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INTERNATIONAL

TRUMP'S DISQUALIFICATION WILL NOT STEM THE RIGHT-WING WAVE

The so-called crisis of liberal democracies — which began in some senses with the election of Donald Trump in the US and Brexit in the UK — in 2016, has had myriad consequences. Among these is an eroding faith in public institutions, particularly in the US. A Pew Research Centre survey published in September confirms this trend: Just 16 per cent of respondents said they trust the federal government (a historic low), and “more have an unfavourable than favourable opinion of the Supreme Court — the first time that has occurred in polling going back to the late 1980s”. The ruling by the Colorado supreme court last week — on the heels of other criminal charges, from hush-money payments to inciting an insurrection in January 2020 — barring Trump from appearing on the presidential ballot in the state is unlikely to affirm faith in the democratic system or the judiciary. In an election year, the US Supreme Court will have to, in effect, decide on whether one of the two frontrunners can contest. In fact, in a divided time, it's the political process and the parties that steer it that need to step up.

Trump faces over 90 felony counts in the various cases against him. The Colorado ruling is based on a 19th-century post-US Civil War constitutional amendment under which a constitutional functionary is barred from holding office if they actively engage in or incite an insurrection. While it applies only to the state, it has a much wider significance. Similar petitions have been filed all over the US and the supreme court (US SC) decision will have a bearing on all of them. Given that the US SC has a 6-3 conservative Republican-leaning majority, it is unlikely to uphold the Colorado verdict. Even with a more liberal bench, a judgment essentially disqualifying a major candidate would bring up understandable questions about the separation of powers.

No presidential candidate has faced as many criminal charges as Trump. But there is little doubt about his popularity: The most recent polls show that he is neck-and-neck with Joe Biden, with third-party candidate Robert Kennedy also making a strong showing. Many of the other Republican candidates — Vivek Ramaswamy, for example — are “Trumpists”, indicating how America's right wing has become coloured by the politics of the former president. Trump, then, has thrown up an institutional and philosophical challenge. How do political institutions deal with populist politicians, who do not necessarily follow the rules of the game? How does the centre hold when the extremes become mainstream? These are questions whose answers are also required beyond the US. But it is not just for a court to answer them.

HOW IS THE U.K. CRACKING DOWN ON IMMIGRATION?

The story so far:

The government of the U.K. recently proposed new immigration rules to cut the net flow of immigration to the country, primarily by tightening visa requirements across several categories of workers seeking to move to the U.K. from abroad. Immigration policy has always been a key policy plank for the government headed by the Conservative Party, and there has been concern that in recent years the number of those immigrating to the U.K. compared to those emigrating abroad has risen sharply.



Why is the United Kingdom tweaking its immigration rules?

According to the U.K.'s Office for National Statistics (ONS), net migration into the U.K. touched a record high of 7,45,000 in 2022, with reports suggesting that the number of work permits issued to foreign technology professionals in particular rose from 39,899 in 2021 to 52,686 in 2022, marking a five-year high. Specifically, it was the category of web design and development that saw the largest percentage increase with 76% more work permits issued during this period. Of the 11,80,000 people who entered the U.K. during the year ending June 2023, with the intention to stay for at least one year, the greatest majority of migrants — 9,68,000 — came from outside the EU.

According to the ONS, students comprised the largest cohort of non-EU migrants, both in 2023 and 2022. However, the proportion of workers arriving to take on roles in healthcare, to make up for the severe staff shortage in the NHS and social care, have also been rising steadily. The nations that sent the most migrants to the U.K. from outside of the EU were, in order, India (which sent 2,53,000 people), Nigeria (1,41,000), China (89,000), Pakistan (55,000) and Ukraine (35,000). Of these individuals, a total of 39% entered the U.K. for the purpose of pursuing studies, 33% to work, and 9% for humanitarian reasons, according to the ONS.

U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's office has said that migration was "far too high" and putting "unsustainable pressure on communities and councils", a sentiment echoed by Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, who said that "shockingly high" inward migration was a sign of the "failure not just of immigration, but also of asylum and of the economy".

What are the proposed new regulations?

The new visa regulations propose to clamp down on the dependents of students arriving in the U.K. as well as other categories of foreign nationals with family ties in the country.

Skilled workers seeking visas will be impacted by an increase in the minimum salary requirement. At the moment this salary requirement is the highest, of either £26,200 per year or £10.75 per hour or whatever is defined as the "going rate" for the job in question. From early 2024, this is expected to rise to £38,700 per year. Health and social care workers, who comprise nearly 50% of work visa migrants, will reportedly be exempt from the increase, suggesting that the maximum impact will be on middle-skilled jobs including those working in the hospitality industry. Families of U.K. citizens too could be impacted — an aspect of the changes that has provoked the sharpest protests. For example, the minimum income necessary for U.K. citizens seeking to bring over a family member who is a foreign citizen will rise from £18,600 to £38,700 a year — and such a move would have impacted approximately 70,000 people who sought such visas during the year ending June 2023.

Other changes include a ban on immigrant care workers bringing family members with them, a review of student visas for graduates to prevent "abuse" of the system including a ban on students switching to work visas before completing their studies, and an increase in the immigration health surcharge paid to the NHS by annual fee visa holders, from £624 to £1,035.

What is the broader impact of the proposed changes?

Following a sharp backlash from immigration advocacy groups, the U.K. government has already walked back its proposal to raise minimum salary requirements for U.K. citizens to bring in non-U.K. family members, reducing the threshold amount from £38,700 to £29,000, "with further



increases at unspecified dates thereafter.” Meanwhile, acting on fears that the new rules could lead to family separations across the border, advocacy groups such as Reunite Families, are said to be exploring legal avenues to challenge the proposed new immigration rules which amount to being “punished for falling in love”.

THE REBEL WHO BECAME THE RULER

On April 30, 1991, a cyclone hit the coastal Bangladesh with monstrous ferocity. Storm surges drove seawater deep inland. At the end of the nearly seven-hour-long cyclone, at least 1,40,000 people were left dead. Sheikh Hasina, then the leader of the principal opposition Awami League, reached the affected areas near Chittagong before the Government of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) could muster any response. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia should take moral responsibility for failing to provide timely assistance to the people and resign immediately, Ms. Hasina demanded. The images of Ms. Hasina walking on the devastated landmass of coastal Bangladesh drove her into the centre of a grieving nation. The BNP sensed a growing threat, and violent attacks targeted Ms. Hasina in the following months.

Earlier, on November 10, 1987, the police of military ruler Mohammed Ershad had targeted her, which killed three of her young colleagues from the student wing of the Awami League. Sensing that a deeply unpopular and confused military dictator was failing in governance, Ms. Hasina and Ms. Zia came together in 1987. The two were known to be opposed to each other. Yet, they formed an alliance, asking for genuine democracy. In the winter of 1990, the Hasina-Zia duo mobilised lakhs of people in Dhaka, shaking the foundations of Ershad’s regime. Ershad responded by declaring emergency, but in the face of mounting pressure, he resigned on December 4. In the February 1991 election, the BNP came to power, and Ms. Hasina emerged as the main opposition leader. The cyclone of April that year gave Ms. Hasina the political rebirth that she wanted.

Long before the 1991 cyclone, the coastal part of the country was devastated in the winter of 1970 by cyclone ‘Bhola’. For days, the government of Yahya Khan, sitting in a distant Islamabad, did not know the scale of the devastation. The apathy of the Yahya Khan government was matched by the brutality of Operation Searchlight that was launched by the Pakistani military to crush the democratic aspirations of the winner of general election — the Awami League, under Sheikh Mujib, her father. The Awami League, which took power after the birth of Bangladesh following the India-Pakistan war of 1971, represented the young and restless youth of East Pakistan.

When Mujib was assassinated on August 15, 1975, Ms. Hasina was in West Germany. She and her sister Rehana survived the massacre that wiped out their entire family, including their five-year-old brother Sheikh Russell. After the killings, Ms. Hasina took refuge in India for six years. This was the formative period of the future Prime Minister. In this phase, Ms. Hasina struck a friendship with Congress leader Pranab Mukherjee and the Gandhis of India.

On May 17, 1981, Ms. Hasina returned to Bangladesh. By then, the Awami League had elected her in absentia as its general secretary. The battle against the Ershad regime was tough and the battle against the Zia government was no less. Ms. Zia, widow of former military ruler Zia-ur Rahman who founded the BNP, tried to corner Ms. Hasina as attacks continued. But the Zia government could not recover from the blow of the cyclone and the BNP was defeated in the election of 1996, paving the way for the first term of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The rebel became the ruler.



Agreement with India

In 1997, Ms. Hasina concluded the 30-year Ganga Water Sharing Agreement with India that was to last till 2026. She also announced the plan for building the ambitious bridge across the Padma in this tenure. She reached out to the Chakmas in the Chittagong Hill Tract and concluded a peace treaty on December 2, 1997 with the Parbattyo Chattogram Jana Samhati Samiti. Despite striking several right notes, Ms. Hasina lost the 2001 election that was held under a caretaker government, to a four-party alliance led by the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, Jatiya Party (Manju) and Islamic Oikyo Jote.

The BNP-led government became known subsequently for the alleged support that it provided to the secessionist forces like the ULFA and other groups in India's Northeast. Rampant corruption and public protests crippled the country.

A new Caretaker Government came in January 2007 with support from the military, which imposed emergency and postponed the elections. During this time, Ms. Hasina was jailed on corruption charges which helped her gain public sympathy. The election held on December 29, 2008 returned her to power. This time, she returned to take advantage of her partnership with India and reached an in-principle agreement on Teesta water sharing and started negotiations and survey for the historic Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) with India.

In February 2013, the trial of Abdul Quader Mollah reignited the painful memories of the genocide committed during March-December 1971 under the supervision of the Pakistani military. The powerful Shahbag movement that started in February 2013 demanded death sentence for Mollah, who had earlier got a life sentence. In December that year, Mollah was hanged. Ms. Hasina returned to power in 2014 in an election that was boycotted by the BNP. Unfazed, Ms. Hasina next year sealed the LBA with India.

Continuing with the Shahbag spirit, her government kept up the heat on the collaborators in the genocide and hanged a number of leaders, including Motiur Rahman Nizami and Mir Quasem Ali of Jamaat-e-Islami in 2016. That year, extremism posed the toughest challenge to Hasina with the Islamic State attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery of Dhaka. She vowed to continue her campaign against terrorists which became synonymous with her rule. A tough fighter who had taken on a military dictator in the 1980s, she had by now become a grandmother and acquired a front rank as one of the longest ruling female leaders in the world.

Election controversy

There has been no indications from the party so far about who might succeed Ms. Hasina. Her son Sajeeb Wazed Joy, an entrepreneur, and daughter Saima Wazed, have both hit the headlines. Ms. Saima recently became the South East Asia Regional Director of the World Health Organization, prompting criticism of nepotism. However, for the veteran leader, succession is not yet a priority. The coming election is already in international focus as the BNP has planned to boycott the polls once again. Ms. Hasina has maintained that there will not be the repeat of the past caretaker governments as that provision in the Constitution has been removed. The BNP, however, demands a "neutral government" before polling.

As global pressure mounts on her, Bangladesh is all set to hold the election on January 7. Ms. Hasina has sent emissaries abroad to invite observers and diplomats and promised a fair contest. Despite her assurances, around 14 parties, including the BNP, are boycotting the election. With the completed Padma bridge, and a series of new airports and roadways, Ms. Hasina showcases



her achievements while seeking re-election, though there is economic stress and criticism of a widening crackdown on the opposition. It remains to be seen if Ms. Hasina, the former rebel, would be willing to test her popularity in the ring of a truly “free and fair election” and convince the opposition to join the race at the last moment.

HOUTHİ ATTACKS: A THREAT TO GLOBAL SHIPPING?

The story so far:

On December 23, the crisis in the Red Sea reached Indian waters as Liberian-flagged merchant vessel Chem Pluto heading to Mangalore port was hit by a projectile about 271 miles from Porbandar in Gujarat, just outside the Indian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This comes in the backdrop of a sharp rise in missile and drone attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea by Houthi rebels in Yemen in the last couple of weeks following Israel’s offensive against Hamas in Gaza.

What is the latest on m.v. Chem Pluto?

The vessel with 21 Indians and one Vietnamese crew managed to sail on its power after the attack and reached Mumbai on Monday escorted by the Indian Coast Guard Ship (INGS) Vikram. Upon arrival, a Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal team carried out a preliminary assessment of Chem Pluto and analysis of the area of attack and debris found on the ship points towards a drone attack, the Navy said. “However, further forensic and technical analysis will be required to establish the vector of attack, including type and amount of explosive used,” it stated. A joint investigation by various agencies is also underway.

In another instance, on December 23, Gabon-flagged, Indian crewed vessel m. v. Sai Baba reported a drone attack in the Southern Red Sea and is now on its way to India. The twin attacks on m.v. Sai Baba and Norwegian-flagged m. v. BLAAMANEN, represent the 14th and 15th attacks on commercial shipping by Houthi militants since October 17, according to the U.S. Central Command.

How do these events impact India and the world?

Threats to shipping in the Gulf of Aden and the region are not new as seen with episodes of Somalian pirates and the global anti-piracy efforts by several countries. However, the recent events represent a serious escalation that can potentially disrupt supply chains and impact economics. The Red Sea is a key shipping artery for global commerce and the Bab el-Mandeb is a critical choke point.

Following the October 7 terror attacks on Israel by Hamas and the subsequent offensive by Israeli Defence Forces, the Houthi rebels have declared they would target all maritime commerce linked to Israel. What is especially worrying is their sophisticated arsenal of ballistic missiles and long range drones that are threatening maritime traffic far from the shores. The U.S. Navy has been shooting down missiles and drones in the region almost daily.

“About 12% of global trade passes through the Red Sea, which accounts for billions of dollars of goods and about 30% of the world’s container shipping. Access to the Red Sea requires passage through the Bab el-Mandeb — a narrow strait about 20 miles wide with Djibouti to the west and Yemen to the east,” Susan Stigant, Director of Africa Programs with the U.S. Institute of Peace wrote in a commentary.



Following the attacks, several global shipping majors have announced their decision to avoid the route and take a longer route through the Southern Indian Ocean adding to both fuel and operating costs in addition to the time. For instance, shipping industry giant Maersk had begun re-routing vessels around Africa via the Cape of Good Hope.

Recent data indicates a notable shift in transit passage in the Suez and Red Sea as Israel-flagged and owned ships increasingly avoid transiting the Red Sea due to heightened security concerns, one official monitoring the situation said.

“The avoidance of the Red Sea route has substantial implications, potentially adding one to two weeks to voyages, disrupting shipping schedules, and subsequently elevating fuel and insurance costs,” the official said adding this strategic shift has implications for the revenue generated by the Suez Canal, as well as the operational dynamics of ports in Djibouti and the Gulf of Aden.

What is being done to address this?

To counter the attacks and protect the free flow of commerce in the Red Sea, on December 18, U.S. Secretary of Defence Lloyd J. Austin announced the establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian (OPS), an “important new multinational security initiative under the umbrella of the Combined Maritime Forces and the leadership of its Task Force 153, which focuses on security in the Red Sea.” Since the announcement of OPS, several companies in the last few days announced their decisions to review the re-routing.

From the Indian side, both the Navy and Coast Guard have increased their presence and surveillance in the region. Navy Chief Admiral R. Hari Kumar said, on December 26, that the Navy presently has four destroyers of Project 15B and 15A class deployed to counter piracy and drone attacks on merchant shipping. Further, P8I long range patrol aircraft, Dorniers, Sea Guardian Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, helicopters and Coast Guard ships are all deployed jointly to counter these threats, he stated.

Since October 2008, the Indian Navy has continuously deployed at least one ship on anti-piracy patrol in the Gulf of Aden and since 2017 under Mission Based Deployments has deployed one capital warship each at all the critical maritime choke points into the IOR.

Indian Navy’s Information Fusion Centre for Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) located in Gurugram is actively monitoring the region and coordination in the back end to facilitate communication where required, like between the Navy and the company when m. v. Ruen was hijacked recently in the Gulf of Aden. We coordinate operational responses and assistance to vessels in the Indian Ocean Region, Captain Rohit Bajpai, Director IFC-IOR said last week. “The international organisation had removed the high risk area that was there in the Gulf of Aden on January 1 this year and this is the first instance of actual piracy where a vessel has been hijacked.”

However, several questions remain.

For instance, Indians constitute close to 15% of commercial sailors while Indian owned vessels are very few and a lot of Indian crude and cargo is carried by foreign ships. So how would India and other countries react to a major attack resulting in loss of life or precious cargo? “Where do we draw the line?,” another official questioned.

The fact remains that a shock to global economies in terms of delays and price rises due to the regional crisis is looming on the horizon.



NATION

WHAT'S THE LATEST BLIP IN INDIA-MALDIVES TIES?

The story so far:

Earlier this month, the Maldives Cabinet decided against renewing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with India for cooperation in hydrography. The agreement, which was signed in 2019, is due to expire in 2024. Coming soon after newly elected President Mohamed Muizzu's pledge to send back Indian troops currently stationed in the Indian Ocean archipelago, the move was yet another indication of his government's intention to reverse the former Ibrahim Mohamed Solih administration's 'India first' policy.

What is hydrography?

It is the science of studying oceans, seas, and other water bodies, by compiling and analysing data, maps, and charts. Branching off from applied sciences, it looks at measuring and describing the physical attributes of water bodies and predicting how they might change over time. While it is said to be undertaken primarily for safety of navigation, it also supports other activities, such as economic development, security and defence, scientific research, and environmental protection. Hydrographical measurements include tidal, current and wave information.

What is India's expertise?

India has been an active member of the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) since 1955. The Indian Naval Hydrographic Department (INHD) was established in 1874 in Kolkata. It is the nodal agency for hydrographic surveys and has a fleet of indigenously built modern survey ships. India partners with many countries in the Indian Ocean Region and African and East Asian countries such as Mauritius, Seychelles, Tanzania, Maldives, Mozambique, Vietnam, Myanmar, Kenya, and Sri Lanka. According to the INHD, its role has broadened over time, owing to the heightening global character of hydrography and "its growing potential as a force multiplier" in terms of maritime diplomacy. Personnel from 39 countries have trained at the National Institute of Hydrography, functioning under the INHD.

Why was the 2019 MoU significant?

The MoU was signed in June 2019, during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to the Maldives. It was Mr. Modi's second visit to the Maldives since he participated at President Solih's swearing-in ceremony in 2018. Months before the time the MoU was inked, President Solih and the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) had secured a landslide win in the general elections. The two Indian Ocean neighbours, and their leaders, backed by a decisive majority, committed to close cooperation in development, defence and maritime security. The first meeting of the Joint Commission on Hydrography was held in the Maldives in September 2019. Following the agreement, the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) and the Indian Navy have carried out three joint hydrographic surveys in 2021, 2022, and 2023.

Why has the Cabinet decided against renewing the agreement?

While President Muizzu has not made a statement specifically on the MoU on the joint hydrographic survey, a senior official told Maldivian media that the decision was aligned to the current administration's pledge to terminate all agreements with foreign parties that are



detrimental to or endanger the national security of the Maldives. “It is in the best interest of Maldivian sovereignty that this capacity is improved within our own military, entrusting them with the responsibilities of surveilling and policing our waters, and excluding the participation of any foreign party in such an endeavour,” Under Secretary for Public Policy Mohamed Firzul told a media conference.

The message appeared to be in line with Mr. Muizzu’s broad election campaign, pledging to remove Indian troops from the country and “restoring the Maldives’s sovereignty”. Once he assumed charge, the core demand of the ‘India Out’ campaign led by former President Abdulla Yameen, found mention in President Muizzu’s first set of official announcements.

How has India responded?

In its first response yet to the Cabinet decision, the Ministry of External Affairs on Thursday said India had a “proven track record” in the field. “Let me just say that India has a proven track record in the field of hydrography. And we have also been cooperating with many countries in the Indian Ocean region on hydrography and various elements related to that. The benefits to partner countries are visible, I would like to just leave it at that,” spokesperson Arindam Bagchi told the weekly media conference.

What does this mean for India-Maldives ties?

Going by recent developments, it appears as if New Delhi will have to brace for a challenging phase of its Male partnership. Maldives is a member of the Colombo Security Conclave, an initiative aimed at enhancing Indian Ocean maritime security, that includes India, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius. However, earlier this month, the Maldives skipped the latest round of the Conclave’s NSA-level meet held in Mauritius. Notably, it coincided with Maldivian Vice-President Hussain Mohamed Latheef’s visit to China, to attend the China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation, where he said the Maldives was “eager to explore novel avenues of collaboration and cooperation with China”. The MEA’s response to the termination of the Maldives’s joint hydrographic initiative with India, pointed to New Delhi’s belief that its neighbours should tap the “benefits” of India’s expertise. How it will navigate the choppy waters connecting its southern neighbour will be closely watched.

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE COLOMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE

In early December, India’s National Security Adviser (NSA), Ajit Doval, took part in the sixth NSA meeting of the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC). The meeting reviewed the developments and progress made by the CSC in the last year and agreed upon a road map for the year 2024 to promote a safe, secure, and stable Indian Ocean. The meeting also included member-states, Mauritius and Sri Lanka, and observer-states, Bangladesh and Seychelles. The Maldives, now under a new dispensation, was the only member-state that was absent, underscoring the impact of domestic politics over regional collaboration. It is imperative for India to continue pushing for a proactive CSC to address the challenges in the Indian Ocean.

Changing dynamics

The CSC underscores the evolving dynamics of the Indian Ocean. The organisation came into its own in 2011, with Sri Lanka joining India and the Maldives for a trilateral maritime security grouping but came to a standstill after 2014 due to rising tensions between India and the Maldives. In 2020, India not only pushed for the revival and institutionalisation of the organisation but also



expressed interest in expanding the CSC to Mauritius, the Seychelles, and Bangladesh. The push for the CSC demonstrates India's evolving strategic vision for the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean is at the heart of an evolving multipolar world today, with extra-regional powers competing to make inroads in the region. This competition will further increase as the Indo-Pacific's importance grows.

For India, a traditional power in the region, the CSC offers an opportunity to strengthen its leadership and security architecture. Since its independence, India has played an increasing role in promoting security in the Indian Ocean. The lack of capacity of island nations to secure the seas and counter transnational threats has continued to motivate India to assist them in defence and security-related capacity building, infrastructure development, and equipment provision. India has also played a vital role as the first responder in the region, be it to avert coups or to offer humanitarian and economic assistance during COVID-19 and multi-faceted crises. The CSC offers India an opportunity to institutionalise its role, shape the regional security architecture, and better address the existing and emerging threats.

A revival that is linked to the China factor

China is another crucial reason for the revival of CSC. Since the early 2000s, Beijing has invested substantively in the Indian Ocean with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, helping it access the Indian Ocean. Beijing's outreach to the Indian Ocean is to control the crucial sea lines of communication and trade and to limit India's influence and presence. Today, China is not only strengthening its naval capabilities; it also maintains strong defence relationships with states in the Indian Ocean region and also conducts regular maritime exercises in the Ocean. It has established a base in Djibouti and controls Sri Lanka's Hambantota port. It continues to use scientific ships to map the Indian Ocean bed. Finally, it also wants to counter the prevailing security architecture in the Indian Ocean by institutionalising its presence through platforms such as the Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation.

Despite expressing concerns about some of these developments, India realises that many regional countries do not necessarily consider China a threat. They are also too dependent on China to have an overt anti-China policy. As a result, the CSC has focused on five pillars — maritime security and safety; countering terrorism and radicalisation; trafficking and transnational crime; cyber-security and protecting critical infrastructure, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. It is with these sectors of cooperation that India hopes to better understand and respond to threats from the Indian Ocean and continue being a preferred partner for the Indian Ocean states.

This strategic accommodation and flexibility is, in fact, contributing to the security of the Indian Ocean. Since 2021, the CSC has investigated terrorism and terror financing, narcotics trafficking, cybercrime and security, marine pollution, maritime law, and coastal security. In 2022, for the first time, the organisation held a conference of oceanographers and hydrographers and another conference on coastal security. The next iterations of these conferences are scheduled for 2024. Joint working groups have already been established, or are being finalised, on terrorism, cyber-security, humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR), trafficking and transnational organised crimes. Apart from regular NSA and Deputy NSA meetings, the countries are collaborating on capacity-building in sectors such as counter-terrorism, police, law enforcement, and cyber-security.



The influence of politics

Yet, the CSC, as a young institution, remains vulnerable to domestic political changes in its member-states. The Maldives's absence from the recent meeting is an example of this vulnerability. Two reasons would have likely contributed to its decision: first, to prefer a close relationship with China, or second, to live up to the expectations of the nationalist campaign that have pledged to distance the Maldives from India on defence cooperation. But, this use of nationalist and pro-China cards is not exclusive to the Maldives. All the members of the CSC are democracies, and these countries play and will continue to use both the cards for their domestic and external benefits as the Indo-Pacific region grows in prominence. For New Delhi, whose ambitions, responsibilities, and threats have increased significantly in the last decade, the CSC will remain an important instrument to help it consolidate its regional leadership.

A QUIET REPRIEVE

The decision of the Qatari court of appeals to reduce the capital punishment handed down in October to eight former Indian naval personnel is a major reprieve for the men and their families, and spells relief for the government that has been pursuing diplomatic channels for leniency. While the detailed judgment is still awaited more than 24 hours after the pronouncement, the upholding of the conviction is a disappointment, and the government and the men's families must now reassess their legal strategy and evidence of their innocence before filing a review petition with Qatar's Court of Cassation, the highest in the system. If all avenues of judicial appeal are exhausted, the government will have three options. First, to continue to press for a review of the conviction with Qatar's ruling Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. If that fails, the men could appeal for clemency and ask for a pardon, that Qatar's rulers have given in the past. A third option would be for the men to serve out their terms in India, once the length of incarceration is clarified, according to a 2015 bilateral Agreement on Transfer of Sentenced Persons. However, this option would require them to accept the conviction cannot be reversed. Through this process, the government must be seen to be pursuing diplomatic and political efforts at the highest level, to convey the extent that the men are a priority for India.

It is significant that the development comes after Prime Minister Narendra Modi made his first public outreach to the Qatari leadership — he met the Emir on the sidelines of COP28, on December 1. Whether such a political outreach, or a high-level mission to Doha, would have been more productive earlier, after the men were first arrested in August 2022, is a moot point now. It is commendable that New Delhi, in contrast to its stand with Canada over its allegations, has chosen not to react to the case with public rhetoric, especially the kind of targeting of Doha seen in some sections of the media, a move that would have been counterproductive. If the case implicating the men is in any way connected to India's intelligence services, then it is important to consider an appropriate review of any operations that could jeopardise Indians overseas. New Delhi has also done well by not allowing the case to become hostage to the growing tensions in the region, over the continuing bombardment of Gaza by Israel. It is hoped that a consistently calibrated position, careful of Qatar's sensitivities, and coupled with a quiet, but determined push, would bring the eight Indians back home safely.

DESPAIR IN DISTRESS

In a world where the movement of labour is curtailed and restricted, it is no surprise that people affected by distress in their homeland seek opportunities in the developed world despite the



enormous risks during their journeys. The recent episode of the forced return of 303 Indians who were detained at a French airport is suspected to be another such instance, or worse, trafficking. About 20 of them sought asylum in France, while the rest returned to Mumbai on Tuesday. However, it is well-known now that an alarming number of Indians, nearly 1,00,000 and five times the number in the previous year, attempted to enter the U.S. between October 2022 and September this year, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection data. More than half these attempts were through the heavily guarded Mexican border, with the rest being attempts to use the sparsely manned Canadian border. The rise of Indians risking the rather treacherous route to enter the U.S. through Mexico came to light when a six-year old girl from Punjab was found dead in the Arizona desert in June 2019. This was about nine months before the COVID-19 pandemic, which led the Trump Administration to invoke the rarely used Title 42 of the U.S. Code that deals with public health, empowering border agencies to turn away asylum seekers even without a hearing. After the COVID-19 years and since the Biden Administration came to power, such migration attempts began to steadily rise again. That Indians are willing to take risks and bear enormous difficulties only to become illegal immigrants in the U.S. suggests that they are doing so either in desperation or are being misled.

Initial reports from the current incident also bear the tell-tale signs of what has been reported in the past about such cases — the majority of the air passengers were men from Punjab, Haryana and Gujarat; about a dozen were unaccompanied minors. Immediate reasons for such migrations have been cited by some Sikhs as alleged religious persecution, while others cited the distress in farming. Regardless of the reasons, it is time the Indian government paid attention to the trafficking racket that appears to be widespread especially across parts of rural Punjab and Haryana, where gullible people fall prey to tall promises of a better future in the U.S. Their situation has been exacerbated by the crisis that they face in farming with plummeting incomes and overexploited and fragmented farmlands. A crackdown on exploitative middlemen in the labour market can only be the beginning.

