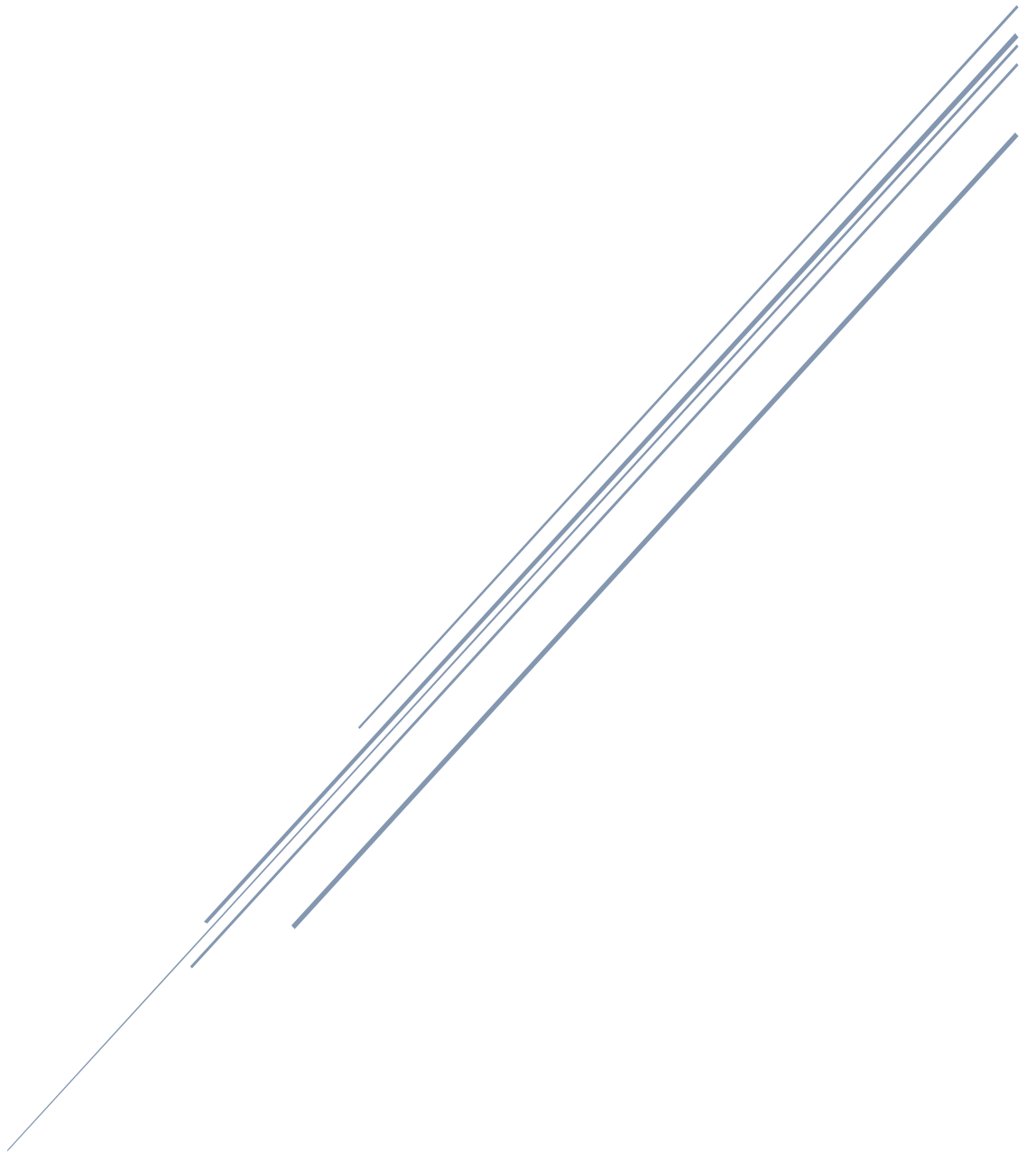


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INTERNATIONAL

ALMOST 80 YEARS AFTER THE HOLOCAUST, 245,000 JEWISH SURVIVORS ARE STILL ALIVE

Almost 80 years after the Holocaust, a report reveals that approximately 245,000 Jewish survivors are still living in over 90 countries. Nearly half reside in Israel, 18% in Western Europe, 16% in the United States, and 12% in former Soviet Union countries. Most survivors are over 90 years old, with 61% being women. The report emphasizes the individual stories behind the statistics and highlights the enduring impact of the Holocaust on survivors. The Claims Conference, which handles compensation for survivors, emphasizes the need for increased attention and support for this aging population. The report also shares the personal account of a 95-year-old survivor in Berlin, emphasizing the importance of sharing testimonies to combat rising antisemitism.

NARROWING FIELD

The 2024 U.S. presidential election's Republican primaries race has already narrowed to two candidates, frontrunner and former President Donald Trump and former Governor of South Carolina, Indian-origin Nikki Haley. The latest twist in the election cycle saga, which kicked off last week with the Iowa caucuses, saw Florida Governor Ron DeSantis step off the contest after he admitted that he could not see a path to victory. Both he and Vivek Ramaswamy, a pharmaceuticals entrepreneur who exited the race earlier, have endorsed Mr. Trump, who leads by double digits, 50% to Ms. Haley's 39% among likely Republican voters, in New Hampshire, the next Republican primary venue. In Iowa, he garnered 20 delegates to Ms. Haley's eight, a wide margin, even if he has a long road ahead to acquire the 1,215 delegates necessary to capture the nomination. While there are no presidential debates on the cards at this time because Mr. Trump has refused to join them, the tenor of the remarks by the two candidates against their rival appeared to be getting sharper. Ms. Haley questioned Mr. Trump's mental fitness to hold high office after he seemed to confuse her with former House of Representatives Speaker and Democrat Nancy Pelosi, in the context of the January 6, 2021 riots. Mr. Trump has mocked her first name Nimrata and, in an echo of the birther movement remarks he made against former President Barack Obama, implicitly questioned whether she was a natural-born U.S. citizen.

Unlike previous U.S. elections, such as in 2016, where there were no fewer than 10 candidates in the fray during the presidential debates, this time a considerable skew in voter preferences towards Mr. Trump is evident, leading to a lopsided primaries season. Ms. Haley is only likely to remain in the race for as long as she is able to raise sufficient funds to keep her campaign going, and donors are notoriously quick to pull out when they see a dead end for a candidate, regardless of their political leanings. The wholesale rush towards the aura of Trumpism, now apparently an ever-growing force despite Mr. Trump facing serious criminal indictments and other legal challenges, has in fact fractured mainstream Republicanism as a bulwark of the U.S. conservative movement. Voters now appear to prefer Mr. Trump's chaotic ad hocism in policymaking, his aggressive views on immigration and minorities of all hues, and his relentless eschewing of political propriety even when dealing with institutional issues. Unless there is an impulse for new leadership within the Grand Old Party to challenge the Trump "paradigm", the sheer lack of alternative voices with populist appeal will lead to Trumpism deepening its hold on U.S. institutions, governance and socio-economic outcomes.



