The report defines MCIs as individual firms, or groups of affiliated firms that offer a range of crypto-based services, products and functions which primarily revolve around operating of the trading platform. Examples include Binance, Bitfinex and Coinbase. In the traditional financial

landscape, the functions are provided by separate entities, instead of the same entity. This prevents conflict of interest and promotes market integrity, investor protection and financial stability.

The primary source of revenue for these platforms are the transaction fees generated from trading-related activities, the traded security here being self-issued crypto assets. Trades from alternative platforms may also indirectly drive additional demand for other services offered by the platform. These may include prepaid debit cards and lending, among other services. This shows that the aspirations of MCIs extend beyond just trading to becoming a "one-stop shop" for crypto-based services.

FSB's report observes that the magnitude of these revenue sources is unclear because of the limited publicly disclosed information.

What about transparency?

The report observes that most MCIs are not transparent about their corporate structure. Further, they are privately held. Even if they disclose information, the report observes, it is typically for a small part of their business, specific to a jurisdiction. Much of the available information has surfaced through press coverage, court filings and regulatory actions and not public disclosures. The watchdog observed that MCIs failed to create a "meaningful separation" between potentially conflicting business lines, and provide clear account of transactions and activities or audit practices, among other things. The report suggests this could be intentional, to limit understanding of their vulnerabilities, economic models and activities — thus, to also evade regulatory oversight. Overall, this translates to lowered or non-existent oversight parameters for management of risk and governance frameworks.

Poor risk management, the report says, "may make it easier for insiders to engage in misconduct that magnifies MCI vulnerabilities." The lack of transparency could also mean that risks from lack of effective governance or lack of profitability of the business model would be hidden until the negative shocks fully materialise. In fact, in June this year, the U.S. SEC alleged that Binance misled investors about their risk controls and inflated trading volumes.

What about spillovers?

The report observes that, based on available evidence, the threat to global financial stability and to the real economy from the failure of an MCI is presently "limited." However, recent experience about failure or closure of "crypto-asset-friendly" banks reveal the prevalence of concentrated deposit exposures to firms whose business models rely in some form on crypto assets. In March this year, Silvergate Bank had to wind down its operations and voluntarily liquidate. This was after the FTX collapse and an ensuing loss of confidence (in crypto-assets) that resulted in a 'run-off' (investors moving away from riskier to safer assets).

UNDERSTANDING WEB BROWSERS: HOW DO THEY WORK?

Web browsers are our digital passports to the vast universe of the internet. Their simplicity is deceptive as beneath their user-friendly interfaces lies a world of intricate processes that transform clicks into the web pages we interact with every day.

What are web browsers?

Fundamentally, the browser is an application that people use to send and receive messages via the internet. In other words, the browser is a program that runs on your device, with its purpose being to fetch information in different formats from the internet and show it on the device. It also does the reverse, receiving your input (say, a click), translating it to code, and transmitting it to some other machine across the internet.

How were browsers born?

In the early 1990s, the internet was a fledgling entity, largely text-based and navigated through little pieces of code typed out and transmitted to machines somewhere else, waiting for them to respond. Then, in 1990, the English computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee introduced the concept of the World Wide Web, and with it came the first web browser, also named 'WorldWideWeb'. It didn't just display web pages; it also allowed users to edit them.

The next watershed moment was the debut of the Mosaic browser in 1993. Developed by a team at the U.S. National Center for Supercomputing Applications, it introduced the concept of displaying images alongside text, revolutionising the way we interacted with the web. This is when the internet became visually engaging. Netscape Navigator burst onto the scene a year later and rapidly became the most popular browser of its time. It brought feature innovations like bookmarks and a user-friendly URL bar, simplifying navigation and making the web more accessible.

Then, the late 1990s witnessed a fierce battle among browser developers — a period dubbed the 'Browser Wars'. Microsoft's Internet Explorer (IE) and Netscape Navigator were the primary contenders. This competition spurred rapid innovation, with each browser striving to outperform the other in terms of speed, features, and compatibility. By 2000, IE had emerged as the dominant browser, due in large part to its integration with the Windows operating system. But this period of monopoly also caused development and innovation to stagnate.