OLD AND STRONG

The importance of External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit to Russia this week can be gleaned from the special effort New Delhi and Moscow have made to make the meetings successful and productive. For India, at the end of a year of prolific diplomacy, a five-day visit would seem unusually long, particularly as the Kremlin leadership normally does not see high-level foreign visits at all in this period right before its holiday season. It is equally unusual for Russian President Vladimir Putin to meet lower-ranking foreign officials, as he did while meeting Mr. Jaishankar. The warmth was significant given that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has skipped the annual leadership summit, an unbroken tradition from 2000-21, for two years now, leading to speculation about the health of the India-Russia relationship after the Ukraine war. While India took care not to criticise Russia, worries over the flagging of defence supplies, continued issues over paying Russia for imports in third currencies, and the general decline in other bilateral engagements have persisted. It is clear that a large part of Mr. Jaishankar's mission was to smooth over the perception of differences. The resultant agreements, pertaining to furthering collaboration in future Kudankulam nuclear power projects, fostering connectivity, trade and resuming talks for the Eurasian Economic Union-India free trade agreement, and joint military production indicate that bilateral relations are on track. So is multilateral cooperation, especially as Russia plans to host the expanded BRICS summit next year, and India and Russia continue to coordinate positions at the UN and SCO. Mr. Jaishankar's announcement that imports of Russian



hydrocarbons will continue to rise despite the West's Russian sanctions, indicated the strength of ties that continue "regardless of political fluctuations".

Mr. Jaishankar's affirmation that the annual leadership summit will be resumed in 2024, appeared to signify that both sides are working to eliminate any static in the relationship. His statement that the India-Russia relationship was the 'only constant in world politics' over the last six decades would not have gone unnoticed especially in Washington and Beijing, given some of the friction in India-U.S. relations over the Pannun investigation, as well as U.S. President Joseph Biden's decision not to accept Mr. Modi's invitation for Republic Day, while India-China relations have ended another year in impasse over the military standoff. It remains to be seen whether the bonhomie will yield concrete movement on the rupee-rouble payment mechanism, or on expediting the delayed delivery of S-400 air system units. However, the larger import of his visit, and his words that the "geopolitical and strategic convergence" between India and Russia in a multipolar world that is "rebalancing", will be watched most closely by votaries and critics of the relationship.

A CASE OF REVANCHISM

The judiciary should not be seen as legitimising recurring, communally motivated attempts to change the status of places of worship. In yet another order that may end up expediting the project of converting a mosque into a temple by indirect means, the Allahabad High Court has ruled that a set of suits filed in 1991 for a declaration that a part of the site of the Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi as the property of Lord Vishweshwar is not barred by law. The court has decided, as it had done earlier on a 2022 suit by a group of Hindu worshippers, that the old suits are not barred by the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, which invalidates legal proceedings that may lead to altering the status of any place of worship as it stood on August 15, 1947. In what seems to be specious reasoning, the court has held that the Act is not applicable as the "religious character" of the structure is yet to be determined. In other words, instead of nipping the cunning piece of litigation in the bud, the court has allowed a full civil trial to decide whether the structure in the Gyanvapi compound is a mosque or a temple and stated that unless this status is determined based on evidence, it cannot be called a temple or a mosque. Such an approach may only end up driving modern society into a revanchist mindset seeking to avenge medieval depredations.

In the case of the 2022 suits by women worshippers, the court had noted that the proceedings were aimed at asserting a right to worship the deities on the mosque precincts, and not to convert it into a temple. However, the 1991 suits explicitly seek a declaration that the main part of the site is a mosque and also want the mosque administrators to remove all their religious effects. Despite this explicit relief being sought, the court has chosen to treat it as a suit that is maintainable and not barred by the Places of Worship Act. The order has also upheld the order for a survey of the premises by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), but asked for the ASI survey done on the basis of the 2022 suits for the purpose of deciding the 1991 suits also. It has provided for a further survey, if necessary. What is disconcerting in the High Court order is that it claims that the dispute raised in the case is "of vital national importance". This is an astounding claim for a judicial institution to make while adjudicating litigation between two parties. The judiciary must stay committed to the constitutional vision of secularism and enforce the statutory bar on converting or reconverting the status of places of worship.



BENGAL GOVERNOR TO MOVE HC AGAINST JU 'CONVOCATION'

Bengal Governor C.V. Ananda Bose is likely to approach the Calcutta High Court against the 'unauthorised convocation' at Jadavpur University on December 24.

The convocation was held despite the Governor sacking Vice-Chancellor Buddhadeb Sau and the Pro Vice-Chancellor assuming the role of the V-C on his own.

"It is learnt that Chancellor Dr. C.V. Ananda Bose has received legal advice to move a writ of quo warranto in Calcutta High Court against the unauthorised convocation in the Jadavpur University, flouting the law of the land and judgments of the Supreme Court," a Raj Bhavan source told The Hindu.

According to the legal experts consulted by Raj Bhavan, the writ will lie against the Pro V-C. Dr. Bose had on December 23 issued orders for removal of the officiating V-C but the State Education Department stepped in and asked the interim V-C to maintain status quo and conduct the convocation as per schedule.

'Overriding Chancellor'

Raj Bhavan sources said the government has no role in the universities, including holding of convocation.

"In the present case, the government sanctioned holding of the convocation overriding the authority of the Chancellor," the officials said.

After the convocation on Sunday, the acting V-C had told media persons that he had acted on the recommendations of the University court. However, Raj Bhavan authorities insist that the Chancellor is the competent authority to preside over the court. They questioned the validity of the court meeting on the ground that the Chancellor was not present and the V-C had no authority as he was removed by the Raj Bhavan.

Prof. Sau was appointed by Dr. Bose in August 2023 when a student died allegedly after falling from the University's hostel building after being severely ragged by his seniors.

"The authorisation, given to Prof. Sau to exercise the powers and perform the duties of the office of V-C, Jadavpur University, until further orders, are withdrawn. This order will take immediate effect," the Governor's order on Saturday removing Prof. Sau had said. Despite his removal, Prof. Sau continues to officiate as Vice-Chancellor.

According to Raj Bhavan officials, they are receiving several petitions from students and guardians asking about the validity of the degree received at the convocation. "The Chancellor has constituted an empowered committee to suggest an appropriate way out so that the interests of the students are protected," a Raj Bhavan official said.

LAW OF NUMBERS

The 18-day winter session of Parliament that was adjourned sine die on December 21 marked a new low in India's parliamentary democracy as the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party refused to engage with the Opposition, evaded executive accountability and passed a battery of Bills with far-reaching consequences for the country while a majority of the Opposition members remained



suspended. In the final count, a total of 146 Members of Parliament (MP) from the Opposition bloc were suspended — 46 of the Rajya Sabha, and 100 of the Lok Sabha, as they clamoured for a statement by Union Home Minister Amit Shah on a breach of security that involved protesters gaining entry into the chamber of the Lok Sabha on December 13. The rift lingers, as Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge has written to Vice-President of India and Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar, terming the suspension of Opposition MP as “predetermined and premeditated” by the government. The absence of any application of mind was evident, Mr. Kharge has written, recalling that an MP who was not even present in the Lok Sabha, was among those suspended. The Chairs of both the Houses could not ensure smooth conduct of the session. Attempts made by Mr. Dhankhar and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla lacked the requisite imprimatur of impartiality.

It was in the absence of a majority of the Opposition members that the government passed new laws that rewrite the criminal code of the country, regulation of telecommunication and the appointment of the Election Commission of India. The common feature of these laws is an unprecedented increase in the power of the executive, and it is not a coincidence that they were passed without a meaningful parliamentary debate that took on board conflicting views. The government refused even the Opposition demand for a statement on the security breach, in a show of obstinacy that equates numerical majority with logical and moral infallibility. The government has blamed the Opposition for bringing the suspensions upon itself, and this position has been echoed by the Speaker and the Chairman. The case of the alleged mimicry of Mr. Dhankhar by an Opposition MP was a distraction that was convenient for the ruling party. Mr. Dhankhar himself told the Rajya Sabha that the alleged mimicry was an insult to his community, a dismaying correlation to be made by anyone, let alone a legal luminary such as himself. It is another matter whether the Opposition should have invested so much time and effort in asking for a debate on the security breach by a few misguided youths. The effect, if not the objective, of it all was to derail parliamentary functioning and obtain a free pass for the executive.

A TALE OF TWO REGIMES: DISRUPTIONS AND HURRIED DELIBERATIONS

After the suspension of numerous Members of Parliament in the recently concluded Winter Session, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi slammed the Opposition parties for disrupting proceedings.

During the 18-day session, the Lok Sabha witnessed a security breach, following which the Opposition demanded a statement from the Union Home Minister. The request was rejected. The Opposition MPs then protested and carried placards into the well of the House. This resulted in the record suspension of 146 MPs.

When Arun Jaitley was the Leader of the Opposition during the UPA-II government, he had said that while parliamentary obstruction should be avoided, disruptions are a “legitimate tactic of the Opposition” if “parliamentary accountability is subverted”. Similarly, Sushma Swaraj, when she was the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, had said that “not allowing Parliament to function is also a form of democracy, like any other form”.

Data of the past two decades show that most interruptions in Parliament occurred during the 15th Lok Sabha (2009-2014) when the BJP was the principal opposition party. Over 50% of the available sitting hours were lost in interruptions then. In the same period, over 40% of the time in the Rajya Sabha was lost in disruptions — the highest in the four Lok Sabhas over the 2004-2023 period.



INDIA'S REVISED CRIMINAL LAW PROPOSALS

The story so far:

Union Home Minister Amit Shah introduced three revised Bills in the Lok Sabha to replace British-era criminal laws: the Indian Penal Code (IPC) will be replaced by the Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita Bill, 2023; the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) by the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita, 2023; and the Indian Evidence Act by the Bharatiya Sakshya (Second) Bill, 2023. The Bills underwent review by a Parliamentary Standing Committee, leading to corrections of errors and over 50 recommended changes highlighted by Opposition MPs. Mr. Shah clarified that the revised Bills address suggestions and were introduced to avoid numerous official amendments.

Here are the key highlights of the revised Bills.

Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita Bill, 2023

Section 113 of the revised Bill has modified the definition of the crime of terrorism to entirely adopt the existing definition under Section 15 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA). The UAPA, often labeled as draconian, is defined as a terrorist act 'with intent to threaten or likely to threaten the unity, integrity, economic security, or sovereignty of India or with intent to strike terror or likely to strike terror in the people or any section of the people in India or any foreign country.'

The earlier version of the Bill included within the ambit of a terrorist act, vague acts such as intimidating the general public or a segment thereof, disturbing public order, creating an atmosphere or spreading a message of fear; destabilising or destroying the political, economic, or social structures of the country, or creating a public emergency or undermining public safety. Accordingly, even non-violent speech could be categorised as a terrorist act under this definition.

However, the new definition differs from the UAPA's definition in one respect — UAPA includes the production or smuggling or circulation only of high quality counterfeit Indian paper currency, coin, or any other material within the ambit of terrorism, whereas the revised Bill widens this definition to cover the same activities concerning any counterfeit Indian paper currency, coin or of any other material.

Further, possessing property derived from or through a terrorist act is punishable only if held knowingly. Similarly, harbouring a terrorist is punishable if it is done both voluntarily and knowingly. The offence of recruiting and training persons to engage in terrorist acts has been introduced, mirroring sections 18A and 18B of the UAPA.

Notably, the Explanation to this section allows an officer not below the rank of Superintendent of Police to decide if the prosecution of a terrorist act should continue under the UAPA or section 113 of this Bill.

The offence is punishable by death or imprisonment for life. Those who conspire, abet, incite, or facilitate the commission of a terrorist act could face imprisonment ranging from five years to life.

Cruelty defined

Another addition to the revised Bill is that it proposes to define "cruelty" against a woman by her husband and his relatives, which is punishable with a jail term of up to three years. The newly



inserted section 86 defines 'cruelty' as (a) wilful conduct likely to drive a woman to commit suicide or cause grave injury or danger to the life, limb, or health (whether mental or physical); or (b) harassment of a woman to coerce her or any person related to her to meet any unlawful demand for property or valuable security.

Although the offence has now been defined in a separate provision, Section 498A of the IPC and Section 84 in the original Bill defined cruelty using the same terms in their "explanation" clauses. Therefore, there is no new addition in effect in the revised Bill.

Court proceedings

The newly inserted section 73 stipulates that those who print or publish 'any matter' concerning court proceedings in rape or sexual assault cases without permission would be punished with a two-year jail sentence and a fine. The Explanation to this provision clarifies that reports on High Court or Supreme Court judgments would not amount to an offence within this provision.'

In an attempt to do away with regressive terminology, the earlier version of the Bill had replaced terms such as lunacy, mental retardation, and unsoundness of mind with 'mental illness.' However, the panel pointed out that the term 'mental illness' is too wide in its import and could even include mood swings and voluntary intoxication. As a result, the revised Bill replaces the term 'mental illness' with 'unsoundness of mind' in a majority of the provisions. It has added the term 'intellectual disability' along with unsoundness of mind in section 367 (competence to stand trial).

The original Bill made mob lynching and hate crime a separate category of murder for the first time. The offence dealt with cases where murder is committed by five or more persons acting in concert with one another, on grounds of race, caste or community, sex, place of birth, language, personal belief, or any other ground. However, it was criticised by the panel for prescribing a lesser minimum sentence of imprisonment of 7 years as opposed to the offence of murder, where the minimum sentence is imprisonment for life. The revised Bill has now removed the minimum punishment of seven years and now penalises mob lynching at par with murder.

Ignored recommendations

Two crucial recommendations of the panel to include a gender-neutral provision criminalising adultery, and a clause that criminalises non-consensual sex between men, women, trans persons, and acts of bestiality has been left out in the revised Bill. In 2018, a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court unanimously decriminalised adultery for being discriminatory and infringing upon a woman's autonomy. However, the panel reasoned that adultery should be criminalised in a gender-neutral manner since it is crucial to safeguard the sanctity of the institution of marriage.

The panel pointed out, "Section 377 IPC can still be invoked when there is a non-consensual sex/rape of a man by another man. A woman can also initiate proceedings against her husband for unnatural sex under Section 377 IPC. If, as per the Nyaya Sanhita, these acts are not offences, it means that the victims of sodomy, buggery, etc. will have no remedy available under it. So if a man is 'raped' by another man, what is his remedy?" Thus, this leaves men and transgender persons with no legal remedy against sexual offences.

'Petty organised crime'

The revised Bill includes a more precise definition of 'petty organised crime': Whoever, being a member of a group or gang, either singly or jointly, commits any act of theft, snatching, cheating,



unauthorised selling of tickets, unauthorised betting or gambling, selling of public examination question papers or any other similar criminal act, is said to commit petty organised crime.' The Explanation to this provision stipulates that theft would include trick theft, theft from a vehicle, dwelling house, or business premises, cargo theft, pickpocketing, theft through card skimming, shoplifting, and theft of an Automated Teller Machine.

Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita, 2023

The original Bill introduced the concept of 'community service' as a form of punishment for petty offences such as an attempt to commit suicide, public servants unlawfully engaged in trade, theft of property less than ₹5,000, public intoxication, and defamation. This punishment has now been defined under Section 23 of the revised Bill. Community service is 'work which the court may order a convict to perform as a form of punishment that benefits the community, for which he shall not be entitled to any remuneration.' Moreover, a Magistrate of the First or Second Class has been specifically empowered to impose this punishment, to encourage a more reparative approach to minor crimes.

Power of police

Section 43(3) of the original Bill permitted the use of handcuffs to prevent the escape of individuals accused of serious offences and ensure the safety of police officers and staff during arrests. However, the panel recommended that this should be restricted to select heinous crimes like rape and murder instead of extending its usage to persons who have been accused of committing 'economic offences.' In another change, the power of the police to use handcuffs has been expanded beyond the time of arrest to include the stage of production before court as well.

Conduct of court

The original Bill permitted the conduct of court proceedings through audio-visual means. However, certain types of proceedings mentioned in the earlier draft have been deleted, including inquiries, trials before court of sessions, trials in summary cases, plea bargaining, and trials before High Courts. Meanwhile, the provisions allowing the reading out of charge to the accused, hearing on discharge, examination of witnesses, and recording of evidence in audio-visual means have been introduced in the revised Bill in sections 251, 262, 266, and 308 respectively.

Police custody

The revised Bill has overlooked the concerns of the panel regarding a provision in the earlier version that allowed police custody beyond the initial 15 days of arrest.

Section 187(3) of the Bill, which corresponds to Section 167 (2)(a) of the CrPC, does not contain the phrase 'otherwise than in the custody of the police' — implying that the prescribed 15-day-period of police custody can now be an aggregate of shorter periods of custody sought over the entire period of an investigation lasting 60 or 90 days (depending on the nature of the offence.)

Since people, particularly those hailing from marginalised backgrounds, may be subjected to extreme custodial violence, the panel underscored that "there is a concern that this clause could be vulnerable to misuse by authorities, as it does not explicitly clarify that the custody was not taken in the first 15 days either due to the conduct of the accused or due to extraneous circumstances beyond the control of the investigating officer. The committee recommends that a suitable amendment be brought to provide greater clarity in the interpretation of this clause.



Accordingly, under the revised Bill, the detained person must now be produced before the Magistrate or released in petty cases within 24 hours.

Bharatiya Sakshya (Second) Bill, 2023

Section 61 of the original Bill allowed the admissibility of electronic evidence by underscoring that an electronic record shall have the same legal effect as a paper record. However, there was no requirement for a certificate under section 63 (corresponding to the requirement of a certificate under section 65B of the Indian Evidence Act). This provision has now been revised to state that the admissibility of an electronic record is subject to section 63.

Existing concerns

Experts have flagged that the three revised Bills present a missed opportunity to rectify extensive over criminalisation and wider police powers that aggravate State control.

Pointing out that the provision of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita, 2023, which permits police custody beyond the initial 15 days of arrest endangers civil liberties, Dr. Anup Surendranath and Ms. Zeba Sikora highlights, “The massive expansion of the possible duration of police custody in the BNSS strikes at the very heart of civil liberties protection. The BNSS expands the maximum limit of police custody under general criminal law from 15 days to either 60 days or 90 days (depending on the nature of the offence). Under our current law, police custody is limited to the first 15 days of arrest. The expansion under the proposed BNSS heightens the risk of exposure to police excesses. Given widely acknowledged concerns about the safety of arrested persons in police custody, and the heightened risk of coerced and fabricated evidence after prolonged detention, this provision of the BNSS is a shocking expansion of police powers.”

DECRIMINALISING MEDICAL NEGLIGENCE: VIEWS FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE BED

In a recent development, Home Minister Amit Shah announced in Parliament last week that doctors will be exempted from criminal prosecution in cases of death due to negligence. However, according to Section 106(1) of the Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita (BNSS), the rulebook set to replace the Indian Penal Code, doctors will continue to face a two-year imprisonment and/or a fine if convicted. This is lesser than the Sanhita’s recommended punishment of five years for other cases of death by negligence (for example, by rash driving).

In his announcement to the Lok Sabha, Mr. Shah claimed that the Indian Medical Association (IMA), the largest representative body of doctors in India, had requested the Home Ministry for an exemption from criminal prosecution.

According to Dr. R.V. Asokan, the IMA president, the Association had first raised concerns about increasing criminal cases of negligence being filed against doctors in an April 2023 meeting. The agenda item A-2 from the meeting document deems criminal prosecution of doctors for medical negligence “irrelevant” and demands that doctors be “exempted” from it.

After the April 2023 meeting, in September 2023 the IMA made a submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the BNSS. According to the submission, the IMA reported around 98,000 deaths per year due to medical negligence in contrast with 52 lakh medical negligence cases filed against doctors. Further, the IMA also asked that a law criminalising violence against doctors be included in the BNSS since “75% of doctors and paramedics face violence as per IMA”.



The IMA also estimated the economic loss due to violence against doctors to be in the order of billions of rupees per day.

Finally, the IMA also asked in its submission that the BNSS make a clear distinction between medical “negligence” and medical “accident”. While “negligence” would refer to a “reckless”, “conscious and voluntary disregard of the need to use reasonable care” on part of the doctor, an “accident” would involve sudden and unexpected deaths of patients under medical care without conscious intention to harm on the part of the doctor.

The BNSS in its current form has not made any explicit distinction between medical negligence versus accident.

That said, several existing clauses in the BNSS may offer protection to some doctors from criminal prosecution. For example, clause 26 provides an illustrative example of acts done in “good faith” that are exempt from criminal prosecution:

A, a surgeon, knowing that a particular operation is likely to cause the death of Z, who suffers under the painful complaint, but not intending to cause Z’s death, and intending, in good faith, Z’s benefit, performs that operation on Z, with Z’s consent. A has committed no offence.

In a similar vein, clause 30 adds:

Z is thrown from his horse, and is insensible. A, a surgeon, finds that Z requires to be trepanned. A, not intending Z’s death, but in good faith, for Z’s benefit, performs the trepan before Z recovers his power of judging for himself. A has committed no offence.

Conundrums

Explaining the need to exempt doctors from criminal prosecution for negligence, Dr. Asokan said, “[the criminal prosecution of doctors] has become a form of harassment and doctors are mortally afraid of the criminal law.” “This influences the decision a doctor makes in critical moments,” he added.

In other words, Dr. Asokan holds that exemption of doctors from criminal prosecution will provide the nation “better results in patient care.”

However, bioethicists, lawyers, and members of the public express concerns that a blanket exemption of doctors from criminal prosecution for negligence might lead to an increase in medical malpractice and put marginalised populations at an increased risk.

Rohin Bhatt, a Delhi-based bioethicist and lawyer, said that the conversation around medical negligence is incomplete without contributions from patients and patient advocacy groups. He believes that “patient advocacy groups have not been given the voice they deserve [in this conversation].”

Further, he also argues that owing to the “power imbalance” in the doctor-patient relationship, an act of negligence on the part of the doctor calls not for a lower punishment but a higher one. According to him, “it is because of unequal power balance in the doctor-patient relationship, [an act of medical negligence] calls for a higher punishment than the standard.”



WILL NEW TELECOM BILL STREAMLINE THE SECTOR?

The story so far:

The Telecommunications Bill, 2023, was passed in Parliament this week. When it receives the assent of the President, the Bill will replace three archaic laws such as the Telegraph Act of 1885, the Indian Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1933 and The Telegraph Wires (Unlawful Possession) Act, 1950. It aims to consolidate the law for wireless networks and Internet service providers, and simplify the process of application for licences and permits for telecom operators.

What is the Telecommunications Bill, 2023?

The Bill governs authorisation of telecommunication networks and services, provides for auctioning as well as administrative allocation of spectrum, defines the mechanism for exercising the right of way for laying telecom infrastructure such as cables in public as well as private property. It also spells out emergency measures the government can take in the interest of national security and public safety such as intercept messages, suspend telecommunication services as well as take temporary possession of any telecommunication service or network. The Bill also states that rules will be framed to protect consumers with the setting up of a 'Do Not Disturb' register to ensure they don't receive a specified class of messages without prior consent.

The Bill governs a whole host of services, including over-the-top services such as WhatsApp, Telegram and email services like Gmail through a broad definition for 'telecommunication' which is given as "transmission, emission or reception of any messages, by wire, radio, optical or other electro-magnetic systems, whether or not such messages have been subjected to rearrangement, computation or other processes by any means in the course of their transmission, emission or reception." This vast definition entails that every internet app within India has to comply with the law. The Bill also marks a shift from a licensing regime to an authorisation regime, where all telecommunication services in India "shall obtain an authorisation from the Central Government, subject to such terms and conditions, including fees or charges, as may be prescribed." Anyone who offers a service without authorisation will face an imprisonment of up to three years, or a fine of up to ₹2 crore.

The Bill allows the government to assign spectrum for telecommunication through auction except for entities listed in the First Schedule for which assignment will be done by administrative process. The First Schedule includes entities engaged in national security, defence, law enforcement and crime prevention, public broadcasting services, disaster management, promoting scientific research and exploration, as well as Global Mobile Personal Communication by Satellites such as Space X, and Bharti Airtel-backed OneWeb, which had been pushing for administrative allocation.

What are the concerns over the Bill?

According to critics, the new Telecommunications Bill, 2023, is draconian and provides a legal architecture for mass surveillance and internet shutdowns. Among its several contentious clauses is the requirement that all users have to be identified through the use of "verifiable biometric based identification as may be prescribed" by telecommunication service providers. Further, it requires that no user shall furnish any false particulars or suppress material information. This could impede whistle-blowers as well as journalists who operate under anonymity. If users fail to comply, they will be charged a hefty penalty from ₹25,000 to ₹1,00,000 for some provisions.



Most of the contentious provisions are contained in Chapter IV, which grants emergency powers to the Central government in the interest of public safety and national security. Section 19 (f) empowers the Central government to notify “standards and conformity assessment measures” in respect of encryption and data processing in telecommunication, which has raised eyebrows given that most internet communication is increasingly being pushed towards encryption to evade national state surveillance programmes. The government’s interest in breaking up encryption of WhatsApp and Signal has to be seen in the backdrop of a controversy over Israeli company NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware targeting 300 mobile phone numbers for illegal surveillance, including those of serving Ministers in the Narendra Modi government, Opposition leaders, lawyers, activists and journalists.

It also allows the Central or a State government during a public emergency, including disaster management, and in the interest of public safety to take “temporary possession of any telecommunication service or network”. It can take over control and management of such services or networks. It can intercept messages on the pretext of “preventing incitement to the commission of any offence”, and direct suspension of telecommunication services in such circumstances like the shutdown of Internet seen in Manipur and Jammu and Kashmir.

How has the industry received the Bill?

The Digital Infrastructure Providers Association (DIPA) and the Cellular Operators’ Association of India have welcomed the provisions in the Bill that bring uniformity across States in terms of ‘right of way’ rules and regulations, along with rates. These, they say, will also address long-standing issues for telecom infrastructure providers, including capping of charges, and deployment of telecom infrastructure on private property. The telecommunication network is not considered part of the property for transactions or tax purposes, and hence the Bill is also welcomed for providing relief to the infrastructure industry from the additional exorbitant tax burden.

The Indian Space Association has thanked the government for including satellite-based communication networks for allocation of spectrum by administrative method. It says that the move will “help spur growth in the nascent space sector... and also help drive innovation, create opportunities for start-ups, and strengthen the country’s position in the global satellite market.” But an international group of organisations and experts such as the Signal Foundation, the Internet Freedom Foundation and the Internet Press Institute have written to Telecom Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and underlined that interception of message will enable “indiscriminate surveillance” and weaken online safety. The groups say that the Bill creates uncertainties around the ability of service providers to offer strong encryption, and develop privacy-respecting innovations.

The authority to suspend the internet has been granted without dwelling over procedural safeguards recommended by the Supreme Court as well as the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Information and Technology. The groups have, therefore, demanded that the Bill be withdrawn in its current form.

IS PEGASUS SPYWARE TARGETING JOURNALISTS IN INDIA?

The story so far:

The Washington Post and Amnesty International report claims that Pegasus spyware targeted journalists in India, including Siddharth Varadarajan of The Wire and Anand Mangnale of South



Asia editor of the Organised Crime and Corruption Report Project (OCCRP). The intrusion was detected in October 2023 after Apple warned users, including MPs, of potential ‘state-sponsored attacks’ on their iPhones.

What has Amnesty International alleged?

After Apple issued a security notification to certain iPhone users, including MPs, in October, researchers at Amnesty International’s Security Lab analysed the allegedly infected devices, including those belonging to Mr. Varadarajan and Mr. Mangnale. At the end of their examination, they reported finding traces of Pegasus’s activity on their respective devices. Security Lab concluded that a message to facilitate a “zero-click exploit” had been sent to Mr. Mangnale’s phone over his iPhone’s iMessage app on August 23. Once received, the message was designed to covertly install Pegasus on the device. “The attempted targeting of Anand Mangnale’s phone happened at a time when he was working on a story about an alleged stock manipulation by a large multinational conglomerate in India,” an Amnesty report stated.

Mr. Varadarajan was allegedly targeted by Pegasus on October 16. According to Amnesty researchers’ analysis, the attacker had used the same email address to target both Mr. Varadarajan and Mr. Mangnale: natalymarinova@proton.me.

What is a zero-click exploit?

A zero-click exploit refers to malicious software that allows spyware to be installed on a device without the device owner’s consent. More importantly, it doesn’t require the device owner to perform any actions to initiate or complete the installation.

The specific exploit allegedly in use on the two devices is called BLASTPAST (previously identified as BLASTPASS). It plays out in two phases. In the first, the attack attempts to establish a link with the Apple HomeKit – which gives users a way to control multiple smart devices – on the target’s device. In the second, some malicious content is sent via the iMessage app to the target. According to Amnesty, the purpose of the first phase – the ‘outreach’ – could be to determine how the device can be exploited or to keep it in sight for further exploitation in the future. The second phase is the one that delivers the full spyware “payload”.

