



CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

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INTERNATIONAL

WHAT IS THE GLOBAL FALLOUT OF TWO WARFRONTS?

The story so far:

The world witnessed growing security crises involving great powers in 2023. The Ukraine war, which began on February 24, 2022 with Russia's invasion of its neighbouring country, continued throughout 2023 with little changes on the frontline. Another major war broke out in West Asia after Hamas's October 7 cross-border attack that killed at least 1,200 Israelis. As the year winds down, no end is seen to both wars. While Ukraine's counteroffensive aimed at taking back the territories lost to Russia failed during the year, Israel's attack on Gaza, which has levelled much of the tiny enclave of 2.3 million people, is continuing.

How is the Israel conflict impacting the region?

With Israeli leaders claiming that the fighting would go on for months, risks of a wider regional war are rising. As conflicts persist with large-scale destruction of global security and disruption of supply chains, the Global South, whose focus is on its own developmental challenges, is getting impatient with the current order and is pushing for alternatives. These trends are likely to continue in 2024.

What does the Ukraine war tell about the global order?

What made the Ukraine war, the largest ground war in Europe since the Second World War, one of the most consequential conflicts of the post-war world was its great power involvement. While the actual fighting is between Russian and Ukrainian soldiers within Ukrainian territories, the source of the conflict is the rivalry between NATO, a Cold War-era trans-Atlantic nuclear alliance, and Russia, an ageing great power. After the war broke out, NATO members, under the leadership of the U.S., formed a coalition to financially and militarily support Ukraine. Weakening Russia has been one of the declared objectives of this coalition.

The West's approach was two-fold: it sought to cripple the Russian economy with expansive sanctions and wound Russia on the battlefield by supplying weapons worth billions of dollars to Ukraine. The sanctions have hit the Russian economy (while the reverse impact of the sanctions hit Western economies as well) but did little to stop Vladimir Putin's war machine, which is telling of how the global economic landscape is changing after the rise of China and India. On the battlefield, Ukrainian soldiers, tens of thousands of them trained in Western bases, fought with some of the West's most advanced weapons. Still, after the breakthroughs in Kharkiv and Kherson last year, Ukraine failed to make any substantial territorial gain in 2023. Six months after the Ukrainian counteroffensive, Russian troops are now on the offensive, seizing the Donbas town of Marinka earlier this week. Ukraine and its allies are facing some reality checks as the war is set to enter its third year.

Where does Israel's war on Gaza stand now?

If Russia is fighting a long war of attrition in the NATO-supported Ukraine, Israel is fighting a blitzkrieg in defenceless Gaza. Israel's attacks have practically turned Gaza uninhabitable, but the Jewish state is far from meeting its declared objectives of the war — be it freeing the hostages, dismantling Hamas or taking down the Islamist group's top leadership. As the war is set to enter its third month, Israeli generals and political leaders show no let-up in fighting. While it's too early



to make a clear assessment of how Israel's war on Gaza would affect West Asia, there are some signals on the geopolitical fallout of the war. Israel stands almost isolated on the global stage despite its claim that Hamas brought this war upon Gaza after the October 7 attack. Israel's war also drilled holes into the moral case the West, especially the Biden administration, had built around Russia's Ukraine invasion to drum up global support. The total number of civilians killed on both sides of the Ukraine war in 22 months is roughly 10,000, according to the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU). The total number of Palestinians killed in Gaza in less than three months is 21,000, a vast majority of them women and children, as per the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry. The U.S., which is supplying arms and money to Ukraine to fight the Russian invasion, has not even called for a ceasefire in Gaza. In the UN Security Council, the U.S. vetoed two resolutions that called for a humanitarian ceasefire; and in the UN General Assembly, the U.S., Israel and two other countries voted against a resolution that endorsed the Palestinians' right to self-determination. There is a groundswell of anger towards the U.S.'s support for Israel in the Arab world. Russia, which the U.S. seeks to isolate and weaken, and China, the U.S.'s primary competitor, on the other side, are trying to channel this anger by offering support for the Palestinian cause.

What's the Global South's response?

In the case of Ukraine, most countries in the Global South refused to buy the western narrative that the war was caused by an "unprovoked Russian aggression", and stayed away from the sanctions regime. They condemned the war and called for upholding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, in this case, Ukraine, but called for talks and a ceasefire instead of prolonging the fighting. In the case of the Gaza war, they support an immediate ceasefire. While they condemned the Hamas attack, they also strongly backed the Palestinians' right to self-determination (meaning, an end to Israel's continuing occupation of the Palestinian territories). They also see the different positions taken by the West, particularly the U.S..

How does India look at the conflicts?

India's positions, which are largely aligned with those of the Global South, are driven by both its specific interests and the larger trends it sees in the global dynamics. In the case of Ukraine, it condemned the war and called for talks and a ceasefire without naming any party. Even under heavy pressure, it was careful not to let the crisis affect its multifaceted strategic partnership with Russia. In the case of Gaza, it repeatedly condemned the Hamas attack on Israel, an important bilateral partner, while also reiterating its traditional position in support of the two-state solution. When civilian casualties mounted in Gaza under Israel's indiscriminate attacks, India joined the global chorus calling for a ceasefire.

The U.S. seems less in control of the geopolitical developments unfolding in its spheres of interests — Europe and West Asia. Its efforts to weaken Russia are not rewarding and it is unable to control a vengeful Israel, which is affecting its reputation in the Arab World, and the Global South in general. China is focused on its immediate periphery and is wary of risks. Russia is the weakest among the three great powers. So India, itself a strong proponent of a multipolar world, sees the global order in flux. It appears to be careful not to align with any great power, while maximising its interest through multi-engagement and trying to be a voice of the Global South.



RED SEA ATTACKS: WHY MANY US ALLIES HAVE NOT JOINED ITS OP PROSPERITY GUARDIAN

As part of a maritime security initiative in the Red Sea named Operation Prosperity Guardian, the United States military said Sunday (December 31) that its forces opened fire on Yemen's Houthi rebels.

The USS Gravelly destroyer first shot down two anti-ship ballistic missiles fired at a Maersk ship passing through the southern Red Sea on Saturday, after the vessel reported getting hit by a missile earlier that evening, AP reported. The Houthis confirmed 10 casualties.

The recent attacks on ships passing via the Red Sea, a crucial trade route that connects the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, have prompted many businesses to pause the movement of cargo.

Yemen-based Houthis, a clan belonging to an Islamic sect, have claimed responsibility for the attacks – launched to protest Israel's ongoing military strikes on the Gaza Strip. A ship passing by near the coast of Gujarat was also targeted via a drone last week.

The US Secretary of State Lloyd Austin had announced the joint security initiative to aid the safe movement of ships in December 2023. However, a few days on, many US allies have yet to commit to the operation.

Initially, it was reported that 9 countries were joining the operation – the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles and Spain. But missing from the list are other major US partners, such as Australia, Japan, and most Arab nations, including Saudi Arabia. But why? There are multiple factors at play here.

Bahrain is the only Middle Eastern nation to have joined the operations. "But this is no surprise: the small nation is home to the US Navy's 5th Fleet," states a DW report.

It adds that while other countries are losing money with the re-routing of ships away from the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, there is an apprehension towards taking a firm stance against the Houthis.

For decades, ever since the creation of Israel in 1948, Arab countries have claimed a principled opposition to it and supported the cause of Palestine. Even as several countries have sought to normalise relations with Israel in recent years, its continuous military action against Gazans – mostly civilians, women and children – has now drawn condemnation globally from a human rights perspective.

In this regard, the cause of Palestine has again gained centre stage. In October, various Arab countries – United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Egypt and Morocco – condemned what they called Israel's "flagrant violations of international law" in response to the October 7 attacks from Hamas.

Joining a grouping that is decidedly against the Houthis's purported protest action would potentially open these countries to criticism over their prior stand.

Saudi Arabia, in particular, has played a role in supporting the anti-Houthi forces in the Yemen civil war. In around a decade since the war began, the Houthis seem to have seized and held onto power and Saudi Arabia now seems unwilling to invest further in the conflict. It is now

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



participating in peace talks. Simultaneously, it is pursuing closer ties with Iran, which is believed to be backing the Houthis. Thus, an explicit call against the Houthis would harm these efforts.

Some of these concerns might be common to other countries, too. US officials have said that more than 20 countries have already joined the Operation, but it has been reported that they are not willing to publicly declare themselves as partners.

Why other partners are reluctant

Among other countries too, there is some reluctance to fully commit to joining the mission. Spain's defence ministry has said, "We will not participate unilaterally in the Red Sea operation."

Italy is sending Virginio Fasan, a naval frigate, to the Red Sea "to protect its national interests in response to specific requests made by Italian shipowners," Reuters reported. It is not being done as part of the operation. Further, The Netherlands said it would send two staff officers and Norway said it would send 10 naval officers to Bahrain. Denmark said its participation would be in the form of sending one officer.

This general lack of enthusiasm perhaps also points to countries wanting to stay away from getting deeply embroiled in a global flashpoint, even as Israel continues its offensive. Just on December 30, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that "the war is at its height" and can last "for many more months."

Australia has said it will not be sending a ship or a plane, but tripling its contribution to the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). It is a multi-naval taskforce that has 39 members – including India, Australia, Bahrain, Brazil, Canada, Egypt, France, Germany, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom, the United States and Yemen. Operation Prosperity Guardian will be coordinated by the Combined Task Force 153, which was set up in April 2022 to improve maritime security in the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden.

Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles told Sky News of the choice to focus more on its own strategic concerns, saying, "We need to be really clear around our strategic focus, and our strategic focus is our region — the north-east Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Pacific."

BLOW TO NETANYAHU

The Israeli Supreme Court's decision to strike down a law passed by the Knesset last year that sought to limit the judiciary's powers is a clear setback to the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which is fighting a brutal war in Gaza. The law, passed with 64-0 votes in the 120-member Parliament after an opposition boycott in July 2023, had scrapped the reasonability doctrine, a legal standard used by the country's judges to assess government decisions and ministerial appointments. The legislation, which amended Israel's Basic Laws, was part of a reform package by the right-religious government to strengthen the hands of the government over the judiciary. Despite street protests, the coalition government passed its first part in the Knesset. Government supporters claimed that the court had no powers to rule on a Basic Law, which it had not done in the past. But on Monday, the court, sitting with a full panel of 15 judges for the first time in its history, stated, 12 to 3, that it had the powers to rule over the Basic Laws; eight judges, against seven dissenters, ruled in favour of striking down the law that scrapped the reasonability standard.



The reasonability doctrine is not a unique standard employed by Israel's courts. Judges in other liberal democracies such as Australia, Canada and the U.K. assess the reasonableness of government decisions. In Israel, a country with a single House of Parliament, a ceremonial President and with no written Constitution, the independence of the judiciary is critical to ensure that there are checks and balances in the system. Israel's far-right government was trying to tip this balance in favour of the Knesset, which is dominated by right-wing, pro-settler and ultra-Orthodox parties. The Supreme Court has put the brakes on this overhaul plan, for now. Its decision comes at a precarious time for Mr. Netanyahu, who has seen his popularity plummeting after his government failed to detect and stop the October 7 Hamas attack that killed 1,200 Israelis. The war of almost three months in Gaza, claiming at least 22,000 lives, has triggered a humanitarian tragedy, but Israel is far from meeting its declared objectives. On the day of the court ruling, the Israeli military announced the drawing down of thousands of reservists from Gaza and sending them back to work to strengthen a shrinking economy. In a recent poll, 69% of Israelis want elections immediately after the war is over. Mr. Netanyahu had claimed unity when he declared war on Hamas, but as the war drags on, divisions have started resurfacing. Any attempt to press ahead with the judicial overhaul plan would only weaken his government further. Instead, the Prime Minister should focus on bringing the war to an end.

WHO WAS HAMAS LEADER SALEH AL-AROURI, KILLED IN A DRONE STRIKE IN BEIRUT?

Saleh al-Arouri, a senior Hamas official, was killed in an Israeli drone strike in Beirut. Al-Arouri, 57, played a key role in founding Hamas's military wing and was deeply involved in its operations. He resided in Beirut, acting as a Hamas ambassador to Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed militant organization. Accused by Israel of planning kidnappings and plotting against the Palestinian Authority, he was designated a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" by the US in 2015. His death is a significant blow to Hamas, but the organization claims it won't impact its operations. Analysts anticipate increased tensions between Israel and Hezbollah, with potential repercussions for the wider region.

TERROR IN IRAN

The twin blasts in the south-eastern Iranian city of Kerman at a memorial for Qassem Soleimani, the Quds Force commander whom the U.S. assassinated in Baghdad in January 2020, expose the security vulnerabilities of the Iranian regime at a time when conflicts are spreading in West Asia. At least 84 were killed in the worst terror attack in the Islamic Republic's history. Soleimani, the brain behind the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC) overseas operations, had enjoyed cult status when alive, and became a symbol of an embattled regime's resilience over the past four years. While Iran's leaders called it a terrorist attack but stopped short of blaming anyone, mid-rung officials said the responsibility for the attack "lies with the U.S. and the Zionist entity". However, on Thursday, the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility. For the IS, Soleimani was a sworn enemy as he had mobilised Shia militias to fight the IS in Syria and Iraq. These groups played a role in the urban battles in Iraq during 2018-19 that saw the destruction of the physical structures of the IS Caliphate. The group lost its proto state but survived as a terrorist entity in parts of Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

For Iran, the attack has come at a precarious moment when tensions are rising in West Asia. The Kerman memorial event was bombed a day after a senior Hamas leader was killed in Beirut in a drone strike, for which Lebanese officials have blamed Israel. Hezbollah, which has been engaging Israeli troops in a limited way since October 7, has vowed retaliation. On December 25, an Israeli



strike in Syria killed Seyyed Razi Mousavi, a senior IRGC adviser. Israel, whose ongoing attack on Gaza has already killed at least 22,000 people, seems ready to take more risks even at the cost of regional escalation, while in the Red Sea, Iran-backed Houthi rebels of Yemen have been repeatedly attacking commercial vessels since late November. Pro-Iran Shia militias have targeted U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria since October 7, and on Thursday, a U.S. strike in Iraq killed a Shia militia commander. The Israel-Hamas war is no longer about just Israel and Hamas. It has put the whole region in a ring of fire. As chaos spreads the IS seems to have found an opportunity to strike its old enemy which is under pressure. The attack should serve as a warning to Iran and its rivals. If chaos and instability spread it would be a boon for jihadists. This calls for a de-escalation of the current regional crisis. Iran, on the other side, should not walk into the web of provocations set by its rivals. It should show restraint and focus on strengthening internal security.

BALUCH MARCH: FROM TURBAT TO ISLAMABAD

The story so far:

In December 2023, hundreds of Baluch people marched to Islamabad protesting enforced disappearances and killings in Baluchistan. Despite the Islamabad High Court's permission to stay and protest, the state used force, arresting and forcefully sending them back. This led to more protests in Baluchistan, with complaints about unreleased detainees. Enforced disappearances, killings, and protests reveal a deep-seated conflict between Pakistan's federal government and Baluchistan. The government views Baluchistan strategically but disregards it as an equal partner, using tactics like manipulation and repression to control the province, even resorting to using religion to undermine Baluch identity.

What was the Baluch long march to Islamabad all about?

The "long march" started with the killing of Balaach Mola Baksh in November 2023. He was picked up from his home in October in Turbat, by the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD), and was produced at the court in November. However, in early December, he ended up dead along with three others; according to the initial CTD statement, they were militants who got killed in an encounter. According to his family, Balaach was killed in custody by the CTD, which threw his body along with other unidentified men.

Following the death, the family members of Balaach protested with his corpse against the extra-judicial killing and asked for filing an FIR against the CTD personnel.

After initial reluctance, on December 9, the police filed an FIR against four CTD personnel. However, by then, the protestors had decided to march to Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan, and subsequently, to travel to Islamabad. What started as a protest in a town in Baluchistan in late November reached the provincial capital during the second week of December and then to the national capital during the third week.

While the initial protest demanded an FIR and an impartial inquiry into the killing of Balaach, it expanded later to bring an end to the enforced disappearances, return of the disappeared and justice for those who got killed so far. Balaach's death has become a symbol of a larger issue – of enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings in Baluchistan.

According to these sources, individuals, including political activists and students, are forcibly taken into custody by state agencies in violation of the law. The COIOED received 2192 cases in Baluchistan until January 2023, with 445 reported disappearances. Discrepancies exist between



state and civil society figures, with independent organizations claiming thousands have disappeared over the past three decades.

Protestors from Balochistan often march to Islamabad to raise awareness and demand justice for the disappeared. Reasons for choosing Islamabad include the perceived failure of the provincial government to address the issue, security agencies' influence, and the symbolic importance of addressing grievances at the national level. The weak provincial political landscape, divided political parties, and lack of strong national representation exacerbate the challenges faced by the Baloch community.

The protestors strategically choose venues like press clubs in Karachi and Islamabad for their protests, aiming to attract media attention, as the provincial media is considered weak. The text highlights the Baloch community's sense of marginalization and lack of a national news agency representing their concerns.

The political parties in Balochistan are described as weak and divided along tribal lines, while national parties have a limited presence. The intra-Baloch and intra-Baloch-Pashtun divide has allowed the deep state to manipulate provincial parties for its interests. The absence of a unifying political leader further contributes to the challenges faced by the Baloch community in seeking justice and representation.

How to contextualise the Baloch problem?

Enforced disappearances, extra-judicial killings, protests and insurgencies are an expression of a larger problem between the federation and the province, between the Establishment (Pakistan's military based security state) and the Baloch people. Since independence, at the federal level, Pakistan's political elite looked at Balochistan as its biggest province, strategically located (sharing borders with Iran and Afghanistan and a long coast with Gwadar port) that needs to be controlled. Balochistan considers itself an equal partner of the federation and complains of being treated as a client state whose resources are being plundered. The Establishment, since the beginning, had assumed a larger role in dealing with Balochistan and had kept the Parliament away from pursuing any political approach. The Establishment's strategy has been to manipulate the Baloch political leadership that was already divided, militarise the civil society through repression and crush the insurgency. The latest to the list is to use religion to undermine the Baloch identity.

Will the enforced disappearances and the Baloch protests continue?

In the short term – yes. The state aims to silence the society, manipulate the political leadership and neutralise the militants in Balochistan. It has managed to dodge occasional judicial activism led by select judges using suo moto provisions. While its strategies have been consistent with the above, the results are not.

The continuation of civil society activism and initiatives led by the Voice of Baloch missing person, the Baloch Yakjehti Council, and larger women's participation underlines the societal resistance to the state's silencing strategy. In terms of political manipulation, the state may have succeeded so far with a divided tribal leadership with a Sardar culture. A growing middle class in the province (cutting across tribal affiliation), youth engagement, and surprisingly strong women participation in the protests and civil society activism should underline the new winds of change in Balochistan.



WHY A BANGLADESH COURT HAS SENTENCED NOBEL PRIZE WINNER MUHAMMAD YUNUS TO JAIL

Nobel prize winner Muhammad Yunus on Monday (January 1) was sentenced to six months in jail by a court in Bangladesh for violating the country's labour laws. The 83-year-old, credited with pioneering the system of micro-finance loans to help impoverished people, was granted bail pending appeal.

While Yunus called the judgement "contrary to all legal precedent and logic", his supporters said the case was politically motivated. The professor shares a frosty relationship with Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who once accused him of "sucking blood" from the poor.

Currently, Yunus is facing a wide array of other charges involving alleged corruption and fund embezzlement.

Who is Muhammad Yunus?

Born in 1940 in Chittagong, Yunus received his PhD in economics from Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, USA, in 1969 and subsequently, became an assistant professor at Middle Tennessee State University. After Bangladesh was formed in 1972, he returned to his homeland and was appointed head of the economics department at Chittagong University.

As Bangladesh struggled to stabilise its economy and tackle poverty in the post-independence years, Yunus came up with a unique idea to help the impoverished. He decided to provide small loans to entrepreneurs who wouldn't normally qualify for bank loans, on terms suitable to them.

"Following the success of an initial local experiment, Professor Yunus became confident that the model could work on a broader scale and went to set up microcredit projects in other parts of the country. Within seven years, the initiative took formal shape as the Grameen Bank in 1983," says an African Development Bank Group profile of him.

Grameen Bank is credited with lifting millions from poverty — it has disbursed collateral-free loans of \$34.01 billion among 9.55 million people since its inception, Daily Sun, a Bangladesh-based national daily, reported last year. The recovery rate is 97.22%, the report added.

Owing to the grand success of Grameen Bank, banks based on this model operate in more than 100 countries today.

In 2006, Yunus and Grameen Bank jointly received the Nobel Prize in Peace "for their efforts to create economic and social development from below." The professor came to be known as the "Banker to the Poor".

Why does Yunus share a tumultuous relationship with Sheikh Hasina?

Soon after winning the Nobel Prize, Yunus began to flirt with the idea of forming his own political party. This didn't sit well with Hasina, who was in jail at the time under the charges of extortion.

In the following months, Yunus abandoned his plans, saying there wasn't enough support for his new political movement. Nonetheless, once Hasina returned to power in 2009, her government opened a host of investigations into Yunus' activities. The prime minister accused him of using force and other means to recover loans from poor rural women as the head of Grameen Bank.



Why has Yunus been sentenced to jail?

The Third Court of Dhaka on Monday found Yunus' company, Grameen Telecom, which he founded as a non-profit, guilty of violating labour laws. According to the judgement, 67 of the company employees were supposed to be made permanent, which they were not, and the employees' participation and welfare funds were not created. Moreover, as per company policy, 5% of the company's dividends were supposed to be distributed to staff, which was not done.

The court convicted Yunus, as chairman of Grameen Telecom, and three other company directors, sentencing each to six months in jail. Grameen Telecom owns 34% of Bangladesh's largest mobile phone company, Grameenphone, a subsidiary of Norway's telecom giant Telenor, according to a report by Associated Press.

What are the other cases against Yunus?

Yunus is said to be facing more than 150 cases. In 2015, he was summoned by Bangladesh's revenue authorities over non-payment of taxes amounting to \$1.51 million. Two years before that, he was put on trial for allegedly receiving money without government permission, including his Nobel Prize award and royalties from a book.

In 2011, Yunus was removed as managing director of Grameen Bank for allegedly violating government retirement regulations.

The mounting litany of cases against Yunus has garnered concern globally. In August last year, 160 international figures, including former US President Barack Obama and ex-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, signed a joint letter denouncing the "continuous judicial harassment" of Yunus.

The signatories, including more than 100 of his fellow Nobel laureates, said they feared for "his safety and freedom".

In response, Hasina said she welcomed international experts to assess the ongoing legal proceedings against Yunus.

DreamIAS



NATION

INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY WILL HAVE TO FACTOR IN A SERIES OF ELECTIONS GLOBALLY

Domestic policy, rather than geopolitical events, could be a major factor in foreign policy in 2024, given that more than a fourth of the world, in terms of population and number of countries, will go to vote during the year. For India, which will hold the world's largest election, the diplomatic calendar and focus will be decided by countries in the neighbourhood, global powers and major countries in the Global South, all of which will hold parliamentary or presidential elections next year.

According to the U.S.-based International Foundation for Electoral Systems' Election Guide, at least 60 countries around the world will see parliamentary, presidential or major Assembly elections over the next 12 months, with a likely population of more than two billion people casting votes. International commentators have called 2024 the "biggest election year" ever.