WHY ARE CONFLICTS SPREADING IN WEST ASIA?

The story so far:

West Asia is in flux. What started as a direct military confrontation between Israel and Hamas has snowballed into a regional security crisis. Hezbollah, Kataib Hezbollah, Hashad al-Shabi, Houthis, Iran, Pakistan and the United States are all now part of an expanding conflict theatre. As Israel's war on Gaza, which has killed more than 24,000 people in 100 days, is continuing with no foreseeable end, the related security crisis in the region is widening.

How has the Israel-Hamas war spilled over?

When Israel launched its war on Gaza, after Hamas's October 7 cross-border attack in which at least 1,200 Israelis were killed, there were fears that the conflict could spill over beyond Palestine. Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia group that's backed by Iran, fired rockets at Israeli forces in the Shebaa Farms, an Israeli-controlled territory which Lebanon claims as its own, in solidarity with the Palestinians. Ever since, Hezbollah and Israel have exchanged fire many times, though both were careful not to let tensions escalate into a full-blown war. While Arab countries, upset with Israel's indiscriminate bombing, stuck to the path of diplomacy to turn up pressure on the Jewish state, Iran-backed militias elsewhere opened new fronts. Houthis, the Shia militias of Yemen, started attacking commercial vessels in the Red Sea from mid-November, again in "solidarity with the Palestinians". Houthis, who control much of Yemen, including its Red Sea coast, has used sea denial tactics to target dozens of ships ever since, forcing several shipping giants to suspend operations in the Red Sea, which connects the Mediterranean Sea with the Arabian Sea (and the Indian Ocean) through the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

When Houthi attacks imperilled the Red Sea traffic, the U.S., which continues to support Israel's war on Gaza, started carrying out airstrikes in Yemen, targeting Houthi positions. Hashad al-Shabi, the Shia Mobilisation Forces of Iraq and Syria, who are also backed by Iran, launched more than 100 attacks against U.S. troops deployed in the two countries. In retaliation, the U.S. carried out attacks in Syria, and killed a commander of Hashad al-Shabi in a hit in Baghdad, which led to protests by Iraq. Israel has carried out multiple strikes inside Syria and Lebanon, killing Hamas, Hezbollah and Iranian commanders. As instability spread, the Islamic State terror group attacked a memorial event for Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian general assassinated by the U.S. in January 2020, in Kerman, southeastern Iran. As it was coming under growing regional and domestic pressure, Iran carried out strikes on January 16, in Iraq's Kurdistan, Syria and Pakistan, claiming to have hit a Mossad operational centre and Sunni Islamist militants. In retaliation, Pakistan carried out air strikes in Iran on January 18.

Who are the main players in the crisis?

While multiple players are present in the crisis, there are three major operational centres — Israel, Iran and the U.S. Israel says it has the right to attack Gaza until it meets its objectives — dismantling Hamas and releasing hostages; Iran is the main backer of all anti-Israel non-state actors in West Asia, be it Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, Houthis or the Shia militias of Iraq and Syria. The U.S., which has a widespread military presence in the region, has three objectives — to ensure the security of Israel, the security of America's troops and assets deployed in the region and the perseverance of the U.S.-led order in the region. So, the bottomline is that Israel is fighting a vengeful war on the Palestinians with full U.S. support; Iran-backed proxies are



attacking Israel and American interests in the region in retaliation, while Iran seeks to strengthen its deterrence; and the U.S. is attacking these proxies to meet its objectives.

What does this mean for regional security?

This is an unstable situation. West Asia has seen conflicts in the past, between nation states (Iran and Iraq; and Israel and Arab nations) and states and non-state actors (Israel's wars with Hezbollah and Hamas). But currently, the region is witnessing a widespread security crisis, involving both powerful states and non-state actors.

Last time West Asia faced a major transnational war was in 1967 when Israel launched attacks on surrounding Arab countries. But the 1967 war concluded within six days, with Israel's decisive victory against the Arabs. Today, even after 100 days, the conflict is only escalating and widening.

In the past, the U.S. had retained a domineering presence in West Asia, shaping its geopolitical outcomes, and America's rivals were wary of breaching certain red lines. This was the backbone of the U.S.-led order in West Asia. Though Iran stayed out of it since 1979, it never risked a direct war with the U.S. or Israel. The current crisis suggests that the old order is in tatters. Iran-backed proxies are directly attacking both Israeli and American positions, while Iran is flexing its military muscle through cross-border attacks. The Houthis have challenged the U.S.'s ability to provide security to one of the world's busiest shipping routes. Arab countries remain America's allies, but are increasingly frustrated with Washington's unconditional support for Israel's war on Gaza. The U.S., despite its support for Israel, seems unable or unwilling to push Israel to end its disastrous war and bring back some stability.

Being unable to end the war and having picked a fight with Shia militias, the world's most powerful country is acting like one of the several disruptors in West Asia, and not as a guarantor of peace, stability and deterrence.

What's next?

There is no clear way-out from this polycentric crisis. After more than 100 days of war, Israel has achieved little in Gaza, given the targets it set for itself. It is unlikely to wind down the offensive in the near term.

As long as Israel continues the war, Hezbollah and Houthis will continue their attacks. It's to be seen whether the U.S. air strikes on Houthis, who survived Saudi bombing for seven years, would have any real deterring effect other than symbolic values. The U.S. strikes on the Shia units in Iraq and Syria have not stopped them from launching new attacks. If instability spreads further, the Islamic State and other jihadists would seek to exploit the situation. Iraq and Syria remain vulnerable to internal and external challenges. Iran has sought to project force, but Pakistan's response has underscored Iran's limitations. The U.S., once a shaper of outcomes in West Asia, watches the region plunge into chaos.

The only silver lining amid this spiral of crisis, as of now, is that the Saudi-Iran detente, and the associated Saudi-Houthi peace, is holding.

ENDLESS WAR

The crash of a Russian plane with Ukrainian prisoners of war on board has once again shown how delicate the situation between the two countries that have been at war since February 2022 is.