This monotony was broken in 2004 or 2005, in the next turning point in the history of browsers: the emergence of Mozilla Firefox. Developed by a community of volunteers and based on open-source principles, Firefox introduced ground-breaking new features like tabbed browsing and pop-up blocking, and also allowed users to 'extend' their personal browsers with add-ons. Firefox's arrival reinvigorated competition and set new standards for user-friendly browsing.

In 2008, Google launched Chrome, which swiftly gained in popularity for its speed and minimalist design. Like browsers past, Chrome's success also revitalised the browser market and encouraged innovation across the board. Other browsers, like Mozilla Firefox, Apple's Safari, and Microsoft Edge (as a successor to Internet Explorer) also evolved, providing users with a range of choices tailored to their preferences.

What is inside a browser?

Modern web browsers have multiple core components, each of which is a complex technology in itself. They also rely on several others, plus standards that say how the internet should work.

First is the request and response component. When you enter a website's address (in the form of the Uniform Resource Locator, or URL) into your browser's address bar or when you click a link, you set in motion a sequence of digital communication. The browser sends a request to a server, asking for the contents of the specific web page you're interested in. This request travels through

a network of servers, like dispatching a letter through a series of post offices. Upon reaching the server, the request is received and processed. The server then formulates a response containing the information (or data) required to construct the web page. This response embarks on its journey back to your browser, carrying the digital blueprint for the page you requested.

Second is deconstructing the response. The response from the server is not a singular entity. Instead, it is an amalgam of various files. Typically, these files have information encoded in three languages: HTML, CSS, and JavaScript. Each set of information plays a pivotal role in shaping the final presentation of the web page. HTML, short for Hypertext Markup Language, provides the architectural blueprint of a webpage. Similar to the skeletal framework of a building, made with iron bars, bricks, and cement, HTML defines the structure of the page, outlining elements like headings, paragraphs, images, and links. As the cornerstone of web content, HTML is the foundation on which browsers construct the visual layout.

Imagine CSS, or Cascading Style Sheets, to be the interior designer of the digital world. This information imparts style and aesthetics to the HTML structure by controlling attributes like colour schemes, fonts, spacing, and positioning. CSS ensures that the webpage comes into its unique visual identity. JavaScript is the dynamic engine, making web pages interactive and responsive. Analogous to the electrical system in a building, JavaScript breathes life into static content. It allows interactive elements like pop-ups, forms, animations, and real-time updates, creating an engaging user experience. It also allows the browser to run some scripts and perform simple tasks on a page instead of waiting to receive instructions from a distant server.

Then there is rendering — with HTML, CSS, and JavaScript in hand, a browser begins the process of rendering. This involves deciphering the HTML to understand the structural arrangement, applying CSS for stylistic finesse, and executing JavaScript to infuse interactivity (One can deconstruct the final result on a webpage by right-clicking on the page and selecting 'Inspect'). This process is remarkably swift, assembling the final webpage and presenting it to the user in a cohesive and visually appealing manner in much less than a second, depending on the amount of data. Rendering engines are in themselves a key piece of technology that enable screens to display graphics.

Fourth component is managing data. Browsers serve as adept custodians of your digital footprint, so they also implement instruments like cookies and cache to enhance your online experience. Cookies are small snippets of data stored on your computer by websites you visit. Think of them as digital post-it notes. They retain information such as login status, site preferences, and shopping cart contents. This allows you to navigate seamlessly, without having to re-login to a site when you close and reopen it in a short span of time. Comparable to short-term memory, the cache is a repository of frequently accessed files. When you revisit a webpage, the browser checks its cache to see if it already has a copy of the required files. If so, it retrieves them from the cache rather than re-downloading them from the server. This accelerates page loading time and conserves bandwidth.

And finally, we have security. Web browsers are sentinels that guard your digital sanctuary. They use an array of security measures to protect your data as they fly between your computer to various servers, via the internet, and even when they're stored on your computer itself. They do this by using encryption protocols, such as HTTPS, to create secure 'tunnels' for data exchange shielding the information from prying eyes. Browsers also use warning systems to alert you about potentially malicious websites, preventing inadvertent exposure to threats.

What next for browsing?

As technology hurtles forward, web browsers evolve in tandem. They are embracing cutting-edge technologies like WebAssembly, a format that enables near-native performance within the browser environment. Support for virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) experiences is also on the horizon, promising immersive online interactions. Additionally, privacy features are being bolstered, providing users with greater control over their digital footprint.