To begin with, India's neighbourhood will see the impact of elections in the first few weeks of 2024 itself, with polls in Bangladesh scheduled for January 7, the second round of general election in Bhutan on January 9 and an election in Pakistan scheduled for February 8. The election in Bangladesh appears to be a "foregone conclusion" in favour of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League (AL), with the largest Opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, deciding to boycott the polls.

In Bhutan, outgoing Prime Minister Lotay Tshering has already been ousted in the first round of election, and the contest is now between former Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay's People's Democratic Party (PDP) and former top-bureaucrat Pema Chewang's new Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP).

Pakistan's election, like Bangladesh's, appears one-sided at present, with former PM Imran Khan and most of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party's top leadership in prison. The likely winner, three-time PM Nawaz Sharif, has already made it clear that he intends to improve ties with India. Sri Lanka, on a more stable wicket due to support from India, is due to hold parliamentary and presidential elections in 2024, which could change Colombo's course with Delhi too.

India has already felt the impact of elections on ties with global powers, especially the five permanent members or P-5 countries of the UN Security Council (UNSC). U.S. President Joseph Biden declined this month to attend the Republic Day parade as its chief guest. U.S. officials have indicated Mr. Biden's own party primaries, as well as the U.S. Congress's crucial session at the time, mean he will be unable to visit in January.

India's election season will kick in by March, and subsequently, the U.S. campaign season will be in full swing. Furthermore, if the U.S. race is won by Mr. Biden's likely rival former President Donald Trump, India and the world will prepare for a return to very choppy waters in ties. China doesn't hold general election, but its next geopolitical move could be decided by Taiwan's general election on January 13, amidst a threat from Beijing that it seeks to "reunify" Taiwan with the mainland.

Russian presidential election, expected to hand President Vladimir Putin a fifth term, is due from March 15-17. With the U.K., where the Parliament is set to be dissolved on or before December 19



next year, New Delhi will be watching closely for an opportunity to seal the Free Trade Agreement with the Conservative Party government.

France, another member of the UNSC, is not due for election, but the 700-plus seat European Parliament will head for elections in June 2024, and the result will be closely watched as 400 million from 27 European countries go to vote — with worries of a right-wing resurgence pushing tougher immigration policies as well as a less flexible position on the India-EU Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA).

Finally, New Delhi will be watching developments in the Global South's biggest powers, including Indonesia, where President Jokowi is stepping down after completing two terms, as well as parliamentary elections in Mexico, South Africa and Iran.

DONKEY ROUTES: EN ROUTE EUROPE, HOW INDIANS VISIT SEVERAL COUNTRIES TO CREATE 'TRAVEL HISTORY'

Last year, Serbia had to change its visa rules under pressure from the European Union. This was because the Balkan nation was being used by many, including Indians, as an illegal transit route to Europe.

Belgrade's visa-free regime for Indians — along with nationals from Turkey, Tunisia, Cuba and Burundi — was being exploited to get into the bordering Austria, Hungary and Romania, and ultimately to Italy and France. Reason: those travelling to EU countries from Serbia don't require a visa.

In October 2022, Serbia withdrew visa-free arrivals from the above-mentioned countries.

Creating a 'travel history'

The transit phenomenon came to light after European authorities recorded more than 1.3 lakh illegal immigrants in the first 10 months of 2022, many of whom were nationals of the countries allowed visa-free arrivals by Serbia.

In the case of Indians, to show a "considerable travel history" on their passports, the migrants (mostly men of 25-40 years of age, with a major chunk from Punjab) were asked by their agents to enter Serbia after visiting destinations such as Nepal, Dubai and Armenia, so that they came across as genuine travellers to the immigration authorities, people in the know of the matter said.

The recent case of a flight carrying 303 Indian nationals being grounded in France, ahead of its departure for Nicaragua, seems to bring to light a similar pattern — of creating a travel history to come across as tourists to immigration authorities of the receiving country, Nicaragua in this case, even as visa mandate for Indians in the central American country isn't very clear.

Harsh journey, many tragedies

In most such cases, on arrival in the transit country, agents connect the migrants with the so-called 'donkers', or people smugglers, who help them enter their final destination illegally. The donkers charge exorbitant payment for such services. Incidentally, to evade border authorities, many of these migrants are transported in the harshest and most inhuman conditions, not just without food and water, but even gasping for breath, after being asked to hide in cramped containers and delivery vehicles.



One such case had come to light in 2021 — of a young man from Punjab who wanted to go to Italy, and was suggested the transit route of Dubai-Serbia-Romania-Hungary, through which he would have entered Italy in about six months. He was transported to the Hungarian border from Romania in a delivery truck, tucked in a small box. However, he returned to India ultimately, as he could never reach Italy and was forced to continue working on a farm in Hungary.

A 2009 report by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) on Smuggling of Migrants from India to Europe highlights several cases of such migrants drowning in unsafe vessels, suffocating to death in overcrowded truck compartments and ships, or being victimised by smuggling gangs.

One of the biggest such tragedies was reported in 1996, when 283 migrants, most from Punjab, died when the overcrowded boat they were travelling on capsized in the Mediterranean, near Malta, on their way to Italy. Those who reach their destination, too, find themselves locked in cycles of exploitation and abuse, which tend to go unreported because of the person's fear of arrest and deportation.

Destination Europe

Out of the records of immigration-related offences examined at the Delhi airport in 2005, 2006 and 2007, almost 47 per cent of them were related to destination countries in Europe. Of this, about 27 per cent were related to the UK. Most cases of irregular migration to the UK were via France, after landing there with a direct visa, or reaching France through an irregular donkey route.

Other preferred destinations in Europe include Germany, Austria, Spain, Belgium, Italy, Greece, Norway, Switzerland, Sweden, Netherlands, Portugal, Finland, Poland, and Czech Republic. Bosnia, Portugal, Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary are likely to be transit countries for onward travel, chosen on the basis of easier visa processes. Lately, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have also emerged as transit countries.

When going to the US

For those headed to the US, the first step in the most popular donkey route from India is to reach a Latin American country. Countries like Ecuador, Bolivia, and Guyana have visas on arrival for Indian citizens. Some other countries, including Brazil and Venezuela, give tourist visas to Indians easily. Nowadays, many first go to Europe, and from there, directly to Mexico.

Definite numbers not available

A sizable number of Indians are believed to be stranded in Spain, where they entered illegally, and are now seeking general amnesty. Indian detainees have also been reported in Ukraine, Turkey, Slovakia, Malaysia, Romania and Poland, presumably headed to Western European countries. Many of these countries have approached the Indian government from time to time, to confirm their antecedents for the completion of the deportation process.

During the recent Winter Session, MoS External Affairs, V Muraleedharan, had stated in Parliament that many foreign countries do not provide information on illegal migrants in their countries, except when they have to be deported and travel documents/nationality verification are required. As such, Indian Missions and Posts do not have reliable data on the number of Indians staying or working illegally in foreign countries. Apart from Punjab, irregular migration is also being reported in high numbers from Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir.



WEST ASIAN NATIONS HOLD THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF INDIANS IN JAILS ABROAD

About a week ago, a Qatar court commuted the death sentences of eight former Indian Navy personnel. The former Navy officers, employed by a Doha-based company, were arrested in August 2022 allegedly for espionage. This has brought to attention the issue of Indians incarcerated in jails abroad and the steps taken by the government to assist them in their legal battle.

Cases involving Indian prisoners in jails abroad, such as the one in Qatar, in which information about the charges has not been disclosed to the public so far, are rare. In countries such as Canada and the U.K., details about arrests are not made public due to strong privacy laws. However, details of most of the arrests of Indians abroad are in the public domain. Many involve fishermen who inadvertently crossed the international maritime boundary. In December last year, over 50 fishermen from Tamil Nadu and Puducherry were arrested by the Sri Lankan Navy. As per the latest data, 2,612 Indian fishermen were lodged in prisons across 10 countries — Iran (27), Sri Lanka (501), the UAE (5), Bangladesh (309), Bahrain (12), Myanmar (19), Pakistan (1060), Qatar (54), Saudi Arabia (564) and Seychelles (61) — between 2020 and 2022, for crossing the maritime border. Many were later repatriated.

As per the latest data, about 9,500 Indians are lodged in prisons across 89 nations. Notably, most Indian prisoners are in West Asian jails. Saudi Arabia (2,200 prisoners), the UAE (2,143), Qatar (752), Kuwait (410) and Bahrain (310) hold most of these prisoners. Nepal is the only other country in the list of the top six countries with over 1,200 Indian prisoners. Malaysia, Pakistan, the U.K., China, and the U.S. also hold a significant number of Indian prisoners.

While crossing international maritime boundaries was the primary reason. Many Indians were also apprehended for murders, and drug-related and sexual offences. Human trafficking, smuggling, forgery, and fraud were other reasons. Punjab, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Manipur are the States from where most of these prisoners hail.

Most of the Indian prisoners in the U.S. were from Punjab and Gujarat. Many of the prisoners in the Philippines were from Punjab. A majority of the prisoners in Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Maldives were from Tamil Nadu. In Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China, most were from West Bengal. A majority of Indian prisoners in Myanmar were from Manipur.

India has signed an Agreement on Transfer of Sentenced Persons with 31 countries, including Qatar, under which Indians lodged in jails abroad can be transferred to India to serve the remainder of their sentences and vice-versa. From 2006 to January 2022, 86 prisoners were transferred under this agreement to and from India. Where Indians are in sizeable numbers, Indian Missions maintain a panel of lawyers and usually offer the services free of cost. Also, an Indian Community Welfare Fund is set up in Missions abroad to assist Indian nationals in prisons and other crisis situations.

DECODE POLITICS: AS PM MODI VISITS, WHY LAKSHADWEEP IS MORE THAN 32 SQ KM FOR BJP

ONE OF THE halts in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's event-packed itinerary across southern states on Tuesday and Wednesday was the Union Territory of Lakshadweep.



Modi reached Lakshadweep on Tuesday, chaired a review meeting on various aspects relating to the islands, and on Wednesday, laid the foundation stone for projects worth Rs 1,150 crore.

An archipelago of 36 islands with an area of 32 sq km, making it the country's smallest UT, Lakshadweep may seem a speck in the BJP's grand India project. However, from the perspective of the projection of Modi as a national leader cutting across the North-South discourse, to reinforcing his government's message of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' in a territory that is almost entirely Muslim, Lakshadweep is a crucial speck.

The 'strong borders' focus

BJP leaders say the PM's visit, his announcement of development projects and the party's growing activities in Lakshadweep are all part of the importance the Modi government places on territories that are strategically significant. Lakshadweep is considered particularly vital due to the increased Chinese engagement in its neighbours Sri Lanka and Maldives.

In his speech at Kavaratti announcing the projects for Lakshadweep, Modi did not mince his words contrasting his government's initiatives with that of his predecessors. "After Independence, the only priority of governments that remained at the Centre for decades was the development of their own political parties. Far-off states, border areas or those in the middle of the ocean were not given any attention... In the last 10 years, our government has made border areas and areas at the edge of the sea its priority... In 2020, I guaranteed you that you will get a fast Internet facility within the next 1,000 days. Today, the Kochi-Lakshadweep Submarine Optical Fibre Project has been inaugurated. Now, Internet in Lakshadweep will be available at 100 times higher speed."

The Kerala link

Despite failing to make a mark electorally in Kerala, the BJP remains determined to win over one of the country's last holdouts when it comes to the party. And Lakshadweep could be a crucial gateway to the state.

The Kerala mainland is the closest territory to Lakshadweep, and the UT is dependent on it for most of its needs. The people of the two territories have close social and cultural links, and Malayalam is the most common language spoken on the islands.

The projects announced on Wednesday

A member of the NCP, Lakshadweep MP Mohammad Faizal acknowledged the Modi government's "concerted efforts" behind several projects the PM inaugurated or launched today, including the optical fibre project, the Jal Jeevan Mission to reach drinking water to the people, and the distribution of cooking gas cylinders. Almost 80% of the households on the islands now get tap water while gas cylinders reach every island, Faizal said.

The other project announced by Modi Wednesday was the Low Temperature Thermal Desalination plant at Kadmat, which will produce 1.5 lakh litres of clean drinking water every day. Additionally, he announced Functional Household Tap Connections for all households on the Agatti and Minicoy islands.

Given the strategic importance of Lakshadweep, the government is also considering an Air Force station in the UT, a source said. "With the affiliation of Maldives towards China getting deeper, an airport for defence purposes on the Minicoy Island (which is closest to Maldives) is also on the cards... It can be used by civilians as well," the source said.



Modi's second visit

It was the second time the PM was visiting Lakshadweep. The first time was in December 2017, when Modi chaired a high-level meeting at Kavaratti to review the situation after Cyclone Ockhi hit the area.

But it has been in the Modi government's second term that the BJP has really turned its focus to the islands. In December 2020, overruling reservations of local political leaders, the Centre chose a former Gujarat minister seen as close to Modi, Praful Khoda Patel, as the Administrator of the UT.

A number of initiatives taken by Patel since, including a ban on beef; the draft Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation, 2021, which gives the Administrator the power to remove or relocate islanders from their property for any developmental activity; the Prevention of Anti-Social Activities Act, under which a person can be detained without any public disclosure for a period of up to one year; and the draft panchayat notification, disqualifying a member with more than two children from becoming a member, have run into problems with locals.

Several steps taken by Patel also ran foul of the local BJP unit. The former BJP general secretary of Lakshadweep, Mohammad Kasim, had called him "authoritarian" and said his proposals were not in the interests of people on the islands.

The party, however, has remained largely unruffled in its efforts to expand its base in the UT. BJP Rajya Sabha MP Radha Mohan Agarwal, who is in-charge of Lakshadweep, has been focusing, for example, on getting the islands air connectivity – an issue with huge appeal for a population dependent on the mainland for almost everything, including medical assistance and education.

Agarwal has always said he is only interested in making "genuine efforts" for the islands, and that the people there are "nationalists".

The Opposition's view

Faizal asks why the PM was silent on Wednesday on "the biggest concern of the residents – the current administration's attempts to take back the occupancy rights of residents". "The people here expected the PM to say something... Also, this administration has not yet done anything to develop the transportation sector, which is the most important issue for the residents. There was a 15-year perspective plan, but it is almost scrapped. As a result, old ships are out and there are no new ones to replace them," the MP said.

According to him, the BJP is a long way still from making any electoral impact in Lakshadweep. "The NCP and Congress dominate the scene," he said. However, as the BJP learns from its missteps, quite like how it did in the Northeast with its varied minorities, "changing the game in an area with just over 55,000 eligible voters would not be tough", a source said.

A Union minister added that Modi's visit should not be seen through the lens of politics alone. The government had the option of inaugurating the projects for Lakshadweep announced on Wednesday from Kochi, or virtually, he said. "But the Prime Minister decided to go to Kavaratti because he has the conviction that it is important to get the people there included in India's development process. The BJP knows it may not get the party any votes or win it an election in Lakshadweep."



SC'S TRANSLATION PROJECTS PICKED UP GOOD SPEED IN 2023

The Supreme Court's monumental project of translating all of its 36,000 judgments into Scheduled Languages achieved unprecedented speed in 2023, with the E-SCR portal starting with just 2,238 translated judgments in January and ending the year with over 31,000.

Currently, the highest number of translated judgments are in Hindi at 22,396, followed by Punjabi (3,572), Kannada (1,899), Tamil (1,172), and Gujarati (1,112).

Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, in his Republic Day speech, said that the Supreme Court was on a mission to provide judgments in all Scheduled Languages — a project that started under the tenure of Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi in mid-2019 and taken forward by his successors.

Justice Gogoi had at the time given credit to his successor and then number two judge, Justice S.A. Bobde, for first mooted the idea of translating the court's judgments into regional languages. Justice Bobde continued the efforts during his tenure as top judge, introducing AI tools and also inaugurating the Supreme Court Vidhik Anuvaad Software (SUVAS).

However, the speed of translations increased under the tenure of Chief Justice Chandrachud, largely due to the court's decision to put into service an group of retired High Court judges and their law clerks, who were able to correct erroneous interpretations or translations of the AI-based software. This coupled with the system set in place for the translations by the Editorial Section of the Supreme Court has resulted in the jump in pace, say officials.

But despite the speed of translations picking up, questions have been raised by lawyers and legal experts on how these translated judgments will be useful when High Courts are not yet permitted to conduct proceedings in regional languages except in Hindi-speaking States. Further, the translated rulings come with a disclaimer that absolves the Supreme Court Registry of any responsibility for incorrect or inaccurate translations.

And apart from Hindi, there is no standardised glossary of legal terminology in many other regional languages to facilitate uniform translations from English, which has already led to incoherent translations in some languages such as Tamil, said Justice K. Chandru (retd), former judge of the Madras High Court. The Bar Council of India's Bharatiya Bhasha Samiti, chaired by Justice Bobde, is currently working on creating this "common core vocabulary" for all Indian regional languages, the government said earlier this year.

A Supreme Court source said that they started with breaking down the judgments year-wise and page-count-wise.

The team also started picking out common orders for petitions that would help train the software for translations.

As per the system set in place, once the translations are done through the software and by retired judges and law clerks (who are paid a stipend), they come back to the Editorial Section, where they are examined thoroughly. The whole process is being overseen by a committee headed by Justice S.A. Oka, who liaises with the Chief Justice.

But for common orders such as "SLP leave granted", the machine translations in Hindi were throwing up an issue, the source said. "The software was translating 'leave' to avkaash, which actually meant 'holiday'. We needed the human eye to fix these things," the source said.



As for Tamil translations, Justice Chandru told The Hindu, “I have seen some of the translations made so far. No one can read them. For each word in law in English, we have different usages in Tamil Nadu and there is no standardised version created so far.”

He added that while the AI system for translations had its own problems, and there was a lack of expert translators who could get the job done accurately.

Even for the Hindi translations that are most common on the E-SCR portal, lawyers practising in States such as Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have told The Hindu that the absence of headnotes in the translated judgments is another barrier in them being used.

Project disclaimer

But even as the project continues, the court has ensured that each translated judgment comes with a disclaimer: “Supreme Court Registry will not be responsible for incorrect or inaccurate translation and for any error, omission or discrepancy in the content of translated text. The translation of judgments is provided for general information and shall have no legal effect for compliance or enforcement.”

The disclaimer also says that anyone using the translations should be responsible for checking the accuracy themselves with the original version.

SHIELDING SEBI

The Supreme Court of India’s ruling on a batch of petitions, filed in the wake of a U.S.-based short seller’s allegations of malfeasance including stock price manipulation at the Adani group of companies, has squarely tossed the ball back to the markets regulator’s court. The Court has opted to subordinate petitioners’ entreaties to protect larger public interest to its chariness to substitute “its own wisdom over the regulatory policies” of the Securities and Exchange Board of India. In its 46-page order, the Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud is emphatic in observing that “SEBI has prime facie conducted a comprehensive investigation” that “inspires confidence”, and that “the facts of this case do not warrant a transfer of investigation from SEBI” given that “prima facie no deliberate inaction or inadequacy” was found in the regulator’s conduct of its probe. Strikingly, the Bench has completely skirted the fundamental questions that the Court-appointed Expert Committee in its May 2023 report had opted to leave as a ‘matter between SEBI and the Court’ — the determination of possible violations pertaining to minimum public shareholding and related party transactions. The Bench has instead seized upon prayers urging the Court to direct SEBI to revoke its amendments to the Foreign Portfolio Investors Regulations and Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements — amendments that were at the heart of petitioners’ submissions of regulatory failure — and roundly denied them on grounds that there was neither “any illegality”, nor were the norms “capricious, arbitrary or violative of the Constitution”.

The ruling has also done little to assuage investors’ concerns about SEBI’s approach to getting to the bottom of the allegations raised by Hindenburg Research in its January 2023 report. Without elaboration on any of the regulator’s findings, the Court has blandly observed that “SEBI has completed 22 out of the 24 investigations into the Adani group” and that completion of the remaining two “are pending due to inputs being awaited from foreign regulators”. The Bench has directed SEBI to complete these “expeditiously”. While the Court’s reluctance to review the policy actions of a ‘specialised regulator’ is understandable, the decision to leave the crucial question of



SEBI's perceived tardiness in investigating allegations of corporate malfeasance and market manipulation by a large conglomerate back to the remit of the very same watchdog hints at a degree of judicial abstinence that may only undermine the larger public good. The Court is surely aware of past instances where it has found SEBI wanting in alacrity of enforcement, a facet flagged by the experts' panel appointed in this case as well. After all, 'justice must not only be done, but it must also be seen to be done'.

STRIKING FEAR

The provision in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) that treats hit-and-run accident cases as an aggravated form of the offence of causing death by rashness or negligence will be the first in the new, yet-to-be implemented code to be scrutinised for its severity. With truck drivers worried about the implications of Section 106 of BNS abstaining from work, the government has promised to bring it into play only after consultations with the All India Motor Transport Congress. However, with the transporters' body taking the stand that the strike was primarily resorted to by the drivers who feared additional criminal liability, the issue will require tactful handling. It has now become an issue that concerns transport workers than those running the business of transportation. It may appear that a strike against a law that makes penal provisions concerning hit-and-run accidents more stringent is unjustified, especially in the context of road accidents becoming a leading source of fatalities in the country. However, it has also drawn attention to the question whether there was a case for increasing the jail term for accidents from two to five years in all cases, and to 10, in the case of failure to report them to the authorities.

Section 106 of the BNS will replace Section 304A of the IPC, which punished the causing of death by rash and negligent act that does not amount to culpable homicide. The existing section provides for a two-year jail term. There are three components to Section 106: first, it prescribes a prison term of up to five years, besides a fine, for causing death due to rash or negligent acts; second, it provides for reduced criminal liability for registered medical doctors of two years in jail, if death occurred in the course of a medical procedure. The second clause concerns road accidents in which, if the person involved in rash and negligent driving "escapes without reporting it to a police officer or a Magistrate soon after the incident", the imprisonment may extend to 10 years and a fine. Drivers flee an accident scene out of fear of lynching. In such cases, the authorities seem to believe that such drivers can move away from the scene of crime and then report to the police. The term 'hit-and-run' is one in which the offending vehicle is not identified. It must be emphasised that once the person causing a fatal accident is identified, the onus on the police to prove culpability for rashness or negligence remains the same. Given that many accidents are caused due to poor road conditions too, a relevant question is whether the law should focus on raising prison terms or on a comprehensive accident prevention policy package covering imprisonment, compensation and safety.

GOVT SPENT RS 13.50 CR TO OPERATE ELECTORAL BOND SCHEME

The State Bank of India (SBI), which is authorised to issue Electoral Bonds (EBs), has charged Rs 13.50 crore to the government towards commission, printing and other expenses for managing and operating the 'Electoral Bonds Scheme'.

An amount of Rs 11.60 crore, inclusive of GST, has been levied to the government as commission so far, consequent to the sale of Electoral Bonds in 29 Phases, Department of Economic Affairs



(DEA) said in its reply to a Right to Information (RTI) application filed by transparency campaigner Commodore Lokesh K Batra (Retd).

“An amount of Rs 1,90,01,380 (inclusive of GST) has been levied to the government towards printing of Electoral Bonds till date. An amount of Rs 6,720 has been levied for ‘Device to verify Mask-Print Security,’ DEA said.

“The irony’ of the EB scheme is that while donors who buy bond are not required to pay any service charges (commission) to SBI and even printing cost of EBs, it is the government or ultimately, the tax-payers who bear this cost... for enabling transactions of ‘anonymous tax-free funding’ to political parties through the opaque Electoral Bonds Scheme 2018,” Batra said.