Russia says Kyiv downed the plane, which had 65 Ukrainian soldiers, in Belgorod, a Russian border town, that has seen repeated Ukrainian shelling in recent months. Kyiv has slammed Russia for spreading propaganda, but has not ruled out its possible role in the downing. The incident comes at a time when Ukraine's troops are struggling to keep up the fight on the front line amid Russia's incremental advances. Russia, which suffered humiliating setbacks in 2022, has since retaken the battlefield momentum. Last year, Ukraine's top general said the counteroffensive, which began in June 2023, aimed at recapturing Russia-held territories in the south and east, had failed. Russia has made territorial gains in the east, capturing Mariinka and making advances towards Avdiivka and Kupiansk. With its huge losses on the battlefield, Ukraine's generals are calling for the mobilisation of up to 5,00,000 soldiers — which would be hugely unpopular. Worse, the changing mood in Washington has sent an alarming message to Kyiv.

Volodymyr Zelensky's government has vowed to uncover the truth behind the plane crash. If it has been downed by a Ukrainian missile, it would pose a political challenge to Mr. Zelensky. But a bigger problem he is facing is the future of the war. Until now, he has put up a brave face, saying Ukraine would fight until victory — which is, recapturing all the territories Russia has taken. While Russia's annexation of Ukraine regions and its war are a violation of international laws, Ukraine does not seem to have a practical path towards victory. Israel's war on Gaza, which has the Biden administration's full support, has also distracted global attention from Ukraine. If Donald Trump, the U.S. Republican leader, is re-elected in November — he has vowed to end the war in days — Ukraine could come under heavy pressure. The war cannot be sustained without uninterrupted support from the U.S. and its NATO partners. When pressure increases on the battlefield, what Ukraine is doing is to carry out missile and drone attacks inside Russia. Ukraine's possession of advanced weapons, supplied by the West, has enhanced its fire power. Last week, a fuel export terminal on Russia's Baltic coast came under attack. There is suspicion, deep mistrust and misinformation on both sides, which could lead to more violence and accidents. Russia, Ukraine and NATO— should take a more practical assessment of the progress of the war and be ready for talks, instead of continuing an endless war which is hurting all sides.

ISRAEL MUST TAKE ALL MEASURES TO PREVENT GENOCIDAL ACTS IN GAZA: ICJ

Israel must prevent genocidal acts in Gaza and allow humanitarian aid into the territory, the UN's top court ruled on Friday, in a closely watched decision that stopped short of calling for a ceasefire.

The International Court of Justice was not deciding whether Israel was actually committing genocide with its military campaign in Gaza — that process will likely take several years.

But it ruled that the “catastrophic humanitarian situation” in Gaza was “at serious risk of deteriorating further” before a final decision, so it issued a series of emergency measures.

Israel must “take all measures in its power” to prevent genocidal acts and also stop officials making declarations inciting genocide, the court said.

Concretely, the court urged Israel to take “immediate and effective measures to enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance”.

The case was brought by South Africa, which has accused Israel of breaching the UN Genocide Convention.



Speaking to reporters on the steps of the gilded Peace Palace in The Hague, where the court sits, Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor said the measures were tantamount to a call for a ceasefire.

“How do you deliver humanitarian aid without a ceasefire? How do you provide water, access to energy? How do you ensure that those who are injured have healthcare and so on?” she said. “Without a ceasefire, not one of these things can be done.”

‘Outrageous charges’

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the charge against Israel “is not only false, it’s outrageous, and decent people everywhere should reject it”.

Israel stressed during the hearings that it was acting in self-defence after the Hamas attacks of October 7 and was doing all in its power to ease the plight of civilians. While steps to help civilians “are to be encouraged, they are insufficient” to protect the rights of the Palestinians, the court ruled.

Outside the court, hundreds of protesters on both sides gathered, shouting slogans and waving banners

South Africa accused Israel of “genocidal” acts that were intended to cause the “destruction of a substantial part of the Palestinian national, racial and ethnical group.” Israel dismissed the case as a “grossly distorted story” and said that if any genocidal acts had been carried out, they had been executed against Israel during the October 7 Hamas attacks.

TURKEY FINALLY BACKS SWEDEN’S NATO BID: WHY THE OPPOSITION, WHY IT CHANGED ITS STANCE

Sweden’s attempt to join NATO cleared a major hurdle Tuesday (January 23) after Turkey’s parliament supported its membership. For a new country to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), all the existing members have to approve it. Turkey and Hungary had been opposing Sweden’s entry for almost the past two years.

Why does Sweden want to join NATO?

Sweden has not fought a war in two centuries, staying neutral through the two World Wars and the Cold War. In recent years, while it joined the European Union and collaborated with NATO, it showed no intention of actually joining the military alliance its powerful neighbour, Russia, is hostile to.

However, this neutrality had to be abandoned after Russia invaded Ukraine. With public opinion increasingly in favour of joining NATO, both Sweden and Finland applied for membership in 2022. While Finland’s bid was cleared, Sweden ran into stiff opposition from Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Once a country is a NATO member, an attack on its territory is considered an attack on the US-led alliance, and all 31 members are obliged to defend each other.

Why was Turkey opposing Sweden’s bid?

Turkey had accused Sweden of going soft on groups it sees as terrorists, such as the Kurdish militant outfit the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Quran-burning protests held in Sweden, which



its government says are protected under freedom of speech laws, further soured its relationship with Turkey.

When Turkish legislators cleared Sweden's bid recently, Fuat Oktay, a senior member of Erdogan's party, told parliament that Sweden had tightened its anti-terrorism laws, cracked down on the PKK's activities, and lifted restrictions on arms sales to Turkey, AP reported. Sweden has also said it will support Turkey's EU membership bid.

Erdogan had also linked Turkey's support to Sweden with the US agreeing to sell 40 F-16 fighter jets to Ankara. While the US had not said the deal would depend on Turkey's Sweden actions, the sale is expected to go through now.

Hungary had been seen as following Turkey's lead in blocking Sweden. Its grievances with the country include Stockholm's negative remarks about the rule of law and state of democracy under Orban. Orban is also more friendly with Russia than other NATO nations. After Turkey's move, Orban said Tuesday that he had invited Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson to Budapest to discuss "future cooperation in the field of security and defence as allies and partners," reported AP.

What will Sweden bring to NATO?

Once Sweden becomes a member, almost all of the Baltic Sea coastline, except that in Russia's control, will become NATO territory. This will provide the alliance strategic bases close to Russia, make supply lines more streamlined, and make it easier to defend assets in the sea.

Sweden's military, though numerically small, is modern and experienced in past NATO missions. Importantly, it has advanced aircraft and submarine capabilities.