“The two-stage attack process seen in this case is similar to the previous PWNYOURHOME Pegasus attack vector described by Citizen Lab and independently observed by the Security Lab,” Amnesty’s report observed. Mr. Mangnale’s phone was vulnerable to the exploit at the time of the alleged attack. Mr. Varadarajan’s was not, however, because by then Apple had rolled out its 16.6.1 security update to tackle such intrusions. In both cases, however, evidence has reportedly not been found for Pegasus successfully ‘infecting’ the devices.

How has Pegasus’s maker responded?

The Washington Post quoted a statement from the Israeli company NSO, which makes and distributes Pegasus, as saying that it “[stresses] again that all of them are vetted law enforcement and intelligence agencies that licence our technologies for the sole purpose of fighting terror and major crime”.

“The company has no visibility to the targets, nor to the collected intelligence,” NSO stated.



What has happened?

In the wake of the 'Pegasus Project' revelations, activists filed several petitions with the Supreme Court alleging a mass surveillance exercise by the government to muzzle free speech and democratic dissent. In response, the top court asked the Centre to file a detailed affidavit vis-a-vis its use of Pegasus. The Centre refused to comply, however, contending that such a public affidavit would compromise the country's national security.

WHY RANSOMWARE ATTACKS ON INDIAN IT FIRMS ARE A CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

On 20 December, IT services provider HCL Technologies, in its quarterly report, shared that it was hit by a ransomware incident within a restricted cloud environment. Following the attack, the company stated there was no "observable" impact on the overall HCL Tech network. However, news of the attack affected the company's perception of the stock market, leading to a decline in its share prices.

What do we know of the ransomware attack on HCL Tech?

HCL Tech is an Indian information technology company providing solutions in the digital realm, including end-to-end digital offerings, cloud-based solutions, and software. The company is one of the top software solution providers in India.

On 20th December, the company, in its quarterly earnings report, shared that it was hit by a ransomware incident in an isolated cloud environment. The company, however, did not disclose specific details of the attack.

Ransomware is extortion software designed to lock or encrypt a device or data on a system and then demand a ransom for its release. The attacks follow a simple plan wherein attackers gain access to a device or protected data in the cloud. Depending on the nature of the ransomware, it will then lock or encrypt devices, data stored in the cloud, or the entire internal network of an organisation. Attackers usually leave behind a message with instructions on the ransom amount, mode of transfer, or instructions on how to contact them for further guidance.

Why are ransomware attacks a matter of concern?

Indian organisations are increasingly targeted by ransomware attacks. A 2023 study conducted by Sophos, a cybersecurity company, showed that 73% of organisations reported being victims of ransomware attacks, up from 57% the previous year. Of these, 77% of organisations reported that attackers succeeded in encrypting data, with 44% paying the ransom to retrieve their data, a significant drop from 78% compared to the previous year.

However, despite paying the ransom, companies doubled their cost of recovery for the data held hostage by threat actors compared to organisations that did not pay the ransom and relied on backups. Additionally, according to the Indian ransomware report released by India's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In), a 51% increase in ransomware incidents was reported in H1 2022, with a majority of these attacks targeting data centres, IT, and TeS sectors in the country.

Why do threat actors target IT organisations?

Threat actors tend to focus their attacks on organisations that hold valuable data. The more value the data has to the organisation and its stakeholders, the higher the chances that the ransom will be paid.



IT organisations and software vendors hold a lot of valuable data, including sensitive information like intellectual property.

If leaked by threat actors, it could lead to a drop in their value and replication of software, devaluing the company and threatening its revenue streams, making them a valuable target for cybercriminals. IT organisations providing cloud security and data solutions also hold large repositories of data for their clients. Successful attacks on them could potentially open the channel to target supply chains, adding pressure on companies to pay the ransom.

Data held by IT organisations could include personally identifiable data of clients' users, intellectual property, access credentials, and even financial information. This data can be leveraged to launch further attacks. IT organisations are also among the first to adopt new technologies and encourage the use of open architecture, which may not have the highest levels of protection against cyberattacks, making them a target for cybercriminals.

Which other Indian organisations faced ransomware attacks?

Earlier this year, in November, a U.S.-based subsidiary of Infosys was reportedly targeted by a ransomware attack. At the time, Infosys McCamish Systems faced an incident involving a ransomware variant.

However, the company did not share details of the attack, stating that further information would be provided following a comprehensive investigation.

In March, Indian drug manufacturer Sun Pharma was hit by a cyberattack.

A ransomware group claimed responsibility for the attack, impacting the company's revenue due to containment measures implemented to mitigate the damage.

In November 2022, a ransomware attack crippled the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) for days. Hackers reportedly demanded ₹200 crores in cryptocurrency from the hospital.

EXPLAINED: ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT NEXT MONTH'S SPECTRUM AUCTIONS

The government has invited applications from potential bidders for spectrum auctions planned next month, taking the first step towards rolling out 5G services in the country. The Union Cabinet on Tuesday (June 14) cleared a proposal to auction 72,097.85 MHz of airwaves.

Which spectrum bands will be auctioned?

A total 72,097.85 MHz of spectrum with a validity period of 20 years will be put on auction from July 26. The auction will be held for spectrum in the frequencies of 600 MHz, 700 MHz, 800 MHz, 900 MHz, 1,800 MHz, 2,100 MHz, 2,300 MHz, 3,300 MHz and 26 GHz bands.

"It is expected that the Mid and High band spectrum will be utilised by telecom service providers to roll out 5G technology-based services capable of providing speed and capacities which would be about 10 times higher than what is possible through the current 4G services," an official statement said.

How will the auction be conducted?

The e-auction will be conducted on a simultaneous multiple rounds ascending model. Bidders will have to submit an earnest money deposit ahead of the auction, on the basis of which each bidder

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



will be allocated eligibility points. During the auction, the company will be able to place its bids using these eligibility points.

How much will the spectrum cost?

At reserve price, the entirety of the spectrum is valued at over Rs 5 lakh crore. Last year, the government had announced a telecom sector relief package, and some facets of the scheme have been included in the terms of this auction. A mandatory requirement to make upfront payment by the successful bidders has been done away with for the first time.

Payments for spectrum can be made in 20 equal annual installments to be paid in advance at the beginning of each year. The bidders would be given an option to surrender the spectrum after 10 years with no future liabilities with respect to balance installments.

The government will also not collect any spectrum usage charge on airwaves auctioned in this round, and the requirement for bank guarantees and financial guarantees has been done away with.

How did the government arrive at the pricing of spectrum?

Last month, the Digital Communications Commission (DCC) had stuck to the base pricing for spectrum suggested by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI). In April, TRAI had recommended cutting spectrum prices for 5G airwaves by 35-40 per cent.

Specifically, the telecom regulatory body suggested that the base price for prime 5G band of 3,300-3,670 MHz be kept at Rs 317 crore per MHz, which is 35 per cent lower than the base price of Rs 492 crore per MHz announced in 2018.

Similarly, for the 700 MHz, the price recommended by TRAI comes out to Rs 3,297 crore, which is almost 40 per cent lower than prices recommended by the regulator in 2018.

Last year in March, the government sold the rights to use airwaves to telecom companies for Rs 77,820.81 crore. At the time, the government had put on offer frequencies in the 700, 800, 900, 1,800, 2,100, 2,300, and 2,500 MHz bands.

However, no bids were received in the 700 MHz and the 2,500 MHz bands due to the high base price of the 700 MHz band.

What are some of the technical highlights of the auction?

After years of keeping the decision in abeyance, the government has finally decided to increase the number of microwave backhaul carriers in the existing frequency bands of 13, 15, 18 and 21 GHz bands.

In the official statement, the government said that it has decided to provisionally allot two carriers of 250 MHz each in the E-Band spectrum, and also decided to double the number of traditional microwave backhaul carriers in the existing frequency bands.

Currently, across these bands, there are 2,090 microwave backhaul carriers available. This has been done because high bandwidth telephony services like 5G require additional backhaul capacity for smooth functioning.



What are private captive networks?

The government has also cleared the path for tech companies to acquire spectrum directly from it to test and build industry 4.0 applications such as machine-to-machine communications, Internet of Things, artificial intelligence, etc. Companies such as Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) have expressed interest earlier in building these non-public 5G networks to develop such solutions.

These networks will not be accessible to the general public. DoT said it will undertake demand studies and thereafter seek TRAI recommendations for direct assignment of spectrum to such enterprises.

RELIANCE JIO GOES PAST BHARTI AIRTEL TO BECOME SECOND LARGEST INDIA'S FIXED-LINE SERVICE PROVIDER

Telecom operator Reliance Jio has taken a lead over Bharti Airtel to become the country's second largest fixed-line service provider in February 2022, according to data published by the sector regulator Trai.

Fixed-line or wireline telecommunication refers to telephone and broadband internet services provided through a network of cables.

Reliance Jio wireline subscriber base reached over 58.85 lakh while Bharti Airtel recorded a customer base of more than 57.66 lakh in February, according to subscriber report of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India released on Tuesday.

Reliance Jio led the wireline telephony growth by adding 2.44 lakh customers in February. Bharti Airtel came second in the segment by adding 91,243 new users.

Vodafone Idea added 24,948 customers, Quadrant 18,622 and Tata Teleservices 3,772.

Reliance Jio is now behind only BSNL which has over 75.76 lakh wireline customers.

The government-owned BSNL and MTNL, which jointly have a 49.5 per cent share in the segment, lost 49,074 and 21,900 fixed-line customers, respectively.

INS IMPHAL COMMISSIONED: ITS CAPABILITIES, AND THE STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF VISAKHAPATNAM CLASS OF DESTROYERS

INS Imphal (Pennant D68), the third of four warships of Project 15B that together form the Visakhapatnam class stealth-guided missile destroyers, is set to be commissioned into the Indian Navy on Tuesday (December 26). Here is all you need to know about the development, technological assets, weaponry and strategic significance of the Visakhapatnam class of ships – the youngest in the lineage of Delhi and Kolkata classes of indigenous destroyers.

What is Project 15B?

Between 2014 and 2016, the Indian Navy commissioned three guided missile destroyers of Kolkata class under a project codenamed '15A'. The Kolkata class included INS Kolkata, INS Kochi and INS Chennai. These ships were a step ahead of their precursor Delhi class of ships, which included INS Delhi, INS Mysore and INS Mumbai, built under Project 15 and commissioned between 1997 and 2001.

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



Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDSL), one of India's key Defence Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs), has built all these ships. A ship class signifies a group of ships built with similar tonnage, usage, capabilities and weaponry.

For building the advanced variants of the Kolkata class guided missile destroyers, a contract for construction under the project codenamed '15B' was signed in January 2011. The lead ship of Project 15B, INS Visakhapatnam (Pennant No D66), was commissioned into the Indian Navy in November 2021 and the second ship INS Mormugao (D67) in December 2022. The fourth ship, D69, which when commissioned will be christened INS Surat, was launched in May last year.

Designed by the Indian Navy's in-house warship design entity Warship Design Bureau, and built by MDSL in Mumbai, the four ships of Project 15B are christened after major cities from all four corners of the country — Visakhapatnam, Mormugao, Imphal and Surat. The class is identified by its lead ship, in this case INS Visakhapatnam.

The construction of Yard 12706, now INS Imphal

Four major ceremonial events mark a ship's life – keel laying, launching, commissioning and decommissioning. The keel laying ceremony originates from the tradition of laying one central timber which forms the backbone of the ship.

For modern ships, keel laying is marked by the first of the modular components of the ship being placed in the dock. The time taken to build Imphal and the period for her trials is the shortest for any indigenous destroyer, the Ministry of Defence has said. The keel of INS Imphal (which was referred to as Yard Number 12706) was laid on May 17, 2017.

The next milestone is launching when the ship is transferred from the building site into the waters. Yard 12706 was launched into the water on April 20, 2019. It sailed out for her maiden sea trials on April 28 earlier this year and completed a comprehensive schedule of trials, both in the harbour and at sea, leading up to its delivery on October 20. This was done within a record time frame of six months – the fastest for a ship of its size. On Tuesday, the ship is set for commissioning, marking the day the ship joins the active service.

Technological Characteristics and Armament of Visakhapatnam class

The four ships of the class are 163 meters long and 17.4m wide, with a displacement of 7,400 tonnes. To put it in perspective, India's first indigenous aircraft carrier INS Vikrant is 262 meters in length, 62 meters wide and displaces around 43,000 tonnes when fully loaded. The ship has a 'combined gas and gas' (COGAG) configuration integrating four gas turbines. The propulsion system allows the ship to reach a maximum speed of 30 knots and a maximum range of 4000 nautical miles.

Ships of Visakhapatnam class are operated by a crew of around 350, including 50 officers and 250 sailors. The accommodation and working areas have superior ergonomics and habitability as compared to its predecessor classes of destroyers.

Visakhapatnam class of destroyers have multiple fire zones, elaborate battle damage control systems and distributional power systems for improved survivability and reliability for operating in extreme operational and conflict scenarios. The class also has a total atmospheric control system (TACS) that offers protection to the crew from chemical, biological and nuclear threats.



They are also equipped with a state-of-the-art combat management system that can evaluate threats using analytical tools and create a tactical picture that includes available resources on board. This helps to allocate the resources based on the tactical picture compiled and the weapons package available on board. The class has a secure network to handle data from all the sensors and weapons systems.

The arsenal of the Visakhapatnam class has BrahMos surface-to-surface cruise missiles and vertically launched Barak-8 surface-to-air missiles for long-range engagement of shore and sea-based targets. The forward bow deck of the ship has a 127 mm main gun and also has four AK-630 30mm guns for close-point engagement.

The ship is armed with indigenously developed 533 mm torpedo launchers and RBU-6000 anti-submarine rocket launchers to provide anti-submarine warfare capability. It can operate two multi-role helicopters, including Sea King or HAL Dhruv. The ship has a rail-less helicopter traversing and also has a hangar facility.

Strategic Significance

Technically, destroyers are a category of warships that have high speed, manoeuvrability and longer endurance. They are designed to be part of naval formations like a fleet or a carrier battle group also known as carrier strike group.

The modern destroyers that are swift, sleek and difficult to detect, primarily protect the fleets and carrier battle groups from the short-range attackers from surface, air and sub-surface. The guided-missile destroyers are the destroyers that are armed with guided missiles for anti-aircraft warfare, anti-surface operations and anti-submarine warfare.

Because of the speed, manoeuvrability and striking capability, the guided missile destroyers are a key asset in various types of naval operations, mainly offensive. Being a follow-on of the Kolkata class, the Visakhapatnam class incorporates not just the feedback and suggestions from the Navy but also several new features. The state-of-the-art stealth feature makes Visakhapatnam class have the radar signature of a very small ship. A very high indigenous component gives this platform a strategic edge.

Visakhapatnam class is arguably one of the most advanced classes of ships in the Indian Navy. It can operate as an independent offence platform even when not part of a large formation. With all its modern sensors and communication facilities, the class is a key asset in network-centric warfare, which denotes the use of information technology and computer networking tools to form networks of various force elements in play in a conflict scenario.

CENTRE TAKING REVENGE ON AAP BY REJECTING PUNJAB, DELHI TABLEUX FOR R-DAY: BHARADWAJ

Delhi Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj has accused the BJP-led Central government of seeking revenge on the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) by rejecting the tableaux proposals for Punjab and Delhi in the upcoming Republic Day parade. Bharadwaj asserted that this rejection is not a coincidence and is driven by ill-will towards AAP. He highlighted that Delhi's tableau proposals have been consistently rejected for the past three years, and this year, even Punjab's proposal was rejected.

“Delhi is the national capital of India and Republic Day takes place here in this city. Despite that, the Centre has been rejecting the Delhi tableau for the last three years. In 2022, Delhi's tableau



was themed around Resolve 75 and it was rejected in the second round of design meeting. In the following year, our topic was Women Empowerment; again, the design was rejected,” he said.

For Republic Day 2024, the AAP government had proposed a tableau themed on ‘Viksit Bharat’ and again, they rejected Delhi’s design and idea, said Bharadwaj.

The AAP leader claimed that despite following the Centre's suggestions for changes in previous years, the rejection continues. Delhi BJP Secretary Bansuri Swaraj countered, accusing the AAP government of trying to create controversy and alleging involvement in various scams instead of focusing on development.

Bharadwaj said Delhi’s proposed tableau was themed around Delhi hospitals and mohalla clinics.

UNJUST AND UNWISE

In a conflict-prone border province such as Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), security forces have to tackle not only terrorism but also engage in counter-insurgency operations in a precise and just manner. The Pir Panjal Valley, comprising Poonch and Rajouri districts, has witnessed fierce encounters between security forces and militants in jungle terrain, leading to the death of 28 soldiers this year. The death of three civilians who were detained by the Army in the Poonch-Rajouri area following a deadly ambush on an Army convoy on December 21, and the fact that five other civilians were badly injured due to alleged torture by the security forces, is a severe indictment of the counter-insurgency tactics there. Such heinous actions by security forces targeting civilians in response to militant attacks are clearly problematic, on two counts. First, this increases the unpopularity of a regime that has not been democratically elected in the Union Territory where provincial elections have not been held for more than half a decade. This is a blow against counter-insurgency in an area that has been relatively more peaceful in comparison to the Kashmir Valley. In fact, the Pir Panjal region has been experiencing militancy in the last two years after relative calm for a decade and a half. Counter-insurgency operations of the kind that followed the ambush last week breed discontent among residents in a region which has not been supportive of militancy in the near past.

One of the aims of militants in the asymmetric warfare waged against Indian security forces is to provoke the forces into committing rights violations against civilians and to use grievances and indignation among them to increase their own support base. Such actions by security forces play into the hands of militants and their handlers across the border. Second, the legitimacy of force or violence and its use by the state depend on the justness of the actions. Indiscrimination in the use of violence targeting civilians without just cause only results in the questioning of that legitimacy in the eyes of the people. The J&K police have registered a murder case against unidentified persons following the deaths of the civilians and the Army has taken three senior officers off their posts while promising an inquiry. Both these agencies must now deliver justice quickly and in a firm manner. “Fake encounter” deaths and torture by security agencies in the Valley have resulted in spurts of increased militancy besides public outrage that developed into major law and order situations. The Bharatiya Janata Party-led Union government has tried to use a no-holds barred security-centric approach to tackle the problem of militancy and public anger in J&K. The repeated acts of rights violations and crimes in the name of counter-insurgency are clear evidence that this approach is not working.



EXPRESS VIEW ON PUNJAB'S DRUG CRACKDOWN: A PROMISE TO KEEP

An investigation by this paper into Punjab's long tryst with the drug menace and a renewed crackdown by the state administration to curb it has thrown up disquieting details: Of the 11,156 FIRs filed under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act by Punjab Police between April 1, 2022, and February 28, 2023, women are at the centre of nearly 10 per cent of the cases.

Barring a Covid-19-induced lull in 2020, this upward graph has been the trend in the drug trade in the state since 2019. Other findings include the rise in popularity of nasheeli goliyan — pharmaceutical opioids — over chitta or heroin; a suspiciously uniform pattern of apprehension of suspected users-peddlers registered in FIRs highlighting concerns of loopholes that can be exploited for acquittals; and the fact that major dealers continue to evade arrests.

As a border state, Punjab's centrality to the Golden Crescent (Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan) trade route of heroin and cocaine has long rendered it vulnerable to the scourge of drugs, morphing it from a transit point to one of the major end consumers. In March this year, speaking in the state assembly, Punjab Health Minister Balbir Singh had pegged the number of individuals grappling with addiction at 10 lakh. From April 1, 2020, till March 31, 2023, Punjab has reported 266 deaths due to overdose of narcotic and psychotropic substances.

Since Bhagwant Singh Mann assumed office in March 2022 with the promise, like that of his predecessors, of eradicating the menace, his government has adopted a two-pronged approach — a severe crackdown on suppliers, including seizure of their properties, and an awareness and rehabilitation campaign that focuses on prevention and restitution through creative campaigns such as cyclothons, street plays and gully cricket.

It is a step in the right direction, given that so long as there is demand, supply chains will continue to spring up. But this paper's investigation also throws up issues that require the understanding and addressing of deeper, systemic fault lines. The greater involvement of women in the drug trade indicates a direct link with poverty — many of the women peddlers belong to denotified tribes or are from EWS or rural backgrounds, thrust into the trade by their husbands or families or by a temptation to get rich quickly. A large number of these women are from the Malwa region, the largest political region of Punjab, parts of which continue to score very low on social indices.

Easier access and availability of education, alternate vocations and opportunities of reintegration into society might be a good place to start for finding the way out of this crisis. The setting up of all-women anti-drug committees in some Malwa villages is a welcome step.

But it is equally important to keep the focus on dismantling the organised mafia. While minor drug seizures are crucial to push the case for prevention over rehabilitation, Punjab's problems will continue unless those at the top of the organised network are brought into the net. The government must keep up the momentum to make good on its promise.

RIFT OVER RELIEF

The recent spat between the Central and Tamil Nadu governments over flood relief after two spells of heavy rainfall in the State has been disheartening for those struggling to rebuild their lives. The duel between Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and State Minister for Youth Welfare Udhayanidhi Stalin over semantics should not have arisen, with the focus and energy devoted to ensuring the return of normality to the southern districts of the State that were



overwhelmed on December 17 and 18. Fortunately, better wisdom prevailed with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assurance to Chief Minister M.K. Stalin of the Centre's support. Mr. Stalin, had, prior to this, in a meeting with Mr. Modi in New Delhi, sought interim relief funds of ₹7,033 crore and a final relief fund of ₹12,659 crore for the damage caused earlier by Cyclone Michaung to the Chennai area. He also wanted ₹2,000 crore from the PM's National Relief Fund (for the southern districts). The State has sought ₹21,692 crore in total from the Union government.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh had earlier carried out an aerial survey over the Chennai area and announced the release of the second instalment of ₹450 crore to the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF). The Centre has also sanctioned ₹500 crore for a flood mitigation project in Chennai. The State is now awaiting a fresh central announcement after visits by inter-ministerial teams to the affected areas. As Ms. Sitharaman pointed out in her press conference, the central government does not declare any natural disaster a national disaster. It is only after an assessment by its team that any natural disaster is classified as a disaster of severe nature — as seen in the 2013 floods in Uttarakhand and 2018 floods in Kerala. In such a case, there is additional financial assistance from the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF). So, there is no question of calling the floods in Tamil Nadu as a "national disaster". The central government should ensure clear guidelines when it comes to relief. It should also consider revising its position on excluding long term or permanent restoration works from the ambit of the SDRF/NDRF. There must be an open debate on the suggestion by a parliamentary committee in March 2021 that States hit by severe disaster be permitted to use more than the 25% flexi-fund component of centrally sponsored schemes to carry out post-disaster permanent restoration works. As micro, small and medium enterprises get no relief under the norms of the two funds, the Centre should ensure relief to this sector, which employs nearly 1.4 crore people in the State. Finally, the Centre must consult cyclone-vulnerable Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, West Bengal and Gujarat and formulate new norms on disaster management that would leave no room for political controversy.

CASH TRANSFERS HELP BENGAL WOMEN TAKE FINANCIAL DECISIONS, SAYS STUDY

A study by Amartya Sen's Pratichi Trust on Lakshmir Bhandar, one of the flagship schemes of the West Bengal government, points out that the cash incentives have increased the women beneficiary's ability to make financial decisions and position in the family, but larger issues of child marriage and domestic violence require special attention.

"From the gender perspective, although issues of security, dignity, and freedom of choice for women are being addressed to a certain extent through Lakshmir Bhandar, larger background realities like child marriage, and domestic violence still need special attention," the report by Pratichi Trust said. The study published recently pointed out that 85.55% of women report that they decide how to spend the money themselves, followed by joint decision-making with their husbands at 10.76%.

Another interesting figure that the study points out is that the majority of the respondents report that their position in their family is enhanced due to Lakshmir Bhandar (Yes=61.07%, No=38.93%). The picture across social groups is also mostly equitable (though the perception of STs might demand more probing).

Lakshmir Bhandar, a flagship programme to provide financial assistance to women from economically weaker sections of society in the 25-60 age group, provides ₹1,000 every month to women from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households and ₹500 a month for other categories. The scheme was announced by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in February 2021



during the the Assembly election campaign. The West Bengal government annually spends over ₹15,000 crore on the scheme and the number of beneficiaries has increased to about 2 crore.

The study published recently points out that from the “policy point of view, it is important to ensure that there is conversation and awareness regarding the conflicting realities of domestic violence, child marriage and gender-based discrimination on the one hand and the benefits or freedom that accrue to women as a result of direct cash transfer programmes on the other”.

Child marriage an issue

Despite schemes such as Lakshmir Bhandar and Kanyashree (scheme providing cash incentives for school-going girls) child marriage continues to be a challenge for the policy makers in West Bengal. In its report, the researchers of the Pratichi Trust have pointed out that Lakshmir Bhandar has presented before women of “modest background considerable promises for making a difference to their quotidian lives”. The study emphasised that entitlement, however, small but regular and steady has a multiplier effect on the lives of the beneficiaries.

SCS WERE NEVER COUNTED IN ANDAMAN; NOW A HOUSE COMMITTEE SITS UP AND TAKES NOTICE

The Parliamentary Committee on Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, led by BJP MP Kirit Premjibhai Solanki, has acknowledged the “significant presence of Scheduled Castes in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.” However, there has never been an official count of Scheduled Castes in the region, and the Constitution (SC) Order has never listed any community as SC on the islands. The issue was highlighted by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in 1999, pointing out that those referred to as Scheduled Castes were actually refugees from Bangladesh resettled on the islands by the Indian government until 1980. The House committee has recommended that the Union Territory administration form a special panel to study representation and welfare schemes for the SCs on the islands and report actions taken. The committee's suggestion arose after a study visit to the islands, emphasizing the need for addressing the issues faced by the SC population concentrated around Port Blair town.

VULNERABLE TRIBAL GROUPS

On November 29, the Union Cabinet approved the Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM JANMAN), aimed at providing PVTG households and habitations with basic facilities such as safe housing, clean drinking water and sanitation, improved access to education, health and nutrition, road and telecom connectivity, and sustainable livelihood opportunities.

In addition, saturation will also be ensured for schemes like Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY), Sickle Cell Disease Elimination, TB Elimination, 100% immunisation, PM Poshan, PM Jan Dhan Yojana, etc. This initiative is part of the Pradhan Mantri-PVTG Development Mission announced in India’s 2022-23 Union Budget, allocating Rs 15,000 crore over three years to develop them.

Who are PVTGs?

In 1960-61, the Dhebar Commission identified disparities among Scheduled Tribes, leading to the creation of the “Primitive Tribal Groups” (PTG) category. In 2006, this category was renamed Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).



Initially identifying 52 groups, the category was expanded to include 75 groups in 22,544 villages across 18 states and one Union Territory of India, totalling about 28 lakh individuals. These groups, living mainly in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, are characterised by pre-agricultural lifestyles, low literacy, small or stagnant populations, and subsistence economies.

Population sizes vary significantly, from under 1,000 in some groups, such as the Great Andamanese (around 50) and the Onge (around 100), to over 1 lakh in others, such as Maria Gond of Maharashtra and Saura in Odisha. Some tribes in central India, like Birhor, face stagnation, while the Onge and Andamanese are experiencing a decline.

What are the challenges in their development?

PVTGs are severely marginalised due to their isolation, low population, and distinct socio-economic and cultural traits. They struggle with limited access to basic services, social discrimination, and vulnerability to displacement from development and natural disasters. They have little political representation, hindering their participation in decision-making.

Mainstream society often overlooks their traditional knowledge and practices, and stereotypes about their backwardness are prevalent.

They are also battling loss of traditional livelihoods and resource rights, lack of market knowledge for Non-Timber Forest Produce, and exploitation by middlemen, threatening their traditional occupations.

What schemes have been floated for them?

The Centre and state governments have introduced several initiatives to support PVTGs. The PVTG Development Plan provides education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities while preserving traditional knowledge. The Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM) focuses on market linkages and Minor Forest Produce (MFP) procurement at Minimum Support Prices.

Other significant schemes include the Pradhan Mantri Adi Adarsh Gram Yojana, Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) and Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), which collectively aim for the holistic development of tribal areas. Additional measures like Eklavya Model Residential Schools, land titles under the Forest Rights Act 2006, Support to Tribal Research Institute (STRI) scheme, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996, and direct recruitment through reservations further aid in education, self-governance, and protection against discrimination.

However, challenges in implementation, such as resource limitations, lack of awareness, and unequal treatment among different PVTG groups have affected the effectiveness of these schemes.

What does PM-JANMAN do differently?

Proper identification and recognition: The criteria for identifying PVTGs have been criticised for being outdated. Some PVTGs are not recognised as Scheduled Tribes in certain states, and the list containing repetitive names has led to confusion and exclusion.

A 2014 report by Dr. Hrusikesh Panda, Secretary of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, and a 2015 report by Virginius Xaxa highlighted these concerns. The actual number of PVTGs is around 63,



accounting for overlaps and repetitions, as per the publication 'The Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of India — Privileges and Predicaments' by the Anthropological Survey of India.

Baseline surveys have only been conducted for about 40 PVTG groups, emphasising the need for targeted development planning. The government's initiative to create a Human Development Index for PVTGs is a significant step towards addressing these vulnerabilities.