“In addition, there is a huge amount spent/ being spent on the use of government machinery and manpower for managing and operating EB scheme for the tax-free benefits of political parties at the tax-payers cost,” Batra said.

“The amount for printing of Electoral Bonds and for Device to verify Mask-A-Print Security was paid from the budgetary head 2052.00.090.09.01.16 under the grant of the Department of Economic Affairs,” DEA said.

Ahead of the recently-held state elections, political parties garnered Rs 1,006 crore from anonymous donors in the 29th phase of the sale of Electoral Bonds between November 6-20. As much as 94 per cent of the money was raised through the sale of Rs 1 crore denomination bonds.

As per the EB scheme, details of the donors and the political parties are hidden from the public. However, corporates are believed to be the biggest donors to the political parties through the bonds.

The total amount collected by parties through EBs has gone up to Rs 15,946 crore from various anonymous donors in 29 phases since 2018 when the Electoral Bond Scheme was introduced. The demand for Rs 1 crore denomination bond indicates that high net-worth individuals or corporates could have shelled out the money to political parties.

According to the provisions of the EB Scheme, only the political parties registered under Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (43 of 1951) and have secured not less than one per cent of the votes polled in the last general election to the House of the People or the Legislative Assembly are eligible to receive Electoral Bonds.

Interestingly, major political parties have not officially disclosed the amount they received through Electoral Bonds. Further, as the bonds are sold through a public sector bank, the government would come to know who is funding which political party, sources said.

Donors gave Rs 1,056.73 crore in 2018, Rs 5,071.99 crore in 2019 and Rs 363.96 crore in 2020, Rs 1502.29 crore in 2021 and Rs 3,703 crore in 2022, SBI had said.

While details of donors are exempt from RTI, SBI has only been providing the total number of EBs sold and encashed over the years and the number of parties eligible to encash EBs. On November 2, 2023, the Supreme Court ordered the Election Commission to submit data of the electoral bonds received by political parties till September 30.

Electoral Bonds are purchased anonymously by donors and are valid for 15 days from the date of issue. A debt instrument, these can be bought by donors from the bank, and the political party can



then encash them. These can be redeemed only by an eligible party by depositing the same in its designated account maintained with a bank. The bonds are issued by SBI in denominations of Rs 1,000, Rs 10,000, Rs 1 lakh, Rs 10 lakh and Rs 1 crore.

PARADE OF UNITY

Tableau proposals by the Opposition-ruled States of Delhi, Punjab and West Bengal are among those that have not qualified for the Republic Day parade this year, on January 26, leading to allegations of partisanship. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) that is in power in Delhi and Punjab, and the Trinamool Congress that is in power in West Bengal are crying foul. Delhi had proposed showcasing its school education and health services and the Punjab government had plans to exhibit the State's heritage and the history of its martyrs for India's national movement. The West Bengal proposal was to display the Kanyashree project that serves girls in the State. Similar proposals by Delhi and West Bengal have been rejected earlier too. In the case of Delhi, its proposals have been turned down for three consecutive years. In 2022, Tamil Nadu's tableau, which was themed on the State's role in national movement, did not qualify. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has said that as these tableaux were meant for the political promotion of Opposition parties, they did not make the cut. Allegations of partisanship surfaced during the previous United Progressive Alliance regime too, where tableaux proposed by the BJP-run Gujarat government were not approved for the parade for several years.

A national celebration is one that can do without such controversies. The Republic Day parade is a combination of patriotism and pomp, and an observance of the country's unity and diversity. It is a show of hard power, highlighting India's military might, alongside its cultural heritage and soft power. There is a show of state power, but it is also a festival of people's power. The parade celebrates the memory of the momentous struggle that the founders of the republic undertook for freedom from imperialism and towards building a modern democratic nation. The theme for the 2024 Republic Day is 'India – Mother of Democracy' and 'Viksit Bharat' (Developed India). The Ministry of Defence has an elaborate screening mechanism that selects participants for the parade. A committee of distinguished persons drawn from various fields screens proposals from States and organisations. Visual appeal, impact on the masses, theme, degree of detailing, music, and involvement of local artists are the key deciding factors in the selection of a tableau. It is an unfortunate turn for a cherished national day that some States feel excluded from it for political reasons. Regardless of whether their anguish is justifiable or not, efforts to mitigate it would befit the occasion. The Centre should seek ways to achieve more objectivity in the selection of tableaux, and leave little room for complaint.

ARVIND KEJRIWAL, HEMANT SOREN REFUSE ED SUMMONS: WHAT HAPPENS NOW

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has cited Rajya Sabha elections, Republic Day celebrations and the Enforcement Directorate's 'non-disclosure' and 'non-response' approach as reasons for not appearing for questioning before the investigating agency against its summons for appearance on January 3, in the Delhi excise policy case.

In his earlier responses to two such summonses, Kejriwal alleged in his letter that the summons were issued at the behest of the BJP and said it was unclear in which capacity he was being summoned – "as a witness or a suspect". Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren has similarly refused seven summonses by ED in a money laundering case.

Here is all you need to know about ED summonses — and what happens when you refuse them.

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



First, is ED supposed to reveal whether a person summoned is an accused or a witness?

The provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) under which summons are issued nowhere mention that the investigating agency must declare that the person being summoned is an accused or not.

In fact, the provisions are not clear whether the summons are to mention the grounds for questioning of a person. In practice, however, ED always mentions the case in which a person is being summoned to give evidence.

“How can we declare a person as witness or accused even before questioning him or conducting proper investigations,” an ED official told The Indian Express.

What are the provisions for issue of summons?

Summons for interrogation are issued by ED under Section 50 of the PMLA. According to the provision the Director of the ED, for the purposes of investigations, has the power of civil court for inspection, enforcing attendance of a person, compelling the production of record, receiving evidence on affidavits etc.

According to the provision, “The Director, Additional Director, Joint Director, Deputy Director or Assistant Director shall have power to summon any person whose attendance he considers necessary whether to give evidence or to produce any records during the course of any investigation or proceeding under this Act”, and “all the persons so summoned shall be bound to attend in person or through authorised agents” as the ED officer may direct them to do.

What if the person refuses to appear?

The law has provision for penalty of up to Rs 10,000 and invocation of Section 174 of the Indian Penal Code that stipulates a jail term of one month and/or a fine of Rs 500 in case of non appearance against ED summons.

Under Section 63 (2) (C) of the PMLA, if a person refuses to respect the summons issued by ED or refuses to produce documents or evidence as demanded by the agency, “shall pay, by way of penalty, a sum which shall not be less than five hundred rupees but which may extend to ten thousand rupees for each such default or failure”.

Section 63 (4) says: “Notwithstanding anything contained in clause (c) of sub-section (2), a person who intentionally disobeys any direction issued under section 50 shall also be liable to be proceeded against under section 174 of the Indian Penal Code.”

So, can Kejriwal be arrested?

It is easier said than done. To arrest a person under Section 63 of the PMLA, the ED would have to get fresh case registered under Section 174 of the IPC and followed by a trial. Never has this route been followed in the history of the agency.

The other legal route is to get non-bailable warrants issued against the person refusing summons. However, sources said, this would not be easy since most of those refusing summons, including Kejriwal and Soren, give written reasons for non-attendance. ED would have to convince the court that the non-cooperation is deliberate and there is prima facie evidence of the person being involved.



How does ED arrest a person for non-cooperation then?

There are no extant provisions in the PMLA to arrest for non-cooperation. There is also no limit to how many summons the agency must issue before reaching the conclusion that the person summoned is not cooperating.

The law is clear that an arrest can be effected only if the officer is convinced that the person is guilty of the offence of money laundering. Section 19 of the PMLA says, "If the Director, Deputy Director, Assistant Director or any other officer authorised in this behalf by the Central Government by general or special order, has on the basis of material in his possession, reason to believe (the reason for such belief to be recorded in writing) that any person has been guilty of an offence punishable under this Act, he may arrest such person and shall, as soon as may be, inform him of the grounds for such arrest."

How have courts interpreted these provisions?

The Delhi High Court on October 19, 2023 said the ED's power to issue summons under Section 50 of the PMLA does not include the power to arrest a person and said the two are different and distinct.

A single judge bench of Justice Anup Jairam Bhambhani also said the power to arrest under Section 19 of the PMLA is not untrammelled and that "authorities do not have the power to arrest on their whims and fancies".

However, the bench said, Section 19 of the PMLA grants power of arrest to designated ED officers, "It is clear that the power to arrest does not reside in Section 50 nor does it arise as a natural corollary of summons issued under Section 50".

"The exercise of the powers under one, cannot be restrained on the apprehension that it could lead to the exercise of powers under the other. If that is permitted, any and every person summonsed under Section 50 of the PMLA... could resist such summons expressing mere apprehension that he may face arrest at the hands of the ED, in the exercise of the powers under section 19 of the PMLA," the HC added.

The HC also said a person apprehending arrest by the ED can file for anticipatory bail even if they are not named as an accused in the agency's Enforcement Case Information Report (ECIR) or the prosecution complaint.

"The power under section 50 of the PMLA to issue summons to a person and to require the production of documents and record statements, which is akin to the powers of a civil court, is different and distinct from the power under section 19 to arrest a person. These are two separate and distinct provisions," said the HC judge.

GANGSTER GOLDY BRAR DECLARED DESIGNATED TERRORIST UNDER UAPA: WHAT THIS MEANS

Gangster Goldy Brar, the mastermind behind the murder of Punjabi singer Sidhu Moosewala, was declared a designated terrorist by the Centre under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) on Monday (January 1).

Amendments introduced in 2019 brought in provisions by which the Centre can declare individuals — not only organisations — as designated terrorists. Here is how this works.

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



Who is a “terrorist”?

The words “terror” or “terrorist” are not defined, but the UAPA defines a “terrorist act” as any act committed with intent to threaten or likely to threaten the unity, integrity, security, 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 in any foreign country. While the original Act dealt with “unlawful” acts related to secession; anti-terror provisions were introduced in 2004.

The 2019 Bill sought to empower the central government to designate an individual a “terrorist” if they are found committing, preparing for, promoting, or involved in an act of terror. A similar provision already existed in Part 4 and 6 of the legislation for organisations that can be designated as a “terrorist organisation”. Home Minister Amit Shah, during a debate on the Bill in Lok Sabha, stressed on the need to designate individuals as terrorists to root out terrorism.

How are individuals declared terrorists?

The central government may designate an individual as a terrorist through a notification in the official gazette, and add his name to the Fourth Schedule to the UAPA. The government is not required to give an individual an opportunity to be heard before such a designation.

At present, in line with the legal presumption of an individual being innocent until proven guilty, an individual who is convicted in a terror case is legally referred to as a terrorist, while those suspected of being involved in terrorist activities are referred to as terror accused. The 2019 amendment did not clarify the standard of proof required to establish that an individual is involved, or is likely to be involved, in terrorist activities.

What happens when an individual is declared a terrorist?

The designation of an individual as a global terrorist by the United Nations is associated with sanctions including travel bans, freezing of assets and an embargo against procuring arms. The 2019 amendment, however, did not provide any such detail.

The amendment also gave the Centre the power to remove a name from the schedule when an individual makes an application. If an application filed by an individual declared a terrorist is rejected by the government, they have the right to seek a review within one month after the application is rejected.

Under the amendment, the central government set up a review committee comprising a chairperson (a retired or sitting judge of a High Court) and three other members. The review committee will be empowered to order the government to delete the name of the individual from the schedule that lists “terrorists”, if it considers the order to be flawed. Apart from these two avenues, the individual can also move the courts challenging the government’s order.

TMC GOVT. NOTIFIES POILA BOISAKH AS ‘BANGLA DIVAS’

The West Bengal government has issued a notification declaring Poila Boisakh, the first day of the Bengali New Year, as the State Day and the song ‘Banglar Mati Banglar Jal’ written by Rabindranath Tagore as the State Song.

The notification, while referring to the song ‘Banglar Mati Banglar Jal’ as the State Song, said the approximate playing time of the State Song is 1 minute and 59 seconds.



In September, the West Bengal Assembly passed a resolution declaring Poila Baisakh, as Statehood Day and Rabindranath Tagore's song Banglar Mati Banglar Jal as the State anthem. Later, the State Cabinet approved the development. Earlier, Governor C.V. Ananda Bose observed June 20 as Paschim Banga Dibas, triggering a war of words with the State government.

EXPRESS VIEW ON IIT-BHU INCIDENT | A CRIME ON CAMPUS

The student was taking a walk near her hostel with a friend when three men waylaid and sexually assaulted her, all the while documenting the crime on their phones. The incident, which took place on November 1 on the IIT-BHU campus, once again brought to centrestage the spectre of sexual violence that haunts many women, on college campuses, at workplaces, on the daily commute. That the three accused in the IIT-BHU case were arrested on December 30, nearly two months after the assault, offers hope that in this case, justice may be served. That the police investigation has linked the men to three previous cases of molestation at IIT-BHU underlines that it must be served without fear or favour.

A political row has broken out over the affiliation of the three accused with the BJP's IT cell — the association ended in November, according to the BJP Varanasi (Mahanagar) president. It is of utmost importance that the police conduct its investigation professionally. This would help reassure citizens that crimes against women are taken seriously by the authorities and that culprits, regardless of their political connections, will be brought to book. The rise in women's mobility, their growing visibility in public spaces and contribution to the economy and increased participation in all fields, from politics to sports to entrepreneurship, has been a remarkable feature of Indian life in the 21st century. But the picture is often marred by persisting questions about how safe women really are as they step out in a society that remains patriarchal in many ways. The echoes of past crimes that drew the nation's attention — the December 2012 gang rape in a moving bus in Delhi, the gang rape of a photographer in 2013 in Mumbai's Shakti Mills, the 2019 rape and murder of a vet on her way home after work in Hyderabad — have still not faded.

Making women's safety a priority helps the larger cause of enabling them to claim their rightful place, whether it's at work, on the streets and in public parks or in Parliament. It is for the government at every level to ensure that women's safety does not come at the cost of their hard-won freedoms — which means rejecting the impulse to impose dress codes, curfews and other restrictions. This requires a different imagination of what women's safety and freedom means, and it can no longer be postponed.

UNDERSTANDING THE PEACE PACT WITH ULFA

The story so far:

The pro-talks faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) signed a tripartite peace deal with the Centre and the Assam government on December 29, 2023. The memorandum of settlement has several clauses for accelerating the State's development and safeguarding the land and political rights of indigenous communities but a worry remains in the form of the anti-talks faction headed by Paresh Baruah.

How was the ULFA formed?

The ULFA is a by-product of the anti-foreigners Assam Agitation that began in 1979 and ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in August 1985. The fear that the Assamese and other



indigenous communities would be pushed out of their own backyard by “illegal immigrants” (people from Bangladesh) one day had triggered the agitation. While social organisations and students’ bodies chose the path of agitation, a group of radicals, including Arabinda Rajkhowa, Anup Chetia, and Paresh Baruah formed the ULFA on April 7, 1979, to launch an armed struggle with the objective of establishing a sovereign Assam. The group took a decade to recruit and train its members in Myanmar, China, and Pakistan before striking with a series of abductions and executions. The government responded in 1990 with an offensive codenamed Operation Bajrang and banned the ULFA. Assam was declared a disturbed area with the imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act.

When did the peace process start?

Counter-insurgency operations led to the arrest of 1,221 ULFA members in the early 1990s. With support from terror groups such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami and Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence, the ULFA hardliners set up camps in Bangladesh and Bhutan. A military offensive by Bhutan in 2003 and the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League’s return to power in Bangladesh in 2009 saw most of the ULFA members being flushed out from these countries. In 2005, the ULFA raised hopes of peace when it formed an 11-member People’s Consultative Group only to backtrack and unleash a fresh phase of terror. After falling in the net of the security forces in India in 2009, the leaders of the Rajkhowa-led faction signed a ceasefire agreement with the Centre in September 2011. Opposed to talks, Baruah “expelled” Rajkhowa from the ULFA in 2012. In April 2013, the anti-talks group was renamed ULFA (Independent). The pro-talks group signed the peace accord 12 years after the agreement to suspend subversive operations.

What does the peace accord offer?

According to the memorandum of settlement, the ULFA has agreed to renounce violence, disarm, disband the armed organisation, vacate their occupied camps, and participate in peaceful democratic process established by the law. Marking a shift toward non-violence, it aims to ensure the integrity of the country contrary to what the ULFA had initially demanded. The Ministry of Home Affairs will make a time-bound programme to fulfil the demands of the outfit and a committee would be formed for its monitoring. The pact underlines a comprehensive package entailing an investment of ₹1.5 lakh crore for the all-round development of Assam. The most significant part of the accord is the commitment to address the political demands of the ULFA.

These include maintaining the territorial integrity of Assam through amicable settlement of boundary disputes with neighbouring States in the Northeast and continuation of the “guidelines and methodology” adopted for the delimitation exercise conducted in 2023 in future delimitation processes. The pact envisages ensuring maximum representation for indigenous communities in the 126-member Assam Assembly by keeping non-original inhabitants, primarily migrant Muslims, out. The 2023 delimitation is said to have made it impossible for non-indigenous communities to contest 106 of these seats.

Apart from the legislative safeguard, the pact seeks exemption for Assam from Section 3 of the Citizenship Act of 1955 dealing with people who have renounced Indian citizenship or whose citizenship has been terminated, to conditionally stop people of one constituency from being registered in another, and prepare an error-free National Register of Citizens, whose updated complete draft had put 19.06 lakh people out of 3.3 crore applicants on the rejection list.



What are the challenges ahead?

After the signing of the accord — the 11th since the BJP came to power in Assam with its regional partners in 2016 — Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said 90% of extremism in the State was over. Conflict specialists say the pact, provided the government shows its intent to implement the clauses, was a step in the right direction but lasting peace would be elusive unless Baruah and some 200 fighters of his ULFA (I) group talk truce.

The ULFA (I) operates from hideouts in the Sagaing Division of Myanmar. Baruah, believed to be based on the Myanmar-China border, has repeatedly said talks with the “Indian occupational forces” would be meaningless without discussing the sovereignty of Assam. The Chief Minister said the government cannot discuss sovereignty because “no one in Assam wants to secede from India” but efforts to convince Baruah to come for negotiations would continue.

ENDGAME

The signing of a tripartite agreement, in New Delhi, between the pro-talks faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom, the Union government and the Assam State government marks the end of a process that began in 2009. Nearly 15 years ago, the “chairman” of ULFA, Arabinda Rajkhowa, who went on to become the face of the pro-talks faction, was “arrested”, even as other key leaders of the insurgent outfit surrendered. By 2011, following a unilateral ceasefire by the group, the ULFA’s pro-talks faction had already signed a “suspension of operations” agreement, with several cadres staying put at special camps called “Nabanirman Kendras”, putting an end to the then 32-year-old insurgency. A much-delayed talks process finally concluded last week, resulting in the current tripartite memorandum of settlement, enabling the faction’s cadres to agree to surrender arms and vacate their camps. The “commander-in-chief” of the outfit, Paresh Baruah, had opposed the dialogue process in 2009, insisting that the “sovereignty issue” be a part of it, and since then his faction, the ULFA (Independent) has remained hostile to the peace process. The ULFA(I) is now a much weakened outfit, with Baruah believed to be in north-east Myanmar. The ULFA has long lost its potency as an insurgent force from its heydays in the 1990s, when it managed to farm the discontent that persisted in rural Assam even after the Assam Accord of 1985. Since then, the organisation has lost popular support, especially among sections of Assam’s peasantry, due to its violent tactics targeting civilians such as migrant workers and the poor, relying on extortion, besides espousing a flawed chauvinist ideology that misconstrued the nature of the Indian state, which yielded diminishing returns.

Military operations by Bhutan in the early 2000s broke its insurgent might and, later, the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government in Bangladesh handed over most of the outfit’s leaders. Since then, the pro-talks faction gave up the demand for sovereignty and revised its charter of demands to accommodate the interests of the “indigenous people” of Assam, while seeking an honourable exit. The delay in the conclusion of talks meant that some cadres had left the camps over the years, with a few joining the ULFA(I), but reports indicate that recruits to the Baruah-led organisation have fallen drastically in recent years. The threat of militancy from the remnants of the ULFA might have subsided dramatically over the years in Assam, but much needs to be done to raise the livelihood standards of the peasantry in the north-eastern State. Persistent poverty has been a key reason for mobilisation on a narrow ethnic basis, a radical version of which has been espoused by organisations such as ULFA.

**EXPERT EXPLAINS: HOW THE NORTHEAST WAS ‘INVENTED’, 52 YEARS AGO**

On December 30, 1971, two laws — the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act and the North-Eastern Council Act — were enacted by Parliament.

With these, Northeast India “emerged as a significant administrative concept replacing the hitherto more familiar unit of public imagination, Assam,” B P Singh, a former senior bureaucrat who served as the Governor of Sikkim from 2008-13, wrote in *The Problem of Change: A Study of North-East India* (1997).

Today, ‘Northeast India’, or just ‘the Northeast’, is commonly used by Indians to refer to the diverse region, with its inhabitants becoming ‘Northeasterners’, regardless of how they themselves self-identify. Yet the term took root only in the 1970s.

Here is the story of the ‘invention’ of Northeast India.

The Northeast

Northeast India officially comprises eight states — Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura — which are a part of the North-Eastern Council, a statutory advisory body that plays a role in development planning, and region-level policy making.

Pre-Independence, five of these eight present-day states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram) were a part of colonial Assam. Manipur and Tripura were princely states, with resident British political officers answering to the governor of Assam.

Sikkim, the most unique of the eight, was juridically independent but under British paramountcy. It became an independent country in 1947, before being annexed by India in 1975. In 2001 Sikkim was made a member of the North Eastern Council, and thus officially a part of the Northeast.

Part of the colonial “frontier”

Colonial Assam was a “frontier province” in British India. Like the North West Frontier Province (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in present-day Pakistan), the political legal setup in the province was very different from the rest of the country.

Direct rule was limited to territories behind the administrative border, known as the ‘settled districts’ of Assam (most of present-day Assam and Sylhet, now in Bangladesh). These densely populated districts were — and still are — the region’s economic heartland, with thriving tea, coal, and oil industries emerging in the nineteenth century.

Beyond these districts lay the so-called ‘excluded areas’ or the ‘Hill areas’, controlled by various tribes, with minimal presence of the colonial state. These areas were (and still are, relatively speaking) sparsely populated, and provided a buffer zone between the ‘settled districts’ and the international border.

For instance, like the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) located between the ‘settled districts’ of the NWFP and the international border with Afghanistan, the North East Frontier Tracts (modern-day Arunachal Pradesh and a part Nagaland) was carved out in 1914, and located between the ‘settled districts’ of Assam, and the international border with Tibet and Burma.



National security concerns, and becoming part of the Indian state

Thus, at the time of Independence, the region was unlike any other territory India inherited from the British. Northeast India, as an official place-name, is born out of the postcolonial Indian state's attempts to turn this imperial frontier space into the national space of a "normal sovereign state."

To do this, the Indian state made a series of ad hoc decisions to institute a new governance structure that eventually replaced the administrative setup of a colonial frontier province. Their foremost concern was the nebulous concept of national security.

After 1947, 98 per cent of the region's borders became international (with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan). A roughly 22 km wide land corridor in Siliguri, often referred to as the "chicken's neck", became its sole physical connection with the rest of India.