SPIKING TENSIONS

Kim Jong-un's decision to declare South Korea as an enemy state of the North and abandon the idea of peaceful reunification signals that Pyongyang is adopting a more aggressive stand. Recent months also saw increased war rhetoric from Mr. Kim as well as a series of weapons tests by the North. Last week, Pyongyang claimed to have fired a medium-range hypersonic missile that could travel at low altitudes. It has also tested underwater, unmanned, nuclear-capable drones. Earlier this month, the North fired hundreds of artillery shells near the South's islands of Yeonpyeong and Baengnyeong, closer to the Northern Limit Line, a disputed inter-Korean maritime border. It is evident from these actions that the Kim regime is seeking to alter the status quo. But Mr. Kim's actions were not entirely unprovoked. He sees the growing military convergence between South Korea, Japan, and the U.S. as a security threat. The three countries recently linked up their missile-radar data with one another. The U.S. and South Korea also routinely conduct joint military exercises, which triggers sharp reactions from the North. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, who assumed office in May 2022, has also maintained a hawkish stand towards Pyongyang, saying that peace can be achieved only through strength.

In the past, despite its rhetoric, North Korea was open to diplomatic engagement with the South and the U.S. In 1994, it reached the Agreed Framework with the Clinton administration. As part of this, it agreed to freeze the operation and construction of its nuclear reactors. It was after the collapse of the Agreed Framework during the George Bush Jr. administration that Pyongyang went nuclear. President Donald Trump reached out to the North, which temporarily stabilised inter-Korean ties. When the Trump initiative failed, tensions spiked again. The North's leaders, given



what happened to Libya, Iraq, and the Iran nuclear agreement, have little incentive to give up their nuclear weapons for an agreement with the U.S. In an apparent rejection of the path of reconciliation with the U.S., Pyongyang has ruled out talks on denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula and has taken measures to strengthen ties with China and Russia. But even a complicated diplomatic path would be preferable to a military path any day. A direct conflict between the two Koreas, one a nuclear power and the other backed by the world's most powerful country, would be disastrous for the entire region. Dialling down tensions and rebuilding confidence in inter-Korean relations should be an immediate priority for all stakeholders — Seoul, Pyongyang, and Washington.

LOOKING FOR 'DRAGON BABIES': COULD CHINA SEE MORE BIRTHS IN 2024?

In 2022, China recorded a decline in its population compared with the previous year for the first time since the 1960s. The fall was repeated in 2023, when it saw around 11 million deaths and 9 million births. Amid this trend, the term 'dragon babies' has been floating.

'Dragon babies' refers to babies born in the year of the dragon. The animal-based classification of years is based on the Chinese zodiac. It begins in February 2024. Under this system, every year gets associated with a particular animal – from Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, or Pig. With 12 zodiac signs, every animal repeats after 12 years and the system applies on a rotational basis.

China dragon babies 2000 and 2012 were Years of the Dragon too and saw a slight uptick in births.

All the animals are linked to specific personality traits, which are believed to be present in people born in that year. In recent years of the dragons, a slight uptick in births has been noticed, stemming from the belief that the mythical animals are lucky. Couples often try to have children in the year of the dragon to ensure good fortune comes their way.

Why does this happen?

The dragon is an oft-featured symbol in Chinese culture, and considered auspicious. However, as it was seen as exclusive to the Chinese emperor in ancient times, it was used sparingly.

The Chinese zodiac system is believed to be around 2,000 years old. Associating a year with an animal also lends to other beliefs – determining the combinations of two compatible people based on their signs, what years may be lucky for a person, and even the year they should have a child.

A paper in 2017 ('Can Superstition Create a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy? School Outcomes of Dragon Children in China') from Naci Mocan and Han Yu, two economists at Louisiana State University, studied the impact of this belief.

It found that children who were born in dragon years scored better than other children, on average, on various parameters. This includes the proportion of people possessing at least a Bachelor's degree compared with their peers, college entrance examination scores, etc. They then examined this data along with surveys of parents on expectations for their children.

It was found that "higher educational achievements of Dragon year children in China are largely due to the much higher expectations of their parents," the US National Bureau of Economic Research noted.



The paper found that “Differing income and educational levels of parents cannot explain the higher educational achievements of Dragon year children.” Further, surveys showed that parents of such students have “consistently higher expectations for their children than do parents of children born in other years. Moreover, the parents report investing more time, money, and effort into making sure their Dragon-year children succeed.”

“Even though neither the Dragon children nor their families are inherently different from other children and families, the belief in the prophecy of success and the ensuing investment become self-fulfilling,” the researchers concluded.

How does this translate into the outlook for 2024?

According to the paper, the number of live births increased by 289,224 in 2000 compared to 1999, and by 935,854 in 2012 compared to 2011. This may suggest a possible uptick in births this year.

Further, the increasing number of deaths in China in 2022 was also linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. At the end of that year, China eased its Zero-Covid policy of strict lockdowns that were applied after the detection of only a few cases. It was believed that community transmission of the disease did not take hold in the country for long due to the policy. It slowed the building of the body’s natural immunity against the virus.

This year, the impact of Covid-19 on deaths will likely be lower. But the overall trend of a low fertility rate, that is fewer births per woman in the population, could continue. Some other countries in Asia and a few in Europe are also seeing lower births, with couples opting out of having multiple children or children at all. It is due to a range of factors – the increasing education levels of women over time, high costs of living, significant academic and job pressures, etc.

UNDER JUNTA RULE, MYANMAR PLUMBS NEW DEPTHS

Nearly three years since Myanmar's military junta overthrew a democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the country is wracked by civil war. While the National Unity Government formed by the NLD — many of whose representatives along with elected parliamentarians are in exile — gave the call for armed action leading to various Peoples Defence Forces taking on the military, several ethnic armed organisations (EAO) have also fought the junta.

Early this month, after months of intense conflict that resulted in the junta losing control over scores of towns and military outposts to a coalition of three EAOs — the Ta’ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Arakan Army, who called themselves the Three Brotherhood Alliance, a China brokered ceasefire agreement was signed between the alliance and the junta.

But hostilities continue. The prolonged civil war has severely disrupted the economy even as the junta suspended civil liberties and political freedoms following the coup. The number of journalists imprisoned shot up considerably and the Human Development Index plunged after years of growth.

In 2020, just before the junta took over, this index reached a peak, with Myanmar ranking 101 of 179 nations, better than Malaysia's and India's. In 2022, the rankings plunged to 173, closer to North Korea and Afghanistan.



Voting rights, freedom of association, and civil liberties (0: least democratic, 1: most democratic) gradually improved after the Suu Kyi government was elected in 2015 and peaked in 2020 only to drastically fall in the next two years following the coup. The country's ranking in the index dropped from 106 of 179 nations in 2020 to 168 in 2022.