Participatory bottom-up approach: To help PVTGs effectively, the scheme abandons the 'one-size-fits-all' approach in favour of customised strategies that respect their unique needs and priorities. It actively involves PVTGs in decision-making, addressing land rights, social inclusion, and cultural preservation. This community-based strategy embraces their cultural practices, beliefs, and traditions, ensuring their participation in planning, implementing, and monitoring development projects.

Livelihood promotion: Providing skills training and resources, like land and credit, will help in sustainable livelihoods. Implementing the Forest Rights Act by granting land titles secures access to forest resources. Section 3(1)(e) of the FRA specifically supports the rights of primitive tribal groups and pre-agricultural communities. Additionally, encouraging traditional technologies and skill enhancement through industry partnerships will help maintain cultural heritage while promoting sustainable development.

Health, nutrition and education: Outreach strategies like Mobile Medical Health Units will be crucial for providing healthcare in remote areas. These strategies need to be tailored for specific health issues like teenage pregnancies and oral health, and overcoming language and cultural barriers through sensitised healthcare workers or hiring those from within the community. Collaboration with trusted traditional healers can also aid in addressing complex health issues.

Incorporating their culture and language into the curriculum, providing transportation, and training teachers about PVTG cultural contexts can enhance education accessibility. Additionally, incentives for personnel working in PVTG areas and special educational institutes focused on PVTG needs can further improve opportunities for these communities.

Infrastructure development: The habitations of PVTGs often don't meet the criteria for schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Grameen Sadak Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and Jal Jeevan Mission due to factors like population requirements or lack of surveys.

Guidelines for infrastructure schemes, thus, have been relaxed to improve access to housing, water, sanitation, electricity, and connectivity. Adopting a tola-based (habitation) approach rather than a Gram Panchayat-based approach for development planning will better address these communities' specific needs.

SLOWLY AND STEADILY, RSS GROUPS PREPARE GROUND FOR 'DELISTING' OF CONVERTED TRIBALS

As festivities were being held to celebrate Christmas and ring in the New Year, members of tribal communities gathered under the aegis of a relatively new organisation – the Janjati Suraksha Manch (JSM) – and held separate rallies in Jharkhand and Tripura demanding the delisting of tribals who have converted, essentially to Christianity, from the list of Scheduled Tribes (STs).



The rallies are a part of campaigns launched by the Sangh Parivar over the past few years to prevent Christian missionaries from converting tribals and also to bring them back into the Hindu fold.

While RSS affiliate Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, which vehemently opposes missionaries, has been working among tribal groups since the early 1950s, the demand for delisting has gained momentum over the past two years due to the Sangh's aggressive push.

The JSM formed around 2006, with an aim to raise the issue of delisting converted tribals, is headed by national convenor Ganesh Ram Bhagat, a former minister in the Raman Singh-led Chhattisgarh Cabinet. Its co-convenor Raj Kishore Handsa is a full-time worker of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram.

The JSM has upped its activities over the past few years with rallies and public meetings in tribal-dominated districts of central and northeast India. The organisation claims to have a pan-India presence, but its activities have been more intense in states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Odisha, West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh.

The organisation's slogans emphatically reflect its motto and have an underlying essence – "converted tribals are outcasts". Placards with slogans like "Kul devi tum jaag jao, dharmantarit tum bhag jao (family deity awaken, those who convert get out)", pitting the traditional deity against those who have converted, or "Jo Bholenath ka nahin, woh hamari jaat ka nahin (one who is not with Bholenath is not from our community)", invoking the carefully constructed Hindutva iconography of Lord Shiva being the tribal God are common sights at rallies. The organisation recently ran a campaign against tickets being given to converted tribals in ST-reserved seats ahead of the Assembly elections in Chhattisgarh.

The JSM's efforts run parallelly with the RSS-linked Dharma Jagran Samiti's "ghar wapsi (homecoming) rituals" for converted tribals in Chhattisgarh, the Social Justice Forum's rallying against corporations allegedly funding conversions in Arunachal Pradesh, the VHP's nationwide campaign against quota for converted Dalits, including a campaign to ensure quota benefits are not extended to them, and several BJP MPs raising the issue of delisting of tribals in Parliament during Zero Hour.

Testing the waters

Sources within the BJP, which is yet to make its stand clear on the issue, say the delisting campaigns fit with the strategy of "testing the waters" before making any significant policy decision on the issue.

Similar debates were initiated by the Sangh, sources said, over a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and 'love jihad', prior to a few BJP-ruled states enacting laws on them. "Now, UCC is a part of the national discourse, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi having spoken on it," a source says.

The delisting campaign also is in sync with the Sangh's idea of pushing ideological projects like the abrogation of Article 370, construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, and disputes over temples in Kashi and Mathura while the BJP is in power.

Sources in the RSS point out that the delisting demand of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram is an old one and has been raised through the 1980s and 1990s. Notably, the 2008 riots in Kandhamal of Odisha, which were triggered by the killing of a Hindu monk, were preceded by similar demands.



“The demand was even raised by Congress leaders such as Kartik Oraon. However, it died down subsequently as those in power did not want to call out missionaries. But now a movement is gaining momentum and tribals are realising their rights are being taken away,” a senior RSS leader says.

Bhagat, who recently broke down after being denied a ticket from Jashpur in Chhattisgarh for the Assembly polls by the BJP, says: “Our rally in Ranchi had around 1 lakh people. Of the Rs 100 we get as benefits, Rs 80 are taken away by converted tribals. There are Muslims who marry tribal women and become village pradhans after contesting polls from reserved seats. In addition to this, they also avail benefits meant for minorities,” he claims.

The JSM convenor says the next rally will be held in Delhi, where plans are being made to assemble five lakh people. “We will gherao Parliament and hold a dharna till our demands are met,” he says.

Region to region

However, realising the complexity of the delisting issue, both socially and politically, the Sangh has moderated its stance from region to region. For instance, in the Northeast, where converted tribals are in a majority in several states, the RSS has crafted a support base. The BJP is hardly likely to raise the issue of delisting here.

Similar is the situation in Kerala, where the BJP has the Christian community in its electoral calculations. The party believes it can hope for electoral gains here only if it forges a Hindu-Christian coalition behind it, sidelining the Muslims electorally.

On Christmas day, in his interaction with prominent members of the Christian community, PM Modi said he had a long-standing relationship with them and praised their contribution to education and healthcare sectors. BJP national president J P Nadda visited a church and said the life of Jesus Christ and his sacrifices are a source of inspiration.

Bhagat admits that the situation is different in the Northeast, but is confident that those opposed to delisting will back the demand when a conducive environment is created. “Everyone who lives in Bharat is Hindu after all,” he argues.

But an RSS leader is candid, arguing that delisting ought to be done keeping in mind that different regions have different tribal identities. “Seeing tribal identity as one is a misplaced anthropological construct. The tribals of Maharashtra are different from those in Nagaland. No one is looking at a blanket solution but the issue is genuine,” he says.

ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY

The Union Sports Ministry suspending the newly elected Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) on Sunday marks yet another twist in the nearly year-long saga afflicting Indian wrestling. In January 2023, Olympic medallists Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Punia, and World Championship medallist Vinesh Phogat, had accused the then WFI President Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh and the coaches of the Federation of sexual harassment. The Bharatiya Janata Party parliamentarian was subsequently forced to relinquish control and was charged by the Delhi police for offences including stalking and harassment. But last Thursday, his long-term loyalist, Sanjay Singh, was appointed the new president. Not only did Singh and his fellow Brij Bhushan confidants win 13 of 15 posts to which polls were held, not a single woman was chosen. The sight of Singh standing beside a heavily garlanded Brij Bhushan outside the latter’s residence — which also doubled up



as the WFI office — and the duo flashing the victory sign was enough indication of where the control lay. Such was the disappointment among the wrestlers that a tearful Sakshi announced her retirement while Vinesh warned that no woman will find wrestling safe in the current set-up. On Friday, Bajrang decided to return his Padma Shri award in protest.

Perhaps, it is this embarrassing turn of events that forced the government to finally act. The Ministry has also cited hasty and arbitrary decision-making on Singh's part, wherein he announced the revival of tournaments without taking into confidence the Secretary General (Prem Chand Lochab) as mandated by the WFI constitution. Lochab is one of two WFI office-bearers not considered close to Brij Bhushan. Another reason was the running of Federation affairs from "the premises controlled by former office-bearers, also the alleged premises wherein sexual harassment of players has been alleged". In a nutshell, the mess has laid bare everything that plagues sports administration in India. Even as the nation is diversifying its sporting excellence, the bureaucracy that runs sport still carries the unwelcome legacy of patronage politics. It also does not help that prominent athletes occupying positions of power are mostly deferential to the political masters who helped in their ascent. In the wrestlers' case, the Indian Olympic Association led by the legendary P.T. Usha dithered in its initial response and the athletes' commission comprising iconic sportspersons was tongue-tied. Such was Brij Bhushan's clout that a first information report was registered only after the intervention of the Chief Justice of India. There is still room to wipe the slate clean and usher in reforms. The authorities should go the whole hog.

HISTORY MEET CALLS FOR SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO PAST

"Telangana is a land for revolt and rebellion that challenges the status quo. We have the legacy of Medaram Jatara, Komaram Bheem, peasant rebellion," said Thatikonda Ramesh, the Vice-Chancellor of Kakatiya University, which is hosting the meeting.

The Indian History Congress represents a secular scientific approach to the past, said S.A.N Rezavi, the secretary of the IHC, in his opening remarks. "We are passing through very difficult times. History is being reduced to mythology. The Indian History Congress has a great duty to arrest this situation which has been prevailing in our country for the past few decades," he said. "Today, other attempts are being made to disturb our past. To break our civilisation, to divide our people. I think our historians are fighting from the forefront. Types of histories are circulating in the market based on our beliefs. I hope and wish all these members of IHC remember our contribution," said Mr. Rezavi, professor at Aligarh Muslim University.

"We are the only organisation which has fought any onslaught towards the understanding of the past. During the Emergency imposed by one of the country's Prime Ministers, it was only the Indian History Congress led by people like Bipin Chandra, Irfan Habib, Satish Chandra and other historians who opposed it leading from the front without worrying about what would happen to them," he said. "The cherished values of equity, equality, justice, secularism, humanism, democracy and civil liberties as embodied in the Constitution are being questioned by those who never had any faith in them in the first place or any role in their evolution," said Mridula Mukherjee, formerly with Jawaharlal Nehru University, who was the guest of honour.

"An aggressive and regressive hate-filled hegemonic nationalism is being imposed and substituted for our own homegrown indigenous humane, non-homogenising progressive nationalism bequeathed to us by Dadabhoy Naoroji, Sarojini Naidu," she said recalling the role of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajaji, Maulana Abul Kalam Azam for creating composite nationalism.



140 PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES SET UP IN INDIA OVER PAST 5 YEARS; GUJARAT HAS HIGHEST SHARE

As many as 140 private universities were established in the country during the past five years with the highest number being set up in Gujarat, followed by Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, show data provided by the Union Education Ministry.

The data say 28 private universities were established in Gujarat and 15 in Maharashtra during the period. Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka have 14 and 10 of them, respectively.

“A private university is established by an Act passed by the State legislature concerned and notification issued by the State government concerned,” a senior Education Ministry official said. “The name of a private university is included in the list of universities by the University Grants Commission (UGC) as per Section 2(f) of the UGC Act, 1956, on receipt of the copies of the Act and notification from the university,” he said. Such private universities are empowered to award general degree programmes without the specific approval of the commission, the official said.

“However, the approvals for running professional and medical programmes are given by the respective regulatory or statutory bodies, and such programmes are governed by the norms of respective bodies such as the All Indian Council for Technical Education, National Medical Commission, and the Dental Council of India,” he added.

Seven private universities were established in Chhattisgarh in the past five years, while Jharkhand and Rajasthan got six each.

Five universities each were established in Bihar, Odisha, Uttarakhand and Telangana, while four each were set up in Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Manipur, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Sikkim, and Uttar Pradesh.

At 40, the highest number of private universities were established in the academic year 2018-19.

CLARIFYING PROTOCOLS FOR JN.1 COVID-19 INFECTIONS

The spike (S) protein is one of the key biological characteristics of Sars-CoV-2. This protein allows the virus to penetrate into the cells of its host (human beings) and cause the infection. This means that without the S protein, the virus would not be able to infect human beings, and so, this is a protein that is of interest to scientists making vaccines and anti-viral drugs. In its initial risk evaluation, the WHO said that previously, JN.1 was tracked as part of BA.2.86, the parent lineage that is classified as a variant of interest. The earliest sample of JN.1 was collected on August 25, 2023. In comparison with the parent lineage BA.2.86, JN.1 has the additional L455S mutation in the spike protein.

A paper published in The Lancet Infectious Diseases said that the L455S mutation may slightly reduce JN.1's ability to bind to human cells, but may have increased this sub-variant's immune evasion properties.

The challenge has always been making effective drugs and vaccines when the virus is constantly mutating, points out Deepak Sehgal, professor, department of life sciences, Shiv Nadar Institute of Eminence, Delhi. Prof Sehgal, along with his student Aditya Trivedi and others, recently published a paper in the FEBS Journal about an inhibitor that can bind to the viral proteins of the coronavirus



in order to prevent its replication. This, he said, could eventually help the development of drugs to treat Covid-19.

Will the current Covid-19 vaccines work? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, earlier this month, said there was no indication of increased severity from JN.1. Existing vaccines, tests, and treatments still work well against JN.1. The Pune-based Serum Institute of India (SII), has said it will be “aiming to obtain licensure for XBB1 COVID variant vaccine which is very similar to the JN.1 variant for use in India,” as reported by The Hindu previously.

Do we need booster shots? Subramanian Swaminathan, vice president, Clinical Infectious Diseases Society, India, says that since the JN.1 strain seems to have significant immune evasion, another dose of the same vaccine may not provide added protection.

AMAS WAR TO MANGO PICKLE: WHAT WAS ‘GOOGLED’ IN 2023

In 2023, Chandrayaan-3 was the most searched term among news events in India, according to Google Trends. The lunar mission, which made India the first nation to touch down on the southern polar region of the moon, found a place in the global list of most searched news events too. It ranked ninth out of the top 10 news topics that trended globally in 2023. Chandrayaan-3 garnered widespread interest across all States in India, unlike other news events wherein searches were mostly limited.

The rest of the nine news events that trended in India this year include the Karnataka Assembly election results, actor-director Satish Kaushik’s demise, the Union Budget, gangster-politician

Atiq Ahmed’s murder, the ethnic conflict in Manipur and the train accident in Odisha which killed close to 300 people. International news events that made the list were the earthquake in Turkey, Hollywood actor Matthew Perry’s death and the Israel-Hamas war.

Search interest about the Hamas war and the Manipur ethnic violence sustained for a longer period, given their drawn-out nature.

India loved its sports personalities this year too, especially its cricketers, with both the Indian Premier League (IPL) and the Cricket ODI World Cup featuring in the 2023 calendar. Seven of the 10 most searched people in India were sportsmen. These include Shubman Gill, Rachin Ravindra, Mohammad Shami, Glenn Maxwell, David Beckham, Suryakumar Yadav and Travis Head. Along with them, actress Kiara Advani (at the first spot), YouTuber Elvish Yadav (fifth), and actor Sidharth Malhotra (sixth) complete the top 10 list. Among the most searched sports events, the IPL took the first spot followed by the Cricket World Cup. The Asian Games and Indian Super League were the only non-cricketing sports events in the top 10 list.

Under the ‘what is’ category, the G-20, UCC and ChatGPT were in the top three. Under the ‘how to’ category, ‘how to prevent sun damage for skin and hair with home remedies’ was the most searched followed by ‘how to reach my first 5k followers on YouTube’ and ‘how to get good at Kabaddi’.

‘Coding classes near me’ was searched the most in the ‘near me’ category. ‘Onam Sadhya near me’, ‘gym near me’ and ‘Jailer movie near me’ are also featured in this category. Jawan topped the most searched movies followed by Gadar 2 and Oppenheimer. Farzi topped the most searched shows followed by Wednesday and Asur. ‘Mango pickle’, ‘sex on the beach’ and ‘panchamrit’ were the



most searched recipes. 'Vietnam', followed by 'Goa' and 'Bali' were the most searched travel destinations.

Globally, the top 10 search terms in the news category were about natural disasters and shootings that happened in North America. Besides them, the world also searched for the Israel-Hamas war (first spot), the Turkey earthquake and Chandrayaan-3, which were common search interests in the global and India list. The 'Titanic' deep-sea submersible that went missing in June, was the second most searched news topic globally. While the submersible that went missing was 'Titan', the word used for searching was 'Titanic.' The war in Sudan completes the global top 10 list.

RAM TEMPLE: MAKRANA MARBLE, PINK SANDSTONE FROM RAJASTHAN, GRANITE FROM TAMIL NADU AND TELANGANA

The under-construction Ram Temple in Ayodhya, set to be inaugurated on January 22, incorporates various types of stones from different parts of India. The main temple structure uses pink sandstone from Rajasthan's Bharatpur district, while the plinths are made from 17,000 granite stones sourced from Tamil Nadu and Telangana. White Makrana marble and colored marble from Mandla in Madhya Pradesh are utilized for inlay work. Teakwood from Maharashtra's Balarshah and Allapalli forest ranges has been employed in 44 doors, including 14 to be gold-plated. The temple complex, designed to last 1,000 years, features sewage and water treatment plants, a fire service, and an independent power station. The construction involved more than 4,000 workers, and experts from various Indian institutes collaborated on the project. The temple avoids the use of iron and concrete, opting for traditional stone construction methods for longevity. The structure, built to handle 2 lakh pilgrims daily, includes a granite retaining wall to prevent damage from the nearby Saryu river. The complex has undergone extensive research and analysis, drawing from the construction models of 550 temples across India. Ahead of the consecration ceremony, sun-themed pillars called 'Surya Stambhs' are being installed along a prominent road in Ayodhya, contributing to the beautification of the temple town.

NEPAL PITCHES FOR SITA'S BIRTHPLACE IN JANAKPUR — AN OLD AYODHYA LINK

With just a month to go for the inauguration of the grand Ram Temple in Ayodhya, Nepal is buoyed at the tourism prospects the development might bring for them, collaterally. With Nepal's Janakpur believed to be the birthplace of Lord Ram's consort Sita, they are hoping pilgrims from across the world, who visit Ram's birthplace, will also make a trip to Sita's birthplace.

On Friday, Nepal's Ambassador to India Shankar Prasad Sharma said that the two countries are working to establish a "sister city relationship" between Janakpur and Ayodhya. Sharma has been pitching Janakpur as an "indispensable" part of the Ramayana circuit", ahead of the temple inauguration. Envisaged by the Indian government in 2014, the Ramayana circuit retraces the life of Lord Ram and includes major pilgrim sites related to the Ramayan, along with Janakpur in Nepal.

Janaki Mandir — the birthplace of Sita — embodies the cultural heritage of Nepal, and it has become one of the major components for strengthening ties between India and Nepal, he said. "With India and Nepal working jointly on the Ramayana circuit, Janakpur is a vital part, which will aid tourism development in both the countries. There are people in Thailand and Indonesia also, who know about Ram and Sita and these places like Ayodhya and Janakpur interest them. Better connectivity will help economic development in the region," Sharma said during the event.



“Nepal also has a Balmiki ashram, like the one in India,” said Sharma, adding that Nepalese believe that it is the original religious retreat where Sita spent several months. “And this only shows how so many people in Nepal love Ramayan — the philosophy and ideals of Lord Ram. Nepal would like to support, develop and promote the Ramayana circuit in Nepal as well as in India,” he added.

During Nepali PM Prachanda's visit to India, Prime Minister Modi emphasized the Ramayana circuit as a connection between the two countries. The initiation of a bus service and the Bharat Gaurav tourist train between Janakpur and Ayodhya as part of the Ramayana circuit in 2022 further underscores India and Nepal's joint promotion of cultural and tourism circuits. The Ramayana circuit, along with the Buddhist circuit, is one of the only two transnational circuits among the 15 thematic circuits proposed by the Ministry of Tourism. This is seen as India's attempt to strengthen cultural ties with Nepal, especially in the face of increasing economic influence from China. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) Sah-Pracharak, Narendra Thakur, emphasized the cultural heritage-based relationship between India and Nepal, cautioning against elements with vested interests attempting to disrupt this cordial relationship. Thakur believes that the Ramayana circuit will have a global impact, extending beyond South Asian countries.

WHERE FOSSILS MEET FAITH IN A MADHYA PRADESH DISTRICT

A stone deity worshipped by the Bhils in Madhya Pradesh's Bagh was recently proved to be a fossilised dinosaur egg. With scientists hoping to bag India's first UNESCO Geopark tag, can tribal traditions and fossilised gods reconcile with prehistoric truths and scientific temper?

As Veshta Mandloi, 38, carefully unwrapped a “tribal god” nestled inside a white cement bag at the dinosaur park bordering the quaint Padlaya village of Madhya Pradesh's Dhar district, the team of scientists from Lucknow's Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeosciences (BSIP) held their collective breaths.

Just like their ancestors worshipped ancient stones as deities, generations of Bhils had worshipped this sun-baked, reddish-brown Kakad Bhairav or Bhilat Baba. Sacrifices of chickens and sheep marked their whispered pleas to the roughly oval-shaped deity — whose weathered face is adorned with a black tilak and a handlebar moustache — for bountiful harvests and healthy livestock. Palaeontologists, however, confirmed recently that the revered ‘Kakad Bhairav’ was in fact a 66-million-year-old fossilised egg of a titanosaur, a herbivorous dinosaur.

Since the 1980s, discoveries like sauropod bones, fossilised dinosaur eggs and extinct marine creatures paint a vivid picture of the area's undiscovered ancient past. Eminent palaeontologist Ashok Sahni says India has the “largest-of-its-kind dinosaur hatchery on Earth” that stretches 10,000 sq km across Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

Over 256 fossilised dinosaur eggs have been unearthed in Madhya Pradesh's Bagh so far, with 20 nests unearthed recently. The fossilised titanosaur egg is in a vault at the local forest office, while the others have been donated to museums and government facilities.

For years, scientists had been attempting to prove that the Bhil deity was, in fact, a fossilised dinosaur egg. A 2023 research paper proved just that. Tribes that resided in the Narmada Valley worshipped fossilised Titanosaurus eggs, having cattle jump over them for healthy offspring or performing animal sacrifices before harvests.

The latest discovery, scientists hope, will give a fillip to their nomination for India's first UNESCO Global Geopark tag.



Awarded by the United Nations' body since 2015, the geopark tag is given to territories for sites with global relevance to geology, geomorphology or palaeontology. If selected, the Bagh site will join a select club of 195 UNESCO geoparks in 48 countries. As it lies in waiting, Madhya Pradesh and BSIP have partnered to transform the dinosaur park into the nation's first geopark.

These fossilised treasures range from rare ammonites (sea creatures with spiral shells that went extinct 66 million years ago), whose stories are etched in the ridges of their handed shells, to shark teeth and massive titanosaurs eggs.

Cradling a fossil in his palm and wearing a utility vest, Verma, 53, looks the part of a palaeontologist. As the light glints off the fossil's ancient surface, he murmurs, "This Cidaris (sea urchin)... isn't it beautiful? I started my journey with this."

In fact, it was an English captain who excavated India's first dinosaur bones. Captain William Sleeman, posted in the Narmada Valley, discovered the skeletal remains in Jabalpur cantonment's Bara Simla Hill in 1828. As a tribute, a town in MP, 40 km away from Bagh, was rechristened as Sleemanabad.

Fast forward 150 years, when the first dinosaur eggs in India were found — once again in Jabalpur — in 1982. Eminent palaeontologist Sahni made the serendipitous discovery while stooping to tie his shoelaces. Sitting there, etched in rocks in the middle of the site were fossilised titanosaurs eggs. Currently the Professor Emeritus at Panjab University, Sahni would be a part of the team that pieced together the bones of India's newest species of carnivorous dinosaur, *Rajasaurus narmadensis*, in 2003.

Around 1996, sauropod remains were found in Bagh, setting off a frenzy. Forest officials said, "Poachers stole valuable wood log fossils that were used to make decorative plates. They also destroyed rock structures and used them as construction material. Even eggs were stolen from the region." Palaeontologist Sahni paints a vivid picture of India's Cretaceous dinosaurs in his book, *Dinosaurs of India*. He describes them as the most widespread of all Indian dinosaurs, living during a tumultuous period of continental drift and volcanic activity, which is said to have shaped this region.

Explaining the importance of the research undertaken in this region, Mahesh Thakar, the director at BSIP, says, "These fossils belong to the Cretaceous Period, around the time when dinosaurs went extinct. Research shows (that it took place) after a volcanic eruption happened, because of which the Deccan Plateau was formed. We think it was responsible for the extinction (of dinosaurs) in India. This research helps shed light on that time." Today, these priceless evolutionary secrets strewn in the unfenced 89 hectares have been entrusted to three watchful Bhil men, equipped with meagre resources like lathis.

CRICKET, COMMERCE

Last week's Indian Premier League's (IPL) auction in Dubai reiterated the sporting brand's enduring value and financial muscle. The T20 league, which many years ago Rahul Dravid famously referred to as 'a domestic tournament with an international flavour', has come a long way since its launch on a glitzy April night at Bengaluru's M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in 2008. The championship has survived a betting and fixing scandal, team suspensions and ownership issues, and become an irreplaceable element of the Indian summer and a much-watched fixture in the annual cricket calendar. The latest auction with its overseas tryst had an obvious recency bias as



evident in the World Cup winning Australian squad's trio of skipper Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Travis Head eliciting competitive bids. The first two also scaled the ₹20 crore peak, which had remained unscaled so far in the IPL's history. Kolkata Knight Riders picked Starc at ₹24.75 crore and Sunrisers Hyderabad latched onto Cummins at ₹20.50 crore. In all the club against country debate that affects sports like football and cricket, what a player achieved for his nation adds immense value to his or her credentials, and that in turn means better money with clubs vying for the star athlete's presence. The Aussies reaped their rewards and many others too were recognised.

The build-up to the auction had its share of drama, as Mumbai Indians took Gujarat Titans skipper Hardik Pandya. He was subsequently appointed as the Mumbai Indians' captain and that meant Rohit Sharma's chequered history as an IPL captain had perhaps drawn to a close. There were cryptic social media posts from Jasprit Bumrah and Suryakumar Yadav, and that added to the speculation within the Mumbai Indians' ranks. And since the IPL is seen as a mirror to the Indian team's fortunes in T20, the presumption is that Pandya will continue to lead India in the shortest format. With the West Indies and the U.S. hosting next year's ICC T20 World Cup, the latest auction and the 2024 IPL edition will have a lot of layered meanings attached to them. Seen in that light, unsung Indian players, plying their wares in domestic cricket, being picked by various franchises, is also a reflection of a young crop that may don the Indian blue sometime in the future. Players such as Sameer Rizvi, Kumar Kushagra, Shubham Dube, Swastik Chhikara and Ramandeep Singh found eager buyers. But the way Pakistan cricketers have been kept away from the IPL is also a pointer that sport cannot stay immune to geopolitical tensions.

EXPRESS VIEW: A TEST FOR INDIAN WOMEN'S CRICKET TEAM

Lack of Test cricket experience hasn't come in the way of the Indian women's team displaying exemplary prowess and temperament in the game's longest format. Australia and England are the traditional powerhouses of the women's game, and the former especially has been virtually unbeatable across formats over the last several years.

India hadn't played Test cricket for more than two years before taking on both these sides at home, but it put on dominant back-to-back performances. England suffered a 347-run thrashing in a little over two days, and while the Aussies took the game well into the fourth and final day, they were finally outplayed in a eight-wicket loss.

This despite the fact that most Indian players had virtually no experience of the four-day game and the long form is not even played at the domestic level. It makes the performance even more noteworthy as even senior players like skipper Harmanpreet Kaur and Smriti Mandhana are not used to the ebbs and flows of multi-day cricket. International women's cricket is almost exclusively played with the white ball, over 20 or 50 overs. Apart from India, England and Australia, other teams barely play Tests, and even these three sides only have a one-off Test as part of a tour. The entire Australia and England series was confined to one city — Mumbai.

The BCCI is the richest cricket board in the world. The women's game worldwide will take the next big step if it backs it wholeheartedly. The launch of the Women's Premier League was a significant moment, and the next women's 50-over World Cup is also scheduled in India. Women's Test cricket needs India to take the lead even as the big crowds for matches suggest there's appetite and interest. Insisting on one Test match, at least, during every tour, home or away, would be a good start. It would be a shame if India's women cricketers are not given ample opportunity to showcase their skills in this format.



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

FEDERAL RESERVE'S RATE CUTS COME INTO VIEW AS U.S. INFLATION RETREATS

Traders broke out the champagne after a government report showed the personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price index fell 0.1% in November from October, responding to the first decline on that measure since April 2020 by boosting bets not only that the Fed will begin reducing borrowing costs in March but will continue to cut them throughout the year. Futures contracts tied to the Fed's policy rate are now pricing an end-of-year benchmark rate in the 3.5%-3.75% range, 1.75 percentage points below the current level.