By the 1960s, national security concerns were further heightened. India lost a border war with China in 1962, with the Chinese entering all the way into Assam, and the movement for Naga independence was in full swing. India and Pakistan fought a war in 1965, and the Mizo rebellion began the following year. Fears about the challenge to national security if the country's external and domestic enemies were to join hands, became jarringly immediate.

That the state of Nagaland was created a year after the China War is no accident. By making Nagaland into a state, Indian officials hoped to create Naga stakeholders in the Indian dispensation that would help quell the Angami Zapu Phizo-led rebellion. In retrospect it turned out to be the first step toward replacing the administrative structure of the frontier province with a new structure of governance.

With the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act of 1971, Manipur and Tripura, previously union territories, were given statehood. Meghalaya was carved out of two previously autonomous districts within Assam, and so was the union territory of Mizoram. The erstwhile North East Frontier Agency became the union territory of Arunachal Pradesh. Both Mizoram and Arunachal would be granted full statehood in 1987.

The weight of a name

When using a directional name, it is perhaps always a good idea to ask, "Where is it we really start from, where is the place that enunciates this itinerary"? For "the Northeast", the point of reference is clear: it is the Indian "heartland". The directional place-name highlights the peculiar hierarchical relation that has developed between this region and the nation since Independence.

There is perhaps no better evidence of the region's othering than the normalisation of the racialized category Northeasterner. While the term is hardly ever used for self-identification (one rarely hears someone say "I am a Northeasterner" rather than "I am a Naga/Khasi/Meitei/Kuki"), it nonetheless has found its way into commonspeak, especially outside the region.

Moreover, Northeasterners have long complained of being subjected to racial slurs based on phenotypic stereotypes. Many find themselves non-recognized and misrecognized, hailing from places such as China, Nepal, Thailand, or Japan, or as 'lesser Indians' rather than as equal citizens.

Since the new governance structure and its naming were the result of a process of muddling through — and not much thought was given to its possible consequences — it was perhaps inevitable that it would create as many new problems as it would solve.



CENTRE SET TO END FREE MOVEMENT REGIME AT UNFENCED MYANMAR BORDER

The Union government is all set to scrap the Free Movement Regime (FMR) along the Myanmar border, a senior government official said on Tuesday. People living in border areas, who could cross over to India, will soon require visas, the official added. India and Myanmar share an unfenced border, and people on either side have familial and ethnic ties, which prompted the arrangement in the 1970s. It was last revised in 2016.

The official said that around 300 km of the border will be fenced and a tender will be issued in the next few days. A survey of the border areas with the help of drones has been completed.

'Centre's domain'

Amid apprehension that States such as Nagaland and Mizoram may oppose the move, the official said, "Border security is Centre's domain. We may take note of their concerns but the final decision is of the Union government. We are in talks with Myanmar."

Under the FMR, every member of the hill tribes, who is either a citizen of India or a citizen of Myanmar, and who resides within 16 km on either side of the border, can cross the border on production of a border pass, usually valid for a year, and can stay for up to two weeks per visit.

The Manipur government has suspended the FMR since 2020, following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh said on September 23, 2023, that he has urged the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to cancel the FMR along the India-Myanmar border and complete its fencing. He attributed the ongoing ethnic violence in the State to the free movement of people from across the border.

Migrant influx

After a military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, there was an influx of undocumented migrants, over 40,000 refugees took shelter in Mizoram, and around 4,000 refugees are said to have entered Manipur.

The migrants belonging to the Kuki-Chin-Zo ethnic group share ethnic ties with communities in Mizoram and Manipur.

India shares a 1,643 km-long border with Myanmar, which passes through the States of Arunachal Pradesh (520 km), Nagaland (215 km), Manipur (398 km), and Mizoram (510 km).



VOICE OF SECESSION

Till 2008, Masarat Alam Bhat, chief of the separatist Muslim League Jammu and Kashmir, lived in the shadows like many other second-rung separatist leaders. He was catapulted into the limelight in 2008-09 when armed insurgency in Kashmir transitioned into agitational politics.

He hit headlines again last week when his party was banned under provisions of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act by the Centre for “supporting terrorist activities and inciting people to establish Islamic rule in J&K”.

Unlike other top separatist leaders such as JKLF chief Yasin Malik, Hurriyat leaders Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, who built themselves on a volatile past and emerged gradually on the political scene in Kashmir, 52-year-old Bhat’s rise to steer the streets was quick. As Kashmir fell into chaos due to a row over land granted to the Amarnath shrine in 2008, Bhat was believed to be the force behind the massive protests that shook the valley.

He popularised pro-azadi (freedom) songs, including ‘Aeyi Aeyi Azadi’ (Freedom is about to come), promoted anti-India graffiti and set off mass protests. He issued calendars, with timing and dates on when to shut down and when to shop essentials during prolonged street agitations. Security forces had to use force to quell these street protests, resulting in the death of around 200 civilians between 2008 and 2010.

The District Magistrate in Kupwara, Jammu and Kashmir, depicted Mohammad Yasin Bhat as a secessionist in a dossier, attributing to him the strategy of disrupting public tranquility to create chaos in line with his ideology. Bhat, advocating for the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to Pakistan, assumed leadership of the hardline Hurriyat group while in jail following the death of Syed Ali Shah Geelani in 2021. Born in 1971 in Srinagar, he faced his first arrest in 1990 under the Public Safety Act at the age of 19, having been associated with the Islamic Students League and later the militant outfit Hizbullah. Over the years, Bhat has been arrested multiple times, facing sedition charges in 2010, and gaining release in 2015, causing political tensions. Despite numerous detentions and cases, Bhat has spent over 22 years in jail. The recent ban on the Muslim League Jammu-Kashmir and Jamaat-e-Islami in Kashmir marks the end of significant pro-Pakistan political parties in the region since 1990.

WITH NEW NOTIFICATION ON ADMINISTRATIVE BOUNDARIES, CENSUS TO BE DELAYED AGAIN

The deadline to freeze the administrative boundaries of districts, tehsils, towns, municipal bodies and others for the Census has been extended till June 30, 2024, a senior government official told The Hindu.

This means the decennial exercise, which should have started in 2020, will now be postponed again till at least October 2024 as it usually takes about three months to prepare the list of enumerators after setting the boundaries.

The Additional Registrar-General of India, in a notification to the States on Saturday, said that the competent authority had decided to further extend the date of freezing of administrative boundaries up to June 30, 2024. This rules out the Census exercise before the 2024 election, which is expected to be held in April and May. This is the ninth such extension of the deadline.



Under the 128th Constitution Amendment Act, 2023, also known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, the reservation of one-third of the seats for women in the Lok Sabha and the Assemblies shall come into effect after delimitation is undertaken based on the first Census held after the Act came into force.

The Act received Presidential assent on September 29.

On September 20, Union Home Minister Amit Shah told the Lok Sabha that the Census and the delimitation would be conducted after the election, but did not specify the year when it would take place.

Outdated data

India has conducted the Census every 10 years since 1881. The first phase of this decade's Census was expected to begin on April 1, 2020, but had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the absence of fresh data, government agencies are still formulating policies and allocating subsidies based on the data accrued from the 2011 Census.

CENTRE DEFENDS PUTTING UP 'SELFIE POINTS'

The Centre on Friday defended before the Delhi High Court its decision to install "selfie points" in public places for promotion of its defence policy initiatives, saying it helps familiarise the public about government schemes and policies.

"We are familiarising public with the government's schemes and policies. Engagement in selfie system is a gift of technology and let's make use of it. The physical construct of selfie points enables people to engage effectively, thereby having a greater impact," Additional Solicitor-General (ASG) Chetan Sharma told the court.

The Centre made the submissions before the court which was hearing a public interest litigation (PIL) petition against the use of public servants and defence personnel for promotion of government schemes and policies.

The petitioners challenged communications issued by the Controller General of Defence Accounts and the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) to publicise the government's development activities.

THE AYODHYA RAM TEMPLE: 4 MANDIRS AT EACH CORNER, 5 MANDAPS AND EMPHASIS ON GREEN COVER

With weeks to go for the inauguration of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir on January 22, the Pran Pratishtha or consecration ceremony of the Ram Lalla idol will be preceded by a week-long ritual beginning January 16.

Built over three floors with each one being 20-foot high, there are a total of 392 pillars and 44 doors in the complex.

The temple is being built in the Nagara style of temple architecture and the idol of Ram Lalla will be placed in the sanctum sanctorum. The Shri Ram Darbar will be on the first floor and there will be five mandaps (halls) — Nritya Mandap, Rang Mandap, Sabha Mandap, Prarthana Mandap and Kirtan Mandap.



Statues of deities will adorn the pillars and walls and there will be mandirs at four corners of the compound dedicated to Surya, Bhagwati, Ganesh, Shiv. On northern and southern arms, temples to Annapurna and Hanuman will be built respectively. Besides these, temples of Maharshi Valmiki, Vashishtha, Vishwamitra, Agastya, Nishad Raj, Shabri etc have also been proposed in the complex.

ram janmabhoomi

Construction work underway at the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir. (Express photo by Chitral Khambhati)

The foundation of the temple has been built with a 14-metre-thick layer of roller-compacted concrete, giving it the appearance of an artificial rock. A 21-foot-high granite plinth has been placed to protect against ground moisture and no iron has been used anywhere.

Ramps and lifts for the elderly and differently abled devotees have also been built with a separate block in the complex with a bathing area and washrooms. There will also be a pilgrims facility centre for 25,000 people with medical and locker facilities.

Great emphasis has also been given on environmental and water conservation, with 70% of the 70-acre area being left green.

Ram mandir The temple is being built in the Nagara style of temple architecture and the idol of Ram Lalla will be placed in the sanctum sanctorum.

Makrana marble and pink sandstone from Rajasthan, granite stone from Tamil Nadu and Telangana, and coloured marble from Mandla in Madhya Pradesh have been used for the construction, officials of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust entrusted with building the structure had said.

The pink sandstone measuring 4.7 lakh cubic feet from Rajasthan's Bharatpur district has been used in the main temple structure, 17,000 granite stones in the plinths, and the white Makrana and coloured marbles were used for the inlay work, it is learnt.

Also, teakwood procured from the Balarshah and Allapalli forest ranges of Maharashtra has been used in 44 doors of the temple, including 14 which will have gold-plating work, the officials said.

The temple complex will have its own sewage and water treatment plants, fire service, and an independent power station, Trust secretary Champat Rai had said, adding that experts from IITs in Delhi, Guwahati, Chennai and Bombay; NIT Surat; Central Building Research Institute, Roorkee; National Geo Research Institute, Hyderabad and the National Institute of Rock Mechanics worked together to give the final shape to the temple.

Ram Mandir Ayodhya The temple is being built in the Nagara style of temple architecture. (Express Photo by Chitral Khambhati)

More than 4,000 workers, including 460 craftsmen, have been working round the clock to ready the temple's ground floor for the consecration ceremony.

Trust project manager Jagdish Aphale had said that they studied 550 temples across India to find the best possible construction models. "The temple premises can accommodate 1,500 people at a time. After studying the damage to some old temples in Mathura and Kashi due to lightning strikes, it was decided to install 200KA light arresters over the temple structure, which has been tested



for the first time in India. As pilgrims take parikrama of the temple, the walkways and columns have been engraved with 100 events from Valmiki's Ramayana and would include Ram Katha Darshan," said Aphale, who is also in-charge of pilgrimage management.

The run-up to the consecration ceremony:

January 16: Vishnu Puja and gau daan at Saryu embankment

January 17: Ram Lalla idol will be taken for Shobha Yatra or nagar bhraman with the eyes shut. Water from Saryu will be taken to the temple in a kalash.

January 18: Prayers to Ganesh and Varun, other rituals, and chanting of mantras at the temple

January 19: Nau grah shanti hawan at temple site to please all planets

January 20: Sanctum sanctorum to be washed with Saryu water, prayers to be held for vastu shanti

January 21: Ram Lalla's throne to be washed with Saryu water in 125 kalashas

January 22: Prayers and rituals, followed by Pran Pratistha at Abhijeet Muhurt

MEET ARUN YOGIRAJ, ONE OF THE THREE SCULPTORS WHO MADE RAM LALLA'S IDOL FOR AYODHYA TEMPLE

With the Ram temple in Ayodhya set to be inaugurated on January 22, Karnataka BJP leaders since January 1 have been congratulating Arun Yogiraj, one of the three sculptors who have made idols of Ram Lalla (Lord Ram in his childhood).

Though the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra trust is yet to announce which of the three idols will be placed in the sanctum, many BJP leaders, including former chief minister BS Yediyurappa and Union Minister of Parliamentary Affairs Pralhad Joshi, claimed Yogiraj's work has been selected.

Yogiraj, a resident of Mysuru, belongs to a family of famous sculptors. He says his family has been doing this work for 250 years, or the past five generations.

Who is Arun Yogiraj?

Yogiraj, 38, is counted among the most sought-after sculptors in the country. While he has an MBA degree and even took up a job briefly, he came back to his family profession.

"I have been assisting my father in sculpting since I was 11. After working elsewhere for a few months, I realised sculpting was my passion. I came home in 2008. While my father supported my decision, my mother wasn't happy that I quit my job. She finally came around in 2014, when I received South India's young talent award," Yogiraj said.

His grandfather, B Basavanna Shilpi, was patronised by the kings of Mysore, and had been trained by Shilpi Siddanthi Siddalinga Swami, the royal guru of Mysore palace. Basavanna Shilpi had supplied 64 idols in just 11 months to the Gayatri temple, located on the Mysuru palace premises.

Arun Yogiraj has a team of 15 artisans and some students volunteering to learn the art. Besides orders from India, he has received multiple orders from USA, Malaysia and other places.



He also has trained many students free of cost. He runs Brahmarshi Kashyapa Shilpakala Shala trust in Mysuru, to train children in clay modelling and other skills.

What are some of his famous works?

Some of Yogiraj's works include a 28-foot monolithic black granite stone sculpture of freedom fighter Subhash Chandra Bose for Delhi's India Gate; a 12-foot Adi Shankaracharya idol for Kedarnath, Uttarakhand; India's largest 10-foot monolithic white marble stone sculpture of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Mysuru; and sculptures of Lord Panchamukhi Ganapathi, Lord MahaVishnu, God Buddha, Nandi, Swami Shivbala Yogi, Swami Shivakumara, and Goddess Banashankari installed at various temples across India.

How did he prepare the Ram Lalla idol?

Yogiraj said the Trust had told the three sculptors the idol should look like a five-year-old, and be 51 inch (4.25 feet) in length.

"We were given stones from several places, like Nepal, Karkala in Uttara Kannada district, HD Kote in Mysuru district, and Makrana in Rajasthan. I selected the Krishna Shila stone from HD Kote. Scientists from the department of mines and geology also gave inputs. Some of these stones react to the water and milk which devotees pour. Krishna Shila is a unique stone that does not react to any liquid and has been used in Karnataka for 1,000 years," he said.

The artist added that while there are references for Lord Krishna (as a child), few such descriptions are available about Lord Rama's childhood. "I visited some schools. There had been a children's event (Chinnaramela, a summer camp at Rangayana) in Mysuru. I went there to observe children. A five-year-old looks very different from a three-year-old or four-year-old. I tried to capture how a five-year-old looks, working with about 1,200 photos. The idol, along with the innocence of a child, has to have divinity. It took me two months to visualise the idol," he said.

Over the next four months, he sculpted the idol. "As I was away from home in Ayodhya, I used to work 12 hours a day and after that did some homework for the next day," Yogiraj said.

The other two sculptors who worked on the idol are GL Bhat of Bengaluru and Satyanarayana Pandey of Rajasthan. The Trust will install one of these three idols inside the sanctum, while the other two will be placed within the premises of the temple.

DECODE POLITICS: WHY EKNATH SHINDE HAS DUG UP A DARGAH DISPUTE IN THE HILLS

EKNATH Shinde is discovering that becoming the Chief Minister of Maharashtra propped up by the BJP may have been the easy part. As the countdown starts to the next elections, it's a fight from the scratch for the man who split the Shiv Sena to win enough numbers to not just retain the party but also his place in the coalition, amidst a BJP buoyed by yet more poll wins and a combative Ajit Pawar-led NCP.

Against this background comes the roll of a well-tested dice by Shinde now – a dispute involving the centuries-old Haji Malang Dargah.

What is the shrine, and what is the dispute?

Located on the lowest plateau of Malanggad, a hill fort 3,000 feet above sea level on the Matheran hill ranges, the Haji Malang Dargah is revered by both Hindus and Muslims.



Chandras Ketkar, one of members of the trust that runs the dargah, whose family has been managing it for the past 14 generations, told The Indian Express: “Anyone claiming that the dargah is a temple is doing it for political mileage... In 1954, the Supreme Court in a case related to control of the dargah within the Ketkar family observed that the dargah was a composite structure that cannot be governed either by Hindu or Muslim law, but only by its own special custom or by general law of trusts.”

The trust has had both Hindu and Muslim members, and while the shrine remains a dargah, Hindus continue to perform aarti on its premises on full moon day.

The first sign of communal strife over the shrine came in the mid-1980s when Shiv Sena leader Anand Dighe started an agitation claiming that the shrine belonged to Hindus as it was the site of a 700-year-old Machindranath temple. In 1996, he insisted on leading 20,000 Shiv Sainiks to the shrine to offer prayers.

The then Chief Minister Manohar Joshi along with Shiv Sena leader Uddhav Thackeray also attended a prayer that year. Since then the Sena as well as right-wing groups refer to the structure as Shri Malang Gad.

The movement helped burnish Dighe’s credentials as “Dharmaveer, or warrior of the faith”, granting him an almost legendary status within the Shiv Sena.

Dighe’s protege, Shinde sees himself as the inheritor of his legacy – and now, his dargah claims. Speaking at a religious event called ‘Malanggad Harinam Mahotsav’ earlier this week in his Thane fiefdom, Shinde spoke of Dighe’s role in the “liberation movement” of Malang Gad after which, he said, “we started saying Jay Malang, Shri Malang”.

Shinde's political challenges include countering Uddhav Thackeray's claim to his father Bal Thackeray's legacy and positioning himself as the true upholder of Hindutva. The dargah issue, coupled with Shinde's actions in demolishing structures around the Satara tomb of Afzal Khan, aligns with his narrative of following the principles of Balasaheb Thackeray and Anand Dighe.

Shinde also faces difficulties in expanding his Sena faction's organizational structure, particularly in districts where loyalty to Uddhav Thackeray remains strong. The inclusion of the Ajit Pawar-led NCP in the ruling alliance adds further uncertainty to Shinde's political future, despite the BJP's verbal support.

The stand of other parties

The BJP has given tacit backing to Shinde’s stand. Maharashtra BJP president Chandrakant Bawankule said: “When you evaluate religious sites, you need to see what was located there earlier. The government will look into the history of Malanggad and check its origins. We will take decisions based on that.”

The NCP Sharad Pawar faction attacked Shinde for “making utterances just so to feed communal strife”, and said this did not behove a CM. “He should realise that he is CM Eknath Shinde and not just Eknath Shinde,” Jitendra Awhad said.

The AIMIM also questioned a CM “targeting the religious place of one particular faith”. “Haji Malang is a centuries old dargah. The Maharashtra CM says we will change its character. You are the CM of the entire state and the people living in it,” AIMIM chief Asaduddin Owaisi said.



BJP STAYS SILENT ON VEERASHAIVA-LINGAYAT DEMAND

The Veerashaiva-Lingayat community's representative organization, Akhil Bharat Veerashaiva Lingayat Mahasabha, has urged community members not to identify as "Hindu" or by their subcastes during the census. Instead, they are encouraged to mention "Veerashaiva" or "Lingayat" in the religion column. Surprisingly, there has been no response from the Sangh Parivar and the BJP, despite their strong objections in 2018 to the Congress government's recommendation for a separate religion status for Veerashaiva-Lingayats.

In the past, the BJP vehemently opposed the move, accusing those supporting it of trying to divide the community. The issue led to a division within the Veerashaiva-Lingayat community, impacting the Congress in the 2018 elections. However, the current silence from the BJP, including leaders like B.S. Yediyurappa, marks a notable departure from their previous stance. Even the demand for a response from RSS and Panchacharyas by the National general secretary of Jagatika Lingayata Mahasabha, Shivanand Jamdar, has gone unanswered.

Although the mahasabha has not explicitly demanded independent religion status in its resolution, it seeks inclusion of all sub-castes of Veerashaiva-Lingayats in the Central list of OBCs. The distinction is made between independent religion status and reservation, as the resolution emphasizes the inclusion of sub-castes under the OBC category within the Hindu religion.

CHANGING PORTRAYAL OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN HINDI ENTERTAINMENT

The depiction of tribal populations has been marked by cliches and stereotypes. After decades of being reduced to caricatures and cardboard characters, the cinematic gaze towards tribal issues and culture is getting incisive and inclusive

At a time when the Bharatiya Janata Party's tribal outreach is paying rich electoral dividends, the entertainment industry is also adjusting its gaze towards a segment of society that constitutes around 8.5% of the population.

Over the years, the depiction of indigenous communities has been marked by cliches and stereotypes. Often portrayed as barbaric people who kill indiscriminately to save their atavistic customs, they have always been shown to need the civilisational embrace of the hero. Their women are shown to be gullible, who easily surrender to the status and masculinity of the city-bred male protagonist.

Depiction in 'old' Bollywood

The portrayal of tribal people is often sexualised to suit the urban gaze and a perception has been built that when it comes to cultural communication, indigenous communities either break into a 'Chadh Gayo Papi Bichua' or jive to the rhythmic gibberish of 'Jhinga Lala Hu'. From Madhumati (1958) and Talash (1969) to Carvan (1971) and Shalimar (1978), there is a long list of films where indigenous people are reduced to caricatures or cardboard characters where men and women are dressed in attires laced with beads and feathers.

Even Satyajit Ray was guilty of perpetuating the stereotype in Aranyer Din Ratri (1970) where Simi Grewal's face was blackened to make her fit into a stock tribal character who gives in to the charm of the sheheri babu, the bhadralok. With hardly any role in the running of the industry and only limited consumption at the box office, the pushback has been meek.



A glorious exception has been Mrinal Sen's *Mrigaya* (1976). Released during the Emergency, it is about the rule of law in unequal societies. When the lustful moneylender kills a tribal rebel he is rewarded by the colonial master but when the young tribal protagonist beheads the beast to save his wife from his clutches, he falls prey to the British rule of law. The film's message goes beyond the clash of cultures. It talks of resistance against a system that indemnifies the perpetrators of injustice.

Four decades later, S.S. Rajamouli came up with one of the most problematic profiling of indigenous communities in *Bahubali* where the film suggests that those who adopted the Hindu way became civilised and the rest remained in the 'dark ages'.

A marked change

Of late, the entertainment space has finally been engaging in a more nuanced debate on issues of tribal identity and survival. Writers seem eager to portray tribal characters as the driving force of a narrative as generic tales give way to more lived-in experiences. The naivety is no longer romanticised and female characters have more heft. Like in most cinematic trends these days, the push has come from the south when the tribal woman in *Jai Bhim* (2021) stood up to power and refused to be crushed without a fight within the ring provided by the Constitution. Rajamouli also made amends with *RRR* (2022). The Gond girl Malli becomes a symbol of the natural wealth of the tribals that continues to be ravaged by those in power for their vested interests.