In fact, on the civil liberty index, which focuses on the extent to which citizens enjoy civil liberties, Myanmar was assigned a score of 0 in 2022, meaning the country's citizens have no such liberties now. Notably, this score was lower than even the pre-2011 figures — the transition year which saw the military initiating the process of handing over the government to a civilian regime after years of junta rule. The country's ranking in the index dropped from 145 of 167 countries in 2020 to a joint last rank along with Syria and North Korea in 2022.

In the freedom of expression index, which measures the extent to which people can voice their opinions in the country (0: least democratic, 1: most democratic), the scores in 2022 plunged to the level seen before 2011. Currently, the country is ranked 171 of 179 nations on this measure.

The number of journalists imprisoned went up from 0 in 2020 to 48 in 2022 — the third highest number of arrests globally after Iran and China. This was reflected in the press freedom index — the country ranked 173 of 180 nations in 2022, a sharp drop from the 139th rank it held in 2020, three places above India.

The country's economy has suffered too. The GDP per capita decreased rapidly post the 2020-peak and the per capita income too tapered sharply.

Altogether, these took a toll on the Human Development Index which measures health, knowledge and standard of living.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE FOURTH NATIONAL ELECTIONS OF BHUTAN

The story so far:

On January 10, the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) declared the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the ruling party with 30 out of 47 seats in the fourth national assembly elections. The Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP) became the opposition party with 17 seats.

What is electoral system of Bhutan?

In 2008, Bhutan converted from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary government. The King of Bhutan is the head of the state whereas the Prime Minister is the head of the government. Since 2008, Bhutan has conducted four elections. The Parliament of Bhutan consists of the King of Bhutan, the National Council (upper house), and the National Assembly (lower house). The elections to the National Assembly are a two-tier system consisting of a primary round and then general elections. All registered parties contest in the primary round of elections and the top two voted parties contest the general elections to decide the ruling party and the opposition party. While in the primary round of elections, all five registered parties of Bhutan contested, PDP and BTP secured the most votes of 42.53% and 19.58 % respectively.

What were campaigns of the parties?

The PDP, a liberal party, emerged as the winner with a landslide victory. The party's campaign revolved around economic recovery, developing infrastructure, and boosting the private sector. More action-oriented goals were a prominent factor in winning the vote.

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



The BTP, which is a new entrant in the electoral race, became the opposition party in its first term. Its campaigns focused on “a vibrant and prosperous Bhutan” through a robust private sector, effective governance, strengthening local governance, and establishing the Bhutan Idea and Innovation Bank.

What were the key issues?

The country’s Gross National Happiness (GNH) was the central theme of all elections so far. However, the economy was the major driving force of the fourth round of elections. The average economic growth in the past five years stood at 1.6%. According to the National Statistics Bureau (NSB), the youth unemployment rate in 2022 was 28.6%. The private sector has been stagnant since the pandemic, and the tourism sector has also witnessed a downfall. According to the Ministry of Finance, the total debt of Bhutan was 124.5% of its GDP as of September 2022. The foreign reserves of Bhutan have also been declining and are close to going below the constitutional limit. In 2023, the reserves declined to \$689 million, sufficient only for 14 months of essential imports. The constitution mandates reserves for at least 12 months of imports. Second, there were demographic challenges. Mass migration has been sharply increasing leading to a shortage of manpower. The exodus of high-skilled people to other countries for better educational and job opportunities has affected the delivery of public services domestically. Additionally, fertility rates have been declining.

The elections also witnessed a decline in voter turnout. In the 2018 elections, the turnout for the primary round and general elections stood at 66.36% and 71.46% as compared to 63% and 65.6% in 2023-24.

What next for Bhutan?

With a caretaker government in place and a few challenges, the fourth round of elections conducted in Bhutan exhibited a smooth transition to democracy. PDP being one of the oldest parties has been trusted again for stabilising the economy for a better and prosperous Bhutan. In the 2013 elections, the PDP won and took over a weak economy that grappled with soaring inflation, frozen credit, import bans, and minimal business activity. The party was successful in increasing GDP and foreign reserves. With the slogan “For a Better Druk Yul [For a better Bhutan]” PDP, President Tshering Tobgay is set to be the Prime Minister of Bhutan for the second time.

NEPAL REQUESTS RUSSIA NOT TO RECRUIT ITS NATIONALS INTO ARMY

Nepalese Foreign Minister N. P. Saud, during his meeting with Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Vershinin Sergey Vasilievich on Friday on the sidelines of the ongoing Non-Aligned Summit in Kampala, Uganda, asked Russia “not to recruit Nepalese nationals into the country’s Army and to help repatriate those who have already joined the forces”, according to the private secretariat of Mr. Saud.

Mr. Saud clarified that “Nepal has no policy to send its nationals to foreign Army except those few countries with which it has traditional arrangements. Therefore, I have asked the Russian Minister not to recruit our nationals into its Army,” Mr. Saud was quoted as saying by his personal secretariat.

Mr. Saud also asked the Russian side to “send back the dead bodies of those killed in the Russia-Ukraine war while fighting for the Russian Army and to provide due compensation to the family of the victims”.



The Russian side has informed Mr. Saud that necessary arrangements will be made to provide compensation to the family of the deceased as per the Russian law. Mr. Vesilievich, who is also the leader to the NAM Summit from Russia, has assured Mr. Saud that initiatives will be taken to address the concerns raised by Nepal.

MUSEVENI REGRETS INDIANS' EXPULSION BY IDI AMIN IN 1970S

Nearly 52 years after Ugandan dictator Idi Amin expelled the Indian community from his country, President of Uganda Yoweri Museveni on Sunday called that move a “mistake” and expressed gratitude to the Indian community of Uganda for the service that they rendered over the decades. President Museveni’s comment which came at the 19th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit held in the capital Kampala was a rare expression of regret about an event that has long been considered one of the traumatic incidents that struck the Indian diaspora in the 20th century.

“Uganda was moving very well in the 1960s and then we had a man called Idi Amin... He came and took over the government. We decided to fight him. But in the very short time he expelled our Asians... who had come from Asia and settled here,” Mr. Museveni said.

In August 1972, Amin ordered the expulsion of Indians and other South Asians who were an integral part of the Ugandan life till that point. In the end, around 80,000 Indians and thousands of Pakistanis and Bangladesh citizens were expelled from Uganda. In recent years, several Indians who traced their roots to Uganda under Amin have come into prominence including former U.K. Home Secretary Priti Patel.

Speaking at the NAM summit, President Museveni recalled the contribution of Indians in building the economy of Uganda, and said the convention centre where the 19th NAM summit was held this year was also built by one of those who were affected by Amin’s decision.