Early to rejoice?

Analysts caution that Fed policymakers themselves may not be quite as euphoric, noting that much of the decline in November came from falling goods prices that is unlikely to continue, at least at the same pace. Rent inflation is still running high, though it is forecast to recede in the coming months.

"There is some turbulence ahead in the Q1 inflation readings that I think Fed officials will want to get through before turning the focus squarely to rate cuts," wrote Inflation Insights' Omair Sharif.

"Fed officials will want to see a few reports with softer shelter data to gain confidence that they can move on to rate cuts."

Last week the Fed kept its policy rate in the 5.25%-5.50% range for a third straight month, and Fed Chair Jerome Powell signaled that with the rate-hike campaign that began in March 2022 likely over, policymakers would next turn to a debate over the timing of rate cuts.

Still, said KPMG Economics' Diane Swonk, "We see Fed officials as hesitant to ease rates so soon for fear of backtracking on the hard-won fight against inflation."

WHAT DOES CHINA'S 2024 ECONOMIC POLICY LOOK LIKE?

The story so far:

The 2023 Chinese Central Economic Work Conference (CEWC) recently concluded, highlighting a stability-focused pathway for the nation's 2024 economy. Key directives include shifting from export-led to domestic demand-led growth, enhancing high-quality production, striving for tech self-reliance while cooperating with trade partners, and maintaining financial discipline. While echoing previous goals, this agenda emphasises the need for structural reforms, necessitating a departure from entrenched Chinese party-state practices to shape the country's economic future.

How is China strategically addressing the challenges?

The first key area is dual circulation. As global demand has continued to decline amidst heightened sentiments of protectionism and 'de-risking', the country is now looking inwards to boost domestic consumption and only allow for a complimentary relationship with international demand. Chinese President Xi Jinping has referred to this as the "New Pattern of Development," and is an ambitious structural reform for a country known as the world's manufacturing hub.



What specific measures are being implemented?

China prioritises “high-quality” economic growth focused on addressing the imbalance between development and people’s increasing demands for a better life. This shift emphasises domestic demand, specialised self-reliance, and sectors like high-tech and sustainable manufacturing. Agriculture receives attention for its contribution to GDP and growth, aligning with goals of rural revitalisation and food security, supported by the establishment of “agriculture innovation centers.”

Self-reliance in core technologies has continued to be a repeated and explicit goal for the revival of the Chinese economy in the backdrop of intensifying tech-related export controls placed by the U.S. and its issue-based and treaty-based allies (such as the Netherlands and Japan respectively) against China. Although, the language of the CEWC readout has changed from “self-improvement” in high-technology in 2022 to “strength” in 2023. China maintains a “prudent monetary policy” and a “proactive fiscal policy,” focusing on financial stability. The latter was also reiterated at the Central Financial Work Conference that took place just a month ago and has now become part of the implementational mandate of the newly established Central Finance Commission. Under ‘proactive fiscal policy’, in the past year, China has mobilised tools such as tax rebates for medium and small enterprises, as well as interest rate discounts for local governments. This is to enable them to alleviate some of the debt stress and continue to invest either in keeping employees on a regular payroll or in the unhindered development of infrastructure. Fiscal tools like tax rebates and interest rate discounts aid small enterprises and local governments in managing debt and sustaining infrastructure development. Efforts to ease local government debt include a special bond issuance for post-disaster recovery. However, the local authorities are warned to embrace frugality and stricter financial discipline due to escalating debt burdens, reaching around \$60 trillion. The emphasis is on “fiscal sustainability” rather than bailouts. Monetary policy aims for stabilised liquidity levels, avoiding infusion despite past promises of an economic boost. Economic challenges like currency depreciation, income insecurity, rising unemployment, and capital outflows suggest injecting more liquidity won’t improve investment and borrowing sentiments.

To address economic concerns, China aims to promote balanced trade to increase international demand. This move signals a willingness to open its market to key trade partners, potentially creating more balanced trade relations without favoring China excessively. This approach aligns with China’s goal of “opening-up,” supporting high-quality growth, focusing on self-reliance, especially in areas like technology and food security, amid ongoing U.S.-China geopolitical competition.

INDIA-ASEAN TO REJIG 15-YEAR TRADE PACT IN EARLY 2024

India and the ten-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) will begin negotiations in February to “modernise” their decade-and-a-half-old free trade agreement (FTA) to bring more balance in the pact currently weighed against New Delhi. But new areas like labour, environment, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and gender, are likely to be kept out, sources have said

“There will be a complete re-look at the FTA with the broad objective of bringing down the trade deficit for India. We want to modernise the FTA as a lot has evolved since it was signed almost 15 years back. New elements such as product specific rules and trade remedies will be brought in to make the FTA more efficient,” a source told businessline, not wishing to be identified.



The first round of negotiations for reviewing the FTA, officially known as the ASEAN India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITGA), will be on February 18-19 in New Delhi, the source said. Negotiations will follow a quarterly schedule aiming to wrap them up by 2025.

India has long been pressing for a review of the AITGA, which was signed in August 2009 and implemented in January the following year, as the pact resulted in disproportionate benefits for the ASEAN.

Trade deficit

India's trade deficit with the region was at \$7.5 billion per annum when the pact was implemented. This has ballooned to \$43.57 billion in FY23. In 2022-23, India's exports to the region were valued at \$44 billion, while its imports were at \$87.57 billion.

"The Commerce Department has collected inputs from various sectors on tariff and non tariff barriers faced by them in the ASEAN. Market access for Indian businesses has to go up by addressing both areas," the source said.

Sectors that need propping up include chemicals and alloys, plastics and rubber, minerals, leather, textiles, gems and jewellery, per an industry analysis.

"India will also need to make some concessions for the ASEAN as the review will have to benefit both, but the objective of bringing balance has to be central," an industry official also seeking anonymity added.

Revamping AITGA

Modernising the AITGA will include incorporating changes in the Rules of Origin (ROO), which can work in favour of India by increasing market access for some items as well as blocking possible re-routing of goods by China through the ASEAN countries, the source added.

ROO are the criteria to determine the origin of a product and establish if it qualifies for duty cuts under an FTA.

"PSRs will be introduced in the ROO chapter which can help India relax rules for certain items to increase exports. At the same time, loopholes could be blocked to check circumvention by China," the source explained.

The modernised AITGA will also have a chapter on trade remedies, which will seek to provide a safety net for domestic industry against unfair trade practices or unforeseen surges in imports of goods, he added.

But no new areas, such as environment, labour, MSMEs or gender, will be added to the AITGA. "We do not want to complicate the free trade pact by cluttering it with new issues. The focus will be on making the existing pact more efficient," the official said.

The 10-member ASEAN, which includes Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, accounted for 11.3% of India's global trade in 2022-23.



INDIA CLOSING IN ON LITHIUM DEAL WITH ARGENTINA, TAPPING AUSTRALIA, CHILE

The Mines Ministry, through the state-owned Khanij Bidesh India Ltd (KABIL), has entered into a draft exploration and development agreement with Argentinan miner CAMYEN for possible acquisition and development of five-odd lithium blocks.

The company has also entered into a non-disclosure agreement with Chilean miner ENAMI for 'possible exploration, extraction, processing and commercialisation' of the mineral and appointed consultancy major PwC for identification of investable projects in Australia.

Incidentally, Latin American nations, primarily Chile and Argentina, account for 30–35% of the world's supplies. Chile, with 11% of the world's lithium reserves, supplies 26% of the requirements; while Argentina with nearly a fifth of the global reserves supplies about 6%-odd. Australia is among the other large producers globally.

Talks are in 'advanced stages' for acquisition of lithium blocks in Argentina. The reported cost of the acquisition in Argentina could run into a 'couple of hundred crore' and the proposal would be put up for Cabinet approval.

Ministry officials said the KABIL board had approved the 'Draft Exploration and Development Agreement' and a proposal for opening of a branch office in Catamarca, Argentina was subsequently cleared by the Ministry.

"Mines Ministry has given necessary approval to KABIL for entering in to the agreement (with CAMYEN)," the officials told

Intensifies search

India has over the last one year intensified its search for critical mineral, including lithium. The alkaline mineral, also called 'white gold', is a cornerstone in India's switch to green energy thereby reducing its carbon footprint.

Right now, India has put up just lithium blocks for auction — one in J&K and another in Chhattisgarh — with most of its domestic requirements being met through imports. The Import bill is pegged at about ₹24,000 crore.

'EXPORT OF BASMATI RICE COULD BE AFFECTED BY RED SEA ATTACKS'

The rerouting by major shipping lines in an effort to avoid the Red Sea route, which has seen multiple attacks on vessels by Yemen's Houthi rebels, could raise the price of Indian basmati rice exports by 15 to 20 per cent, a senior official with a government agency said.

The alternative route may also affect India's exports of the long-grain rice to Egypt and European countries, said the official, requesting anonymity. This comes after the world's second-largest container shipping company, Maersk, said all vessels previously paused and due to sail through the Red Sea region will now be rerouted around Africa via the Cape of Good Hope for safety reasons.

The official said India's exports face a shortfall of about \$4 billion to \$5 billion this year after it curbed exports of wheat, rice and sugar amid rising prices. However, India expects growth in exports of other farm commodities to offset the export deficit this year, the official said.



Maersk had announced on December 15 that it would pause all vessels bound for the Gulf of Aden over the highly escalated security situation in the area. "This decision was taken to ensure the safety of our crew, vessels and customers' cargo onboard," the firm said.

INDIA MAY COMPENSATE EXPORTERS AGAINST UK, EU CARBON TAX

The Centre is exploring a range of relief measures to soften the blow of the carbon tax introduced by the European Union and the UK, which includes offering compensation to exporters affected by the tax to help them remain competitive in the global markets, a government official told The Indian Express.

The carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM) or carbon tax is expected to have an impact on India's iron, steel, and aluminium exports worth \$8-\$9 billion headed into Europe and the UK. However, CBAM has provisions to include more products with high carbon footprint going forward which could mean greater impact over the years.

"There are various options on the table to tackle carbon tax such as seeking longer transition time and repatriation of the duties. We are also looking at other collaborative mechanisms where we devise a way to come out with supportive measures to make the product more competitive. We are discussing and deliberating along these lines," the official said.

CBAM kicked off on October 1, 2023 with carbon emissions reporting requirements on imports at its borders. But the EU will impose the actual tax from 2026. The period between 2023 to 2026 is known as the transition time.

"Addressing these kinds of measures in an FTA is a challenge. These kinds of measures emanate from WTO provisions that we all have committed to. It allows members to take measures for the protection of human lives, plants, and health. It includes the environment as well," official added.

India has already challenged carbon tax at the WTO as it believes CBAM is in violation of special and differential treatment (SNDT) provisions of the WTO that advocates longer time periods for implementing agreements and commitments for developing nations to safeguard the trade interests of developing countries. "CBAM undermines SNDT...they argue that if we follow the principle the whole objective gets defeated. But then a country like India will always argue for a longer transition time," the official said.

Trade experts have also criticised CBAM for violating the principle of international environmental law that says that all states are responsible for addressing global environmental destruction yet not equally responsible. Common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) assumes all the more significance for India that barely contributes one-seventh of world's carbon emission.

"The key emissions source that the EU seeks to tackle is energy, which it imports, and which will be consumed in manufacture of these products. However, the EU creates a very different landscape in its textual proposals in the India-EU FTA. Export pricing discipline under the Energy and Raw materials chapter specifically forbids any incentives by India to its own industry to consume green energy," Sangeeta Godbole, a former revenue officer who was part of the Indian team negotiating the India-EU free trade deal, said.

After the EU notified CBAM earlier this year, the UK this week said that its version of CBAM will come into effect by 2027. The UK government factsheet said that the UK CBAM will place a carbon



price on some of the most emissions intensive industrial goods imported to the UK from the aluminum, cement, ceramics, fertilizer, glass, hydrogen, iron and steel sectors.

Both UK and EU have argued that the objective to introduce CBAM is to prevent carbon leakage which is defined by the movement of production and associated emissions from one country to another due to different levels of decarbonisation effort through carbon pricing and climate regulation.

WHY THE WHITE HOUSE IS OPPOSING JAPAN FIRM'S BID TO ACQUIRE US STEELMAKER

Japanese steel major Nippon Steel's plans to buy Pittsburg-based US Steel has been opposed by both Democratic and Republican lawmakers — and now by the Joe Biden Administration. The bipartisan opposition to the \$14.9-bn deal would appear to contradict the foundational American commitment to free markets and unfettered enterprise.

Critics of the deal argue that the acquisition of the storied American company, floated in 1901 by J P Morgan and Andrew Carnegie that was, at its peak, one of the biggest companies in the world, could threaten US national security and impact union jobs in Pennsylvania — a key battleground state.

United Steelworkers, a powerful union that had endorsed Biden's 2020 presidential run, has opposed the deal.

Late on Thursday, the White House said the proposed acquisition of US Steel by a foreign entity "deserve(s) serious scrutiny in terms of its potential impact on national security and supply chain reliability".

Short-sighted objections

There are multiple issues here.

One, Nippon Steel is the largest steelmaker in Japan, one of Washington's closest allies — an alliance the State Department describes as "the cornerstone of US security interests in Asia and...fundamental to regional stability and prosperity".

The alliance, according to the US, is based on "shared vital interests and values, including the maintenance of stability in the Indo-Pacific region, the preservation and promotion of political and economic freedoms..."

The argument for the US national security imperative, therefore, seems difficult to swallow.

Two, Nippon Steel, the world's fourth largest steelmaker, is well-capitalised and could bring more stability to US Steel's operations. The acquisition would put the combined entity among the top three steel producers in the world, and create one of the biggest steel companies outside China — thereby restoring some of the iconic American company's past glory, and advance Washington's renewed manufacturing push.

Third, this is not a hostile takeover. US Steel has been looking for a buyer since August, when it turned down an unsolicited bid from an American rival.

Four, the terms of the deal, which is pending approval in an upcoming vote by US Steel shareholders, seem reasonable. Nippon Steel would pay \$55 per share, which is a 40% premium



excluding assumed debt. Also, US Steel will keep its headquarters in Pittsburgh, and will retain its name.

Finally, Nippon Steel is not new to America — it has been operating in that country for four decades, starting with a joint venture project with Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel in West Virginia.

Roadmap, hurdles ahead

The influential United Steelworkers, which was instrumental in getting President Donald Trump to slap duties on steel imports during his term in office, has called the deal “shortsighted”, and said it would work to block the takeover.

Union president David McCall said in a statement that the union had remained open to working with US Steel to keep the company domestically owned and operated, but US Steel had instead chosen to “push aside the concerns of its dedicated workforce and sell to a foreign-owned company”.

Neither US Steel nor Nippon had consulted the union, “which is in itself a violation of our partnership agreement”, McCall said.

There are regulatory hurdles as well. A group of Republican Senators had written to Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen after the deal was announced, arguing that the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) — an inter-agency panel chaired by the Treasury Secretary with power to block acquisitions of US companies by foreign firms if the deal posed a threat to American national security — should block the transaction.

Lael Brainard, director of the National Economic Council, which is part of the President’s Executive Office, said the deal looked “like the type of transaction” that CFIUS is set up to investigate, and that the administration “will be ready to look carefully at the findings of any such investigation and to act if appropriate”.

Reuters, quoting traders, however reported that CFIUS would find it challenging to block the deal given that Nippon is from Japan, a US ally with a history of having invested in North America.

The deal also needs to meet shareholders’ approval — which may not be a big problem.

Shares of US Steel surged after the announcement on Monday, while Nippon’s fell on concerns that the company had overpaid to acquire a company that has long been seen as underperforming. US Steel employs more than 20,000 people globally, including more than 14,000 in the US.

MUMBAI IS TAIWAN’S NEXT STOP AS ITS FIRMS MOVE FAR FROM CHINA

At a time when top Taiwanese tech firms are looking at relocating their manufacturing facilities away from China to India, Taiwan announced Wednesday that it will open a new office in Mumbai — its third in India, after Delhi and Chennai.

This is being viewed as a strategic move by Taipei, as its ‘China-Plus-one’ strategy aims at encouraging businesses to expand their operations outside of China while maintaining their presence in that country.

While India does not have formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan yet as it adheres to the One-China policy, Taiwan has established Taipei Economic and Cultural Centres in India to conduct business



here. In the absence of an embassy, they represent Taiwan's interests in India, and while its office in Delhi functions as an embassy, the centre in Chennai operates as a consulate.

In an official statement on Wednesday, Taiwan's Foreign ministry said that "in recent years, cooperation between the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the Republic of India has witnessed significant progress in numerous domains, including economics and trade, science and technology, critical supply chains, culture, education, and traditional medicine".

"In light of this development, the R.O.C. (Taiwan) government will establish the Taipei Economic and Cultural Center (TECC) in Mumbai in order to further deepen exchanges and cooperation between the two countries," it said.

It said that since the TECC in Chennai was set up in 2012, nearly 60 per cent of all Taiwanese businesses investing and opening factories in India have chosen to develop their operations in southern India. Chennai and its surrounding areas have thus benefited from the investments made by Taiwanese manufacturing industries. The establishment of the TECC in Mumbai is expected to have a similar effect in western India, it said.

Explaining the rationale to open its office in Mumbai, it said, "India became the world's fifth-largest economy in 2022, and becomes the most populous nation this year. With its enormous market and related business opportunities, India has emerged as a major investment destination for global enterprises. Mumbai is the largest city in India, serving as the country's financial center and boasting its largest port. Many countries have established consulates in Mumbai, including the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Australia."

Taiwan-based Foxconn, which is Apple's largest supplier, has an iPhone manufacturing facility in Tamil Nadu. The company is now setting up another iPhone production facility in Karnataka that is expected to start production by April next year.

Taiwan produces close to 70 per cent of the world's semiconductors and over 90 per cent of the most advanced chips that are required for almost all electronic equipment such as smartphones, car components, data centres, fighter jets and AI technologies.

The Taiwan Foreign Ministry statement said that the TECC in Mumbai will help expand mutually beneficial trade and investment opportunities between Taiwan and India. "Furthermore, the TECC in Mumbai will provide visa services, document authentication, and emergency assistance to businesspeople, tourists, and Taiwanese nationals in the states of Maharashtra, Goa, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh, as well as the union territory of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu," it said.

"Under Taiwan's New Southbound Policy, it will also promote exchanges and cooperation in science and technology, education, culture, and people-to-people ties between Taiwan and western India," it said.

While India follows the One-China policy, it has an office in Taipei to carry out diplomatic functions. It operates under the name of India-Taipei Association, which is headed by a senior Indian diplomat.

The India-Taipei Association (ITA) in Taiwan and Taipei Economic and Cultural Center (TECC) in New Delhi were established as de-facto Indian and Taiwanese embassies in each other's capitals in 1995.



Both sides have maintained the focus of ties on commerce, culture and education. The profile of the ties, now in their third decade, has been deliberately kept low, owing to the sensitivities of China.

The bilateral trade between India and Taiwan is on an upswing. The volume of trade increased from USD 2 billion in 2006 to USD 8.9 billion in 2021.

WHY HAS THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT CRITICISED THE METHODOLOGIES OF GLOBAL CREDIT RATING AGENCIES?

On Wednesday, the Finance Ministry released a document titled Re-examining Narratives: A Collection of Essays, which Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran said was an “attempt to present alternate perspectives on diverse areas of economic policy that have long-term implications for India’s growth and development priorities”.

The first of the five essays in the document is a criticism of what the government calls the “opaque methodologies adopted by credit rating agencies to arrive at sovereign ratings”.

The essay seeks to flag issues with the methodology adopted by the three main global credit rating agencies, and to show, based on calculations by the Finance Ministry, how these gaps affect India adversely.

Why do sovereign ratings matter?

Sovereign ratings are about the creditworthiness of governments. They provide a marker for investors around the world about the ability and willingness of governments to pay back debt. Just as an individual’s credit rating is critical to whether she gets a loan and at what interest rate, sovereign ratings affect a country’s ability to borrow money from global investors.

Again, just as an individual or corporate borrower with a well documented history of paying back loans (showing willingness to pay back) and substantial assets or income streams (showing ability to pay back) gets a new loan (for a car/ house/ factory) at a cheaper interest rate than someone with no credit history or assured income streams or assets, governments with lower sovereign ratings have to pay higher interest rates when they borrow.

Sovereign ratings matter not just for the government but also for all businesses in that country. That’s because the government is considered to be the safest bet in a country. If the sovereign rating of a country’s government is low, the businesses of that country end up forking out an even higher interest rate when they borrow from global investors.

Most developing countries (such as India), while rich in either labour resources or land or mineral resources, suffer from a lack of capital (money available to put to use). In the absence of financial resources, developing countries struggle to make the best use of their natural strengths. A poor sovereign rating can inhibit the ability of these countries to borrow money from rich investors — just as a good rating can make it easier to become more productive and remove mass poverty.

Which are the main rating agencies?

Sovereign credit ratings predate the Bretton Woods institutions, i.e., the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. There are three main globally recognised credit rating agencies: Moody’s, Standard & Poor’s and Fitch.



Moody's is the oldest; it was established in 1900 and issued its first sovereign ratings just before World War I. In the 1920s, Poor's Publishing and Standard Statistics, the predecessor of S&P, started rating government bonds.

While the US and European countries have enjoyed a good record, ratings have been affected by global events. For instance, according to an IMF research paper, sovereign defaults spiked during the 1930s Depression, and most ratings were downgraded. By 1939, all European sovereigns, barring the UK, were in the speculative grade.

What is the government's criticism?

The Finance Ministry has pointed out three main issues with the methodologies used by the rating agencies.

First, they "are opaque and appear to disadvantage developing economies" in certain ways. "For instance," the Ministry says, "the Fitch document mentions that the rating agency "takes comfort from high levels of foreign ownership" in the banking sector and that "public-owned banks have historically been subject to political interference"."

"Such an assessment", the government argues, "tends to discriminate against developing countries, where the banking sector is primarily run by the public sector". According to the government, such an assessment also ignores the welfare and development functions that public sector banks have in a developing country, including playing an important role in promoting financial inclusion.

Second, the government says, "the experts generally consulted for the rating assessments are selected in a non-transparent manner, adding another layer of opaqueness to an already difficult-to-interpret methodology".

Third, the rating agencies do not convey clearly the assigned weights for each parameter considered. "While Fitch does lay out some numerical weights for each parameter, they do go on to state that the weights are for illustrative purposes only," the essay says.

NO TAKERS FOR RUPEE PAYMENT FOR OIL IMPORTS

India's push for rupee to be used to pay for import of crude oil has not found any takers as suppliers have expressed concern on repatriation of funds and high transactional costs, the oil ministry told a parliamentary standing committee.

The default payment currency for all contracts for import of crude oil is US dollar as per the international trade practice. However, in a bid to internationalise the Indian currency, the Reserve Bank of India on July 11, 2022 allowed importers to pay with rupees and exporters be paid in rupee.

While there has been some success with non-oil trade with a select few countries, rupee continues to be shunned by oil exporters.

"During FY 2022-23, no crude oil imports by oil PSUs was settled in Indian rupee. Crude oil suppliers (including UAE's ADNOC) continue to express their concern on the repatriation of funds in the preferred currency and also highlighted high transactional costs associated with conversion of funds along with exchange fluctuation risks," the oil ministry told the parliamentary department related standing committee.



The ministry, whose submissions are part of the committee's report which was tabled in Parliament last week, said Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) has informed that it incurred high transaction costs as crude oil suppliers pass on the additional transactional costs to IOC." The RBI, it said, had last year permitted opening of rupee vostro accounts in the partner trading country. Under this mechanism, Indian importers undertaking imports through this mechanism shall make payment in Indian rupee which shall be credited into the special Vostro account of the correspondent bank of the partner country, against the invoices for the supply of goods or services from the overseas seller /supplier.

"Payments for crude oil can be made in Indian rupee, subject to the suppliers' complying with regulatory guidelines in this regard," the ministry said. "Currently, Reliance Industries Ltd and oil PSUs do not have an agreement with any crude oil supplier to make purchases in Indian currency for supply of crude oil." India is the world's third largest energy consumer. With its domestic production meeting less than 15 per cent of its needs, the country imports the remaining crude oil, which is converted to fuels such as petrol and diesel at refineries.

In the 2022-23 (April 2022 to March 2023) fiscal, India spent USD 157.5 billion on import of 232.7 million tonnes of crude oil. Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and UAE were its biggest suppliers. Of this, 141.2 million tonnes came from the Middle East, accounting for 58 per cent of all supplies.

In the current fiscal, India imported 152.6 million tonnes of crude oil between April and November for USD 113.4 billion.

EXPRESS VIEW: INDIA'S ECONOMY, AHEAD OF A NEW YEAR

Over the past few years, the world economy has faced several shocks — from the Covid-19 pandemic to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas conflict in West Asia. These shocks have caused severe disruptions in economic activities and contributed to a surge in inflation. However, with the fallout from these shocks receding, the global macroeconomic scenario has improved. After contracting by 3.1 per cent in 2020, the world economy grew by 6 per cent in 2021 and 3.5 per cent in 2022. The International Monetary Fund expects growth at 3 per cent this year. And world consumer prices, which rose from 4.7 per cent in 2021 to 8.7 per cent in 2022, have fallen in large parts since.

The Indian economy is also faring better. It grew at 7.6 per cent in the second quarter, faster than most had expected. Forecasts by the RBI indicate that the growth momentum is likely to sustain over the next financial year. According to Axis Bank research, India's output gap as against its pre-pandemic trend is likely to have narrowed to 7 per cent till December 2023. Alongside, retail inflation, which had touched 7.44 per cent in July on the back of higher food prices, has fallen, touching 5.55 per cent in November. As per the central bank forecasts, inflation is expected to average about 4.35 per cent in the second and third quarters of the next financial year. The momentum in public sector capex has sustained and in some sectors the PLI scheme is showing healthy results. Investors expect political and policy continuity going into the general elections next year and seem increasingly optimistic about the economic prospects. After net outflows in September and October, foreign portfolio investors invested around \$7.8 billion in November and December, bringing full year investments to almost \$20 billion. Foreign direct investments, which had been falling since last year, have picked up over the past few months. However, pain points remain. For one, job creation remains a challenge. A sizeable section of the new entrants to the labour force is not employed in the more productive sectors of the economy. Rural demand



remains subdued. And despite healthy corporate and bank balance sheets, there is little indication of a broad-based pickup in the private investment cycle.

In February, the Union budget will be tabled in Parliament. After that, the monetary policy committee of the RBI will hold its first meeting of the calendar year. Considering the recent dovish tilt by the US Federal Reserve, and with some MPC members suggesting that a less restrictive policy is called for, it is possible for the MPC to provide guidance on the trajectory of interest rates through the year. The general elections will follow, a new government will be sworn in, and it will present a full budget, detailing its expenditure priorities. These will have a bearing on the country's near-term growth prospects.

EXPRESS VIEW ON RBI AND INTEREST RATES: A DISSENTING NOTE

Up until December, there were expectations that interest rates in the US, and much of the developed world, would stay higher for longer. However, the US Federal Reserve's dovish tone in its December meeting was in sharp contrast to these views. The projections accompanying the Fed meeting indicate the possibility of three rate cuts next year. This surprised the markets. The 10-year US bond yield fell sharply and is currently hovering around 3.9 per cent. In comparison, in its December meeting, the monetary policy committee did not provide any indication of a policy pivot. Rather, it noted that "policy must continue to be actively disinflationary to ensure anchoring of inflation expectations and fuller transmission."

In his statement, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das also reiterated that even as inflation has fallen, "the target of 4 per cent CPI is yet to be reached and we have to stay the course." However, in an interview to this paper, Jayanth Varma, member of the monetary policy committee, has said that "we are approaching the point where an interest rate cut is necessary to prevent an excessive real interest rate."

He argues that the real interest rate of 2 per cent now is "excessive", and that a "real rate slightly below 1.5 per cent is appropriate". Varma has voted against the MPC maintaining its stance of remaining focused on the withdrawal of accommodation. Another MPC member, Ashima Goyal, has in the past indicated that a real interest rate of around 1 per cent is suited for the economy.

Any move to either change the stance of monetary policy or to cut interest rates will depend on the trajectory of retail inflation. If there is a sense of comfort that inflation is nearing the central bank's target of 4 per cent, then Varma believes that monetary policy can be "less restrictive". This opens up the space to cut rates. In its December meeting, the RBI had projected inflation at 5.6 per cent in the third quarter and 5.2 per cent in the fourth quarter of this year. For next year, it expects inflation at 5.2 per cent in the first quarter, 4 per cent in the second quarter and 4.7 per cent in the third quarter. However, there is some uncertainty over this trajectory of inflation, especially food inflation. While one-off food price shocks can be looked through, monetary policy, as Das has noted, "has to stay alert to the risk of such shocks becoming generalised and derailing the ongoing disinflation process". The actions of the MPC must be guided by the objective of ensuring price stability.