In popular milieu, Amar Kaushik's *Bhediya* (2022) smartly uses the beliefs and folklore of the Apatani tribe of the North East to convey the message of sustainable development with the catchphrase 'prakarti hai to pragati hai'.

The deep-seated prejudice of a section of the system comes to fore in the second season of Richie Mehta's *Delhi Crime* (Netflix) where members of denotified tribes are falsely implicated for a sudden spurt in burglaries and gruesome murders in the posh area of South Delhi. Here, a retired police officer is called in to throw light on the case and reminds us that denotified tribes were called criminal tribes during Colonial rule and that their behaviour hasn't changed after independence. As the corrupt officer paints the entire community with the same brush, the series expresses the general sentiment that exists against the denotified tribes in society and how it has pushed them into a corner. The system in its hurry to solve the case often falls prey to such dangerous profiling. In its denouement, the series stands apart as the stereotype is dismantled by sensitive officers like Vartika Chaturvedi and Bhupendra, faces of the same system that criminalises tribals.

Combating the 'Naxal' narrative

If *Delhi Crime* shows us that indigenous tribes are living next to us in the urban jungle, Devashish Makhija's recent release *Joram* addresses the development debate and de-hyphenates the tribal-Naxal narrative in Jharkhand while staying true to the man-on-the-run thriller genre. In the film, jungles are turned into mining hubs in the name of development by a woman MLA who hails from a tribal community. And Dasru, the protagonist is caught between the so-called guardians and the usurpers of his habitat. While the film doesn't get into the rights and wrongs, it captures how the likes of Dasru are getting dispossessed of their land and culture.

In a telling sequence in the film, Dasru, while returning from Mumbai, the city where he was forced to migrate to as a daily wager, asks a passenger if he has given up on farming. "There is no grain, our fields sprout iron now," comes the blunt reply. The guts to fight for the resources of the jungle,



loses out to the hunger of the gut. Like Vartika in Delhi Crime, Ratnakar, the junior police officer in Joram becomes a tool to raze the predictable Naxal narrative.

That tribal interest is a monolith and that all tribals are poor is shaken in Navdeep Singh's Shehar Lakhot (Amazon Prime) where a Ph.D. holder tribal leader protests for the rights of tribal lands in the marble belt of Rajasthan. It shows how industrialists use the local tribal MLA to control the agitation.

Aar Ya Paar (Disney Hotstar) deals with the options before a tribal youth takes on the insatiable greed of a corporate bully to occupy the natural resources. Will Sarju make the country proud in archery or become a hired assassin in his pursuit of revenge and survival? It is a meandering series but again the voice of reason comes from a law enforcer. Asked to eliminate the resistance, officer Aditya Dutt says these people (tribals) believe the jungle is their world while we see it as our fiefdom.

Director Nila Madhab Panda has been working on how climate change affects those the most who have no carbon footprint. In his latest cautionary tale, The Jengaburu Curse (SonyLiv), he takes the idea forward in the tribal belt of Odisha that is being trampled by mining barons and links local issues with a global environmental crisis.

A more complex yet cogent analysis of the value of indigenous communities comes through in Sameer Saxena's Kaala Paani (Netflix). In the survival drama, the fictitious Oraka tribe holds the cure for a deadly virus that has hit the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

The series critiques unsustainable development models even as the administration navigates the moral quandary of a typical trolley problem: is it okay to sacrifice a few to save thousands in the name of evolution and change?

THE GOVERNMENT'S OTT OVERSIGHT

The story so far:

The new Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, 2023, expands regulatory oversight to include OTT platforms and digital content. It aims to replace the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, proposing mandatory registration, content evaluation committees for self-regulation, and a three-tier regulatory system. The government claims it will modernise regulations and enhance business ease but the move raises concerns over potential censorship and impacts on freedom of speech due to increased scrutiny of digital media for "obscene and vulgar" content.

What does the Bill say?

No person or broadcasting company can provide services or run a network without formal registration or intimation to the government, with the exception of a few authorised bodies like Prasar Bharati or Parliament channels.

In line with the provisions of the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act of 1995, all cable and satellite broadcasting network operators must register to operate, while broadcasters should get approval from the registering authority for transmitting programmes. They are also required to maintain subscriber data.



Similar provisions apply to terrestrial and radio broadcasting networks. “Different rules can be made for different types of broadcasters and network operators, allowing for tailored regulations based on the nature of their operations,” reads the explanatory note released along with the Bill.

The draft further expands the purview of broadcasting rules to networks that use the internet to broadcast services and programmes, such as Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) and OTT broadcasting services (classified as broadcasting network operators in the draft) if they have the required number of subscribers or viewers. The Bill leaves it to the Union government to prescribe limits later.

Under the Act, OTT broadcasting services will, however, not include a social media intermediary or a user of such intermediary, as defined under the Information Technology Act, 2000.

Content quality and accessibility

Any programme or advertisement broadcasted through TV, radio, or other broadcasting services must adhere to the Programme Code and Advertisement Code, which are yet to be defined. These Codes will also apply to individuals and organisations broadcasting news and current affairs programmes online through e-newspapers, news portals, websites and other similar social media platforms that operate as a “systematic business” or “professional” entity. Digital copies of newspapers and publishers of commercial newspapers, however, will be exempted.

Broadcasters will have to classify their programmes into different categories based on context, theme, tone, impact and target audience. The classification must be prominently displayed at the beginning of the show so that viewers can make “informed decisions.” The Bill requires network operators to implement access control measures for shows that are classified for restricted viewing, such as those with adult content.

Additionally, the Bill provides accessibility guidelines to address the needs of persons with disabilities, calling for broadcasting network operators and broadcasters to make their platform, equipment and programmes more accessible. Suggested measures include audio descriptions for the blind, sign language translations, adding subtitles in different fonts, sizes and colours, and using accessible applications.

It further asks broadcasters to make a certain percentage of content accessible within a specified period in accordance with the accessibility guidelines. A disability grievance redressal officer will be appointed by the Centre to address complaints pertaining to the accessibility guidelines, and a broadcaster or broadcasting network operator could be penalised in case of a violation.

Self-regulation

One of the highlights of the draft is a proposed self-regulation regime to ensure compliance with the programme and advertisement codes and to address other complaints.

Every broadcaster or broadcasting network operator must establish a Content Evaluation Committee (CEC) with members from various social groups, including women, child welfare, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minorities. Broadcasters will be allowed to air only those programmes certified by the CEC, except for specific shows exempted by the government.

The Centre, meanwhile, will have the authority to define the size, quorum, and other operational details of the committee. The details of the committee members, including their names and credentials, should be published by the broadcaster or network operator on their website.



The three-tier broad regulatory structure prescribed in the draft has the following components:

Self-regulation by operators

Broadcasters and broadcasting network operators will have to establish and maintain mechanisms for the filing and redressal of complaints. A grievance redressal officer will be appointed to handle complaints related to content and contravention of the programme and advertisement codes. In case the official is unable to decide in the prescribed period or the complainant is not satisfied with their decision, it can approach the self-regulatory organisation.

Self-regulatory organisations

It is a proposed body of broadcasters, broadcasting network operators or their associations, which will guide their members to ensure compliance with the broadcasting rules and deal with grievances related to content violations not resolved within a specific time frame. They can also take up appeals against the decisions of broadcasters or network operators.

If a broadcaster is found guilty of any wrongdoing, the self-regulatory organisation to which it belongs has the authority to expel, suspend, or impose penalties in the form of advisories, censures, warnings, or monetary fines, not exceeding ₹5 lakh for each violation.

Broadcast Advisory Council

The Centre will establish an advisory council, consisting of independent experts and government representatives, to oversee the implementation of the regulations. It will hear content violations complaints and accordingly make recommendations to the government.

The government will then, after due consideration, issue appropriate orders and directions. The Council can also form review panels to assist with its functions. These panels are assigned specific cases or appeals and provide their recommendations, considered as recommendations of the Broadcast Advisory Council as per the text of the Bill.

Provision for inspection, seizure of equipment

The Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill allows inspections by the government without prior notice. Operators must facilitate monitoring at their own cost and can face equipment seizure if violations are suspected. Companies are liable unless they prove a lack of knowledge or due diligence.

“The equipment seized shall be liable to confiscation unless the operator of broadcasting network or broadcasting services demonstrates compliance with the provisions of the rules or guidelines, within 30 days from the date of seizure of the said equipment,” the Bill says.

There is, however, a provision of a written notice to the operator informing it of the grounds for such confiscation to provide the opportunity of making a representation. In case no such notice is given within 10 days from the date of the seizure of the equipment, it has to be returned to the operator.

What are the penalties for non-compliance?

The Bill includes provisions for penalties such as removal of objectionable shows, orders, apologies, off-air periods, or even cancellation of registration in case of non-compliance with the programme and advertisement codes.



The Centre may prohibit the transmission of a programme, or operation of broadcaster or broadcasting network by citing public interest or national security reasons. If the programme or channel is “likely to promote disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred, or ill-will between different religious, racial, linguistic, or regional groups or castes or communities or if it is likely to disturb public tranquillity on grounds of religion, race, language, caste, or community,” then it can be prohibited by order, the draft reads.

“Where the Central Government thinks it necessary or expedient so to do in the interest of the— (i) sovereignty or integrity of India; or (ii) security of India; or (iii) friendly relations of India with any foreign State; or (iv) public order, decency or morality, it may, by order, regulate or prohibit the transmission or re-transmission of any Television Channel or programme,” it says.

In addition, the Bill provides for monetary penalties and imprisonment for certain “serious offences.” The amount of the penalty will depend on the financial capacity of the company or individual. The maximum penalty for unregistered entities and major categories is 100%, while the penalty for medium, small and micro categories is 50%, 5% and 2%, respectively.

What are the main concerns?

The broad scope of the Bill for traditional broadcasters, such as cable TV, and the evolving OTT space, which essentially has a different business model and content delivery mechanism, has drawn a mixed response from legal experts and advocates for digital freedom.

Digital rights organisation Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) has called for a cautious examination of the Bill due to the proposed codes’ similarity to the Code applicable to cable TV and the increased censorship of TV programmes as a consequence. “This may affect the publisher’s online free speech, freedom of journalistic expression and artistic creativity, & the citizen’s right to access differing points of view because publishers will be compelled to only produce content which is palatable to the Union Government,” it says.

The group claims that exerting executive control over OTT content will lead to “over-compliance and self-censorship” because platforms would aim to avoid the government’s broad discretion when it comes to punishments.

The IFF further notes that the Bill has left several provisions to be determined later by the Centre, arguing that such excessive delegation of rule-making would create uncertainty for stakeholders. “Spanning over 70 pages, the Bill includes 60 instances of “as may be prescribed” and 17 instances of “as notified by the [Union] Government.” While we recognise that in some instances specificity is needed to be or must be left to future rulemaking, these must be accompanied by relevant safeguards to protect against arbitrary rule-making,” the IFF says.

On the potential impact of the legislation on digital platforms, technology policy expert Shruti Shreya of think-tank The Dialogue believes that the requirement for all online content creators to adhere to a programme code requires careful consideration. “While ensuring content quality is essential, the subjective nature of terms like ‘good taste’ or ‘decency’ could lead to ambiguous interpretations... The digital space thrives on creativity & expression - how will this legislation affect this dynamism?” she asks.



ARMY REVIEWS GEN NARAVANE'S BOOK: WHAT RULES GOVERN WRITING BY SERVING AND RETIRED PERSONNEL?

The Army has begun a review of the memoirs of its former Chief General M M Naravane (retd) after news agency PTI published excerpts from it last month.

The excerpts revealed hitherto unknown details of the Indian leadership's response to the crisis arising out of the standoff with China in eastern Ladakh in 2020, and on the discussions on various aspects of the Agnipath scheme of recruitment in the armed forces before it was launched last year.

The book, titled Four Stars of Destiny, is scheduled for release this month.

What information does the book contain on the LAC standoff with China?

The published excerpts described a communication between Gen Naravane and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on August 31, 2020, when Chinese troops were moving tanks and men in Rechin La pass on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh.

Singh told Gen Naravane that he had spoken with the Prime Minister, and that the Army was free to act as it deemed fit. "Jo ucchit samjho woh karo," Singh said, according to the excerpts.

The former Chief recalled that "a hundred different thoughts flashed through my mind", and he called then Northern Army Commander Lt Gen Y K Joshi. "We cannot be the first ones to fire,' I told him... Instead, I told him to move a troop of our tanks right to the forward slopes of the Pass and depress their guns so that the PLA would be staring down the barrels of our guns," Gen Naravane has written.

The excerpts also gave some details about the deadly clash between Indian and Chinese soldiers that took place in the Galwan Valley during the night of June 15-16, 2020. China's President Xi Jinping would not forget the incident easily because PLA troops had suffered "fatal casualties" for the first time in more than two decades, Gen Naravane wrote.

Why is the book being reviewed by the Army?

Under Section 21 of The Army Rules, 1954, serving personnel are not allowed to "publish in any form whatever or communicate directly or indirectly to the press any matter in relation to a political question or on a service subject or containing any service information".

Also, it is prohibited to "publish or cause to be published any book or letter or article or other document on such question or matter or containing such information without the prior sanction of the Central Government".

Serving officers also cannot "deliver a lecture or wireless address on a matter relating to a political question or on a service subject or containing any information or views on any service subject" without prior sanction.

The Rules explain that "'service information' and 'service subject' include information or subject...concerning the forces, the defence or the external relation of the Union".

Officials said the rule may not apply if an Armed Forces personnel writes a book that is unrelated to his/ her work, or is of a literary or artistic nature.



Do these Rules also apply to a retired officer such as Gen Naravane?

The Rules do not explicitly state the process that is to be followed by retired defence services officers while publishing a book.

Some officials told The Indian Express that the review process for books to be published by Armed Forces personnel can draw from the Central Civil Services (Pension) Rules, 1972, which were amended in June 2021 by the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT).

This is despite the fact that the Armed Forces do not come under the purview of these Rules.

The amended Rules barred retired government servants who have served in intelligence or security-related organisations from publishing any information related to the organisation after retirement without prior permission.

Retired civil servants who do not belong to this category do not require government sanction to publish a book, the officials said.

Have other Army officers written books earlier?

Yes, several serving and retired Army officers have written books on various military-related subjects in the past.

Books written by former Army Chiefs include Kargil: From Surprise To Victory by Gen V P Malik (retd), and Courage and Conviction: An Autobiography by Gen V K Singh (retd).

INDIA IN 2023: STRIDES IN CLIMATE ACTION, CRITICISM OF CONSERVATION

At the COP-28 climate summit in Dubai, developing countries, including India, asked rich nations to vacate carbon space by achieving negative carbon emissions, and not merely reaching net zero by 2050.

India also submitted its third national communication to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change on December 9. According to it, the country reduced GDP emission intensity by 33% between 2005 and 2019, achieving the target 11 years in advance.

On the wildlife front: an estimation exercise found the number of tigers has gone up in the Shivalik Hills-Gangetic Plains landscape, central India and the Sundarbans, but dwindled in the Western Ghats and the Northeast-Brahmaputra Plains due to habitat loss, fragmentation, and poaching.

The cheetah conservation project drew sharp criticism over the deaths of six of the 20 adults imported from Namibia and South Africa.

India also launched the International Big Cat Alliance, to conserve the world's seven principal big cats: tigers, lions, snow leopards, leopards, jaguars, pumas, and cheetahs. The Alliance is open to 97 countries and organisations. The government also amended forest conservation and biodiversity laws, inviting sharp criticism from several state governments, policy experts, and conservationists.

The Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act applies to land recorded as 'forest' in government records, exempting certain categories of land from its purview.



Conservationists argue that limiting the applicability of the FCA would invalidate the Supreme Court's 1996 judgment in the T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad case, which said the Act was applicable to land covered under the "dictionary meaning of forests" or "deemed forests" (forests not officially recorded as forests).

The amended Act exempts forest land up to 10 ha for constructing security-related infrastructure and the area falling within 100 km of international borders, Line of Control and Line of Actual Control for "strategic and security-related projects of national importance".

Himachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura, Mizoram, and Assam had said such a step could potentially encompass large areas of their forest land and affect traditional forest-dwelling communities.

The government also introduced changes to the Biological Diversity Act to help protect plants and resources in India. The goal was to encourage growing medicinal plants instead of taking them from the wild, support traditional Indian medicine, make it easier for research and patents, and involve more foreign investments. However, there are worries because the new law says people using traditional knowledge or practising certain types of medicine don't have to share benefits with local communities who have that knowledge.

WRITER RAHUL SANKRITYAYAN'S TIBETAN COLLECTION OF MANUSCRIPTS TO STAY AT OLD PATNA MUSEUM

An invaluable collection of manuscripts and paintings from Tibet by travel writer-historian Rahul Sankrityayan has become a bone of contention between the Bihar Museum authorities and eminent scholars as well as the family of the late historian.

Although the authorities have decided to retain the 'Rahul collection' within the old Patna Museum building instead of moving it to the swanky new Bihar Museum following objections by his family members and scholars, the latter are still not satisfied.

The Rahul collection was a provisional gift made to Patna Museum by the late scholar commencing from 1933, and is the fruit of the four arduous journeys he made to Tibet in 1929, 1934, 1936 and 1938. Items were added to it until 1956. It contains Tibetan 'Thangka' paintings, more than 1,600 Tibetan manuscripts, coins, ritual objects, images of bronze, unbaked clay and wood, items of jewellery, costumes as well as glass negatives of some rare palm leaf scriptures.

Demands cataloguing

Sankrityayan's family as well as eminent scholars are now demanding a physical and scientific cataloguing of the manuscripts and paintings. "At present what is on display is a digital version of the manuscripts from the collection. We are not aware of the whereabouts of the originals. We appeal to the authorities to do a physical and scientific cataloguing of all the items in the presence of noted scholars and other stakeholders," Jaya Sankrityayan, daughter of the scholar told The Hindu.

Officials at the Patna Museum, however, said that the collection of manuscripts and paintings are lying in safe storage in the Bihar Research Society building which exists within the premises of the Patna Museum.



“A decision has been taken not to shift this rare collection to the new Bihar Museum building,” Shankar Suman, a senior official at the Patna Museum said.

According to Anjani Kumar Singh, Director General of the Bihar Museum, a separate gallery is being made for the artefacts in the Patna Museum building and they will be displayed once that is complete.

The controversy over the Rahul collection’s shifting to the Bihar Museum began in 2015 when the swanky new building was opened for public and a decision was made to display artefacts from ancient India to 1764 in the Bihar Museum’s permanent gallery and those of the post-1764 period at the older Patna Museum. The two museums are also being connected by a tunnel being built by the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation.

While the 106-year-old iconic Patna Museum locally known as the ‘Jadu Ghar’ had been directly under the State administration, the Bihar Museum is governed by an autonomous body — the Bihar Museum Society — which has been constituted under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. It has its own set of rules and regulations and the State government provides funds to it. It can generate its own funds and also arrange money from other agencies and has autonomy in functioning.

On March 7, 2023, the government through a Cabinet decision handed over the administration of the Patna Museum to the Bihar Museum Society as well.

PARLIAMENT SECURITY BREACH ACCUSED UNDERWENT PSYCHOANALYSIS – WHAT IS IT?

On December 22, the Delhi Police said the six individuals accused in the Parliament breach incident underwent psychoanalysis at a government institute in the city in order to ascertain their motives.

The term ‘psychoanalysis’ is usually restricted to the medical literature on mental health when it isn’t provoking suspicious questions. For example, in my own practice, many of my clients have asked me, “Are you psychoanalysing my mind?” Psychoanalysis is an important tool but is often misunderstood.

The origins of psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis isn’t a form of psychotherapy but in fact a worldview. It was the first modern Western system of psychotherapy. The Viennese psychiatrist Sigmund Freud coined the term and developed it with many of his colleagues and peers. He developed psychoanalysis as a treatment modality for people presenting with symptoms that other physicians were unable to treat.

The prominence of such ‘classical psychoanalysis’ has declined over time, while the topic has itself transformed to become less authoritarian and more practical. Its evolution has been influenced by developments in neurology, psychiatry, psychology, philosophy, and the social and natural sciences.

Psychoanalysis aims to give people a greater degree of agency by facilitating awareness of their unconscious wishes and defences.

In 1886, Freud collaborated with physician Josef Breuer, known for his dramatic successes in treating clients with “hysteria”. Their approach involved nudging people to talk about themselves in a bid to recount buried traumatic experiences. Breuer found that when these people were able



to recall traumatic experiences in an affectively charged fashion, their symptoms diminished. This approach came to be known as “the talking cure”.

What is the unconscious?

The unconscious is conceptually central to psychoanalytic theory. Freud posited that certain memories and associated affects are cut off from consciousness because of their threatening nature. Over time, he came to believe instinctual impulses and associated wishes – in addition to traumatic memories – were also not allowed into awareness, and that this happened via cultural conditioning; in which people believed such instincts were ‘unacceptable’.

For example, a person angry with their colleague may disavow these feelings and push them out of awareness by repressing them. Repression is an important psychoanalytic construct characterised by the unconscious forgetting of painful ideas or impulses in order to protect the psyche.

Freud elaborated on this idea by distinguishing between the id, the ego, and the superego. The id is the part of the psyche present from birth and is based on instincts. It presses for instant gratification and discounts situational realities. The ego, emerging out of the id, is its more rational counterpart. Unlike the id, the ego weighs situations before pressing for gratification. It also delays gratification by channeling instinctual needs in a socially acceptable manner. The superego emerges by internalising social values and norms. This psychic agency can be overly harsh and demanding, often leading a person to adopt a punitive stance towards their own instinctual needs.

Many contemporary psychoanalysts no longer find this distinction useful, and instead view the mind as being composed of multiple self-states that emerge in different contexts.

Fantasies, defences, and resistance?

Freud posited that fantasies served numerous psychic functions, including the need to feel safe, regulate self-esteem, and overcome traumatic experiences. He’d previously theorised that fantasies were linked to sexual or aggressive wishes and provided imaginary wish fulfilment. Since fantasies were expected to motivate a person’s behaviour, he believed exploring and interpreting them was vital for psychoanalysis.

A defence is an intrapsychic process that helps individuals avoid emotional pain by pushing thoughts, wishes, feelings, and fantasies out of conscious awareness. Via projection, individuals can attribute their own threatening feelings or motives to another person. And via reaction formation, they can deny a threatening feeling by claiming they’re experiencing the opposite.

Using rationalisation, an individual can find excuses that justify unacceptable behaviours when self-esteem is threatened. Splitting is a way for individuals with borderline personality disorder to think in extremes, regarding people as either perfect or deeply flawed, exclusively nurturing or rejecting, etc.

Individuals with serious physical illnesses may deny being informed of the illness because that would threaten their reality. Through displacement, individuals can shift emotions from one object onto a less threatening one so that the latter replaces the former. (A person who loses a child in a road accident, and thereafter devotes themselves to campaigning against dangerous driving, is exhibiting displacement. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the emotion attached to the child is replaced by emotions attached to the ideals of the campaign.)



Through identification, a victim may assume the faults of the opponent. For example, a woman facing domestic violence may believe she deserves to be beaten to justify her husband's aggression. Via sublimation, a person may transfer unacceptable impulses onto more acceptable alternatives, like channeling anger into political activism.

Freud formalised the concept of resistance when he found his clients were reluctant to work with him. He responded by asking them to engage in free-association: that is, they could say anything that came to their minds, without self-censorship.