“When we came into government, we brought them back and gave back properties of our Asian citizens that Idi Amin had taken. We had a hot debate in the Parliament but we said ‘no’, they must get back their properties,” said Mr. Museveni.

MALDIVES RULES OUT RESEARCH BY CHINESE VESSEL IN ITS WATERS

Chinese research vessel Xiang Yang Hong 03 will not be carrying out research in Maldivian waters, but will arrive for a port call, the Government of Maldives said on Tuesday.

Reports of the Chinese vessel heading to the Maldives have drawn considerable attention in India, especially in the wake of Sri Lanka announcing a one-year moratorium on foreign research vessels calling at the island’s ports, after India voiced concern over visits by a Chinese vessel. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said a diplomatic request was made by the Government of China to the Government of Maldives for “necessary clearances to make a port call, for rotation of personnel and replenishment”.

“The vessel would not be conducting any research while in the Maldivian waters,” the Ministry said in a statement, which Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer shared on social media platform X.



NATION

WHY CANADA HAS PUT CURBS ON FOREIGN STUDENTS, AND HOW INDIANS ARE IMPACTED

Canada's federal government has said it is capping the number of international student visas for a period of two years beginning with the coming academic session. Fewer visas will mean fewer Indian students will be able to travel to Canada for a college degree.

By how much is Canada cutting the number of international student visas?

Marc Miller, the Canadian Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, announced on Monday that for the academic session beginning September 1, 2024, the number of new international student permits would be cut by 35% from the 2023 number.

"This is expected to result in approximately 360,000 approved study permits this year, and will be allocated to provinces and territories to distribute among their DLIs" (Designated Learning Institutions), Miller said in a thread posted on his official X (Twitter) handle.

Why has Canada taken these steps to curb the influx of international students?

Canadian media quoted Miller as saying the intake of international students needed to be capped so that "a sustainable level of temporary residence" in Canada could be maintained. Canada has an obligation to ensure international students "have access to the resources they need to succeed" in the country, the Minister said on X.

Last month, the Canadian government said that from 2024, international students would have to show that they have more than \$20,000 — double the existing funds requirement — in addition to tuition fees to be eligible for a study permit.

Sean Fraser, who had been Immigration Minister earlier, told Canadian media that student intake had grown "beyond what certain communities could handle" — which was the reason for the decisions announced by Miller.

Also, "unscrupulous actors" had been "taking advantage of international students, rendering them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation", Miller said on X. The new measures would "ensure system integrity and sustainable growth", he said.

On the decision to exclude public-private institutions from the PGWP program, the Minister said "these programs are notorious for lacking oversight and do not provide the quality academic experience that Canada is renowned for."

Mandeep, convener of the Montreal Youth Students Organisation told The Indian Express: "There is a housing crisis in Canada currently. Rentals and the cost of living have increased a lot, while jobs are not that abundant. Also, some students have complained that private institutions were charging high tuition fees and offering poor quality education."

Who specifically will be impacted by the decisions? Will there be implications for Indians?

The two-year cap on student permits is only for undergraduate courses. Masters and PhD programs, as well as elementary and secondary school-level courses are exempt.



The curbs will apply to only new applicants — international students who are already studying in Canada, whether in undergraduate or any other courses, are not impacted.

The visa cap will hit Indian students. According to data from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the largest numbers of student visas are given to applicants from Asia, and India is on top of the list (followed by China).

Canada is a favourite destination for students from Punjab. Often, students are joined by their spouses on spouse visas within months of their beginning studies or getting a temporary job. Under the new rules, open work permits will be given to spouses only if they are enrolled in a postgraduate or doctoral program.

According to IRCC data, the population of international students rose from around 3.26 lakh in 2014 to more than 8 lakh in 2022. Last week, The Globe and Mail reported that at the end of December 2023, the number of study permit holders had crossed a million — 1,028,850, according to IRCC data quoted in the report — with more than half of them living in Ontario. The number of work permit holders was estimated at 1.4 million.

THE GROWTH OF INDIA-BANGLADESH TIES

The story so far:

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina returned to power in Bangladesh for a historic fourth straight term earlier this month after her party, the Awami League, secured two-thirds of the seats in the January 7 national elections. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was among the first world leaders to congratulate Ms. Hasina, illustrating the close bilateral relationship between the two countries.

How have ties flourished?

The foundation of India's relationship with Bangladesh was laid in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. India provided critical military and material support to assist Bangladesh in its fight for independence from Pakistan. Despite this, relations soured within a few years as military regimes took control. There was a rise in anti-India sentiment in the mid-1970s over issues ranging from boundary disputes and insurgency to the sharing of water. The instability continued for a few decades until Sheikh Hasina came to power in 1996 and scripted a new chapter in bilateral ties with a treaty on the sharing of Ganga waters. Since then, India and Bangladesh have built cooperation in trade, energy, infrastructure, connectivity and defence.

What about economic cooperation?

Bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh has grown steadily over the last decade. Bangladesh has emerged as India's largest trade partner in South Asia, with bilateral trade reaching \$18 billion in 2021-2022 from \$10.8 billion in 2020-21, though there was a dip in 2022-23 due to the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. India is also the second biggest trade partner of Bangladesh, with exports amounting to \$2 billion in Indian markets.

In 2022, both nations concluded a joint feasibility study on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). The agreement, typically designed to reduce or eliminate customs duties on traded goods and simplify trade norms, is anticipated to open up broader social and economic opportunities. The CEPA gains additional significance as Bangladesh is set to lose its Least Developed Country (LDC) status after 2026, thereby losing its duty-free and quota-free



market access in India. Dhaka will be eager to finalise a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with New Delhi, and also pursue the China-backed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). This dual approach raises concerns for India.

What about infrastructure?

As a “major development partner” of Bangladesh, India is funding several infrastructure and connectivity projects. Since 2010, India has extended Lines of Credits worth over \$7 billion. PM Modi and Sheikh Hasina made history last year when they inaugurated the Akhaura-Agartala rail link that connects Bangladesh and the northeast through Tripura. The link has given India access to Chattogram and Mongla ports in Bangladesh for the movement of cargo. It is likely to boost small-scale industries and develop Assam and Tripura.

In the energy sector, Bangladesh imports nearly 2,000 megawatts of electricity from India. The BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity focuses on connecting major transport projects in India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand, thereby establishing a shipping network. India’s attention will primarily be directed towards the Matarbari Port, located about 100 km from Tripura, which Bangladesh is building. The port will establish a crucial industrial corridor linking Dhaka and the northeast part of India.

What are the points of tension?