FLOWS INTO NRI DEPOSITS DOUBLE TO \$6.1 BILLION IN APRIL-OCTOBER PERIOD

Higher interest rates and stable rupee have attracted more non-resident Indians (NRIs) to deposit money in various deposit schemes offered by domestic banks.



Fresh inflows under various non-resident deposit schemes doubled to \$6.1 billion in April-October 2023 from \$3.05 billion in the same period of the last year, a recent Reserve Bank of India (RBI) data showed.

The surge in NRI deposits was primarily on account of a rise in flows into the foreign currency non-resident, or FCNR(B), accounts.

Inflows into FCNR (B) deposits increased to \$2.06 billion in April-October 2023 compared to an outflow of \$814 million during the same period of last year. In the case of non-resident external rupee accounts, or NR(E) RA, flows jumped to \$1.95 billion compared to \$1.67 billion in the same period last year.

During the period, the highest deposits from NRIs came into non-resident ordinary (NRO) accounts at around \$2 billion. In the same period of last year, flows into NRO deposits stood at \$2.19 billion.

“Higher interest rates offered by banks could be the reason for the jump in NRI deposits. The stability in the rupee vis-a-vis its other peers has also resulted in higher accretion,” said Madan Sabnavis, Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda.

While the NRE account is an account of a non-resident Indian to transfer foreign earnings to India, the NRO account is to manage the income earned domestically. In both the accounts, the deposits are maintained in rupee. FCNR (B) is a fixed deposit which is held in foreign currency. It provides an option for NRIs to retain their money in foreign currency, and so there is no risk of currency depreciation. Under this scheme, the principal amount and interest earned is fully repatriable. FCNR(B) deposits can be maintained in different currencies, including the dollar, pounds sterling and the euro.

Currently, domestic banks are offering interest rates in the range of 6.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent on various NRE term deposits below Rs 2 crore. The country’s largest lender State Bank of India (SBI) is offering an interest rate of 7.1 per cent on NRE term deposits with 400 days tenor for NRE deposits less than Rs 2 crore.

Banks are offering interest rates in the range of 3 per cent to 7.1 per cent on NRO deposits with different maturities. On FCNR (B) deposits maintained in US dollars, the interest rate offered varies from 4 per cent to 5.7 per cent on deposits up to \$a250,000 and have different maturities.

In 2023, the rupee exhibited low volatility compared to its emerging market economies (EME) peers, despite elevated US treasury yields and a stronger US dollar.

On a trade-weighted basis, the nominal value of the rupee has undergone an appreciation of 1.6 per cent during 2023-24 (April-December 8, 2023). Adjusted for inflation differentials, the rupee’s appreciation is even higher at 4.5 per cent. Over this period, the US dollar has appreciated by 1.5 per cent against a broad index of currencies, the State of the Economy article published in the RBI’s monthly bulletin for December said.

Accretion in NRI deposits can also be attributed to Indians going to work overseas again, especially in the Middle East, for jobs post-Covid, said a banker.

“Due to Covid impact, NRI flows were low during the last few years as many people moved back to India. After the COVID scare was over, people have again started going outside India for work, especially from the beginning of 2023, resulting in a jump in NRI deposits,” said a banker.



RBI TIGHTENS NORMS FOR LENDERS INVESTING IN AIFS

In a move aimed at curbing evergreening of stressed loans, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Tuesday directed banks, non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) and other lenders not to invest in any scheme of alternative investment funds (AIFs) which has downstream investments in a debtor company.

An AIF means any fund established or incorporated in India which is a privately pooled investment vehicle, and which collects funds from sophisticated investors, whether Indian or foreign, for investing it in accordance with a defined investment policy for the benefit of its investors. Regulated entities (REs) make investments in units of AIFs as part of their regular investment operations. RBI, however, said that certain transactions of REs involving AIFs raise regulatory concerns.

“These transactions entail substitution of direct loan exposure of REs to borrowers, with indirect exposure through investments in units of AIFs,” the RBI said in a notification. Evergreening of loans is a process whereby a lender tries to revive a loan that is on the verge of default or in default by extending more loans to the same borrower. The process of evergreening of loans is typically a temporary fix for a bank.

As of December 19, there were 1,220 AIFs registered with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI). Total investment commitment raised by AIFs stood at Rs 8.44 lakh crore as of June 30, 2023 compared to Rs 6.94 lakh crore as of end June 2022, according to SEBI data. Total funds raised by the AIFs as of end June 2023 quarter was Rs 3.74 lakh crore, of which Rs 3.5 lakh crore worth of investment was made by the end of the first quarter.

In order to address concerns relating to possible evergreening through this route, the RBI said the regulated entities should not make ‘investments in any scheme of AIFs which has downstream investments either directly or indirectly in a debtor company of the RE’. Downstream investments mean the actual investment by the AIF in a company using the funds they have raised from AIF investors. The RBI said the debtor company of the RE, for this purpose, means any company to which the RE currently has or had a loan or investment exposure anytime during the preceding 12 months.

There have been a few instances where some of the regulated entities used the AIF route to evergreen loans that are under stress, thereby delaying classification of such loans as non-performing assets (NPA).

In such a case, the RE creates an AIF structure to provide funding to its borrower which is likely to become an NPA. The AIF, created by the RE along with other investors, invests in the stressed company, which uses the same money to repay to the lender.

The RBI further said that if an AIF scheme, in which RE is already an investor, makes a downstream investment in any such debtor company, then the RE should liquidate its investment in the scheme within 30 days from the date of such downstream investment by the AIF. In case the REs are not able to liquidate their investments within the prescribed time limit, they will have to make a 100 percent provision on such investments.

According to Veena Sivaramakrishnan, Partner – Banking & Finance and Insolvency and Bankruptcy Practice, Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas & Co, exposure of RBI regulated entities to other entities has been of prudential concern and interest to the regulator. With the new



amendments, RBI has regulated the investment by its regulated entities into AIFs and set down principles of what the AIF cannot do if it has an RBI regulated entity as its unitholder.

“While it is usually rare for RBI to call out specific structures in the nature mentioned in the circular, it does not necessarily come as a surprise as the RBI has always been concerned with hidden NPAs and evergreening as a principle,” she said.

Resurgent India’s Managing Director Jyoti Prakash Gadia said the RBI’s directive aims at plugging the loophole of wrong usage of additional borrowed funds under the AIF route to circumvent the guidelines relating to the restructuring of advances and declaration of NPA.

The need to make 100 per cent provision on such outstanding debt is likely to be a big deterrent to such irregularities in transactions, he said.

EXPRESS VIEW ON BANKING SECTOR: IN GOOD HEALTH

Two reports released by the Reserve Bank of India show that the health of the Indian banking system continues to improve on key parameters. One, bad loans of both public and private sector banks have declined to multi-year lows. Two, high interest margins have, in part, helped boost their profitability. And three, banks’ capital position is also in good shape. Their healthier balance sheets allow for a robust, broad-based expansion in credit growth.

At the end of March 2018, gross non-performing loans of banks had touched 11.6 per cent. But, by September 2023, bad loans had fallen to 3.2 per cent as per the RBI’s report on trends and Progress of Banking in India. The scale of this decline is worth noting — bad loans of large industries have fallen from 22.9 per cent in March 2018 to 4.6 per cent in June 2023. The central bank has also noted that the slippage ratio, which measures new additions to bad loans, has moderated. In fact, as per ICRA’s estimate, bad loans are likely to fall further to 2.1-2.5 per cent by March 2025. Alongside, banks’ capital to risk-weighted assets ratio and common equity tier 1 ratio stood at 16.8 per cent and 13.7 per cent in September 2023 respectively. As per RBI’s Financial Stability Report, the macro stress tests conducted by it indicate that at these levels banks have adequate capital buffers. And even under adverse economic circumstances, their capital levels will remain above required norms. The central bank also notes that non-banking financial companies have also seen a decline in their bad loans, and that their capital position is strong.

There are areas of concern. The RBI has recently flagged the surge in unsecured personal loans, which have grown at a much faster pace than overall credit growth. It has taken steps to “dampen growth exuberance” among lenders (banks and NBFCs), and ensure that they have “loss-absorbing buffers”. However, it notes that the asset quality of these unsecured loans or retail lending has not exhibited any signs of deterioration. In fact, bad loans in the retail segment fell to 1.6 per cent in September, while for the unsecured loans segment, they fell to 2 per cent. While such areas do warrant closer and continuous monitoring and appropriate regulatory interventions, the broad trends presented in these reports indicate that the Indian financial system is in good health.

ROBUST FPI DEBT INFLOWS SEEN AHEAD OF INCLUSION OF BONDS IN GLOBAL INDICES

Robust foreign portfolio investment (FPI) inflows in the debt segment are anticipated ahead of the inclusion of Indian bonds, particularly government securities (G-Secs), in global indices. The inclusion of Indian bonds in the JP Morgan Global Emerging Markets (EM) bond index, scheduled



for June, is expected to boost the Indian bond market. The inflows are likely to be front-loaded in the first quarter of calendar year 2024, providing India with the capacity to comfortably finance the current account deficit. Analysts suggest that the inclusion in global indices could attract additional inflows of \$40-50 billion in 2024.

NARROWING TRADE DEFICIT CUT INDIA'S CAD TO 1% OF GDP IN Q2

India's current account deficit (CAD) declined to \$8.3 billion, which is 1% of the country's GDP in the second quarter of FY24 (July 2023 -September 2023) owing to a "narrowing of merchandise trade deficit" according to the RBI's latest data.

Q2 deficit is lower than \$9.2 billion (1.1% of GDP) in Q1 (April 2023 - June 2023) and \$30.9 billion (3.8% of GDP) a year earlier.

"Underlying the lower CAD on a year-on-year (y-o-y) basis in Q2 FY24 was the narrowing of merchandise trade deficit to \$61 billion from \$78.3 billion in Q2 FY23," the RBI said

As per data, services exports grew by 4.2% on a y-o-y basis on the back of rising exports of software, business and travel services. Net services receipts increased both sequentially and on a y-o-y basis.

Net outgo on the primary income account, mainly reflecting payments of investment income, increased to \$12.2 billion up from \$11.8 billion a year earlier.

Remittances rise

Private transfer receipts, mainly remittances by Indians employed overseas, amounted to \$28.1 billion, an increase of 2.6% from their levels during the corresponding period a year ago. In the financial account, net foreign direct investment witnessed an outflow of \$0.3 billion as against \$6.2 billion in Q2 FY23. Foreign portfolio investment recorded net inflow of \$4.9 billion, lower than \$6.5 billion during Q2 FY23.

External commercial borrowings to India recorded net outflow of \$1.8 billion in Q2 FY24 as compared with net outflow of \$0.5 billion in Q2 FY23.

Non-resident deposits recorded net inflow of \$3.2 billion as compared with \$2.5 billion in Q2 FY23, the RBI said.

EXPRESS VIEW ON RUPEE AND MACROECONOMIC STABILITY: IMF'S MESSAGE

Under Article IV of the International Monetary Fund's articles of agreement, the Fund conducts annual bilateral discussions with members. On Tuesday, it released the annual Article IV country report for India. It details the views of the IMF staff on various macroeconomic issues and discussions with Indian officials on economic development and policies. In this year's report, two areas warrant closer examination. One, the views on India's currency regime. And two, the general government debt level.

The combined debt of central and State governments stood at 81% of GDP in 2022-23, from 88% in 2020-21. Under favourable circumstances, the IMF reckons this could even go down to 70% by 2027-28. The shocks faced by India so far in this century were global, and affected the entire world economy, be it the 2008 financial crisis or the pandemic, the Ministry pointed out. Reacting to



initial news flashes, it further clarified its statement was not a rebuttal to the IMF but “an effort to arrest misinterpretation or misuse” of its comments to imply that General Government debt would exceed 100% of GDP in the medium term. Semantics experts may argue whether the communiqué was confrontational or clarificatory. India’s Director on the IMF Board had already placed on record reservations about its staff’s conclusions on debt risks [“sounds extreme”], and some other aspects of the economy. In the broader picture, IMF staff’s perceptions of India’s fiscal position have actually improved over the past year. From arguing in 2022 that India’s fiscal space is at risk, they now believe sovereign stress risks are moderate. This is in no small part due to the ability of the Centre, whose debt levels were about 57% of GDP last year, to meet fiscal deficit targets in recent times. Reducing debt and spends to stay the course on its commitment to bring the deficit to 4.5% of GDP by 2025-26 from an estimated 5.9% this year, is critical. While reacting to an adverse detail in a report sometimes ends up drawing more attention to it, actions tend to always speak louder than words.

On the issue of the currency, the IMF staff notes that from December 2022 to October 2023, the rupee-dollar rate “moved within a very narrow range”. During this period, the Indian rupee had fallen marginally. This relative stability, which implies heavy foreign exchange interventions by the Reserve Bank of India, has prompted it to reclassify India’s exchange rate regime from “floating” to “stabilised arrangement” for that period. The overall de jure classification, though, has remained “floating”. In its response, the RBI has stated that the data has been used selectively, that the IMF staff’s assessment was short-term in nature, and that taking a longer view would prove them wrong. The central bank maintained that the rupee is market-determined and that there was “no explicit/implicit target/band”. It also maintained that foreign exchange interventions are used only to curb excessive exchange rate volatility. Thus, the reclassification was “unjustified” in its view. The IMF staff has also argued that an “ambitious” path of fiscal consolidation is needed to rebuild buffers and bring down government debt. As per its estimates, if shocks, similar to the ones that India has witnessed in the past, were to materialise, the baseline carries the risk that “debt would exceed 100 per cent of GDP in the medium term”. In its debt sustainability analysis it has also warned that “long-term risks are high because considerable investment is required to reach India’s climate change mitigation targets.” In response, the executive director for India has noted that the risks stemming from sovereign debt are low “as it is predominantly denominated in domestic currency”. And that despite several shocks, the general government level “has barely increased” — it was 81 per cent in 2005-06, 84 per cent in 2021-22, and 81 per cent in 2022-23.

On each of these issues, there are points to consider. On the exchange rate regime, there have been periods when the rupee has fallen less compared to other currencies as its decline has been cushioned by forex interventions. However, a flexible exchange rate, as the IMF also notes, would help absorb external shocks. And on the issue of debt, while both central and state governments have brought down their debt and deficit levels from levels seen during the pandemic, they must continue on the path of consolidation.

The Finance Ministry, last Friday, issued a statement titled ‘Factual position vis-à-vis IMF’s Article IV consultations with India’. For context, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), under its Articles of Agreement, holds bilateral discussions with members, usually every year. IMF staffers collect economic and financial information, and discuss policies with top officials, before preparing a report that is discussed by the Fund’s executive board. The Ministry statement, four days after the IMF released its latest India consultation details, noted that “certain presumptions have been made taking into account possible scenarios that does not reflect factual position”. In particular, the Ministry was referring to an IMF view that adverse shocks could lift India’s general



government debt to, or beyond 100% of GDP in the medium-term (by 2027-28). The Ministry asserted this was only a worst-case scenario and not a fait accompli, and emphasised that other IMF country reports show much higher extreme 'worst-case' scenarios, for instance, at 160%, 140% and 200% of GDP, for the U.S., the U.K. and China, respectively.

'FISCAL DEFICIT MAY BREACH 5.9% OF GDP'

India's fiscal deficit may breach the 5.9% of GDP target for this year and could hit 6%, though tax collections have been buoyant and may offset a wide shortfall in disinvestment outcomes, due to the likelihood of revenue spending exceeding the Budget Estimate by about ₹2 lakh crore, India Ratings and Research said on Tuesday.

The Centre has recently secured parliamentary approval for the first supplementary demand for grants this year, involving an additional cash outgo of ₹53,378 crore, lifting its total spending commitment for 2023-24 to ₹45.6 lakh crore, including about ₹35.6 lakh crore of revenue expenditure and ₹10.1 lakh crore of capital expenditure.

"India Ratings believes, like in the past, there will be a second supplementary demand for grants, as a result of which the revenue expenditure is expected to increase to ₹37.1 lakh crore, over ₹2 lakh crore higher than budgeted for the year," its economists noted.

In the first supplementary demand for grants, the government sought more funds for priority areas like food, fertilizer, and LPG subsidy.

The government had also sought more funds for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in the first supplementary demand for grants.

Supplementary demands

Under the MGNREGS, for instance, almost ₹80,000 crore had been spent by December 19, compared with the Budget Estimate of ₹60,000 crore. The government's supplementary demands included a top-up of ₹14,524 crore for the scheme.

India Ratings and Research economists also said, "Higher-than-budgeted revenue expenditure triggered through the first and likely second supplementary demand for grants in combination with lower-than-budgeted nominal GDP will push the fiscal deficit to 6% of GDP."

A major reason for the increased expenditure would be higher expenditure by a few select Ministries and recouping of over ₹28,000 crore to the Contingency Fund of India which was drawn by 30 departments as an advance in the past, they said.



STATES CAN BORROW AN EXTRA ₹2 LAKH CRORE THIS FISCAL YEAR

States may be able to tap about ₹2.04 lakh crore as additional borrowings over their net borrowing limits for the year, the Finance Ministry indicated on Tuesday.

The Centre had allowed 22 States to raise additional borrowings of almost ₹61,000 crore this year on top of their net borrowing ceilings of 3% of Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), as of October 27, the Ministry said .

The extra borrowing ceiling was granted to States who met their pension liabilities by making required contributions to the National Pension System (NPS), which oversees the retirement savings of government employees since 2004.

Moreover, States are eligible to raise a little more than ₹1.43 lakh crore this year, based on the recommendations of the Ministry of Power.

This is linked to the Fifteenth Finance Commission's (FFC) suggestion to grant States an additional borrowing space of 0.5% of GSDP as a performance-based incentive for carrying out reforms in the power sector that improve operational and economic efficiency at the State level.

HOW TERMS OF TRADE HAVE MOVED IN AGRICULTURE SECTOR, FOR FARMERS AND FARM WORKERS

Terms of trade (ToT) for Indian agriculture — movement in prices of farm commodities relative to that of non-farm goods and services — have recorded significant improvement in the last decade and a half, going by data derived from national income statistics.

ToT can be calculated using so-called implicit price deflators. Gross Value Added (GVA) — the value of all goods and services produced in an economy minus the value of their inputs consumed during a given year, net of product taxes and subsidies — is estimated at both current and constant prices. Current prices are price levels for the given year, while constant prices are those that prevailed during a fixed “base” year.

The deflator is the ratio of GVA at current prices to the GVA at constant prices, thereby also a measure of inflation relative to the base year. The implicit price deflator can be worked out for the economy's individual sectors — agriculture and allied activities, industry and services — as well. The deflator for agriculture GVA divided by that for non-agriculture GVA, then, gives the ToT for the farm sector in a given year.

Favourable movement

NITI Aayog member Ramesh Chand and consultant Jaspal Singh have shown that the ToT for agriculture relative to the non-agriculture sector (with a 2011-12 base value of 100) fell from 90.2 in 1973-74 to 72.2 by 1985-96 and didn't recover much even till the mid-2000s, when it reached 85 levels.

The real recovery happened only from 2009-10, when the ToT hit 97.6 and continued to rise, peaking at 130.2 in 2020-21 before marginally easing to 126.6 in 2022-23 (Chart 1). This improvement is attributed to the global agri-commodity price boom and policy interventions, especially minimum support price (MSP) hikes.



What it means for farmers and farm workers

The ToT based on implicit price deflators is a broad-based indicator of how prices for agricultural commodities have moved vis-à-vis for non-agricultural goods and services. It does not show whether and how much the ToT has improved for those actually engaged in crop production: farmers and agricultural labourers.

The Agriculture Ministry maintains data on both the prices received by farmers for the produce they sell and the prices paid for the products bought by them. The latter include final consumption items (from purchased foods to toilet soap, toothpaste, medicines, mobile services, two-wheelers and gold jewellery), intermediate inputs (seed, fertiliser, pesticides, livestock feed, irrigation charges, diesel, hired labour, marketing costs and interest on loans) and capital goods (tractors, electric motor/pumps, cement, bricks, steel and other construction materials).

Based on the above, the Ministry has constructed year-wise indices of prices received (IPR) and prices paid (IPP) with the three years ended 2011-12=100 as base value. The ToT for farmers is the ratio of IPR to IPP. A ratio above one (or 100%) implies their enjoying favourable pricing power, in terms of what they sell versus what they buy. A ToT ratio below one indicates unfavourable conditions of exchange.

The Ministry has, likewise, constructed year-wise IPR for agricultural labourers, which is basically wages received by them. The IPP in their case is only for final consumption items. Agricultural workers, unlike farmers, have just their labour power to sell, with the money from it also mainly spent on consumption goods.

Simply put, while the ToT for the farm sector as a whole may have improved since the mid-2000s, it has been more for agricultural labourers than for farmers. Moreover, the last few years have been marked by stagnation or deterioration for both.

Political economy implications

Agricultural labourers — a big chunk of them from Dalit, Adivasi or Most Backward Classes backgrounds — have historically occupied the bottom-most rung of India's socioeconomic ladder.

Accelerated growth in the wider economy from around 2003-04 helped create new employment avenues for them outside of agriculture, particularly in construction and the urban services sector. Together with parallel government interventions such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the targeted public distribution system, it led to a tightening of labour markets. Farm workers, in the process, discovered hitherto non-existent alternatives ("opportunity cost") to transplanting paddy, harvesting sugarcane, picking cotton, spraying insecticides or removing weeds in fields.

The resultant rise in real wages for agricultural labourers, also reflected in their ToT, has impacted farmers. They have been squeezed between higher costs — for not just hired labour, but also agro-chemicals, seed, feed, diesel, tractors and farm machinery, and other inputs — and no commensurate increase in produce prices.

Subsidies on fertiliser, electricity/canal irrigation charges, agricultural credit and crop insurance may have partly protected farmers from rising production costs, just as MSP procurement has ensured stable realisations in select crops like paddy, wheat and sugarcane. But even after factoring these, the ToT for farmers has stagnated at best in the last 10 years. That, along with not many new crop yield breakthroughs and fragmentation of landholdings, probably also explains



the clamour for reservations in government jobs and educational institutions by Marathas, Jats, Patidars, Kapus and other dominant agrarian communities.

Even for agricultural labourers, the ToT ratio, while still favourable, has fallen after 2018-19. This is reflected in rural wages, too, hardly rising in real terms after adjusting for inflation.

EXPRESS VIEW ON THE PM-KISAN MODEL: NOT THE WAY FORWARD

The Narendra Modi government is undertaking a “saturation drive” to take the total number of farmer-beneficiaries under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan) to about 8.75 crore, from the current 8.12 crore or so.

Ensuring that every eligible landowning farmer in the country gets covered under this flagship scheme isn't a bad thing, both politically and otherwise. PM-Kisan's welcome feature is that it is a direct income support (DIS) programme. Every farmer is paid a flat Rs 6,000 per year in three equal installments, irrespective of which crops she grows in whatever quantities and sells to whomsoever at any price.

The Rs 6,000-amount is also indifferent to inputs used, whether chemical fertilisers and insecticides or organic manure and biological control of pests and diseases. In other words, it's a subsidy that is not market-distorting or privileging chemicals-based agriculture over so-called natural farming. So long as every farmer who actually farms gets it, one cannot find fault with PM-Kisan.

But even within this overall framework, refinements are possible. For instance, can DIS be given on a per-acre, rather than per-farmer, basis? The Telangana government's Rythu Bandhu scheme provides farmers up to Rs 12,000 per acre per year. This, it is alleged by some, benefits rich farmers over smallholders. That's perhaps an unfair criticism. Those farming larger holdings or growing more crops, after all, also incur higher expenditures. Such farmers, who are probably more dependent on income from agriculture than marginal holders, deserve extra support.

The Rs 6,000 annual payment under PM-Kisan can be made on a per-acre basis up to a limit of, say, 10 acres. That would, to a great extent, address concerns over rich-versus-poor farmers. Nobody should grudge the “middle farmer” — who is responsible for much of India's agricultural production and, indeed, national food security — getting something extra. In fact, state governments can top up the Rs 6,000 amount under PM-Kisan with an equivalent DIS, again as a per-acre transfer.

It raises the question: Where will the money for moving from per-farmer to per-acre payments come from? The answer: By ending all market-distorting subsidies, whether on farm inputs (fertiliser, electricity and water) or output (government procurement of grain at high support price beyond necessary stocking requirements).

The savings from that can be redirected towards PM-Kisan and state government-financed DIS schemes. For illustrative purposes, consider the Centre's fertiliser subsidy alone, budgeted at Rs 1,75,100 crore. If this humongous amount were simply distributed among the projected 8.75 crore PM-Kisan beneficiaries, it would work out to over Rs 20,000 per farmer. Add savings from similar inefficient and environmentally-disastrous subsidies by states, and money shouldn't be a constraint as much as political will. That's a challenge the government that takes charge after the April-May 2024 elections must take head on.



MITIGATING POLLUTION WITH HEALTH INSURANCE POLICY

A cloud of toxic air engulfed entire north India recently with the Air Quality Index (AQI) in Delhi NCR breaching the 500 mark, which is categorised as severe.

Masks on faces, which a common sight during COVID-19, have made a comeback in public spaces. The situation is so grim that it even impacted the Cricket World Cup.

On one hand, England players had to use inhalers because of high levels of pollution while the Bangladesh team cancelled a training session when they visited Delhi for a match.

This year, the situation got pretty severe even before Diwali festivities began. The tragedy was it had become a recurring problem. And, prolonged exposure to high levels of air pollution leads to severe health problems. This makes health insurance a non-negotiable safety shield during these times.

Health implications

Rising pollution brings along severe health consequences. According to a recent study, exposure to polluted air has direct correlation to type-2 diabetes. The study, conducted over seven years among 12,000 men and women in Delhi and Chennai, found breathing air with high levels of PM2.5 particles results in high blood sugar levels and increased type 2 diabetes incidence.

According to medical experts, breathing air with high levels of pollutants is similar to smoking 25-30 cigarettes a day. The short-term implications include eye irritation, itchy throat, and respiratory issues like loss of breath. However, prolonged exposure can also lead to a raised risk of lung cancer and chronic heart disease.

It also reduces life expectancy by taking several years off a person's life.

Another important factor is how pollution hampers the active part of lifestyle. Doctors advise people to stay indoors and avoid physical activity, especially exercise, during periods of high levels of air pollution. While this helps us avoid short-term health risks, it also leads to a sedentary lifestyle which may have long-term health implications. This is especially so for people who may already be going through health complications like diabetes, which require regular physical activity to keep it under check.

While there's little we can do about pollution right now, we do have control over protecting ourselves financially from the higher risk of chronic illnesses it brings. The reassuring part is health insurance offers extensive coverage for such health troubles. Here's how to safeguard yourself with the right coverage:

Coverage for PEDs:

Those with diabetes can take comfort in specialised health insurance plans that provide coverage for pre-existing diabetes right from day one. In fact, those suffering from chronic diabetes can also opt for health insurance plans that provide extensive coverage. These are the individuals with high blood sugar levels who require insulin to keep diabetes under check. The extensive coverage includes not only emergency assistance but also regular health check-ups and monitoring. This empowers policyholders and equips them with the right information to better manage their health.



OPD coverage

Health insurance generally covers hospitalisation expenses which may be caused due to ailments arising out of high levels of pollution. However, if one lives in a city that sees regular bouts of toxic air, it is advisable to get OPD coverage as well.

That is because air pollution can lead to some short-term health complications which may not need hospitalisation, but may need medical attention including doctor consultations and medical tests. Having OPD coverage spares you from out-of-pocket expenses owing to eye problems, cold and cough, respiratory problems, skin allergies, etc.

Critical illness cover

It is also a good idea to get a Critical Illness cover which gives the policyholder a lump sum amount if they are diagnosed with any listed critical illness like cancer or heart disease. The hospitalisation bill can shoot to ₹40-50 lakh in this case. After all, the connection between pollution and such ailments is well-established. This coverage can be used to cover the high cost of medical treatment which is common with such ailments, and also to replace any loss of income arising out of that.

High sum insured

The importance of an adequate sum insured cannot be stressed upon enough, especially in metro cities. Sum insured of at least ₹50 lakh-₹1 crore is important for those exposed to high levels of pollution consistently.

Also, a cover of ₹1 core for two adults in a metro city is quite affordable at about ₹1,300 monthly premium. This helps one afford critical medical care, which is crucial for chronic ailments aggravated by pollution like lung cancer, the cost of which can run significantly high.

APPLYING FOR A LOAN OR CARD? WHAT SHOULD YOUR CREDIT SCORE BE, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

If you plan to apply for a vehicle or a home loan, or a credit card, you should first find out if you have the credit score to be eligible — else your application could be rejected. The credit score of an individual is based on their full loan history, which is stored in the database of a credit information company (CIC) which is registered with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). This data is accessed by banks while considering the customer's application for a loan or a credit card.

What are credit information companies (CICs)?