Transference

It wasn't uncommon for his clients to view him as tyrannical if they had a tyrannical father. In Freud's view, his clients were transferring a template from the past into the present. He believed transference provided a window of opportunity for a person to gain insights into the effects of adverse past experiences on current behaviour.

He also believed that if a therapist maintained anonymity, by withholding information about the therapist's own life or views, the person became less likely to develop transference towards the therapist.

Freud also held that the therapist may have their own unresolved unconscious conflicts and that they paved the way for the therapist to develop feelings towards the client. So, in his view, the therapist had to work through their own countertransference via personal supervision or self-analysis.

How does psychoanalysis help?

It was common practice for Freud to interpret his and his clients' dreams. He considered dreams to be forms of wish fulfilment, and believed interpreting them to be central to psychoanalysis. Contemporary psychiatrists disagree, however.

Change generally involves making the unconscious conscious. In Freud's view, humans are driven by unconscious wishes that aren't in our awareness and that this lack of awareness drives self-defeating behaviour. He reasoned that individuals deluded themselves about the reasons for their behaviour and that the self-deception limited their choices.

According to psychoanalysis, the therapeutic relationship is itself a change mechanism. By acting in a different way than a client's parents did, the therapist can present a new relational experience that challenges the client's maladaptive models.

Traditional psychoanalysis involves four to six sessions per week, and often lasts for years. Contemporary psychoanalysts believe longer-term intensive treatment has certain advantages. While circumscribed symptoms can change in the short term, more fundamental changes in personality functioning need more time to manifest. However, long-term intensive treatment isn't always feasible, practical or even desirable.

Contemporary psychoanalytic practice involves shorter term consultations happening once or twice a week.



WHY HAS THE INDIAN SCIENCE CONGRESS BEEN POSTPONED?

The Indian Science Congress, the largest gathering of scientists and students of science in the country and a permanent annual fixture in the calendar of the participant group for more than a century, has been postponed. The five-day event will not begin on its customary date, January 3. There is no firm word on when — and whether — the congress will meet this year.

Is the postponement of the Indian Science Congress a big deal? Why?

The postponement is unprecedented. With the exception of the two years following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic— 2021 and 2022 — the Indian Science Congress has been held every year since 1914. The 108th edition of the Congress was held in Nagpur from January 3-7, 2023.

The congress is inaugurated by the Prime Minister. It is a permanent fixture on the PM's calendar, and is usually his/her first public engagement of the new year.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had addressed the Science Congress by video link last year, and had called for harnessing scientific knowledge for societal needs and to make India self-reliant. He had inaugurated all previous congresses during his tenure in person.

The Science Congress is a one-of-its-kind event, which brings together scientists and researchers from not just the country's premier institutions and laboratories, but also teachers of science from colleges and universities, and offers them a platform to interact with students and the general public on matters relating to science.

The congress has had a glorious past, with the who's who of Indian science participating and serving as the event's organisers.

So why then has the Science Congress been postponed this year?

The crisis is the fallout of an unresolved disagreement between the Indian Science Congress Association (ISCA), a registered society that organises the event, and the Department of Science and Technology (DST) in the Union Ministry of Science and Technology, the main funder of the congress.

In September 2023, the DST pulled funding support to the congress, alleging "financial irregularities". The ISCA denied the accusation, and challenged the DST's directive that government funds should not be spent on anything related to the Science Congress, in court. This only deepened the rift. The lawsuit remains pending.

The DST's contribution (which was raised to Rs 5 crore in 2023 from Rs 3 crore earlier) pays for most of the event's expenses. The ISCA also receives some funding from a few other government bodies, and raises some more from its members and by renting out space for exhibitions etc. during the event.

The ISCA had decided to move this year's congress from the original venue, Lucknow University, to the private Lovely Professional University (LPU) in Jalandhar in the hope of receiving some funding. While LPU had also hosted the 106th Science Congress in 2019, the DST was said to be unhappy with the ISCA's choice for this year. The ISCA, however, argued that its executive committee does not need the DST's clearance for the venue, and that a DST representative was in any case present when LPU was chosen. Amid this tussle, LPU last month withdrew its offer to host the event.



Was this crisis for the Science Congress not foreseen by the organisers?

The Science Congress has in fact, been in steady decline over the past several years. The glory days of the gathering are clearly over, and it has of late been in the news more for the controversies that it has generated than for any serious scientific discussion or useful outcomes.

Random speakers have used the platform to make outlandish claims and promote pseudoscience, which have drawn ridicule. The papers that are presented or the talks that are delivered, hardly reflect the latest advancements in science.

Most of India's credible scientists now avoid the event. Leading scientific institutions and laboratories have only a token presence, if at all. Most attendees are from colleges and universities with limited scientific credentials.

Several top scientists have, in fact, said that the event should be discontinued, or the government should withdraw support to it. There has been talk of reforms for the past couple of decades, but nothing much has changed.

But what exactly is the government's dilemma here?

The ISCA is an independent body, and the government has no role to play in the selection of the panelists or speakers, the papers to be presented, or the subjects to be discussed at the Science Congress.

But at the same time, the ISCA runs with DST support. Besides the annual grant for the Science Congress, the government also pays the salaries of the ISCA's permanent staff. And because the congress is inaugurated by the PM and attended by other ministers and senior officials, it is perceived as being closely associated with the government. As such, every time the event lands in controversy the government is blamed. Also, while the event is presented as a showcase scientific forum in India, its proceedings often convey an unflattering and frequently embarrassing picture of Indian science internationally.

And what has the government done about this situation?

There has in fact been a strong sentiment within the government in favour of reviewing its association with the Science Congress. This feeling predates the current government — back in 2008, then Science Minister Kapil Sibal was said to be so upset with the goings-on at the congress that he had explored the possibility of discontinuing government support until some reforms were introduced.

However, governments have been reluctant to actually go ahead on this path. They have been wary of opening themselves up to accusations of being “anti-science”. They have also been mindful that the event attracts a large number of students from across the country, and this is their only opportunity to interact with some well-known scientists, and be exposed to new developments in science.

The government has been scaling down its involvement in the Science Congress. The PM no longer presents the awards at the inaugural plenary — some past awardees were subsequently found to have dubious credentials — and the number of people who share the stage with the PM at the inauguration has been significantly reduced.



Is this year's postponement a signal that the Science Congress could be approaching the end of the road?

ISCA general secretary Ranjit Kumar Verma has said that while the postponement is unfortunate, it does not mean the end of Science Congress. "We will hopefully be able to organise the Science Congress before March 31 and we are hopeful that the Prime Minister will attend the event," he said.

A government official told The Indian Express that financial support to the Science Congress could resume. "There was a disagreement over the funding for this year's event, but this does not mean that there would be no support for all future events. Discussions for collaboration will continue for the Science Congress scheduled for 2025," he said.

Scientists have said that one way to reform the Science Congress could be to develop an alternative forum where top Indian and global scientists could be invited to talk about the latest developments in the scientific world and their impacts on our lives.

Such events are organised in many countries, and are extremely popular. They also serve as platforms to get younger citizens and the general public excited about science, and help in the cultivation of scientific temper, which is one of the main purposes of the Science Congress as well. Such an alternative forum could also help to make Indian science more competitive, and could lead to an increase in collaborative research with leading scientific groups and institutions.

DRUG WAR

Prevention is better than cure, but taking this adage to the extreme in the practice of medicine might obnubilate the very purpose of treating patients to recovery, and even turn out to be counter-productive. In the case of prophylactic use of antibiotics, the resultant antimicrobial resistance (AMR) will be deadly. The 'First Multicentric Point Prevalence Survey of Antibiotic Use at 20 NAC-NET Sites India 2021-22' conducted by the National Centre for Disease Control under the Health Ministry has thrown up startling statistics, but more importantly, examining the minutiae italicises key issues that have been flagged by experts for years now. Over 70% of the patients in tertiary-care hospitals across 15 States and two Union Territories were prescribed antibiotics; over 50% of antibiotics prescribed have the potential to cause AMR. But the most crucial reveal was that 55% of the patients surveyed were prescribed antibiotics as prophylaxis, or as a preventive; only 45% were prescribed antibiotics to actually treat infections; of this, only 6% were prescribed the drugs after identifying the specific bacteria.

AMR occurs when pathogens evolve, fortifying themselves against drugs, and stop responding to antimicrobial drugs. While it is the nature of pathogens to evolve, this ever-increasing crisis is constantly being exacerbated by unsound medical, and animal husbandry practices. It is precisely the sort of misuse and overuse of antimicrobials, as revealed by the survey, which cause the development of drug-resistant pathogens that in turn pose great risk to life and exacerbate morbidity. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that bacterial AMR was directly responsible for 1.27 million global deaths in 2019 and contributed to 4.95 million deaths. AMR invalidates the multiple gains that modern medicine has achieved over years, makes infections harder to treat, but also renders other medical procedures and treatments such as surgery, caesarean sections and cancer chemotherapy, much more risky, WHO warns. Infectious diseases specialists and critical-care experts have for long been waving the red flag over AMR, calling for rational prescription of antibiotics, and curbs on the use of drugs to promote growth in animals and plants. It is also clear that there is an antibiotic research and development pipeline crisis, and



urgent measures are required to develop new drug candidates, and more equitable access to them. The role of doctors and the government in regulating use of drugs is crucial in this battle, but more so the latter. Patients too are impatient with the medical process, expecting immediate relief to ailments; but medical science offers no magical remedy. Ultimately, it is the agency with the heft to do both, establish systems that strictly regulate the use of antimicrobials and promote and fund research on newer antibiotics that will draw the line — between life and death.

LEVY 20-30% HEALTH TAX ON FOOD HIGH IN SUGAR, SALT, FAT: STUDY

A health tax of between 20% to 30% in addition to GST can be considered to be imposed on sugar, sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs) like colas and juices as well as foods high in sugar, salt and fat (HFSS), public health researchers have recommended in a study published in *Journal of Health Policy and Planning*.

The recommendation is an outcome of a UNICEF-funded project, and the authors hope that this study along with others will influence policies aimed to reduce consumption of sugar and related products. Niti Aayog is interested in understanding the impact of imposing health taxes and warning labels on food products for encouraging healthy eating practices in Indian consumers. According to Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution data, confectionery manufacturers purchase up to 55% of annual sugar produced in India.

Price Elasticity

Currently, sugar is taxed at 18% GST, if an additional 20-30% tax is imposed, this will take the tax to 38-48%. Researchers have applied the metric of 'Price Elasticity' to determine if there will be any reduction in demand if the prices of the product go up. "Sugar is a widely used product, so on studying price and demand for sugar over years from datasets available between 1984-85 to 2011-2012 of Private Final Consumption Expenditure and Consumer Price Index, we estimate that if the price of sugar is increased by 10%, demand for sugar will be reduced by 2% with all other factors driving the demand remaining constant.

Researchers also noted that additional taxes would increase tax revenues for the government by 12-200% across different scenarios. Different products are currently taxed differently. While sugar currently attracts 18% GST, sugar sweetened beverages attract 28% GST and a 12% additional cess, while high fat, salt and sugar products only attract 12% GST. "Taxing unhealthy foods more is likely to reduce demand while increasing government revenues for reinvestment back into public health programmes and policies that may reduce obesity and the incidence of non-communicable diseases in India," says Dr. Varghese.

India is the largest consumer of sugar in the world, the paper notes. "Global average consumption of sugar is 22 kg per person per year, an average Indian consumes 25 kg per year which includes regular sugar, free sugar from sugar sweetened beverages, traditional sources like jaggery, which is five times the WHO recommended threshold for free sugar intake," the paper says. India is facing a sugar epidemic with a rise in sales of aerated drinks by 22.5% and a rise in all soft drinks by 24.8% from 2016 to 2019. Also, HFSS food products account for 10-30% of the average total caloric intake in rural and urban households respectively, the paper notes.

Imposing a health tax on sugar and related products can help control obesity, tooth decay, risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and certain cancers. Researchers say that if people continue to consume sugar sweetened beverages year-on-year the overweight and obesity



prevalence is expected to rise from 39% to 49% from 2014 to 2023 and type 2 diabetes incidence is expected to rise from 319 to 336 per 1,00,000 in the same period.

Tax rate is tied to the volume of sugars and manufacturers are encouraged to reformulate and reduce the amount of sugar in drinks.

Up to 70 countries have imposed a health tax on sugar, SSBs and HFSS including Mexico, Chile, Saudi Arabia, Argentina and South Africa. In Mexico, taxation on SSBs decreased consumption of taxed beverages (and increased purchase of bottled water) in the first year of implementation and reduced mean BMI in younger age groups.

TATA CANCER HOSPITAL TEACHES AI HOW TO DETECT CANCER FROM SCANS. WHY THIS IS A KEY STEP FORWARD

Consider this scenario: With a simple click, doctors will be able to assess the hardness, texture and elasticity of tumours, including gaining insights into the likelihood of a patient's survival and responsiveness to chemotherapy.

Once the stuff of sci-fi, an initiative by Mumbai's Tata Memorial Hospital, India's largest cancer hospital, is doing just that — deploying deep learning to teach Artificial Intelligence (AI) how to diagnose cancer early on. This detection tool, doctors say, will also help avoid unnecessary chemotherapy for predicted non-responders.

With the hospital's Bioimaging Bank having integrated 60,000 digital scans of cancer patients over the past year, it has laid the groundwork to develop a cancer-specific algorithm. The hospital has also started using AI to reduce radiation exposure in paediatric patients undergoing CT scans.

Dr Sudeep Gupta, the director of Tata Memorial Centre, said, "Cancer cases are expected to double from 13 lakh to over 26 lakh in the next decade. This increase necessitates specialised manpower for early diagnosis. Cancer can be cured in many cases if detected early and treated swiftly."

AFTER 'SOFT RELEASE', GUJARAT NOW CLOSER TO SENDING CAPTIVE-BRED WOLVES INTO THE WILD

At a "soft-release" facility, set up in Gujarat's Banaskantha district for wolves bred in captivity to adapt to conditions in the wild, forest officials happily noted that the few hares that had previously been seen in the four-hectare enclosure could no longer be found, and that feathers and other remains of birds were scattered in the area.

According to the officials, this shows that the wolves have gotten into the habit of actively hunting and also separating feathers from the meat of the birds they catch — important skills for them to pick up before they can be fully released into the wild.

The project, undertaken by Gujarat's Forest Department, to introduce wolves bred in captivity into the wild is the first of its kind outside the US, officials said. It is aimed at restocking the population of wolves in the wild, where they can perform their role as biocontrol agents that keep the population of wild herbivores, like nilgai (blue bulls) and wild boars under control.

Mulu Bera, the state's Forest and Environment minister, told The Indian Express that he had received several complaints from farmers about the increasing number of nilgai becoming a menace to them, and that "an increase in wolf population can help address the problem".



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

WHY DID FIU IND ACT AGAINST VIRTUAL ASSET PROVIDERS?

The story so far:

On December 28, the Financial Intelligence Unit India (FIU IND) issued show-cause notices to nine offshore virtual digital asset service providers (VDA SPs), including Binance, Kucoin, Huobi, Bitfinex and MEXC Global, among others. This was for “operating illegally” without complying with the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA). It has also been written to the Secretary of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology to block URLs of the mentioned entities.

What is the premise of the non-compliance?

In March 2023, Virtual Digital Asset Service Providers (VDA SPs) in India were brought under anti-money laundering/counter financing of terrorism regulations. They were mandated to comply with PMLA 2002, verify the identities of onboarded clients, and maintain records of their financial positions and potentially suspicious transactions. This obligation applies to all VDA SPs operating in India irrespective of physical presence. Non-registration made entities non-compliant despite serving Indian users. To put it in perspective, the entities “though catering to a substantial part of Indian users were not getting registered and coming under the Anti Money Laundering (AML) and Counter Financing of Terrorism Network (CFT) framework”. Currently, 31 VDA SPs have registered with FIU IND.

What purpose does the PMLA compliance serve?

The purpose of PMLA (Prevention of Money Laundering Act) compliance is to enable monitoring and tracking of financial transactions, aiming to curb money laundering and terrorist financing. The reporting obligations under PMLA are crucial for maintaining the integrity of the global financial ecosystem. The Financial Intelligence Unit of India (FIU-IND) seeks compliance from entities falling within the parameters of the March 2023 notification and capable of providing the required information.

The compliance also addresses concerns about the anonymity of cryptocurrency assets and their potential misuse for unlawful purposes. Mandatory Know Your Customer (KYC) verifications for Virtual Digital Asset Service Providers (VDA SPs) ensure that these businesses do not operate with anonymity, making it more difficult for illicit activities.

The government’s intention to enforce PMLA obligations on offshore entities aligns with global efforts for cryptocurrency regulation. India has been advocating for global cryptocurrency regulation through forums like the G-20. The framework proposed by the International Monetary Fund and the Financial Stability Board to the G-20 in September 2023 is expected to be implemented in 2024.

What considerations emerge when looking to regulate VDAs?

The Bureau for International Settlements (BIS), which is the global forum for cooperation among central banks, in a report about financial stability from crypto assets in emerging economies (August 2023) observed three high-level policy options under consideration. These include an outright ban, containment and regulation. BIS observed that an outright ban may not prove



enforceable. This is because of the pseudo-anonymous nature of crypto markets. There could be a possibility that regulators lose all sight of the market, further shrinking their transparency and making them less predictable. Containment would imply controlling the flows between crypto markets and traditional financial systems. However, BIS argued that the strategy would not address the vulnerabilities inherent in the crypto markets and could result in financial stability risks.

About regulation, motivation to regulate the asset varies across jurisdictions. The report holds that it must be ensured that the benefits of regulating and supervising are greater than the costs involved. Furthermore, for emerging market economies three issues are of importance, that is: defining the (regulatory) authority or entity and their scope, then the scope of regulation in terms of either activity or entity, and lastly, filling in the data gaps to understand the technology and interconnections.

'MECHANISM TO WATCH U.S. STEEL IMPORT TARIFFS'

Ministries of mines, steel and the department for promotion of industry and internal trade (DPIIT) will set up an internal mechanism to monitor the export of steel and aluminium products at concessional duties to the U.S., an official said.

Indian exports of these products were earlier attracting additional duties in the U.S., as Washington, in 2018, imposed a 25% import duty on steel products and 10% on certain aluminium products on grounds of national security. In retaliation, India in June 2019, imposed additional customs duties on 28 American products. The U.S. is now allowing these imports from India without paying the extra 25% and 10% duties in return for New Delhi's decision to remove retaliatory duties on eight American products like apples and walnuts.

The official also said the two countries have agreed to set up a joint monitoring mechanism (JMM) to enable exports to America of at least 3.36 lakh tonne of certain steel and aluminium products in a year without paying extra duties.

If Indian exporters face any bottleneck, it would be conveyed to the Commerce Ministry and will be taken up with the U.S. during the meetings of the JMM.

During PM Modi June visit last year, the two countries decided to remove trade irritants and as part of that, both sides agreed to end six trade disputes at the WTO. They mutually resolved those seven disputes and India has decided to remove additional duties on eight U.S. products.

INDIA'S 1991 CRISIS AND THE RBI GOVERNOR'S ROLE

Starting in late 1990, India faced a severe balance of payments stress. This had been precipitated by a slowing of inward remittances and a rise in the price of oil following the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussain. The current account of the balance of payments was subjected to a double whammy, a reduction of receipts and a rise in the value of imports. In 1990-91 the current account deficit swelled to 3 percent of the GDP, a level highest by far in two decades. There was speculation that India would default on its external payment obligations. It was at that moment that the RBI led by Mr. Venkitaramanan played a sterling role, which in effect came to pledging its gold to international banks for a hard currency loan. The details of these initiatives and their significance are set out in the RBI's official history, "In April 1991, the Government raised \$200.0 million from the Union Bank of Switzerland through a sale (with a repurchase option) of 20 tonnes of gold



confiscated from smugglers (sic). Again, in July 1991, India shipped 47 tonnes of gold to the Bank of England to raise another \$405.0 million. This action helped the country repay its international donors and creditors, though it was not sufficient to completely absolve the country of the crisis.” The act of pledging the country’s gold, which involved transporting it overseas, had been mocked by some in India. It only reveals an ignorance of the world. For the RBI to have used its gold to stave off a default was an act of courage. Indeed, it was the smartest economic management. It only needs to be recalled that India imports around 80 percent of its oil to recognise the practical value of the manoeuvre. Default would have narrowed India’s access to the global loan markets to finance its imports were its export earnings to fall short in the future. With the sale and pledging of India’s gold reserves, a breathing space within the payments crisis had been created.

Economic reforms

Before its efforts to raise international loans, the RBI had begun a programme of import compression, implemented mainly via raising the cash margin on imports. While this had commenced before Mr. Venkitaramanan had assumed office as Governor, it was under him that the policy assumed greater force. The cash margin was hiked four-fold between October 1990 and April 1991. Supplementary measures that raised the cost of imports were implemented too, together constituting a stringent effort to rein them in. This strategy turned out to be a winner, and the current account deficit flipped from a high of 3 percent in 1990-91 to a mere .3 percent of GDP in 1991-92. This almost eliminated the need to raise foreign exchange to finance India’s non-debt payments. Though a government led by Narasimha Rao was to take office in mid-1991 and set in motion measures, including a devaluation of the rupee, to improve the balance of payments over the long term there is reason to believe that the immediate improvement of the balance of payments may be largely attributed to the import compression put in place by the RBI. This is implied by the data, which show that while imports contracted substantially in 1991-92 exports did not rise, they declined slightly. The RBI’s official history of the period states “At a critical time and in the thick of the BoP crisis, the main task of the Reserve Bank under the leadership of the Governor, Shri S. Venkitaramanan, turned out to navigate the country through the troubled waters.” It concludes that the crisis was “successfully resolved”. However, it is the economic reforms that followed that have received attention from the public at the time, and understandably. Dr. Manmohan Singh and his team had cut a dash with their bold reconfiguration of the economic policy regime. Once the balance of payment crisis had passed, its architects came to be forgotten and their heroic guarding of India’s international prestige and financial credentials was left unsung in the public sphere. And, for Governor Venkitaramanan himself, the ending of his term was less than glorious due to what the RBI’s official history terms “issues related to an unexpected breakout of irregularities in securities transactions from April 1992”, known to the public as “the Harshad Mehta scam”.

EXPRESS VIEW ON NSO’S GDP ESTIMATES: ON THE UPSIDE

The Indian economy is estimated to grow at a healthy 7.3 per cent in the ongoing financial year, up from 7.2 per cent last year, as per the first advance estimates released by the National Statistical Office. The NSO’s growth estimate for this year is considerably higher than what most independent analysts had projected. In fact, it is even higher than the 7 per cent growth projected by the Reserve Bank of India in the December monetary policy committee. The estimate implies that the economy, after growing at 7.7 per cent in the first half, will likely grow at 7 per cent in the second half of the year. However, as the full year growth estimate is based only on data for the first seven to eight months of the year, it is possible that these numbers will be subsequently



revised, especially considering the intimations of the economic momentum slowing down more sharply towards the end of the year.

The sector-wise data shows that the agricultural sector is expected to slow down significantly. Growth for the full year has been pegged at 1.8 per cent, down from 4 per cent last year. However, in an El Nino year, this growth is better than expected. Alongside, the industrial sector is estimated to grow at 7.9 per cent this year, up from 4.4 per cent last year, driven by stronger manufacturing and construction activities. Manufacturing companies have reported healthy profits and steel and cement production has been fairly healthy so far. On the flip side, the services sector is likely to slow down from 9.5 per cent last year to 7.7 per cent this year, with trade, hotels, transport, and communication dragging down the performance.