The looming Teesta dispute will take centre-stage in the agenda of the Hasina-led government. The issue revolves around the sharing of Teesta’s waters, with Bangladesh seeking an equitable distribution. Another contentious matter is the Rohingya issue. The Hasina government aims for the peaceful repatriation of Rohingyas to Myanmar, but its talks with the military junta have been unsuccessful so far. Bangladesh seeks India’s cooperation to influence Myanmar, but the Modi government, which has ties with the junta, asserts that it will deport Rohingyas from its mainland. Cross-border terrorism and infiltration are additional threats to internal security. The rise of majoritarian forces adds another layer to the complex landscape. While violence against Muslims has increased in India in the past few years, PM Hasina has stood at the forefront to condemn the attacks and express displeasure over comments by Indian leaders on “illegal” immigrants.

What about global ties?

The U.S. has been vocal in its criticism of the Awami League government, exerting pressure on Sheikh Hasina over “democratic backsliding”. In 2021, the Biden administration slapped sanctions on a Bangladeshi anti-crime and anti-terrorism task force, citing human rights violations, and escalated tensions by announcing a policy to restrict visas for Bangladeshis it believed to be responsible for undermining the election process in the country. Adding to India’s concerns is the deepening relationship between Bangladesh and China, marked by the substantial Chinese investments in infrastructure in recent years. China built 12 highways, 21 bridges and 27 power and energy projects in Bangladesh, as per the Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh. However, Ms. Hasina has maintained that her government is “very much careful” about its partnership with China.



WHAT ARE LABOUR RULES FOR WORKERS ABROAD?

The story so far:

The Uttar Pradesh and Haryana governments, with the help of the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), have started the process of recruiting about 10,000 workers to go to Israel, primarily for construction activities. The NSDC website describes it as a “passport to dreams abroad”, and a chance to “discover new horizons in Israel”. There are 2,000 openings for plastering workers, 2,000 for ceramic tile workers, and 3,000 each for iron bending and frame workers with monthly salaries of about ₹1.37 lakh (6,100 Israeli shekels). Screenings have started in various locations in Haryana and U.P. with the help of State governments.

Who are opposing the move?

Trade unions have opposed this move, citing the Emigration Rules under the Emigration Act. They are planning to challenge this employment drive legally. The central trade unions told the media that such a move is against the Indian ethos of bringing back citizens from conflict zones. The trade union leaders alleged that the BJP-led government was using unemployment among the youth and workers to further their “politics of hate” to please Israel. Several hundreds of people, meanwhile, turned up at the screening centres in Haryana.

What do the Rules prescribe?

Workers going to conflict zones or places without sufficient labour protections are required to register with the Ministry of External Affairs’ ‘e-migrate’ portal. Passports issued under the ECR (Emigration Check Required) scheme cover workers travelling to 18 countries, including Afghanistan, Bahrain, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, the UAE, and Yemen. Israel is not on this list and the ‘e-migrate’ system will not be used for those going to Israel despite continuing violence due to Israel’s bombing of Gaza.

The Rules say that no recruiting agent shall collect from the worker service charges more than a maximum of ₹30,000 and the service charges shall include costs of domestic travel or lodging and boarding for conducting of interviews by the recruiting agent. Here, the workers will have to pay a fee to the NSDC, pay for their flight tickets, etc, which will add up to almost ₹1 lakh. The unions point out that paid recruitment in a war zone facilitated by governments violates provisions of the Emigration Act. The MEA spokesperson, Randhir Jaiswal, said India is satisfied with Israel’s labour standards. “Labour laws in Israel are very strict, robust. It’s an OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) country, therefore labour laws are such that it provides for protection of migrant rights, labour rights. On our part, we are very conscious of our responsibility to provide security and safety to our people who are abroad,” Mr. Jaiswal said.

What are the international practices?

The international practices for protection of migrant workers are governed by two conventions of the International Labour Organisation: the Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97) and Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143). While India has not ratified both conventions, Israel had ratified the 1949 convention in 1953. The 1949 convention says: “Each Member for which this Convention is in force undertakes that it will, so far as national laws and regulations permit, take all appropriate steps against misleading



propaganda relating to emigration and immigration. For this purpose, it will where appropriate act in co-operation with other Members concerned.”

The Israel Defense Forces spokesman Doron Spielman had told media that “there is not a place in Israel that is safe now” due to Hamas. According to some estimates, about 100 people who died in Gaza are migrant workers from Asian and African countries, and as per the Indian Embassy website, as of February 2023, “There are about 18,000 Indian citizens in Israel, primarily caregivers employed by Israeli elders to take care of them, diamond traders, IT professionals and students.” According to a 2017 report prepared by the ILO, international migration has grown significantly in the last two decades. The number of migrants from Asia to the Arab states has more than tripled, from 5.7 million in 1990 to 19 million in 2015.

What is the way forward?

The global unemployment rate is set to increase in 2024 while growing social inequalities remain a concern, said the ILO’s World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2024 report. Joblessness and the jobs gap have both fallen below pre-pandemic levels but global unemployment will rise in 2024, it said. It added that many low- and middle-income countries will experience a demographic transition after 2030 and asked the countries to design sensible migration policies and skilling initiatives to support and develop local labour markets with growing populations. “To do so will require, among other things, a more accurate forecast of labour demand by occupations and sectors in destination countries, and a strengthened education and training system in countries with excess labour resources,” the report said.

In 2019, a report of the Parliament Standing Committee on External Affairs had asked the Centre to draft a migration policy. The panel, then headed by MP Shashi Tharoor, said it is concerned to note that the existing institutional arrangements for the protection, safety and welfare of Indian emigrants are based on inadequate data infrastructure.

EXPRESS VIEW: BHARAT RATNA KARPOORI THAKUR

The Bharat Ratna to Karpoori Thakur is richly deserved and apparently politically timed. The award to the socialist stalwart, described by Prime Minister Narendra Modi as the “champion for the marginalised” and “beacon of social justice”, comes 35 years after his death and less than three months before the next Lok Sabha election. In a storied career that began with the Quit India movement and saw him become chief minister of Bihar twice, Karpoori Thakur’s achievements were several and influential, and they have endured — especially his contribution in shaping the public conversation on caste in the country. For the BJP, having just fulfilled its Mandir promise with the consecration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, the honouring of Thakur could be read as a significant foray into Mandal territory that lies ostensibly on the other side of the political fence — ostensibly, because the BJP is no stranger to caste politics, having successfully appropriated pieces of the Mandal vocabulary. In the run-up to the parliamentary election, with the Congress-led Opposition making the demand for a nation-wide caste census a primary plank, the Bharat Ratna to Thakur confirms the BJP government’s inventive use of the award to make a political point — past recipients have included Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Nanaji Deshmukh, Madan Mohan Malviya and Pranab Mukherjee — and to lay claim to the Karpoori legacy.