In sum, web browsers are the unsung heroes of our digital endeavours, translating code into the dynamic web pages that form the backbone of our online experiences. By unravelling the intricate tapestry of processes that underlie their operation, we gain a newfound appreciation for the seamless magic they conjure with every click.

The next time you open your browser, remember that behind the scenes, a symphony of digital choreography is unfolding to bring you the online world to your fingertips. Happy browsing!

Varun Vohra is a co-founder of Vaaree.com, a curated marketplace for home products, and a developer and tech-entrepreneur.

EXPRESS VIEW ON THE LIBRARY OF ANIMAL EMOJIS: THE IDEALISM BEHIND THE PURSUIT OF INCLUSION

There are activists who wave pamphlets outside crowded places for their "save the (insert animal)" cause, while others share petitions online. Some scientists, meanwhile, seem to swear by emojis. Jennifer Anderson, a microbial ecologist at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, was unhappy over the exclusion of several species of insects, fungi, and microorganisms from the library of animal emojis. When her colleagues tested this claim (as scientists do), they were astonished to find that out of emojis representing 112 unique organisms, there were 92 animals, 16 plants, one fungus and one single-cell creature (most likely to be E. coli).

For Anderson and colleagues — whose life's work is on aquatic fungi, and other tiny things — this exclusion is a travesty that they are demanding be addressed. Those less invested in these creatures might take the same attitude as reality TV star Kourtney Kardashian did, when she responded to her sister Kim's hysterical outcry over a lost earring: "There's people that are dying." This is not to discredit the power of emojis. In 2021, an emoji depicting a hand with the index finger and thumb pinched towards each other sparked a massive debate around sexism in South Korea. And earlier this year, a Canadian judge ruled that sending "thumbs-up" emoji deems a contract legally binding.

For a cause that is already sidelined in the mainstream, there may be better ways to spread awareness than dedicating a minuscule graphic, which will languish untouched. Because unless the illustration stands out among the 3,782 emojis that currently exist, it is not saving anything. Even so, there is a precious idealism in Anderson's statement when she says, "Having an emoji signals that an organism is valued or somehow important enough to be part of daily conversation," — and that it may be worth saving.

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JAILED IRANIAN ACTIVIST NARGES MOHAMMADI WINS NOBEL PEACE PRIZE FOR FIGHT AGAINST OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

Jailed Iranian activist Narges Mohammadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday for her fight against the oppression of women in Iran and promoting human rights and freedom for all.

"She fights for women against systematic discrimination and oppression," said Berit Reiss-Andersen, the chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee who announced the prize in Oslo.

Authorities arrested Mohammadi in November after she attended a memorial for a victim of violent 2019 protests. Before being jailed, Mohammadi was vice president of the banned Defenders of Human Rights Centre in Iran. Mohammadi has been close to Iranian Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi, who founded the centre.

Mohammadi is currently serving multiple sentences in Tehran's Evin Prison amounting to about 12 years imprisonment, according to the Front Line Defenders rights organisation, one of the many periods she has been detained behind bars. Charges include spreading propaganda against the state.

Mohammadi is the 19th woman to win the 122-year-old prize and the first one since Maria Ressa of the Philippines won the award in 2021 jointly with Russia's Dmitry Muratov.

Among this year's contenders were the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg, and UN secretary general António Guterres.

The committee had a total of 351 candidates to choose from (259 of which are individuals and 92 organisations). The winner was awarded a gold medal, a diploma and 11 million Swedish krona.

Human rights groups from Russia and Ukraine — Memorial and the Center for Civil Liberties — won the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize, along with the jailed Belarusian advocate Ales Bialiatski.

The laureates were honoured for "an outstanding effort to document war crimes, human rights abuses and the abuse of power" in their respective countries.

The Ukrainian group, Center for Civil Liberties, "engaged in efforts to identify and document Russian war crimes against the Ukrainian civilian population" since the invasion was launched in February last year, the committee said.

Bialiatski, meanwhile, has documented human rights abuses in Belarus since the 1980s. He founded the organization Viasna, or Spring, in 1996 after a referendum that consolidated the authoritarian powers of president and close Russian ally, Alexander Lukashenko.

PINNA NOBILIS: COMEBACK HERO

WHAT IS IT?