The latest data also points to a continuing weakness in consumption. Private consumption is expected to grow at a mere 4.4 per cent this year, reflecting perhaps subdued wage/income growth. Investment activity, though, is expected to remain healthy, with the latest estimates pegging growth at 10.3 per cent. However, investment activity driven by higher government spending might slow down in the months ahead as the national elections approach. In fact, recent data from the Controller General of Accounts shows that central government capex was down 8.8 per cent during October-November. The NSO also estimates nominal GDP to grow at 8.9 per cent this year. This is considerably lower than the 10.5 per cent factored in the Union budget's estimates. Slower nominal GDP growth would suggest that even if the government meets its fiscal deficit target in absolute terms, it is possible that the fiscal deficit ratio edges to around 6 per cent of GDP, marginally higher than the budget estimate.

EXPRESS VIEW ON INDIA'S FISCAL DEFICIT TARGET: STAYING IN THE LANE

Notwithstanding the sharp monthly fluctuations, the Union government's tax collections continue to grow at a fairly robust pace. Data released recently by the Controller General of Accounts shows that in the first eight months of the ongoing financial year, April-November, the Centre's gross tax revenues grew at a healthy pace of 14.7 per cent. This is higher than the growth factored in for the full year in the Union budget. While, on the other hand, government spending is also marginally higher than its budget projections, at the current juncture, based on these trends, most analysts do not expect the government to breach its fiscal deficit target for the year.

On the revenue side, direct tax collections continue to grow at a fairly brisk pace. At the end of November, collections were up almost 25 per cent, with healthy growth in both corporate and personal income tax collections. However, indirect tax collections have been subdued, in part, due to lower excise duty collections. Alongside, data released on Monday shows that GST collections grew at the slowest pace in three months in December, though it is possible that collections in the previous months did receive a boost due to the festive season. So far this year, GST collections have averaged Rs 1.66 lakh crore per month, up from roughly Rs 1.5 lakh crore over the same period in 2023. And while non-tax collections have been healthy, shored up by the higher than budgeted transfer from the RBI, disinvestment proceeds continue to disappoint. As against a target of Rs 61,000 crore, collections have touched only Rs 8,858 crore (as of November). Based on these trends, there are expectations that direct tax collections will comfortably surpass the budget targets, and possibly offset the lower than expected excise duty collections and disinvestment proceeds.

On the expenditure side, the pace of central government capex has slowed down in the last few months, even as, for the year so far, it is up roughly 31 per cent. With elections approaching, and



the model code of conduct likely to be imposed in the next quarter, there is a likelihood of the government not meeting its capex target for the year. There is also a concern that slower nominal GDP growth — the economy grew at 8.6 per cent in the first half of the year, as against the budget estimate of 10.5 per cent — could imply a marginally higher fiscal deficit ratio. However, in absolute terms, for now, a breach of the deficit target does not seem to be on the cards.

GROWTH SIGNALS

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) has yielded close to ₹1.65 lakh crore in gross revenues in the last month of 2023. As the Finance Ministry has highlighted, this is the seventh occasion in this fiscal year that GST revenues were over ₹1.6 lakh crore. The first nine months of 2023-24 have clocked a 12% rise in GST collections, with the monthly intake averaging ₹1.66 lakh crore, from ₹1.49 lakh crore in 2022-23. There is a good chance that the tax, which North Block mandarins have often lamented has not delivered as much revenue as was anticipated at the time of its launch, may end up bestowing a bonanza to the exchequer this year. The Budget had factored in monthly GST revenues of around ₹1.59 lakh crore, so maintaining the current rate should translate into an additional inflow of ₹80,000-odd crore. While this may provide some buffer for any fresh pre-poll handouts from the Centre ahead of the general election, an expected slowdown in the final quarter of the year may moderate the gains. The Reserve Bank of India's projection was for growth to taper off from 7.7% in the first half of the year to 6.5% in the October to December 2023 quarter and further to 6% in the current quarter. December's GST collections for transactions undertaken in November indicate some moderation in momentum already.

Both the headline number and the growth rate for December were the lowest in three months. In fact, the 10.3% growth was far weaker than the 15.1% recorded a month earlier, and just marginally better than September's 10.2% uptick, which in turn marked a 27-month low. Deepavali, which was closer to the middle of that month, should have spurred some last minute spending boost, but that effect seems to have been insipid. Revenues from domestic transactions grew 13% in December, down from the 14-month high growth of 20% in November, suggesting that the initially healthy festive fervour may have partly hit the 'snooze' button. This is corroborated somewhat by e-way bills generated in November which slid to 87 million from 100 million in October. The government has emphasised resilient domestic consumption steered the economy despite global headwinds. Indicators such as car sales, which crossed the four-million mark in 2023, led by high-end sport utility vehicles, can buttress that belief. But with rural demand likely to be fragile amid bleak prospects for the farm sector, and the festive push already in the past, policymakers, for whom this is the last month of official data to base their Interim Budget premises on, must note the slowing pace while factoring in the additional inflow that seems set to exceed expectations.

WHAT MAY 2024 HOLD FOR THE ECONOMY?

The story so far:

Reeling from the aftershocks of the Ukraine-Russia conflict, such as elevated oil prices and high inflation, 2023 had begun on a sombre note with worries of an economic slowdown leading to a hard recessionary landing for advanced economies that would drag down growth in emerging economies like India's too. As it turned out, the year was kinder than expected and the worst fears have not materialised yet, despite a fresh geopolitical flashpoint in West Asia and a few bank collapses in the West. While Indian stock markets ended the year at record highs, the economy



has delivered positive surprises, with ₹1.6 lakh crore becoming the new normal for monthly GST collections and GDP growth hitting 7.7% between April and September on top of a 7.2% rise in 2022-23.

On the cusp of the New Year, what are the key things to watch out for?

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), which had earlier projected India's real GDP to grow 6.5% in 2023-24, has recently raised its forecast to 7%. The Finance Ministry is more sanguine, indicating an uptick of over 6.5% for the year ending March 31, 2024, in its review of the economy published on December 29. Global agencies have also rebooted their growth math for India. "Some of the key sectors of the economy — construction, manufacturing, financial and real estate services — are showing a robust growth and even the trade, hotels, transport sector which had remained below its pre-COVID level of 2019-20, has now fully recovered," said noted economist and chief policy adviser at EY India, D.K. Srivastava. While the domestic growth engine is pulling along, risks to the growth and stability outlook mainly emanate from outside the country, the Finance Ministry noted. Slack global demand has been hurting goods exports through 2023, and IT-led services exports may feel greater heat in the coming year as developed economies continue to face challenges. The fresh disruptions like the attacks on shipping lines in the Red Sea corridors could pose challenges. Interest rate cuts by central banks will be watched closely.

What is expected on the policy and political economy front?

The first half of 2024 may see a lull of sorts, as the government gears up for the Lok Sabha elections. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, who will present an interim Budget on February 1, has indicated that there will be no spectacular announcements, just a vote-on-account to meet public spending needs till a new government is sworn in. But the last such exercise, before the 2019 polls, had included a rejig of income tax slabs and the unveiling of the PM-Kisan scheme that put cash in the hands of farmers. The full Budget for the year, likely in July, will see a larger armoury of policy tweaks at play. Most investors looking for governance and reform signals will have to wait till then, Ms. Sitharaman has said. Policymakers will keep a keen eye on whether a private investment, which is beginning to rebound in sectors like steel, cement and auto, will become more broadbased and allow the government to step off the public capex pedal and focus on fiscal consolidation. "Politics may also create turbulence and uncertainty, as there are 40 upcoming national elections representing 41% of the global population in 2024 alone. Russia, India, the European Union and the U.S., will hold elections that will likely re-shape the path of global affairs in the second half of the decade," noted Avinash Satwalekar, president of Franklin Templeton Asset Management India. Global voters' mood amid an increasing shift to inward-looking, protectionist polity in many countries, could thus, impact trade deals and the broader direction of global economic engagement.

Are there higher hopes of rate cuts occurring in 2024?

While most expect the RBI to start interest rate cuts in the second half of the year, the U.S. Federal Reserve's indication of a pivot from its rate hike cycle has prompted hopes of many other central banks following its cue. A Bank of America report earlier this month said there will be 152 rate cuts next year from central banks around the world. If they materialise, demand for Indian goods and services may yet get a bump-up in 2024. In the Indian context, industry and consumers also eagerly await changes on two more rates - prices of petrol and diesel that have been frozen since mid-2022 and the unwieldy multiple GST rates' framework. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during the recent Assembly polls' campaign, hinted at a review of petroleum products' retail



prices. Perhaps, some relief may be rung in before the Lok Sabha battle. The GST rate rationalisation exercise may only gather steam after the elections but could figure as a poll promise.

Is inflation, and its impact on consumption, no longer a worry?

Despite intermittent spurts, India's inflation trajectory seems to be under better control than a year ago. The RBI expects retail inflation to average 5.2% in the first half of 2024 before easing to its 4% target between July-September and rising to 4.7% in the final quarter. However, as its Governor has asserted, food prices remain a concern. With Kharif crop estimates not rosy and El Niño effects hurting Rabi sowing, the supply of several food items, including pulses, could remain under pressure and keep eating into household budgets. Weaker farm sector performance would also constrain rural demand and feed into a trend of uneven consumption demand — with high-end goods and services booming while low-price segments lag. Recent curbs on retail loans and weak hiring trends in sectors like IT services could also hurt urban demand. Without a broader consumption boost, private capex is likely to be limited to some sectors, which may not suffice to kickstart the virtuous investment cycle necessary to create more and better jobs that can drive up spending capacity and factory utilisation rates.

PANAGARIYA TO HEAD 16TH FINANCE COMMISSION

The government on Sunday appointed former NITI Aayog Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya Chairman of the 16th Finance Commission, which will recommend the tax revenue sharing formula between the Centre and the States for the five-year period beginning April 2026. The Finance Ministry on Sunday notified President Droupadi Murmu's order for Mr. Panagariya's appointment. The terms of reference for the panel were approved by the Cabinet on November 29.

The members of the commission will be notified separately, says the order, which appointed Ritvik Ranjanam Pandey as the panel's secretary.

The Finance Ministry on Sunday notified President Droupadi Murmu's order for Mr. Panagariya's appointment. The terms of reference for the panel were approved by the Cabinet on November 29.

Mr. Panagariya, a Columbia University Professor and trade economist, had served as the first Vice-Chairman of the NITI Aayog, which replaced the Planning Commission, from 2015 to 2017.

The names of the members of the commission will be notified separately, says the order, which appointed Ritvik Ranjanam Pandey, who was earlier a Joint Secretary in the Department of Revenue, as the panel's secretary.

"The Chairman and other members of the Commission shall hold office from the date on which they respectively assume office upto the date of the submission of report or October 31, 2025, whichever is earlier," the order specified.

October 2025 is the deadline set for the commission to submit its recommendations, so that they can be incorporated in the Budget exercise.



INOPERATIVE & UNCLAIMED ACCOUNTS: HOW WILL THE RBI'S REVISED GUIDELINES BENEFIT CUSTOMERS?

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has revised guidelines for classifying accounts and deposits as inoperative accounts and unclaimed deposits by banks. As per the norms, account holders can reactivate their inoperative accounts/ unclaimed deposits by submitting know your customer (KYC) documents afresh at all branches, including non-home branches, of banks in which they have an account.

What is an inoperative account?

A savings or current account is treated as inoperative, if there are no 'customer induced transactions' in the account for a period of over two years.

A customer induced transaction can be a financial transaction initiated by or done at the behest of the account holder by the bank or third party, or a non-financial transaction, or a KYC (know your customer) updation done in face-to-face physical mode or through digital channels such as internet banking or mobile banking application of the bank. Around Rs 1-1.30 lakh crore is estimated to be lying in inoperative bank accounts.

What are unclaimed deposits?

Balances in savings / current accounts which are not operated for 10 years, or term deposits not claimed within 10 years from date of maturity are classified as 'unclaimed deposits'. The government recently informed the Parliament that unclaimed deposits of Rs 42,270 crore are lying with the banks as of March 2023.

What do the revised RBI guidelines say?

The RBI has asked banks to undertake at least an annual review in respect of accounts, where there are no customer induced transactions for more than a year. In cases where there is no explicit mandate to renew the term deposit, banks need to review such accounts if the customers have not withdrawn the proceeds after maturity or transferred these to their savings/current account in order to prevent such deposits from becoming unclaimed.

Banks should communicate to the account or deposit holders through letters or email or SMS that there has been no operation in their accounts in the last one year. The alert messages should invariably mention that the account would become 'inoperative' if no operations are carried out during the next one year and, the account holder would be required to submit KYC documents afresh for reactivating the account in such case.

Which account can be classified as inoperative?

For the purpose of classifying an account as inoperative, only customer induced transactions and not bank induced transactions shall be considered. There may be instances where the customer has given a mandate like standing instructions (SI)/ auto-renewal instructions and there are no other operations in the savings /current account or the term deposit. These transactions shall also be treated as customer-induced transactions. Bank-induced transactions are transactions in the account initiated by the bank such as charges, fees, interest payments, penalties and taxes.

The classification of an account as inoperative will be for a particular account of the customer and not with reference to the customer.



Which accounts cannot be classified as inoperative accounts?

Banks open zero balance accounts for beneficiaries of Central/State government schemes and for students who receive scholarships. Central and State governments have been expressing difficulty in crediting cheques or direct benefit transfer or electronic benefit transfer or scholarship amount in these accounts as they are also classified as inoperative due to non-operation for two years.

The RBI said that banks should, based on the purpose of opening of the account, segregate such accounts in their core banking solution (CBS), so that the stipulation of 'inoperative' accounts is not applicable to these accounts due to their non-operation for a period of more than two years.

How can an inoperative account be reactivated?

The RBI has asked banks to make available the facility of updation of KYC for activation of inoperative accounts and unclaimed deposits at all branches (including non-home branches) and through video-customer identification process (V-CIP) if requested by the account holder and subject to the facility of V-CIP being provided by the bank.

Banks should activate the inoperative accounts or unclaimed deposits only after adhering to the KYC guidelines, it said.

Can banks charge for activation of inoperative accounts?

The RBI has said that no charges should be levied for activation of inoperative accounts.

Is there any penalty on non-maintenance of minimum balances in an inoperative account?

The banks are not permitted to levy penal charges for non-maintenance of minimum balances in any account that is classified as an inoperative account.

Will banks pay interest on savings accounts which are inoperative?

Interest on savings accounts should be credited on a regular basis irrespective of the fact that the account is in operation or not, the RBI said.

HIGHER BORROWING BY STATES TO WIDEN YIELD SPREAD WITH G-SEC

As six states — Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat, Punjab, Rajasthan and Bihar — tapped the market on Tuesday for borrowing Rs 16,000 crore in the first weekly auction for January-March, the spread between the yields on state development loans (SDL) and the Centre's G-sec (government securities) widened to over 50 basis points (bps). With states anticipating higher expenditure and having proposed record borrowing of Rs 4.13 lakh crore in the January-March quarter (Q4), the yield spread between the 10-year state governments' loans and the benchmark 10-year G-sec is expected to widen further amid concerns of higher supply of dated securities, experts said.

"The Q4 FY24 SDL calendar implies that there will be a significant supply of duration, when seen in conjunction with G-sec supply...the gross supply from states and Centre is likely to be concentrated in the 15-year to 50-year segment, at around 35% of total Q4 FY24 supply. This is likely to result in steepening of the curve. Moreover, the large supply for states will further widen the spreads between SDLs and G-sec," Gaura Sen Gupta, Economist, IDFC First Bank said.



The higher supply of state government securities along with G-sec supply is expected to weigh on state government bonds this quarter, with higher borrowing expected to lead to a rise in the borrowing cost for states compared with Centre. The weighted average cut-off of state government securities increased by a sharp 8 bps to 7.71 per cent on Tuesday from 7.63 per cent last week and the spread between the cut-off of 10-year state government securities and the 10-year G-sec (7.18 per cent, 2033 bond) yield widened to 53 bps on Tuesday from 48 bps last week, highest since January 2022, ICRA said.

Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat, Punjab, Rajasthan and Bihar, Higher borrowing by states, Indian express business, business news, business articles, business news stories

“In our view, if the weekly SGS auctions in Q4 FY2024 are closer to the indicated amount, the spreads between the 10-year SGS and 10-year G-sec yield may widen to 50-60 bps in this quarter, especially in February-March 2024,” Aditi Nayar, Chief Economist, ICRA said.

Last week, the Reserve Bank of India had released the indicative calendar of market borrowings by state governments and union territories (UTs), wherein a record borrowing of Rs 4.13 lakh crore has been proposed by states and UTs in the last quarter of this financial year, over 37.4 per cent higher year-on-year. Estimates by economists had pegged states' borrowing to be around Rs 3.4-3.5 lakh crore in Q4. Among states, Karnataka, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu constitute the majority share in the proposed borrowing, with Karnataka and West Bengal accounting for nearly 80 per cent of the incremental indicated borrowing amount of Rs 1.1 lakh crore for Q4. However, the actual borrowing by states could turn out to be lower than the indicated borrowing. ICRA said some states may have estimated their Q4 borrowing by subtracting their actual issuance in nine months so far from the total permitted borrowing for FY2024 by the Government of India. Release of additional funds under the capex loan scheme in Q4 and tax devolution could also help limit the total states' borrowing, it said.

After a gap of 10 quarters, the actual borrowing by states had exceeded the indicated amount by 4 per cent or Rs 8,700 crore in October-December. The total borrowing by states in April-December stood at Rs 6 lakh crore, 90 per cent of the amount indicated for this period (Rs 6.7 lakh crore) compared with 70 per cent in the year-ago period (Rs 4.6 lakh crore actual borrowing vs Rs 6.5 lakh crore indicated).

Though the Centre has given two advance instalments of tax devolution to states/UTs by December-end, a slower nominal GDP growth, moderation in indirect tax and own tax revenue of states and grants by Centre are being seen as the likely factors to have pushed states to indicate higher borrowing. “Grants from Centre are tracking 26.4 per cent YoY lower in FY24 (Apr-Oct) v/s full year budgeted growth of 24.6 per cent in FY24 Budget Estimate. Grants from Centre consist of Central sector schemes, centrally sponsored schemes, finance commission grants and GST compensation cess. A part of the decline was expected with the discontinuation of sharing of GST cess revenue with states since June 2022...the sharper than budgeted decline is likely due to reduction in 15th Finance Commission Grants. Data from Centre (Department of Expenditure), indicates a 31% YoY decline in FY24 (Apr-Nov), led by revenue deficit grants and grants for rural bodies,” Sen Gupta said.



INSTITUTIONAL INVESTORS SHOULD DISCLOSE SHORT-SELL TRANSACTIONS UPFRONT: SEBI

Market regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) Friday told institutional investors to disclose all short-sell transactions upfront at the time of placing an order. The regulator, however, permitted retail investors to make a similar disclosure by the end of the trading hours on the transaction day.

Short-selling is the sale of a stock which a person does not own at the time of trade but has merely borrowed. The aim is to profit from a decline in the asset's price by later buying the shares at a lower cost to cover the short position.

In October last year, Sebi had issued a broad framework on 'Short-Selling and Securities Lending and Borrowing Scheme'. The norms issued Friday are an addition to that framework.

The new norms come two days after the Supreme Court rejected demands for a court-monitored probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) or a special investigation team (SIT) into allegations of stock manipulation and accounting fraud against the Adani Group by the US-based short-seller Hindenburg Research in a January 2023 report.

The court also asked the Centre to probe "the loss which has been sustained by Indian investors as a result of the volatility caused by the short positions taken by Hindenburg Research and any other entities acting in concert with Hindenburg Research" and "enquire into whether there was any infraction of law by the entities, which engaged in short-selling on this occasion".

"The institutional investors shall disclose upfront at the time of placement of order whether the transaction is a short-sale," Sebi said in its framework for short-selling.

The market regulator mandated brokers to collect the details on scrip-wise short-sell positions, collate the data and upload it to the stock exchanges before the commencement of trading on the following trading day.

The stock exchanges should then consolidate such information and disseminate the same on their websites for the information of the public on a weekly basis, it said.

In the framework issued in October, Sebi had allowed short-selling for all classes of investors, including retail and institutional. It has banned "naked short-selling" in the Indian securities market and asked all investors to mandatorily honour their obligation of delivering securities at the time of settlement.

Naked short-selling is when a trader sells shares in some asset without first borrowing them or ensuring they could be borrowed.

Sebi has not allowed any institutional investor to engage in day trading — that is, square-off their transactions intraday. In other words, all transactions would be grossed for institutional investors at the custodians' level and the institutions would be required to fulfil their obligations on a gross basis.

As per the framework, the securities traded in F&O (futures & options) and segments are eligible for short-selling and Sebi may review the list of stocks that are eligible for short-selling transactions from time to time.



Short-selling is a longstanding market practice that has often been the subject of considerable debate across the world. The votaries of short-selling consider it a desirable and an essential feature of a securities market. Critics say short-selling, directly or indirectly, can destabilise the market.

EXPRESS VIEW ON INDIA'S MSP POLICY: THE RIGHT SUPPORT

Oilseeds and pulses farmers today suffer policy discrimination on two counts. The first is from their minimum support prices (MSP) being largely on paper — unlike with rice, wheat and sugarcane, where the government assures MSP either through large-scale direct procurement, or by forcing mills to pay. Mustard is currently selling at Rs 5,000-5,100 per quintal in Rajasthan and chana (chickpea) at Rs 4,700-4,800 in Maharashtra, as against their respective MSPs of Rs 5,650 and Rs 5,440. And this is even before the crops now in the field are to be marketed in about two months' time. The second bias has to do with imports. Wheat attracts 40 per cent import duty, with these at 70 per cent for milled rice and 100 per cent for sugar. As against this, crude palm, soyabean and sunflower oil are importable at zero duty. So are most pulses, barring chana and moong (green gram).

It is not for nothing that India's edible oil imports have risen from 11.6 million to 16.5 million tonnes (mt) between 2013-14 and 2022-23, with the latter valued at \$16.7 billion and meeting almost two-thirds of the domestic consumption requirement. That's not a record the Narendra Modi government would be terribly pleased about. Things have been better in pulses, where imports have fallen from a peak of 6.6 mt in 2016-17 to 2.5 mt in 2022-23, translating into a 90 per cent-plus self-sufficiency ratio. But the current year has seen a resurgence of imports, with the Modi government swinging from a pro-producer to pro-consumer stance ahead of national elections. Price and tariff support apart, oilseeds and pulses have not received research and development attention anywhere near that for wheat, rice or sugarcane. Denial of approval for genetically-modified hybrid mustard and herbicide-resistant soyabean technologies is a manifestation of this official indifference. Even in pulses, the breakthroughs have been largely limited to breeding of short-duration and photo-thermo insensitive varieties in chana and moong.

It's not surprising then — and welcome, in fact — that various departments within the government are flagging concerns over the extant MSP and procurement policy favouring only a few crops, as a report in this newspaper has revealed. Farmers, like all rational economic actors, respond to price signals and incentives. MSPs should supplement, not supplant markets. The two sub-sectors of Indian agriculture that have registered the highest growth over the last two decades — livestock and horticulture — are the ones that are the most market-led. The crops sub-sector, on the other hand, has exhibited less dynamism, in which MSP-based market distortions have certainly played a role. That needs correction. The best way to do it is by replacing all price-based supports, whether MSP or input subsidies, with per-acre income transfers.