There are four CICs, TransUnion CIBIL, Experian, Equifax, and CRIF High Mark, all of which are regulated by the RBI. They maintain credit information of borrowers — including individuals, corporates, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) — which can be accessed by banks and other lending institutions.

They collect information from a variety of credit providers, including banks, credit card companies, and non-bank financial institutions, and rate borrowers on a scale of 300-900 with 900 being the highest rating.

Banks and finance companies normally take a decision on giving a loan based on the rating given by the credit bureaus. Banks mandate the use of credit information report (CIRs) in their credit



appraisal process. Both CICs and banks are supposed to keep the credit information collected/maintained by them updated monthly, or at mutually agreed shorter intervals.

What is an ideal credit score?

The closer the score is to the maximum of 900, the better it is. A score between 550 and 700 is deemed to be fair, and 549 and below is deemed to be poor.

If the borrower's score is more than 800, she will likely get a loan or credit card easily and at a lower interest rate. On the other hand, scores nearer to 300 mean there is little chance of the borrower getting a loan or credit card.

Ratings change with the repayment behaviour. If a borrower defaults, her score will fall. Once it falls to below 500, chances of getting low interest rates and even loans or cards also decline accordingly.

What's in the database of CICs?

CICs have details of all creditors and borrowers in the financial system. This effectively means they are monitoring credit outstanding of Rs 158.29 lakh crore in the banking system. CICs also capture the names of directors, guarantors, and partners involved in the loans.

As of March 2023, there were 36,217 suit-filed accounts — where banks had filed cases against borrowers for loan defaults — involving Rs 926,300 crore, according to TransUnion CIBIL data. There were also 16,899 wilful defaulters, involving a cumulative Rs 353,905 crore, CIBIL data show.

How can borrowers be sure that their data is correct?

If a borrower defaults, and subsequently makes the repayment, they should approach the CIC after a month to check if their status has been updated. If they are still classified as defaulters and their rating is consequently down, they should take up the issue with the CIC for rectification.

This is important because borrowers are in the dark about their credit rating and credit status until they seek a report from a CIC. Unlike banks, they don't have direct access to the CICs' database.

Are there cases where customers have complained?

Yes, the RBI has received many complaints about CICs not updating the status of borrowers. Customers have complained that when they rectify a default issue or point out a wrong classification, the CICs have failed to act within the stipulated timeframe. As a result, many customers have been unable to get loans or credit cards.

It has been pointed out that if a credit card holder defaults on payment, or if she fails to pay a loan instalment, the CICs are immediately notified. However, when the customer has rectified the payment, the CICs have not reclassified them with the same urgency.

What steps has RBI taken to address these complaints?

In October, the RBI asked CICs to provide easy access to a Free Full Credit Report (FFCR) including credit score, once in a year (January-December), to individuals whose credit history is available



with the CIC. The link to access the FFCR conveniently should be displayed prominently on the CIC's website.

The RBI also said that lenders should inform customers of the reasons for the rejection of their request for data correction, if any, to enable such customers to better understand the issues in the credit information report (CIR).

The central bank said CICs should have a board-approved policy for undertaking periodic reviews, at least on a half-yearly basis, of the 'search & match' logic algorithm that they use to provide the borrower's CIR. The CICs should undertake a root cause analysis (RCA) of complaints to identify issues in the existing 'search & match' logic algorithm, it said.

LINKING INSURANCE TO STOCK MARKETS

The Indian capital markets are booming, Sensex reaching dizzying heights of 70,000 points and beyond. Even those who haven't thought of investing in a share in the last two years of a bull market are sitting up and wondering if they are missing something and should jump in.

Coming up is the JFM (January, February, March) quarter, the final quarter of a financial year when life insurance sales pitches go up several notes due to the tax incentive.

We spoke of intentionally (or well-intentioned) confusing product positioning in CoverNote in the last few weeks. Selling insurance as investment, as a tax-break and so on.

Unit-linked insurance

In this instalment let us see one more product from the insurance industry, the unit-linked insurance policy or ULIP, which is definitely among the more sought-after life insurance policy types as industry statistics show.

ULIPs bundle death cover with a market investment. The latter is much like a mutual fund. ULIPs are an easy sell because the returns from it are linked to the capital markets, a pie in the sky that will attract anybody.

Part of the premium you pay goes towards life insurance protection and the rest — usually a larger part — is invested in the capital markets according to your choice of funds.

You float higher with the market and all's well as far as its going well. There is life insurance for your future or for your family's protection, as well as your fund growing with the market.

There is also a tax benefit, much curtailed in the recent years by regulations in order to protect the product from being misused and the prospective policyholder from being misled.

Stock market crash

It's when the music stops that things turn bad. When there is a stock market crash, the value of the fund crashes. This is enough to depress anybody, even professional investors.

But for somebody who made this investment to protect their children and lost value due to external factors, the shock is significant. Significant enough for the anger to turn on life insurance itself.



Because that is what the policyholder was buying when it comes to the core of it. So, if you want a life insurance policy now, buy one. Make your investments separately. Dabble in the market and take the wins and the losses.

But a product that offers multiple benefits under an umbrella is dicey. No investment product can be all things to all people. It's a myth that is a convenient marketing tool. If you don't know about life insurance its easy to educate yourself. But that is not the time to dabble in markets.

UNDERSTANDING VALUE INVESTING: HOW IT WORKS AND BRINGS IN PROFITS

Value investing refers to a style of investing that involves buying assets such as stocks, bonds, real estate etc. at a price that is below their intrinsic value hoping to sell them at a higher price in the future. Value investors believe that an asset's price, while it may fluctuate widely in the short-run, will move towards its intrinsic value in the long-run. Some value investors may also short assets that they believe are trading at a price that is higher than their intrinsic value hoping to make a profit when its price drops.

American economist and value investor Benjamin Graham, who is the author of the classic 1949 book *The Intelligent Investor*, is considered to be the father of value investing while American billionaire investor Warren Buffett is seen as a leading proponent of the value style of investing.

How it works

Value investing is based on the premise that the price of an asset can vary widely from its intrinsic value, which is the discounted value of the likely future cash flow from the asset. For example, the intrinsic value of a company's stock may be 100 rupees per share, but it may be trading at a market price of only 60 rupees. This disparity between the price and the intrinsic value of an asset gives an opportunity for value investors to buy the asset at a price that is below its intrinsic value. Over time, as more investors begin to notice the gap between the price and the intrinsic value of the asset, the price of the asset is bid up towards its intrinsic value. This in turn allows value investors who bought the asset when it was underpriced to sell at a profit. So, a value investor who bought the stock of a company when it was undervalued at 60 rupees per share initially could potentially earn a profit of 40 rupees (or even more) as the price of the stock is bid up by other investors towards its intrinsic value of 100 rupees per share or higher. A value investor generally sells an asset once its price has exceeded its intrinsic value.

The philosophy of value investors differs from that of efficient market theorists who argue that the price at which an asset is traded in the market closely tracks its intrinsic value. Efficient market theorists believe that markets are so efficient that all information that is relevant to an asset is quickly reflected in its price, thus offering very little opportunity for value investors to purchase undervalued assets. In fact, many believe that value investing is dead today because markets price in information so quickly more often than not, which makes it hard to spot good buying opportunities in the modern market.

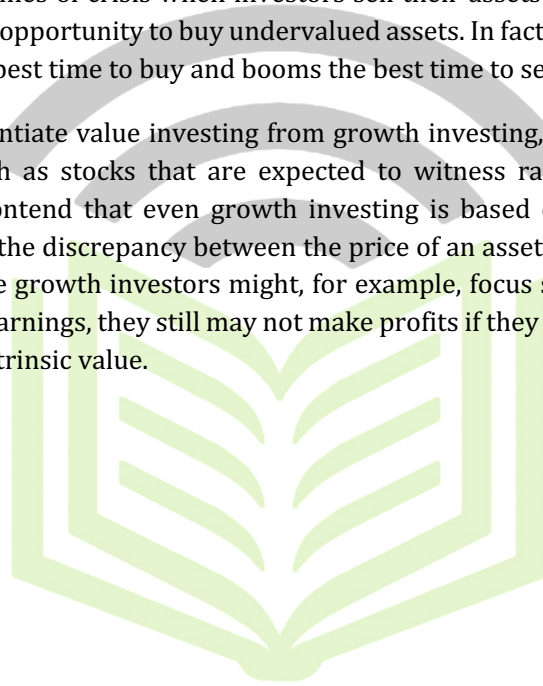
Value investors, on the other hand, believe that price and intrinsic value can differ for long periods of time, thus offering investors opportunities to make profits by buying assets below their intrinsic value.



Judging intrinsic value

The price of an asset may differ from its intrinsic value for various reasons. For one, estimates of the intrinsic value of an asset may vary depending on the opinions of investors. For example, if the majority of investors fail to expect a major rise in the future cash flow of a company, they may undervalue the company's share and hence be willing to pay only a low price for it. This gives contrarian investors an opportunity to buy the asset at a cheap price, and sell it later when other investors finally recognise the enhanced earnings power of the company. It should be noted that since the estimation of the intrinsic value of an asset is an uncertain affair, value investors seeking a "margin of safety" generally look to invest only in opportunities where there is a significant disparity between the price and the value of an asset. The price and the intrinsic value of an asset can also vary during times of crisis when investors sell their assets in panic. So crises can offer value investors a great opportunity to buy undervalued assets. In fact, value investors believe that market panics are the best time to buy and booms the best time to sell.

Some investors differentiate value investing from growth investing, which primarily focuses on purchasing assets such as stocks that are expected to witness rapid earnings growth. Value investors, however, contend that even growth investing is based on the core value investing principle of exploiting the discrepancy between the price of an asset and its intrinsic value. They argue so because while growth investors might, for example, focus solely on investing in stocks with rapidly growing earnings, they still may not make profits if they pay for the stock a price that is far higher than its intrinsic value.



DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

WILL SLIM REVOLUTIONISE LUNAR LANDINGS?

The story so far:

At 1.21 pm IST on December 25, Japan's Smart Lander for Investigating Moon (SLIM) spacecraft entered into orbit around the moon after a months-long journey, and ahead of its planned moon-landing attempt on January 19. If the attempt succeeds, Japan will become only the fifth country to soft-land a robotic craft on the natural satellite, months after India succeeded with its Chandrayaan-3 mission in August. Perhaps more importantly, SLIM's success or failure will also affect the upcoming Chandrayaan-4 mission.

What is SLIM?

SLIM is a spacecraft built and launched by the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) on September 7, 2023, from the Tanegashima spaceport. It weighed only 590 kg at launch, which is almost one-seventh of Chandrayaan-3, which weighed 3,900 kg at launch. Of course, the latter mission also carried a larger suite of instruments.

SLIM was launched together with XRISM, a next-generation X-ray space telescope, onboard an H-2A rocket. JAXA had planned to launch SLIM and XRISM together, so delays in readying XRISM pushed SLIM's launch date from 2021 to 2023.

On December 25, SLIM entered into an elliptical orbit around the moon over three minutes or so. Its apogee (farthest point) in this orbit is 4,000 km and perigee (closest point) is 600 km above the lunar surface.

Notably, JAXA launched SLIM only two weeks after the surface component of India's Chandrayaan-3 mission succeeded and Russia's Luna 25 spacecraft failed. SLIM will also mark the second Japanese attempt this year to soft-land on the moon: the HAKUTO-R M1 lander, built by Japanese company ispace, crashed in late April after its engines shut down too soon during the landing.

How did SLIM get to the moon?

SLIM is lighter because it carried much less fuel. Of Chandrayaan-3's 3.9 tonnes, the propulsion module alone weighed 2.1 tonnes. This is why the mission was launched on July 14 and could reach the moon less than a month later, by following a route called the Hohmann transfer orbit.

On the other hand, SLIM took four months because it followed a longer but more fuel-thrifty route based on weak-stability boundary theory.

Once it was launched into an orbit around the earth, SLIM swung around the planet multiple times, building up its kinetic energy with each swing. Once it was travelling fast enough, it shot up towards the moon's orbit. Chandrayaan-3 followed a qualitatively similar path until this point.

Once it got close to the moon, Chandrayaan-3 applied its brakes – which consume fuel in space – so that it could slow down enough to be captured by the moon's weaker gravity. But once SLIM got near the moon, instead of slowing down and being captured by the moon's gravity, it allowed itself to be deflected in the moon's direction even as it shot past lunar orbit, deeper into space.



This deflection is the result of the combined forces exerted by the earth and the moon. Physicists worked it out in the late 1980s for another JAXA mission, called 'Hiten'.

What will SLIM do on the moon?

SLIM was subsequently on a larger, more loopy path that was designed to bring it back near the moon in December after it had slowed down further. This event happened on Christmas Day, followed by orbital capture the next day.

By sacrificing some time, SLIM could be more fuel-efficient.

All this said SLIM's standout feature is its reputation as the "moon sniper" – a title derived from what it will do on the moon on January 19: it will try to land within 100 metres of its chosen landing site. This is an unusually tight limit given the history of moon-landing missions. For example, the 'Vikram' lander of Chandrayaan-3 was designed to descend in an elliptical area that was 4 km long downrange and 2.5 km wide cross-range, and it eventually landed at a spot 350 metres away from a predetermined one.

(Downrange means in the direction of the craft's motion and cross-range means to either side. In effect, these distances specify how much the craft's path can deviate in these two directions.)

NASA's hulking 'Curiosity' rover was tasked with landing at the centre of a 20 km x 7 km ellipse in Gale Crater on Mars on August 6, 2012, and it landed 2.4 km away. The most precise moon-landing in history was China's Chang'e 3 spacecraft: it landed 89 metres away from its chosen spot in the Mare Imbrium plain on the moon on December 14, 2013. However, it was still allowed to land anywhere inside an ellipse of 6 km x 6 km.

SLIM, in effect, will set the record on January 19 for attempting to soft-land with the smallest ever area tolerance on the moon. The chosen site is near the Shioli Crater, at 13.3° S and 25.2° E. Just as the 'Vikram' lander of the Chandrayaan-3 mission used data from the Chandrayaan 2 orbiter to help guide its descent, SLIM will use data from JAXA's SELENE orbiter, which ended in 2009.

Its lower mass – only 120 kg excluding fuel – will help in this endeavour by rendering it more manoeuvrable while its small size will be a test of its economical design.

Just before it lands, SLIM will deploy two small rovers called Lunar Excursion Vehicle (LEV) 1 and 2. LEV-1, LEV-2, and SLIM will together study the lunar surface near the landing point, collect temperature and radiation readings, and attempt to study the moon's mantle.

How will SLIM affect Chandrayaan-4?

Scientists are interested in the moon's South Pole region at large because parts of some of the craters here are always in shadow, allowing the temperature there to drop very low as well as sparing them the effects of sunlight and diurnal temperature variations. We already know these parts contain water-ice, and a lunar surface mission could potentially explore these sites and attempt to extract water.

When the Indian Space Research Organisation successfully executed its Chandrayaan-3 mission by soft-landing a robotic craft on the moon's surface, on August 23, it also concluded the second phase of its lunar exploration programme. The first mission of its third phase is the Lunar Polar Exploration (LUPEX) mission, a.k.a. Chandrayaan 4.



LUPEX will be an Indian-Japan joint enterprise (however, while JAXA has approved LUPEX, India is yet to) with an earliest launch date in 2026. It will explore an area closer to the moon's south pole than Chandrayaan-3 did – and this makes all the difference.

The terrain near either of the moon's poles is rocky, pocked with several craters, and full of steep slopes. Axiomatically, if there is a suitable landing spot for a (relatively) large landing module or rover, its downrange and cross-range limits will be lower than they were for Chandrayaan-3. The craft will have to land as close to the site as possible, if not at the site itself.

The technologies JAXA will test with SLIM, but especially a feature-matching algorithm and navigation systems, will be crucial for this aspect of LUPEX. For now, JAXA is expected to provide the launch vehicle and the lunar rover while India will provide the lander module. The landing site is yet to be fixed; to compare, the 'Vikram' lander landed 600 km from the South Pole.

BEST AI TOOLS OF 2023: CHATGPT RULES THE ROOST, FOLLOWED BY GOOGLE BARD, MIDJOURNEY, AND MORE

The year 2023 showed us the astounding pace at which Artificial Intelligence is advancing. It can be said that 2023 is a landmark year for AI innovation. From tools that gave wings to creativity, to those that could generate text, code, and art, to AI chatbots that can engross one in conversation on the most complex topics, this year, we saw how AI is fundamentally changing the way we engage with technology.

With just a few days left in 2023, we dive into some of the most promising AI tools that emerged over the year. These tools offer a glimpse into the wide-ranging potential of AI to enhance human capabilities. From image generators such as DALL-E 3 and Stable Diffusion, which captured the imagination of the masses, to the highly sophisticated language models like OpenAI's ChatGPT and Anthropic's Claude that could converse with users with ease, in this article, we explore the diversity in inventive AI applications.

ChatGPT

OpenAI unveiled its sensational chatbot ChatGPT in November 2022. The chatbot that could answer almost any question under the sky, ideate, and write programs stunned the world with its extraordinary capabilities. Chat Generative Pre Trained Transformer (ChatGPT) utilises OpenAI's proprietary large language model (LLM), the GPT-series. After its launch, the San Francisco-based AI start-up went on to add several new features, launched mobile versions for iOS and Android and introduced GPT-4, its most potent AI model.

While GPT-4 expanded the capabilities, OpenAI also endowed the chatbot with the power of the Internet and added plugins for subscribers to use ChatGPT for a variety of use cases. Towards the end of the year, OpenAI held its first-ever developer conference, opening its door to millions of developers. ChatGPT was enhanced with CustomGPTs, which allowed users to create their chatbots. Moreover, DALL-E 3 has been integrated into the interface of ChatGPT. Also, the newly announced GPT-4 Turbo comes with a context window of 1,28,000 tokens. The company has announced that it will soon be launching a GPT Store in the coming months. While the chatbot's capabilities dominated headlines, November saw OpenAI marred by a boardroom coup that shook the company.



Bing AI Chat/Microsoft Copilot

OpenAI may require one to subscribe to its ChatGPT Plus to experience its mighty GPT-4. Bing AI Chat, introduced by Microsoft earlier this year, is a sophisticated feature of the Bing search engine. It is powered by GPT-4 and uses AI for conversational interactions. Backed by the advanced language models from OpenAI, Bing AI Chat can perform an assortment of tasks such as content creation, idea generation, and image generation. Bing AI Chat has been praised by users for its ability to engage in human-like conversations, assist users with coding, travel planning, learning languages, and more. Bing AI Chat which is now known as Microsoft Copilot is seen as a significant step towards integrating AI into search engines, offering an interactive and versatile search experience.

Google Bard

Even as ChatGPT won over users around the world, in March 2023, Google introduced its conversational generative AI chatbot, Google Bard. It is currently available in 46 languages across 238 countries. Google Bard is the next leap in LLM technology and has evolved from Google's proprietary LaMDA to PaLM and is at the moment running on Gemini. Google Bard can be called a search engine on steroids as it can offer informative conversations, translate many languages, be capable of creative writing, and even answer the most complex questions. Google Bard's brain comprises a massive dataset of code and text which allows it to learn and understand human language. Its sophisticated algorithms enable it to process information, generate responses, and contextualise them. Essentially, Bard is a personal AI assistant that can learn and evolve with the user. Google says that it is still under development, however, it offers a glimpse into the future and our interactions with AI.

Runway Gen-2

Gen-2, developed by Runway, an innovative startup backed by Google, is a groundbreaking advancement in AI video software. This technology has already impressed the entertainment industry, as demonstrated by its use in the critically acclaimed Hollywood film 'Everything Everywhere All at Once', where it played a crucial role in creating stunning visual effects. Gen-2 is known for its ability to generate videos from various inputs. These inputs can range from simple text prompts to complex images and pre-existing videos. Our hands-on experience with Gen-2 revealed its impressive capabilities. While the tool is not without its limitations, the quality of the output is noteworthy. Areas for improvement include enhancing the precision of video generation, especially when working with detailed descriptions or specific image prompts. This level of refinement could further augment Gen-2's functionality, making it an even more powerful tool for video creation and editing.

Dall-E 3

DALL-E is a generative AI model renowned for its image-generation capabilities. First launched in 2021, OpenAI introduced its third iteration earlier this year. This model generates images based on natural language inputs, commonly referred to as prompts. Currently, DALL-E 3 is accessible through ChatGPT, Microsoft Paint, Bing Image Creator, and other services using its API. Although these platforms offer similar experiences, ChatGPT is the official channel, making it the preferred method for using the AI model. According to an OpenAI website post, 'DALL-E 3 is natively integrated with ChatGPT, enabling users to employ ChatGPT as a brainstorming partner and prompt refiner. Simply tell ChatGPT what you envision, ranging from a simple sentence to a detailed paragraph.'



OpenAI has also implemented measures to restrict DALL-E 3's ability to generate violent, adult, or hateful content. To use DALL-E 3, users must subscribe to ChatGPT Plus, available for \$20 per month or Rs 1999. It is also accessible to ChatGPT Enterprise users.

Midjourney

In simple terms, Midjourney acts like a magic paintbrush controlled by words. This wildly popular AI tool generates breathtaking images based on text descriptions and prompts. To use Midjourney, users should provide a detailed prompt describing the desired scene, style, ambiance, and mood. Specificity in colour, texture, composition, and lighting settings is essential. Midjourney analyses these prompts and employs powerful algorithms that blend millions of images and artistic styles to match the user's request. Within seconds, the AI tool produces unique artwork, which can then be refined, tweaked, or used to generate more variations. This year, images of Pope Francis in a Balenciaga puffer jacket, created using Midjourney, went viral on the internet. Many initially believed these images to be real, showcasing Midjourney's ability to create precise and photorealistic images.

Pi Chatbot

In August, Mustafa Suleyman, a former co-founder of DeepMind, and Reid Hoffman, an ex-founder of LinkedIn, launched an AI chatbot through their new startup, Inflection AI. This unique chatbot, named Pi, offers a fresh perspective on AI personal assistants. Pi differs significantly from ChatGPT and Google Bard. Its creators describe it as a chatbot designed to be 'supportive, smart, and always there for you.' Unlike typical chatbots that primarily handle mundane tasks, Pi is intended to be more of a companion to humans.

The company explained in a tweet, 'Pi stands for "personal intelligence" and provides infinite knowledge tailored to your unique needs.' We used Pi as motivation to overcome anxiety about driving on the highway and were impressed by its heightened empathy and human-like conversational abilities. The web version of the chatbot provides a pleasant experience, featuring a dreamy layout and interface where text floats invitingly, responding with empathetic emojis and words. Now, the chatbot also has real-time access to latest information from the web.

Claude 2

Anthropic is the San Francisco-based AI startup that made headlines this year after it unveiled its Claude 2 chatbot in July. Claude 2 was a commercial version of its Claude chatbot that was earlier limited to closed beta in Slack. Claude 2 is an AI-powered conversational agent that has been designed to be helpful, harmless, and honest, through a concept known as Constitutional AI.

Claude was the first chatbot to come with a big context window of 1,00,000 tokens which equals 75,000 words. This essentially meant that one could use an entire novel as a prompt. At that point in time, ChatGPT was limited to 8,912 tokens. Eventually, OpenAI surpassed the token window with GPT-4 Turbo. Besides, Claude 2 was mainly used to have natural conversations and assist with various tasks like answering questions, making recommendations, and more. The chatbot is enabled with self-supervision learning which allows it to train from public dialogue instead of manual labelling of data. It is based on transformer-based neural networks that enable it to understand and generate human-like text.



Character.ai

Character AI is a chatbot that lets users have conversations with celebrities, historical figures, and fictional characters. It's different from ChatGPT and Google Bard as its conversations seem more natural. The tool was created with natural language processing and machine learning, which makes its responses more engaging and relevant. In August, it was reported that Character AI had visitors spending the most time on it, an average eight times higher than ChatGPT. The chatbot features AI versions of a famous footballer, renowned physicist, celebrated pop star, and others. Additionally, users can engage in conversations with language educators, mental health counsellors, and well-known characters from video games.

GitHub Copilot

GitHub Copilot is essentially an AI pair programmer designed to enhance the creativity involved in coding. The tool developed by GitHub, which is owned by Microsoft is a collaborative tool that provides contextual suggestions based on comments and code along with offering real-time assistance to developers. GitHub Copilot is capable of suggesting not only individual lines but entire functions almost instantly, and this streamlines the coding process significantly. It is available as an extension in popular Integrated Development Environments (IDE) such as Visual Studio Code, NeoVim, and JetBrains suite of IDEs. Copilot also assists in addressing several coding-related problems and is capable of keeping developers in the flow. It supports all major programming languages and has the intelligence to adapt to a user's style of coding over time.

Adobe Firefly

This year when it comes to creativity, Adobe's Firefly, accessible at adobe.com, has been one of the go-to AI tools for creators this year. This AI image generator is not just any tool, it's a creative powerhouse as it lets anyone add colour to their ideas. Imagine a scenario where you have an idea, a scene, or a concept, one simply needs to input the same into Firefly and let it do the work. It almost instantly transforms your prompts into stunning high-quality images. This tool is perfect for content creators, graphic designers, and almost anyone who needs visual content. In our experience, with Firefly, you can effortlessly create unique thumbnails for videos, striking graphics for social media, or even artwork for your blogs and websites. Firefly is currently free as it is in its beta phase.

Perplexity AI

Ever since the launch of ChatGPT, one thing that was constantly discussed was embedding AI into conventional search engines. Perplexity AI by San Francisco software development company is a conversational AI search engine that offers a chatbot-like interface allowing users to ask questions in natural language. In response, the chatbot responds by citing sources from around the web. It also allows users to ask follow-up questions to dive deeper into any topic. In our experience, Perplexity AI is that bridge that connects creativity and knowledge. The search engine functions like a virtual librarian such as offering precise answers with a source to any query. Users of Perplexity AI have hailed it as an invaluable tool for research, academic purposes, content creation, and even enhancing one's knowledge. Perplexity AI focuses on not just delivering information but also emphasises on quality and credibility of the content.



What lies ahead

The tools assembled here have been listed based on factors such as innovation, utility, and user base. These tools and their creators have also raised some pertinent questions about the future of AI assistants and co-pilots.

2024 is drawing closer. The year 2023 can be called a transformative year for AI with some groundbreaking advancements and trends. We anticipate that the rapid pace of innovations in AI will continue next year as well. Domains such as natural language processing, enhanced AI ethics protocols, and more intuitive user interfaces are likely to dominate in 2024. We also feel that concerns such as those surrounding data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the impact of AI on jobs are likely to persist. We also expect to see the integration of AI in sustainable development, healthcare, and education. However, with these developments, there will be a need for greater monitoring to ensure that AI is used ethically and there is equitable access.

EXPRESS VIEW ON AI IN THE NEW YEAR: FIRST, DON'T PANIC

Public conversation around technology governance in recent times invariably proceeds from an axiom: Regulation and policy are at least a step behind innovation. This has indeed been the case historically, from the printing press to the rise of social media. But it need not be so with AI.

The public launch of Large Language Model (LLM) ChatGPT by OpenAI in November 2022 has disrupted the technology space. 2023 was witness to the democratisation of LLMs — never before has AI this sophisticated, with such human-like interfaces and vast knowledge, been so easily available. ChatGPT also brought into the open the race between the biggest companies in the world including Google, and between China and the US, to develop Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). This year saw a watershed moment in technology, as well as questions around its regulation.

There is a curious dichotomy between the so-called dangers of AI and its purported advantages. The latter are specific: From advanced gene sequencing to tutors for students, from writing code to a competent virtual assistant. The dangers are generally apocalyptic, ranging from science fiction-inspired doomsday scenarios to the effects LLMs and AI will have on creativity, work and the economy, and society as a whole. Two possible reasons account for this. First, those who develop the technologies have a fair idea of its capabilities (although the more advanced AI becomes, in terms of computing power and the data sets it is trained on, the more unpredictable it becomes) but perhaps less so about its impacts. Second, the jobs and ways-of-being threatened by LLMs and possible AGIs differ in a fundamental aspect from earlier disruptions. This time, it is white-collar jobs based on intellectual and cognitive abilities that are under threat. That could explain why there was less panic over mechanisation replacing manufacturing jobs than, say, machines replacing lawyers, doctors, artists and writers.

The panic around AI holds twin dangers. First, it could invite a regulatory response that stifles the potential of a tool that can aid innovation and make knowledge and skills more accessible. Second, it may obfuscate the issues that incrementally end up making AI more harmful than beneficial. The counter to plagiarism needs to evolve. Questions of authorship and copyright are already being litigated in some jurisdictions — for example, with The New York Times case against OpenAI. The use of machine learning software for surveillance, facial recognition and predictive policing has major implications for privacy and human rights. Addressing these concerns requires



more than the expertise of the engineer and the technologist. In 2024, society needs to drive technology, rather than the other way around.