A huge clam that was on the verge of extinction has made a comeback, with a surge in numbers in waters off Croatia, marine biologists say. The clam, known as the noble pen shell or pinna nobilis, started dying out as a deadly pathogen spread in parts of the Mediterranean around 2016. Numbers plummeted across the region and, until recently, scientists in Croatia only knew of around 10 surviving in their corner of the Adriatic.

Last year, a diver spotted a group of 20 near the shore in the north of the Istria peninsula. "The news sounded incredible. It was impossible they were alive," said Sandro Dujmovic of the Natura Histrica organisation, which manages Istria's protected areas.

This year biologists managed to collect about 100 young specimens and take them to an aquarium. "It was a sign that they are still reproducing themselves," Dujmovic told Reuters.

The clams, whose shells can grow as much as 1.2 m across, play an important ecological role by filtering sea water and allowing other organisms to flourish. In the aquarium in the Adriatic town of Pula, they are kept in specially filtered water, clear of the parasites that can attack them.

The scientists said it was too early to say what had caused the comeback, but Croatia's government was funding more research.

ORIGIN MYSTERY OF MUMMIFIED BABOONS FINALLY CRACKED

In 1905, Egyptologists Louis Lortet and Claude Gaillard discovered mummified baboons in Luxor, Egypt, puzzling researchers for over a century due to the animals' non-native status. A recent study led by primatologist Gisela Kopp used mitochondrial DNA analysis to trace the baboons' origins to Adulis, an ancient city in present-day Eritrea. The findings also shed light on the possible location of the lost city of Punt, a vital trade partner for ancient Egypt.

While ancient Egyptians mummified animals, the mummification of baboons posed a mystery as they are not native to Egypt. Previous studies suggested they were bred in captivity for religious purposes. The study's use of mitochondrial DNA allowed researchers to overcome challenges posed by isotope analysis, revealing the baboons' geographical origin.

The study links Adulis and Punt, emphasizing their role as trade partners between 800 BC and 500 BC. Greco-Roman accounts, along with artwork and texts, support a connection between the two locations, suggesting Punt and Adulis might be different names for a common trading center. The findings underscore the Red Sea's significance in historical trade relationships between India, Egypt, and Europe.

This groundbreaking research, one of the first instances of successfully analyzing ancient DNA from non-human primates, opens new avenues for understanding ancient trade routes. The team plans to explore more baboon DNA from different periods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between Egyptians and baboons across various civilizations.

COUSIN OF T. REX HAD AN EXTREMELY PARTICULAR PALATE

The young Gorgosaurus knew what it liked for dinner. About 75 million years ago in what is now Canada's Alberta province, this fearsome Tyrannosaurus rex cousin set about hunting turkey-sized yearlings of a feathered plant-eating dinosaur called Citipes.

With such prey numerous, the Gorgosaurus could be picky about what it ate. It dismembered the helpless Citipes and swallowed its meaty legs whole, ignoring the rest of the carcass.

Scientists have said they have unearthed fossilised remains of a juvenile Gorgosaurus that was 5 to 7 years old and 4.5 m long. Amazingly, it included the animal's stomach contents, revealing its last meals.

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Gorgosaurus and the more famous Tyrannosaurus, which lived several million years later, are members of a meat-eating dinosaur group called tyrannosaurs. This fossil has provided insight into the ecology of this group, showing that the feeding strategy and diet of tyrannosaurs changed dramatically during their lifespan. This is the first tyrannosaur skeleton with prey items preserved inside its stomach.

Based on tooth marks left on bones, adults are known to have hunted big plant-eating dinosaurs.

"Adult tyrannosaurs were well-equipped for seizing and killing large prey, like duckbilled dinosaurs and horned dinosaurs. Their skulls and teeth were capable of withstanding the major torsional stresses associated with biting and holding onto large prey," said François Therrien, dinosaur palaeoecology curator at the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Alberta and co-leader of the study published in the journal Science Advances.

"In contrast, the weaker bites and teeth of young tyrannosaurs were ideal for slashing bites, not holding onto prey," Dr. Therrien added.

Gorgosaurus, a bit smaller than Tyrannosaurus, walked on two legs, had short arms with two-fingered hands, a massive skull 1 m long, reached 9-10 m in length, and weighed 2-3 tonnes. The juvenile Gorgosaurus weighed about 330 kg, with a skull around 50 cm long.