WHY IS UPSKILLING NECESSARY FOR THE RURAL YOUTH?

The story so far:

At a group discussion held by Life Skills Collaborative, most of the rural youth when questioned about their aspirations for the future said they preferred staying in their village. With the prevalent trend of urbanisation — the UN projects that almost 50% of the Indian population will be living in urban areas by 2047 — it is crucial not to overlook those who choose to stay behind in villages.



What is main source of rural income?

Farming is the main source of rural livelihoods, with children from many rural families supplementing their family's income by working on family-owned farms. But the rural economy is experiencing a major occupational shift with more farmers quitting agriculture to join non-farming jobs, hinting at an agrarian crisis. The National Sample Survey Office data recorded 34 million farmers leaving their farms and transitioning to other sectors such as construction during 2004-05 and 2011-12. This highlights the need for not only making agriculture an aspiring vocation among rural youth, but also creating alternative employment opportunities.

How can migration be controlled?

To control migration of these youth to urban areas in search of meaningful employment, it becomes imperative to provide vocational training to students to imbibe relevant rural skills in them so that they can secure a living where they currently live. During discussions at schools, it was found that most students' educational/employment aspirations were limited to choices that were available within the vicinity of their villages. Upskilling opportunities similar to what the Delhi government is trying to achieve with the 'Skills On Wheel' initiative must be brought to students' doorsteps.

What is the current vocational education opportunity?

The current vocational education landscape in rural India is interspersed with Industrial Training Institutes to upskill rural populations, but with little to no placement opportunities. Presently, rural education scarcely focuses on skill development, a blow to the majority of youth who reportedly rely on schools to learn life skills. The LSC Voices 2023 survey — of 15,856 young people across 11 districts — revealed that two thirds of youth aged between 19 and 22 had never taken any kind of vocational training with only 5% of them enrolled in these courses. If learning is infused with rural life skills in schools, rural education will have the potential to nurture a generation capable of thriving.

How can education be improved?

Effective rural education should be tailored such that technical as well as life skills, needed to empower youth in these areas, become accessible to them through formal education. There are many ways this could be done, as educational evidence from other developing economies suggests — such as Mexico's tele-schools and Bhutan's well-being-infused curriculum. The tele-schools provide lessons on subject matters as well as values, thereby providing a much higher level of access to value-based secondary education for remote areas where secondary schools are scarce. This has shown to have trickling benefits in the local economy with improved attitudes and increased aspirations among children and parents.

Closer to home, organisations such as NIIT Foundation and Pratham Institute are working with children in rural areas to provide upskilling opportunities. Hybrid life skilling programs are offered both by NIIT in collaboration with UNICEF through its self-learning platform, and Pratham, which offers courses in both industry-specific skills (such as in healthcare, electrical, construction) and life skills. By offering rural populations skills in fields like agricultural mechanisation, pollution monitoring, nursing and digital technologies via e-learning, rural India can boost employability in both traditional and non-traditional trades, leading to a vibrant economy.



FAULTY COMPULSION

With the government refusing to extend the deadline for Aadhaar details of workers under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) to be seeded to their job cards beyond December 31, 2023, to enable payments through an Aadhaar-based payment system (ABPS), the system has now become mandatory. Alarming, the decision would now affect nearly 35% of job card holders for this mode of payment and 12.7% of “active” workers (those who have worked at least one day in the last three financial years), thereby putting a dampener on the demand-driven scheme for many. ABPS implementation, the Union government claims, will ensure that payments are quick, reduce rejection and plug all leaks. The government also contends that as the ABPS has been in place for MGNREGS from 2017, and because Aadhaar number availability is near universal in India, the ABPS is a robust and a safer way to transfer wages. However, the over-reliance on technical tools has resulted in problematic implementation, with beneficiaries devoid of a proper recourse for corrections in the system. Data analysed by LibTech India suggest that the names of 7.6 crore workers have been deleted over the past 21 months due to discrepancies between the Aadhaar and the job card, among other reasons, with many of these done erroneously.

There are other issues with the use of the Aadhaar-based payments — where errors in any step of the process result in payment failures. Apart from the spelling discrepancy issue between the Aadhaar and the job card of the worker, there is also the problem of mapping the Aadhaar to the wrong bank account for many. In a number of cases, payments can be diverted to some other account than the one beneficiaries prefer, and also without their consent. Claims by the government that Aadhaar use has reduced delays in wage payments have also not been borne out, according to LibTech India, with wage delays largely due to insufficient funds in the first place. Without cleaning up Aadhaar seeding and mapping with bank accounts, making the ABPS mandatory will only create further issues. The Union government must revisit this decision, and work out a way to correct the faulty seeding and mapping problems before imposing ABPS. The Ministry of Rural Development has said that it may consider an exemption from ABPS on a case-to-case basis for gram panchayats if there are technical issues, but it would be better if the Ministry conducts social audits to ascertain the extent of the problem before insisting on ABPS. MGNREGS remains a vital demand-driven welfare scheme that helps the rural poor and its implementation must not be dependent upon a faulty technological system.



LIFE & SCIENCE

XPOSAT: ISRO'S X-RAY EYE IN THE SKY

WHAT IS IT?

At 9.10 am on the first day of 2024, the Indian Space Research Organisation will launch XPoSat, short for 'X-ray Polarimeter Satellite'. Once launched, the satellite will study X-rays emitted by phenomena in space and their polarisation from earth-orbit.

X-rays are electromagnetic radiation whose wavelength is 0.01-10 nanometres (where 1 nanometre is one-billionth of a metre), corresponding to energies of 100-100,000 electron-volt (eV). Electromagnetic radiation is characterised by an electric field and a magnetic field vibrating perpendicular to each other. The polarisation of electromagnetic radiation refers to the orientation of these two fields as the radiation moves through space.

X-rays can be polarised when they get scattered. For example, when an X-ray travelling through space encounters an atom, the electric field of the X-ray can energise an electron, which will then emit a photon. Since X-rays are also photons, the new photon will give the impression that an X-ray photon has been scattered. Polarised X-rays are also produced when the path of a fast-moving charged particle is bent by a magnetic field.

Studying these X-rays can reveal which way the magnetic field is pointing, and tracking how these X-rays evolve in time can reveal many things about the body producing such fields, like a pulsar.

The XPoSat satellite has two payloads to make these measurements. POLIX will study X-rays with energy 8-30 keV emitted by around 40 astronomical sources in five years. XSPECT will study X-rays with energy 0.8-15 keV and track changes in continuous X-ray emissions.

SIGN OF THE FUTURE

Two missions the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has launched in the five months since its success with Chandrayaan-3 have both been scientific in nature: the Aditya L-1 space probe to study the sun and the X-ray Polarimeter Satellite (XPoSat) to study polarised X-rays emitted in astrophysical phenomena. ISRO launched the XPoSat, in a two-part mission, onboard a Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) on its C58 flight on January 1. The relative timing of these launches may be a coincidence but it is heartening because the ratio of scientific to technological missions ISRO has launched is skewed in favour of the latter, at the expense of research in the sense of discovery. Those science-oriented missions have all been exceptional in their own right. For example, XPoSat is only the second space-based experiment to study X-ray polarisation, and at higher x-ray energies than the other, NASA's Imaging X-ray Polarimetry Explorer. Its POLIX payload, realised by the Raman Research Institute, will track X-rays in the 8-30 kilo-electron-volt (keV) energy range and observe emissions from around 50 sources in five years. The XSPECT payload, by ISRO's U.R. Rao Satellite Centre, will study X-rays of energy 0.8-15 keV and changes in continuous X-ray emissions. Together, they are expected to shed light on intense X-ray sources such as pulsars and black holes.

Then again, the science-technology skew is a reminder that ISRO among the world's spacefaring organisations has unique needs and priorities. This is exemplified by the second part of the C58 mission. After launching XPoSat in a 650-km circular orbit around the earth, the fourth stage of



the rocket lowered itself into a 350-km-high orbit and unfurled solar panels, becoming a rudimentary satellite and orbital testbed for the 10 payloads it carried. These are a radio payload by the K.J. Somaiya Institute of Technology and a device to measure ultraviolet radiation from L.B.S. Institute of Technology for Women; a 'green' cubesat propulsion unit, a 'green' monopropellant thruster, a tantalum-based radiation shield, a heater-less hollow cathode, and a nanosatellite platform, all from private entities; and an interplanetary dust counter, a fuel-cell power system, and a high-energy cell from ISRO centres. This is only the third time ISRO has operated the PSLV fourth stage in this way. As such, the C58 mission represents a union of the aspirations of professional scientists, aspiring students of science, and India's private spaceflight sector. This again is a vignette of the demands of ISRO itself as it navigates an era in which a permanent lunar station seems inevitable, drawing as much on technological capabilities as — based on scientific missions — humankind's knowledge of the universe.

EXPRESS VIEW ON ISRO'S NEW OBSERVATORY: A LIGHT IN SPACE

Some of the most exciting features of the universe, like black holes and neutron stars, remain mysteries to humankind. What scientists know is that because of their immensely strong magnetic fields, some of these celestial bodies emit highly energetic X-ray light.

On Monday, ISRO marked the new year by venturing into this relatively uncharted realm of astrophysics. It launched a rocket carrying XpoSat, the country's first space observatory to study the polarisation of cosmic X-rays. This mission could help reveal a hidden picture of the cosmos, potentially transforming the understanding of the nature of the universe itself. The observatory could help scientists scout for emissions from black holes, neutron stars and active galactic nuclei.

These cosmic rays are absorbed by the Earth's atmosphere. Scientists, therefore, need X-ray telescopes in space to understand them. XpoSat has two such payloads. It is the country's third space-based observatory after the recently launched solar mission Aditya-L1 and AstroSat launched in 2015. The Indian observatory is the world's second space mission to study the polarisation of cosmic X-rays, after NASA's IXPE, launched in December 2021.

Generally, light oscillates in every direction. But in certain parts of the cosmos, strong magnetic fields drive particles at incredibly high speeds, creating highly organised or polarised light. There have been a handful of experiments on X-ray polarisation. Most of them were balloon observations and short-duration experiments by NASA and its collaborators. Since the 1970s, imaging studies and spectroscopy have given scientists a fair idea of the energy, time and location of celestial X-rays.

The introduction of polarimetry observations by IXPE marked the beginning of the endeavour to capture the degree and angle of light. It has provided early information on how radiation is produced in some of the most extreme environments in the universe. XpoSat operates in a frequency band different from its American predecessor. Experts believe that a combination of IXPE and XpoSat observations can help answer some of astrophysics's longstanding questions. For example, they can help unravel the contours of black holes in binary stars — two stars gravitationally bound to each other.

2023 marked a significant shift in gears for India's space programme. With the launch of Chandrayaan-3 and Aditya-1, ISRO transitioned from an agency with capabilities in placing satellites in orbit to a planetary exploration agency. Later this year, India's premier space research agency will combine with NASA to send a mission to the International Space Station, the



permanent laboratory in space about 400 km above the earth's surface. A test flight of the Gaganyaan, without astronauts, is also scheduled for this year. With every venture, ISRO has sent signals that it has the expertise and maturity to contribute to all aspects of planetary research. Many more great journeys await the agency.

ISRO TESTS FUEL CELL TO POTENTIALLY POWER SPACE MISSIONS

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) successfully demonstrated a fuel cell that uses hydrogen and oxygen to generate electricity and releases heat and water as byproducts.

The fuel cell, sent to space on the fourth stage of the PSLV on January 1, generated 180W power during the short duration test.

These cells are ideal for human space missions because the heat and water generated as byproducts are also essential, meaning a single system can meet multiple requirements of the mission.

After the January 1 launch, ISRO Chairperson S Somanath said the fuel cell designed by the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC) is a precursor to the future power systems for space stations. The space agency is likely to launch multiple test vehicle missions and at least one unmanned spaceflight under the Gaganyaan mission this year. India has targeted setting up a space station in low earth orbit by 2035.

These zero-emission cells might have uses on Earth as they can replace vehicle engines.

The platform successfully demonstrated another Silicon-based cell developed by VSSC. It will present a low-cost and lighter alternative to current cells. The conventional Li-ion cells use pure graphite as anode (the electrode that releases electrons to generate power in a cell), while the cell ISRO demonstrated uses a silicon-graphite composite that can accommodate more Li-ions in smaller mass, generating more energy per unit weight compared to conventional cells.

"This cell also employs cost effective hardware which is readily available and a crimped sealing based design which reduces the hardware and fabrication costs significantly," the ISRO statement said. The cell's ability to survive and perform in the harsh environments of space was demonstrated on-board PSLV Orbital Experimental Module (POEM).

"... These cells are poised to be used in upcoming operational missions where 35-40% battery mass saving is expected," the statement added.

These were two of the 10 experiments that were taken to space by the POEM in its third flight. While in most multi-stage rockets, the upper stages remain in space before dropping back to the Earth's atmosphere and burning up. However, the space agency started using these spent stages as a platform for technology demonstrations. The other experiments on-board the January 1 PSLV launch included a radiation shielding experiment, an amateur radio and three propulsion systems by space start-ups.

FROM THE MOON TO EUROPA, SIX SPACE MISSIONS TO BE EXCITED FOR IN 2024

The year 2023 proved to be an important one for space missions, with NASA's OSIRIS-REx mission returning a sample from an asteroid and India's Chandrayaan-3 mission exploring the lunar south pole region, and 2024 is shaping up to be another exciting year for space exploration.



Several new missions under NASA's Artemis plan and Commercial Lunar Payload Services initiative will target the moon.

The latter half of the year will feature several exciting launches, with the launch of the Martian Moons eXploration mission in September, Europa Clipper and Hera in October and Artemis II and VIPER to the moon in November — if everything goes as planned.

I'm a planetary scientist, and here are six of the space missions I'm most excited to follow in 2024.

1. Europa Clipper

NASA will launch Europa Clipper, which will explore one of Jupiter's largest moons, Europa. Europa is slightly smaller than the earth's moon, with a surface made of ice. Beneath its icy shell, Europa likely harbours a saltwater ocean, which scientists expect contains over twice as much water as all the oceans here on Earth combined.

With Europa Clipper, scientists want to investigate whether Europa's ocean could be a suitable habitat for extraterrestrial life. The mission plans to do this by flying past Europa nearly 50 times to study the moon's icy shell, its surface's geology and its subsurface ocean. The mission will also look for active geysers spewing out from Europa.

This mission will change the game for scientists hoping to understand ocean worlds like Europa.

The launch window – the period when the mission could launch and achieve its planned route – opens October 10, 2024, and lasts 21 days. The spacecraft will launch on a SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket and arrive at the Jupiter system in 2030.

2. Artemis II launch

The Artemis programme, named after Apollo's twin sister in Greek mythology, is NASA's plan to go back to the moon. It will send humans to the moon for the first time since 1972, including the first woman and the first person of color. Artemis also includes plans for a longer-term, sustained presence in space that will prepare NASA for eventually sending people even farther — to Mars.

Artemis II is the first crewed step in this plan, with four astronauts planned to be on board during the 10-day mission.

The mission builds upon Artemis I, which sent an uncrewed capsule into orbit around the moon in late 2022.

Artemis II will put the astronauts into orbit around the Moon before returning them home. It is currently planned for launch as early as November 2024. But there is a chance it will get pushed back to 2025, depending on whether all the necessary gear, such as spacesuits and oxygen equipment, is ready.

3. VIPER to hunt water on the moon

VIPER, which stands for Volatiles Investigating Polar Exploration Rover, is a robot the size of a golf cart that NASA will use to explore the moon's south pole in late 2024.

Originally scheduled for launch in 2023, NASA pushed the mission back to complete more tests on the lander system, which Astrobotic, a private company, developed as part of the Commercial Lunar Payload Services program.



This robotic mission is designed to search for volatiles, which are molecules that easily vaporize, like water and carbon dioxide, at lunar temperatures. These materials could provide resources for future human exploration on the moon.

The VIPER robot will rely on batteries, heat pipes and radiators throughout its 100-day mission, as it navigates everything from the extreme heat of lunar daylight — when temperatures can reach 224 degrees Fahrenheit (107 degrees Celsius) — to the moon’s frigid shadowed regions that can reach a mind-boggling -240 C.

VIPER’s launch and delivery to the lunar surface is scheduled for November 2024.

4. Lunar Trailblazer and PRIME-1

NASA has recently invested in a class of small, low-cost planetary missions called SIMPLEx, which stands for Small, Innovative Missions for PLANetary Exploration. These missions save costs by tagging along on other launches as what is called a rideshare, or secondary payload.

One example is the Lunar Trailblazer. Like VIPER, Lunar Trailblazer will look for water on the moon.

But while VIPER will land on the moon’s surface, studying a specific area near the south pole in detail, Lunar Trailblazer will orbit the moon, measuring the temperature of the surface and mapping out the locations of water molecules across the globe.

Currently, Lunar Trailblazer is on track to be ready by early 2024. However, because it is a secondary payload, Lunar Trailblazer’s launch timing depends on the primary payload’s launch readiness.

The PRIME-1 mission, scheduled for a mid-2024 launch, is Lunar Trailblazer’s ride.

PRIME-1 will drill into the moon — it’s a test run for the kind of drill that VIPER will use. But its launch date will likely depend on whether earlier launches go on time.

An earlier Commercial Lunar Payload Services mission with the same landing partner was pushed back to February 2024 at the earliest, and further delays could push back PRIME-1 and Lunar Trailblazer.

5. JAXA’s Martian Moon eXploration

The JAXA MMX mission concept to study Phobos and Deimos, Mars’ moons.

While the earth’s moon has many visitors — big and small, robotic and crewed — planned for 2024, Mars’ moons Phobos and Deimos will soon be getting a visitor as well.

The Japanese Aerospace Exploration Agency, or JAXA, has a robotic mission in development called the Martian Moon eXploration, or MMX, planned for launch around September 2024. The mission’s main science objective is to determine the origin of Mars’ moons. Scientists aren’t sure whether Phobos and Deimos are former asteroids that Mars captured into orbit with its gravity or if they formed out of debris that was already in orbit around Mars.

The spacecraft will spend three years around Mars conducting science operations to observe Phobos and Deimos. MMX will also land on Phobos’ surface and collect a sample before returning to Earth.



6. ESA's Hera mission

Hera is a mission by the European Space Agency to return to the Didymos-Dimorphos asteroid system that NASA's DART mission visited in 2022.

But DART didn't just visit these asteroids, it collided with one of them to test a planetary defence technique called "kinetic impact."

DART hit Dimorphos with such force that it actually changed its orbit.

The kinetic impact technique smashes something into an object in order to alter its path. This could prove useful if humanity ever finds a potentially hazardous object on a collision course with Earth and needs to redirect it.

Hera will launch in October 2024, making its way in late 2026 to Didymos and Dimorphos, where it will study the physical properties of the asteroids.

SPACEX'S FALCON-9 TO LAUNCH INDIA'S GSAT-20; SATELLITE TO SPREAD BROADBAND COVERAGE

NewSpace India Ltd. (NSIL), the commercial arm of the Indian Space Research Organisation, will launch GSAT-20 (renamed GSAT-N2), on board SpaceX's Falcon-9 rocket during the second quarter of 2024.

The GSAT-20 is a high-throughput Ka-band satellite (HTS), which will be fully owned, operated and funded by the NSIL.

The agency said GSAT-20 offers Ka-Ka band HTS capacity with 32 beams having pan-India coverage, including the Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep islands. The satellite, weighing 4,700 kg, offers an HTS capacity of nearly 48 Gpbs and has been specifically designed to meet the demanding service needs of remote and unconnected regions.

As part of the space sector reforms announced by the Union government in June 2020, the NSIL was mandated to build, launch, own and operate satellites in "demand-driven mode" to meet service needs of the user.

As part of this, the NSIL successfully undertook its first demand-driven satellite mission, GSAT-24, in June 2022, and the capacity-board of the satellite was fully secured by Tata Play. GSAT-24 mission was fully funded by the NSIL. At present, the agency owns and operates 11 communication satellites in orbit.

"On similar lines, during the second quarter of 2024, NSIL will be undertaking the GSAT-20 satellite mission to offer cost-effective Ka-Ka band HTS capacity primarily for meeting the broadband, as well as IFMC and cellular backhaul service needs. The bulk of the HTS capacity on board GSAT-20 satellite has already been secured by Indian service providers," the NSIL said.

The NSIL is realising the GSAT-20 satellite through ISRO and will be launched on board Falcon-9 under a contract between NSIL and SpaceX, USA, it said.

According to SpaceX, Falcon-9 is a reusable, two-stage rocket designed and manufactured by the Elon Musk-founded company for the reliable and safe transport of people and payloads into Earth orbit and beyond.



CHINESE BOY 'CYBER KIDNAPPED' IN UTAH FOUND SAFE: WHAT IS CYBER KIDNAPPING, HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

A Chinese student who was a victim of 'cyber kidnapping' has been found in rural Utah, unharmed. The 17-year-old, Kai Zhuang, was reported missing on December 28. By the time the police traced him, his parents back in China had paid \$80,000 in ransom.

The boy's parents had informed his host school, in Utah's Riverdale, that he appeared to have been kidnapped. The school then contacted the police. He was found in a tent about 40 km north of Brigham City, where he seems to have self-isolated. What is 'cyber kidnapping', and how does it work?

What is cyber kidnapping?

Cyber kidnapping refers to a crime where the 'kidnappers' convince their victim to hide, and then contact their loved ones for ransom. The victim is also made to send pictures that make it look like they are being held captive — showing them bound or gagged. These are then shared with the family. Both parties believe their loved ones will be harmed if they don't do as the kidnappers ask.

The 'kidnappers', though not physically present, monitor the victim online through video-call platforms. In the Utah boy's case too, his parents were sent a picture indicating he had been kidnapped. The police believe the kidnappers have manipulated him since December 20. He was traced by analysing call data and bank records.

According to the FBI's website, "Although virtual kidnapping takes on many forms, it is always an extortion scheme—one that tricks victims into paying a ransom to free a loved one they believe is being threatened with violence or death. Unlike traditional abductions, virtual kidnappers have not actually kidnapped anyone. Instead, through deceptions and threats, they coerce victims to pay a quick ransom before the scheme falls apart."

Experts believe that with the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), such crimes can rise, as scammers can send people voice notes that sound exactly like a loved one in distress. Last year, an Arizona woman testified in the US Senate about receiving just such a call. When Jennifer DeStefano picked up a call from an unknown number, "her 15-year-old daughter", crying, told her some "bad men" had her. A man then threatened her and demanded ransom. After she cut the call, she called up her daughter, and realised she was safe.

While there is no clear data yet on how many such crimes occur each year, law enforcement experts say they are on the rise. A BBC report from July 2020 mentions that eight cases of cyber kidnap had been reported in Australia that year, all targeting Chinese students.

How to protect yourself?

Experts recommend being extra careful with calls from unknown numbers, though cyber criminals can also make it appear like they are calling from a loved one's number.

Scammers can use data you have shared on social media to make their calls more convincing, so be careful of what you share about yourself and your children online, specially names, specific locations, pictures of your home, neighbourhood, or children's school.

Experts also recommend checking up on your loved ones before making payments, and to approach the police.