WHY THE NEW YORK TIMES IS SUING OPENAI AND MICROSOFT, WHAT IT COULD MEAN FOR AI AND COPYRIGHT

The New York Times (NYT) has become the first major news publisher to sue OpenAI and Microsoft, the creators of ChatGPT and other popular artificial intelligence (AI) platforms, citing “unlawful” use of copyrighted content.

The lawsuit says the defendants largely scrape the NYT’s original content to build their models and manufacture responses. “Defendants seek to free-ride on The Times’s massive investment in its journalism,” the complaint says, accusing OpenAI and Microsoft of using content “without payment to create products that substitute for The Times and steal audiences away from it”. Microsoft has a sizable investment in OpenAI.

This is a battle that could frame the legal contours around intellectual property (IP) rights in the age of generative AI platforms. It is also symbolic of the larger debate on how generative AI platforms could affect people from the creative industry, given that such systems are built on the back of work done by creators of original content, which is then synthesised through an algorithm and presented as fresh information by the AI systems.

Earlier this year, two US authors had also sued OpenAI, claiming in a proposed class action that the company misused their works to “train” ChatGPT.

What is NYT’s main contention against OpenAI and Microsoft?

The lawsuit, filed in the Federal District Court in Manhattan, contends that millions of articles published by the publication were used to train automated chatbots which now compete with the news outlet as a source of reliable information.

NYT has reported that it approached Microsoft and OpenAI in April to raise concerns about the use of its intellectual property and explore “an amicable resolution,” possibly involving a commercial agreement and “technological guardrails” around generative AI products. But the talks had not produced a resolution, the publication said.

The publication also alleges that OpenAI and Microsoft’s large language models, which power ChatGPT and Copilot, “can generate output that recites Times content verbatim, closely summarises it, and mimics its expressive style.” This “undermine[s] and damage[s]” the Times’ relationship with readers, while also depriving it of “subscription, licensing, advertising, and affiliate revenue.”

The “unlawful use” of the paper’s “copyrighted news articles, in-depth investigations, opinion pieces, reviews, how-to guides, and more” to create artificial intelligence products “threatens The Times’s ability to provide that service”, the lawsuit says.

The lawsuit highlights the potential damage to The Times’s brand through A.I. “hallucination”, a phenomenon in which chatbots respond with false information that is then wrongly attributed to a source.

In August, NYT had blocked OpenAI’s web crawler, preventing the company from using content from the publication to train its AI models.



AI and IP rights

Generative AI platforms such as ChatGPT and Google's Bard have ignited a debate on IP rights over original content on the internet.

The responses that AI platforms such as ChatGPT and Bard generate rest on the bedrock of millions of pieces of textual content that creators, including news publishers, have uploaded online.

The music business, too, is pushing back on the use of AI in the industry. Universal Music Group, for instance, has asked streaming services such as Spotify to stop developers from scraping its material to train AI bots in making new songs.

The debate is gaining traction at a time when countries around the world, including India, have archaic copyright laws that need reimagining keeping the AI wave in mind. For instance, in India, creative works are regulated under the Copyright Act of 1957.

The definition of an "author" under the Act includes any literary, dramatic, musical or artistic work which is computer generated, the person who causes the work to be created. But that definition does not take into account that AI systems do not generate information on their own. They are, simply, only as good as the base dataset on which they are trained. And the base dataset is made by copyrighted work produced by other authors.

NEMATOCYST: A CELLULAR WEAPON

WHAT IS IT?

Evolution has come up with many strange ways to help animals defend themselves. One is a specialised cell called a nematocyst. Nematocysts are found in some animals, but especially jellyfish, corals, sea anemones, and hydras, that serve as potent weapons to hunt prey and fend off predators.

Each nematocyst consists of a capsule containing a coiled, thread-like tubule and a bulbous structure with toxins. When stressed, the nematocyst rapidly ejects the tubule, often with an acceleration surpassing that of a bullet. Indeed, this mechanism is one of the fastest processes in the animal kingdom.

Nematocysts play a crucial role in the feeding and defence strategies of cnidarians in particular. Cnidarians are animals that contain cells called cnidocytes. When potential prey comes into contact with a cnidocyte, specialised sensory structures on the cell's surface trigger the release of the nematocyst. The tubule then unfurls, piercing the prey's outer layer or injecting toxins into its body.

The toxins in nematocysts also have different effects. Some are paralytic, immobilising the prey; others are cytolytic, meaning they break down cells. Cnidarians have been known to use a combination of toxins to ensure the success of its predatory or defensive efforts.

Overall, the complexity of nematocysts contributes to the success of cnidarians in various aquatic environments, making them formidable creatures.



SLEEP REGULARITY

Is there a link between very irregular sleep and a higher risk of dementia?

People who have very irregular sleep patterns may have a higher risk of dementia than those who have more regular sleep patterns, according to a new study (Neurology). The study does not prove that sleep irregularity causes dementia. It only shows an association. Researchers found links between sleep regularity scores and the risk of dementia. The risk of dementia was highest for people who had the most irregular sleep. After adjusting for age, sex and genetic risk of Alzheimer's disease, researchers found that those with the most irregular sleep were 53% more likely to develop dementia than people in the middle group. For people with the most regular sleep, researchers found they did not have a lower risk of developing dementia than people in the middle group. "Based on our findings, people with irregular sleep may only need to improve their sleep regularity to average levels, compared to very high levels, to prevent dementia," Dr. Matthew Paul Pase from Monash said in a release.

LIKE SHEEP AND GOATS, REINDEER TOO SLEEP WHILE CHEWING THEIR CUD

Researchers have discovered that the more time reindeer spend ruminating, the less time they spend in non-rapid eye movement (non-REM) sleep. EEG recordings revealed that reindeer's brainwaves during rumination resemble the brain waves present during non-REM sleep, and these brainwave patterns suggest that the reindeer are more "rested" after ruminating. The researchers speculate that this multitasking might help reindeer get enough sleep during the summer months, when food is abundant and reindeer feed almost 24/7. The results were published on December 22 in the journal *Current Biology*.

Light-dark cycles are absent in the Arctic during winter and summer, and previous studies showed that Arctic-dwelling reindeer don't display circadian behavioural rhythms during these seasons, though they tend to be more active during the daytime during the spring and autumn equinox, when light-dark cycles are present.

They found that reindeer slept approximately the same amount during winter, summer, and autumn, despite the fact that they were much more active during the summer. This is in contrast to other species that change the amount they sleep in response to environmental conditions.

One possible strategy is the opportunity for rest during rumination — the re-chewing of partially digested food, which is an important component of digestion for reindeer and other ruminants. Domestic sheep, goats, cattle, and lesser mouse-deer have all been previously observed to produce sleep-like brain waves during rumination, but it was unclear whether rumination could serve a similar restorative function to sleep.

The reindeer's EEG readings during rumination resembled brainwave patterns that are indicative of non-REM sleep including increased slow-wave activity and sleep spindles. Sleeping and ruminating reindeer also displayed similar behaviour, tending to quietly sit or stand during both activities, and were less reactive to disturbances such as a neighbouring reindeer sitting down or getting up.

Next, the researchers tested whether rumination could reduce the reindeer's drive to sleep by depriving the reindeer of sleep for two hours. Following sleep deprivation, the reindeer's EEG



readings indicated a build-up of ‘sleep pressure’ — the unconscious biological drive for more and deeper sleep — suggesting that reindeer experience deeper sleep following sleep deprivation.

COP28: WHAT WERE THE MOST IMPORTANT DECISIONS, WHERE THEY FELL SHORT

The COP28 climate meeting delivered some important outcomes — a first-time acknowledgement of the need to move away from fossil fuels, a first promise to reduce methane emissions, operationalisation and capitalisation of the loss and damage fund, and an agreement on a framework for the global goal on adaptation. However, like all previous COPs, it still remained an underachiever, unable to measure up to the expectations, particularly in galvanising more ambitious climate action in the immediate term.

The expectations

COP28 was being seen as possibly the last opportunity to ensure that the world had some hopes of keeping within the 1.5 degree Celsius warming threshold. The main agenda at COP28 was to carry out a Global Stocktake (GST), a comprehensive assessment of where the world was in its fight against climate change and what more needed to be done to meet the climate objectives. The GST is mandated by the Paris Agreement to be a periodic exercise, the first one in 2023 and every five years thereafter.

COP28 was being held at a time when global warming was breaking new records. The year 2023 is already confirmed to emerge as the hottest year ever. Several months this year set new temperature records. More than 80 days this year happened to be at least 1.5 degree Celsius warmer than pre-industrial times.

At the same time, every assessment showed that the world was not doing enough, and that the 1.5 degree target was rapidly slipping out of hand. COP28, therefore, was expected to use the GST to stimulate more ambitious climate actions, particularly between now and 2030.

The outcomes

However, COP28 disappointed on that front. There was little in the final agreement to accelerate climate action in the short term.

Fossil fuel phase-out: This was the most hotly contested issue at COP28, and the reason for a prolonged deadlock. The role of fossil fuels in causing global warming had never been even acknowledged in any earlier COP decision, but this was getting increasingly untenable. After much deliberations, the final agreement called upon countries to contribute towards “transitioning away” from fossil fuels, “so as to achieve net zero by 2050”. There were no time schedules and no targets. Some countries were extremely disappointed that the term “fossil fuel phase-out” had not been used. But even if it was, it would have a similar effect in the absence of any timeline. Production and consumption of fossil fuels are unlikely to be curbed significantly in the near term, but it is an important, rather unavoidable, measure in the 2050 timeframe.

Tripling of Renewable Energy: This was an expected outcome, and the only one that contributes to additional emission reductions between now and 2030. The COP28 agreement calls upon countries to contribute to tripling of global installed capacity of renewable energy, and doubling of annual improvements in energy efficiency. Together, these two measures have the potential to avoid emissions of about 7 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent between now and 2030, more than all the net result of all the other climate actions being currently taken. Tripling is a



global target, and it is not incumbent on every country to individually triple its current installed capacity. It is thus not clear how this tripling would be ensured.

Phase-down of coal: Despite being a fossil fuel, just like oil or natural gas, coal has received a separate mention in the agreement. This is because coal was already singled out for phase-down in the Glasgow conference in 2021. There was a move to stipulate that no new coal fired power plants could be opened without an in-built carbon capture and storage facility, but this was strongly resisted by India, China, South Africa and other countries. It was dropped, and finally the Glasgow language was reiterated. There is nothing about how this phase-down is to be measured, or from what baseline.

Methane emission cuts: The agreement talks about “accelerating and substantially reducing non-carbon-dioxide emissions globally, including in particular methane emissions by 2030”. Methane is the most widespread greenhouse gas apart from CO₂, accounting for nearly 25 per cent of all emissions. It is also about 80 times more potent than CO₂ in causing global warming. Methane emission reductions can therefore bring substantial benefits. But several countries, including India, are extremely opposed to any mandate to cut methane emissions, mainly because one of the major sources happens to be agriculture and livestock.

Cutting methane emissions could involve tweaking agricultural patterns which could be extremely sensitive in a country like India. Possibly in deference to the concerns of such countries, the agreement does not mention any targets for methane emission cuts for the year 2030, although a group of about 100 countries had made a voluntary commitment, in Glasgow in 2021, to reduce their methane emissions by 30% by 2030.

Loss and Damage Fund: For the poor and vulnerable countries, this was the most important outcome. A decision to set up a Loss and Damage Fund had been taken last year in Sharm el-Shaikh but it had not been created, and no money had been promised. COP28 operationalised this fund on the opening day of the conference, and several countries, including hosts UAE, made funding commitments. By the end of the conference, commitments worth about US\$ 800 million had been made. The money is meant to provide financial help to countries trying to recover from climate-induced disasters.

Global Goal on Adaptation: This was another important step developing countries had been waiting for. Historically, adaptation hasn't received enough attention, or resources, as compared with mitigation activities, mainly because adaptation is largely a local endeavour. Its benefits also are mostly local.

But developing countries had been arguing that a global framework for adaptation was necessary to bring more attention to it. Accordingly, the Glasgow conference had decided to set up a two-year work programme to define the contours of this framework. The work programme resulted in the identification of some common adaptation goals, important for the entire world. These included reduction in climate-induced water scarcity, attaining climate-resilience in food and agricultural production, supplies and distribution, and resilience against climate-induced health impacts.

COP28 adopted the framework, but much more needs to be done on this front, particularly in identifying the indicators to measure progress on each of the global goals. The adaptation agreement currently lacks financial provisions, and countries would need to continue working on it to strengthen it in the coming years.



UNPACKING THE FIRST EVER COP 'HEALTH DAY'

The climate crisis is a public health crisis. Severe temperatures, heat stress, excessive rainfall and floods, an increase in water- and vector-borne diseases, and more frequent extreme weather events are all evidence of this existential threat to our health security. That is why the World Health Organization (WHO) declared “Climate change as the greatest threat to global health in the 21st century”. Marginalised communities are on the front lines of the worst impacts of the changing climate. According to a World Bank estimate, “Climate change could drag more than 100 million people back into extreme poverty by 2030”. Much of this reversal would be due to the “negative impacts on health”. The climate risk index shows that eight out of the 10 countries most impacted by extreme weather events are the low- and middle-income countries.

A good global response

On December 3, the inaugural Health Day at COP28 highlighted the vital link between climate and health, underscoring that combating climate change is integral to advancing global health. The context to the day and the urgency to address the root cause of climate crisis — fossil fuel use — was set in early November with health leaders representing more than 46 million health professionals globally issuing an open letter calling on the COP28 Presidency and world governments to “commit to an accelerated, just and equitable phase-out of fossil fuels as the decisive path to health for all”. Over 1,900 health professionals at this year’s COP propelled the momentum to prioritise human health and well-being in climate decisions, taking centre stage.

Events and activities elevated a focus on people’s health for the first time at a COP like never before. Most notable ones were the COP28 UAE Declaration on Climate and Health that “signifies a global commitment to address climate-related health impacts, emphasizing the imperative for governments to fortify healthcare systems”. The declaration is now supported by 143 countries (to date). The COP28 Presidency, WHO, the UAE Ministry of Health and Prevention, and a group of champion countries also hosted the first-ever climate-health ministerial, which brought together nearly 50 Ministers of Health and 110 high-level health ministerial staff. Ministers of health, environment, finance, and other related sectors set out a “roadmap and opportunities for action to address the rapidly growing burden of climate change on healthcare systems and capture the vast socio-economic benefits from better health and well-being through climate action”.

India’s record

It is noteworthy that India was not represented on the historic health day at COP28. Over the last two decades, India has witnessed a significant rise in extreme temperatures, heat stress events, cyclones, floods, droughts, and malnutrition. In 2019 it ranked seventh globally for the severe impact of climate change, as in the Global Climate Risk Index. According to ‘India 2023: An assessment of extreme weather events’ brought out by Down To Earth magazine and the Centre for Science and Environment, India has seen a disaster nearly every day in the first nine months of this year — from heat and cold waves, cyclones and lightning to heavy rain, floods, and landslides. These disasters have “claimed 2,923 human lives, affected 1.84 million hectares (ha) of crop area, destroyed over 80,563 houses and killed close to 92,519 livestock”.

According to the Reserve Bank of India’s most recent report, as much as 4.5% of the country’s GDP could be jeopardised by 2030 due to the impact of extreme heat and humidity on labour hours, emphasising the economic risks associated with heat-related challenges alone. Not to miss India’s notoriety on its record on rising air pollution that caused at least 1.6 million premature deaths in



2019. Major public health challenges, including malaria, malnutrition, and diarrhoea, further compound the situation. The projected increase in these incidents, aligned with weather-related disasters and their health ramifications, poses a significant threat to the already strained public health infrastructure in the country.

Need for plans

Placing health at the forefront of climate planning in India is not just a necessity but an imperative for several compelling reasons. Over 700 million individuals in India, representing a significant portion of the population residing in rural areas, rely directly on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, and forests, as well as natural resources such as water, biodiversity, mangroves, coastal zones, and grasslands for their livelihoods. It is crucial to proactively formulate plans and policies that cater to their health needs.

Prioritising health in climate planning safeguards both immediate and long-term well-being in the face of climate change impacts. This focus enhances community resilience and disease mitigation, ensuring that populations can better cope with challenges and contribute to sustainable development. Integrating health into climate planning is not only economically prudent, reducing health-care costs and increasing productivity, but also strategically crucial for the overall effectiveness and sustainability of climate actions in India.

SIGNIFICANT CLIMATE MILESTONES OF 2023

Hottest year: The year is all but set to be declared the hottest in history. According to the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S), 2023 was 0.1°C warmer than the 10-month average for 2016, currently the warmest calendar year on record, and 1.43°C warmer than the pre-industrial reference period from January to October.

Highest sea surface temperature ever: Marine heat waves - periods when ocean temperatures are warmer than 90% of prior observations for a given time of year - were widespread in 2023. According to the U.S. National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 48% of global oceans experienced them in August 2023.

Global sea surface temperatures (SST) are usually highest in March. But per C3S data, global average SSTs remained at record highs throughout April, May, June, and July 2023.

Lowest Antarctic sea ice extent: Sea-ice extent is the area of ice covering the Antarctic Ocean at a given time. In 2023, Antarctic sea ice had record low ice growth from April. According to NOAA, sea ice in the Antarctic reached an annual maximum extent of 16.96 million sq. km on September 10, 2023, the lowest since 1979. This year's maximum was 1.03 million sq. km, below the previous record low set in 1986.

Record carbon dioxide levels: Global carbon dioxide emissions are expected to have hit a new high in 2023, up 1.1% from 2022. The Global Carbon Budget Report, published in December 2023, said overall CO₂ emissions, which climbed to a record last year, had plateaued in 2023 due to a slight drop in deforestation.

Loss and damage fund: The world's first loss and damage fund for the impacts of climate change was created in 2023, at the start of the COP28 climate talks in the U.A.E. in early December. The fund will be based at the World Bank but managed by an independent secretariat.



According to a senior U.N. official, it has received pledges of \$792 million from governments, which is a lot but still well short of the billions required to fulfill its purpose.

Impact of food systems: For the first time in the history of climate summits, 134 countries at COP28 pledged to tackle the climate impact of the food industry. These countries represent over 5.7 billion people, 70% of the food we eat, nearly 500 million farmers, and 76% of total emissions from the global food system. But observers noted the declaration doesn't include quantitative targets.

INFECTION OF THE EYE, AND HOW TO PROTECT VISION

In India, 13 lakhs are born blind, and 76 lakhs are suffering from easily treatable methods. By setting up 'vision centres' in rural areas and towns, by setting up well-equipped ophthalmic hospitals with able ophthalmologists, these sufferers can have the Right to Sight. Indeed, this is happening across the country. In addition, some globally recognised 'State of the Art' eye institutions are actively working on Vision 2020, and it appears achievable—Pashyantu Sarvejanah, or 'so that all may see'.

The L.V. Prasad Eye Institute (LVPEI), Hyderabad, where I work, sees on average about 1,200 patients daily, and about 100 of them are infected in the eye with bacteria, fungi or viruses.

My colleague, Dr Savitri Sharma, had earlier reviewed such infections in India. He is recognised as the global expert on what is known as the ocular microbiome.

What is a microbiome?

A genome is the entire set of DNA instructions found in a cell. In humans, the genome consists of 23 pairs of chromosomes located in a cell's nucleus. A biome refers to the species that are present in a location. In our case, the ocular microbiome refers to the bacteria, fungi and viruses that are present in the eye.

The microbes in a healthy ocular microbiome act like a barrier, preventing invasion by harmful pathogens.

The ocular microbiome is also significantly different in the conjunctiva (the thin, clear membrane that protects the eye) and the cornea (the outermost clear layer that helps in focusing and refraction of the eye) of patients with infectious diseases such as fungal keratitis when compared to healthy eye microbiomes.

In 2005, India had a population of 115 crores, and today it is 140 crores. Despite this increase, many eye care centres in rural India, more ophthalmologists in towns and cities, and eye research institutions in cities across the country have helped make India a votary of VISION 2020: The Right to Sight.

However, the prevailing levels of air pollution, due to very high amounts of dust all over the country, have made many people suffer from 'pink eye' (conjunctivitis), itching and swelling of the eye, and blurry vision (when the lens is affected), or sensitivity to bright light.

How does one cope with it? The Cleveland Clinic in the U.S. has suggested several methods for this—use damp, warm or cool kerchiefs to make your eyes feel better; wear protective eyeglasses (spectacles); if you wear contact lenses, clear them; contact your eye doctor and have him/her prescribe appropriate lotions or pills.



DO SHORTENED TB TREATMENT PLANS OFFER THE SOLUTION FOR INDIA'S TB BURDEN?

Tuberculosis is a dreadful disease with a high mortality and has consistently been a global health concern. India accounts for around 27% of TB cases worldwide – which is the world's highest country-wise TB burden – thanks in part to its population of 1.3 billion.

In the last decade, the National Tuberculosis Elimination Programme (NTEP), along with the private sector, has successfully found and treated 17.14 million people with TB, including an estimated 1.4 million children. However, the COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected TB care and has threatened to reverse the gains made in reducing India's burden. Additionally, the growing problem of drug-resistant TB also threatens the progress we have made in basic disease management.

Child unfriendly

TB is curable but treatment is challenging. For drug-sensitive TB, a patient must take the medication for six months, and this is a long period for most people. The treatment also includes three or four drugs that can have side effects and are difficult to swallow at times.

This is particularly difficult when the patients in question are children, who need to abide by a fixed drug regimen under the NTEP. The size and the taste of the tablet are not child-friendly. The NTEP presently recommends a daily dose of medicines under direct observation for six months, which can be tiring for families as well.

It is not surprising that many paediatric as well as adult TB patients discontinue taking treatment due to its long duration and side effects. Sometimes, they feel better and assume that completing treatment is optional. This puts families and other people who are in close contact with a TB-affected person at risk of infection. Stopping treatment prematurely can also contribute to the TB bacteria becoming drug-resistant.

How can we address this issue? One critical way, especially in countries with a high TB burden like India, is to explore new treatment approaches for TB and to integrate them into national plans.

Shorter regimen

The effort to make TB medicines easier to take is underway worldwide, as well as in India. Recent studies in adults who have TB in their lungs considered using a combination of new drugs and existing ones that are currently used for other diseases. The results of these studies are promising, showing that the length of time patients need to stay on their regimen can be reduced from six months to four months.

The SHINE trial, conducted with 1,200 children from four countries (India, Zambia, Uganda, and South Africa), also found that based on the drugs available with the NTEP, children with non-severe TB can be effectively treated in four months instead of six.

Shortening the duration for TB medication to cure the patient faster is transformational and also makes TB programme implementation more feasible.

Both studies had participants from India and their results have been included by the World Health Organization, in its TB treatment guidelines. However, India itself is yet to adopt the revised four-month treatment guidelines. There is, in fact, another study that reported recently that a two-month treatment course could be effective as well.



With a growing political commitment to India's battle against TB, the Indian government must embrace innovation and new approaches to treating this disease.

As it happens, the identification of safe and effective four-month and two-month regimens is the first significant advance in treating the most common form of TB in almost 40 years, and is a monumental achievement. It is also encouraging that more than 30 new chemical compounds that can fight the TB bacterium are in the pipeline.

At this time, it is up to researchers to identify the best combinations of these new drugs that are highly efficacious, the least toxic, and can be easily implemented in programmatic settings.

For this kind of research, a highly concerted effort needs to take place that involves both global and local researchers, funders, and regulatory authorities, with firm national and international political support.

Costs are a determining factor but they can be mitigated as well. Global experience in costing has shown that the prices of newer drugs come down when there is political will and when community charters, funders, and the leaders of national programmes negotiate prices with drug manufacturers. Lower costs can in turn motivate the global adoption of newer, shorter-duration, and less toxic drug combinations for diseases like TB.

India's aim to eliminate TB by 2025 is ambitious. The theme for World Tuberculosis Day (March 24) in 2023 was "Yes, we can end TB", which reflects the worldwide desire to eliminate the disease by 2030.

To (re)invigorate this fight, and to align with the vision of being 'TB Free' ahead of the global target, India must consider active screening and case detection along with new guidelines for shorter TB treatment. Policymakers must also consider moving to a shorter treatment course for treating TB at the earliest. If we delay, we stand to lose the fight as well as millions of lives to an ultimately curable disease.

WILL NEW WEIGHT LOSS WONDER DRUGS GIVE US A FAT-FREE FUTURE?

When a global voice like Oprah Winfrey, 69, admitted that she took prescription weight loss drugs and felt "like relief, redemption, a gift," for finally getting to be healthier, she summed up our story. Of how weight loss, too, needed a nudge tool than just will power, a diet change or a furious pace at the gym. That brings us to the biggest health story of the year, one that gave hope to those battling obesity and Type 2 diabetes — the arrival of GLP1 receptor drug agonists, what we know as Semaglutide and its more popular brand names like Ozempic and Wegovy. While users lost their stubborn fat, the quick visible results also energised them to sustain their weight loss goals through physical exercise.

What's its biggest takeaway? That body weight is not just about cosmetic acceptance and fobbing off social ridicule, that it is all about minimising the burden of sickness and chronic diseases. This acknowledgment of the need to treat obesity as another lifestyle disease alongside diabetes, heart and liver conditions has converted what was once a private concern into a public health issue.

GLP1 receptor agonist will have more uses

GLP1 receptor agonists are a class of drugs that mimic the action of a hormone called glucagon-like peptide 1. When your blood sugar levels rise, these drugs help produce more insulin to control



them. They also curb hunger by slowing down movement of food from the stomach into the small intestine. So you eat less and control your fatty liver too. Latest clinical trials have shown that these drugs improved blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Now trials are ongoing to see if these can help you give up smoking and drinking after users said their cravings were waning, an indication that the medication could also impact many reward pathways in the brain other than food. Researchers are, therefore, studying the therapy's impact on Alzheimer's and Parkinson's since the drugs also work on brain inflammation.

Will it work for Indians?

Semaglutide, though currently available in oral form here, is holding out some hope for obese Indians. The weekly injectables, which lead to a higher percentage of weight loss, are not available yet but can have a lasting effect.

The GLP1 RA has now become the takeoff point for the double agonist of GLP1, Tirezepatide, which has better weight reduction property and diabetes control compared to Semaglutide. "Now triple agonists like Retatrutide have GLP1, GIP and glucagon (third hormone added on). They have resulted in 15 to 20 per cent weight loss, not shown by any drug in the past, compared to bariatric surgeries," says Dr V Mohan, Chairman, Dr Mohan's Diabetes Specialities Centre, Chennai.

Are these really wonder drugs?

"There are side effects of taking Semaglutide shots like nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, bloating, diarrhoea and stomach paralysis. Many cannot tolerate the dosage and give up midway. Besides, recent research has shown that the weight comes back once discontinued and only a longer term usage can sustain weight loss," says Dr Anoop Misra, Chairman of Fortis-CDOC Centre of Excellence for Diabetes, Metabolic Diseases and Endocrinology, New Delhi.

A clinical breakthrough cannot be a public health measure yet because, as Dr Ambrish Mithal, Chairman of Endocrinology and Diabetes at Max Healthcare, points out, "You can't have injections all your life." There is severe muscle loss too. "This accounts for 20 to 30 per cent of the weight lost. Indians are low on muscle mass anyway, so the new drugs pose a challenge to the elderly in the long run," he adds. Besides, it is not for those with pancreatitis, typical thyroid tumour and those who are on certain medications.

The abuse of the grey market

Such has been the noticeable change in human bodies following the use of injectable Semaglutide that the Danish company, Novo Nordisk, the makers of Ozempic, is always rushing to meet demands. Unscrupulous ways of procurement have meant that the grey market for weight loss injectables is alive and kicking in India. "So long as the regime is medically supervised, the therapy would be safe. Trouble is that while the drug works in controlling both diabetes and weight, people only see the latter. And they think it is just another OTC drug to be had at will," reasons Dr Mithal.

Dr Misra has seen the rampant misuse of compounded Semaglutide, where minor tweaks are done to components of the original that can result in serious drug quality problems, such as contamination or a drug that contains too much active ingredient. The compounded versions of Ozempic and Wegovy may swap pure Semaglutide for salt-based forms, which have not been shown to be safe and effective in clinical trials. "There are reports of 'adverse effects' from people who take compounded forms," says Dr Misra.



Dr Mohan insists on Indian data to assess if the new class of drugs is equally effective among patients here as they are “more prone to accumulating abdominal fat because of our high carbohydrate diets.”

When will injectables be available in India?

It’s not like there are no options. “The molecule may have been developed in the West but once their patent expires, they can be produced here by those very companies. Though drug discovery is limited, we are good at drug manufacturing and can make cheaper drugs for here and the US market too,” says Dr Mithal.

Dr Mohan says an injectable will be available next year, considering the gap between the patent expiry and the rollout of lower-priced generic versions hasn’t been that long. The shots could go up to Rs 40,000 a month, a rather steep proposition. Besides, these drugs work best in getting you off the weight cliff in the beginning but for the rest of the journey, the three experts say, you would still need the three pillars of diet, lifestyle correction and physical exercise. Breakthrough is one thing, building a body is still about human effort.



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