The fossil was unearthed at Dinosaur Provincial Park in southern Alberta.

The stomach contents included the leg and foot bones of two Citipes yearlings. Citipes was a small, birdlike dinosaur that walked on two legs and had a head resembling a parrot.

"Since the Citipes would have [laid] some 30 eggs in a nest, their hatchlings would have been abundant in the ecosystem and ripe for the picking by young tyrannosaurs," said University of Calgary dinosaur paleontologist and study co-leader Darla Zelenitsky.

Based on the differing stomach acid damage to the Citipes bones, the yearlings were eaten at different times, and the Gorgosaurus died from unknown causes hours or days after its last meal.

MOSQUITO FOSSIL HAS BLOOD-SUCKING SURPRISE

Lakhs of people worldwide are killed every year by malaria and other diseases spread through the bite of mosquitoes, insects that date back to the age of dinosaurs. All of these bites are inflicted by females, which possess specialised mouth anatomy that their male counterparts lack.

But it has not always been that way. Researchers said they have discovered the oldest-known fossils of mosquitoes: two males entombed in pieces of amber dating to 130 million years ago during the Cretaceous Period, found near the town of Hammana in Lebanon. To their surprise, the male mosquitoes possessed elongated piercing-sucking mouthparts seen now only in females.

"Clearly they were hematophagous," meaning blood-eaters, said palaeontologist Dany Azar of the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Nanjing Institute of Geology and Paleontology and Lebanese University, lead author of the study published this week in the journal Current Biology. "So this discovery is a major one in the evolutionary history of mosquitoes."

The two fossilised mosquitoes, both representing the same extinct species, are similar in size and appearance to modern mosquitoes, though the mouthparts used for obtaining blood are shorter than in today's female mosquitoes.

"Mosquitoes are the most notorious blood-feeders on humans and most terrestrial vertebrates, and they transmit a certain number of parasites and diseases to their hosts," Dr. Azar said.

"Only fertilised female mosquitoes will suck blood, because they need proteins to make their eggs develop. Males and unfertilised females will eat some nectar from plants. And some males do not feed at all," Dr. Azar added.

Some flying insects - tsetse flies, for instance - have hematophagous males. But not modern mosquitoes.

"Finding this behaviour in the Cretaceous is quite surprising," said paleontologist and study co-author André Nel of the National Museum of Natural History of Paris.

The delicate anatomy of the two mosquitoes was beautifully preserved in the fossils. Both displayed exceptionally sharp and triangle-shaped jaw anatomy and an elongated structure with tooth-like projections.

The researchers said they suspect that mosquitoes evolved from insects that did not consume blood. They hypothesise that the mouthparts that became adapted for obtaining blood meals originally were used to pierce plants to get access to nutritious fluids.

Plant evolution may have played a role in the feeding divergence between male and female mosquitoes. At the time when these two mosquitoes became stuck in tree sap that eventually became amber, flowering plants were beginning to flourish for the first time on the Cretaceous landscape.

HONEYGUIDE BIRDS LEARN SIGNALS BY HONEY HUNTERS

African honeyguide birds understand and respond to the culturally distinct signals made by local human honey hunters, suggesting cultural coevolution between species. These successful calls have been maintained in these groups for generations. Systems in which humans successfully cooperate with wild animals are rare. One such involves the greater honeyguide, a small African bird known to lead humans to wild bees' nests. Humans open the nests to collect honey, and the honeyguides eat the beeswax.

ELECTRIC EELS

Can electricity from electric eels transfer genetic material to nearby animals?

The electric eel can release up to 860 volts, which is enough to run a machine. In a recent study, a research group from Nagoya University in Japan found electric eels can release enough electricity to genetically modify small fish larvae (PeerJ —Life and Environment). The researchers' findings add to what we know about electroporation, a gene delivery technique. Electroporation uses an electric field to create temporary pores in the cell membrane. This lets molecules, like DNA or proteins, enter the target cell. Researchers from Nagoya University realised that electric eels in the Amazon River could well act as a power source, organisms living in the surrounding area could act as recipient cells, and environmental DNA fragments released into the water would become foreign genes, causing genetic recombination in the surrounding organisms because of electric discharge. The researchers discovered that 5% of the larvae had markers showing gene transfer.