Karpoori Thakur laid the ground for the architecture of the affirmative action regime established after the Centre implemented the Mandal Commission Report in 1990. In 1978 in Bihar, the Karpoori government had accepted the Mungeri Lal Commission’s recommendations and



instituted a layered quota framework that recognised the cleavage within the backward castes and also acknowledged the need to address the disadvantages faced by women — of the 26 per cent quota, 12 per cent was given to the extremely backward castes or EBCs, 8 per cent to OBCs, 3 per cent to women and 3 per cent to the economically backward upper castes. Over the last several elections in Bihar and elsewhere in the country's north, the EBCs, for long relegated to the margins by the Backward versus Forward cleavage, have emerged as a critical constituency — the BJP has focused on the mobilisation of these castes as part of its strategy to court non-Jatav Dalits and non-Yadav OBCs. In Bihar, the Nitish Kumar government carried out a caste survey in October last year and an important finding was that the EBCs are the largest social bloc, accounting for 36.1 per cent of the state's population. To keep the issue alive ahead of Lok Sabha polls, JD(U) workers and leaders have been fanning out to conduct "Karpoori charchas" across the state's constituencies.

The BJP government's decision seeks to paper over the fissures between the politics of the Sangh Parivar and that of the stream Karpoori Thakur belonged to. Even as anti-Congressism brought them together — first in the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal and then the Janata Party government in Bihar — it was not enough to keep them together. Now, as a new election draws closer, however, a contest has begun that may draw upon history but will not be bound by it. In this moment, the Bharat Ratna by the BJP-led government to a socialist icon sends a signal that is bound to be decoded politically.

JANUARY 26, 1950: HOW INDIA OBSERVED ITS FIRST REPUBLIC DAY

On January 26, 1950, the Republic of India was born. More than two years after Independence, and after nearly a century of nationalist struggle, India was finally a sovereign, democratic republic, free to chart its own course into the future.

On the eve of the 75th Republic Day, we remember the chilly January morning in 1950 when India became a republic.

Dominion to republic

Although British rule in India ended on August 15, 1947, India was yet to sever all ties with the Empire. For over two years after Independence, India remained a British dominion, governed by the British-era Government of India Act of 1935, and officially still owing allegiance to the Crown.

All this changed on January 26, 1950. On that day, the newly drafted Constitution of India came into effect, replacing the Act of 1935 as the supreme governing document of the country. Dr Rajendra Prasad began his first term as the President of India, replacing the British monarch as the ceremonial head of the state.

And finally, the Constituent Assembly, which had drafted the constitution over a period of roughly three years, became the Parliament of India until the first general elections would take place in 1951-52.

A ceremonial parade

Military parades are symbolic expressions of state authority and prestige. During the British Raj, royal parades and processions were common occurrences, projecting colonial power to Indians and the world.



The new republic decided to continue with this tradition — and reclaim it for Indians. Thus, since 1950, Republic Day celebrations have been headlined by a military parade in New Delhi, which has become ever grander and more spectacular over the years.

The 1950 parade was held in the Irwin Amphitheatre opposite the Purana Qila, now known as the Major Dhyani Chand National Stadium. President Dr Rajendra Prasad inspected the parade, and Indonesia President Sukarno was the chief guest.

According to historian Ramachandra Guha, more than 3,000 men of the armed forces marched in front of the president. (India After Gandhi, 2007). The parade saw participation of marching contingents from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and the Delhi Police.

After inspection of the parade by the President, the Artillery, deployed behind the East Stand, fired a 31-gun salute, in three instalments. Between these instalments, the parade fired a 'Feu-de-joie' or the fire of joy — a formal celebratory gunfire — thrice, and then gave three 'jais' to the President of the Republic. Indian Air Force's Liberator planes flew overhead, to cap the spectacle.

After the last massed bands had marched past, the President's horse-drawn carriage entered the stadium, flanked by the President's Bodyguard on horses (a tradition which continues till date). After the Bodyguard saluted the President, Dr Prasad entered his carriage and headed back to Government House (now Rashtrapati Bhawan).

Dignitaries Dignitaries at the first Republic Day parade in 1950. (Government of India)

Describing the day's events, Guha wrote: "Gandhi's India was announcing itself as a sovereign nation-state."

But a job not done

While January 26 was indeed a day of celebrations, the leaders of the nascent country knew that they had a hard task ahead. As Dr B R Ambedkar, chairman of the Constituent Assembly's drafting committee, remarked in his final Constituent Assembly speech on November 26, 1949:

"On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality... We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up."

EXPRESS VIEW ON MACRON IN INDIA: BUILDING ON TRUST

President Emmanuel Macron's two-day visit — he was chief guest at the country's 75th Republic Day function — has reinforced France's special place in India's strategic calculus. The partnership underlined during PM Modi's visit last year to France, is built on three pillars — deepening cooperation in defence, sustained engagement in global issues, especially in emerging and green technologies, and people-to-people contact. These have emerged stronger after Modi-Macron talks in the past two days.

The two countries have adopted a roadmap for defence industrial production. This cooperation aims to create supply chains that fulfil Delhi's security needs and provide it with the necessary bandwidth to negotiate partnerships with other countries. The pacts on clean energy and technology take forward the engagement begun on the sidelines of the Paris Climate Pact in 2015



— the International Solar Alliance, an expanding club of nations, is amongst the most tangible outcomes of this collaboration.

In 2021, the two signed a memorandum on green hydrogen, which aims “to bring the French and Indian hydrogen ecosystems together.” Macron’s reiteration of his last year’s commitment to increase the number of students studying in France to 30,000 and give them attractive post-study work visas will also go down well in a country undergoing an educational churn. The Alliance Francaise network will also be strengthened — this will be particularly welcomed by Indian students who often find language a barrier in accessing French higher education institutes, 35 of which find place in the QS ratings.

In recent years, India has inched closer to Washington. France, too, acknowledges the US’s place in the global order. At the same time, the traditional importance that Paris attaches to its strategic autonomy vis-a-vis Washington has earned Delhi’s trust, especially after the French government refused to toe the dominant Western line after India’s nuclear tests in 1998. France recognised India’s strategic importance at a time when other Western powers turned their back on it. In 2019, France blocked China from raising the Kashmir issue at the UN Security Council after the abrogation of Article 370. French domestic procedures on defence deals have made the country a reliable defence partner. While pacts with the US are dogged by unpredictability due to Congressional interventions and export control regimes, French deals have no such strings attached.

Modi and Macron also exchanged perspectives on Gaza, Red Sea turmoil and conflict in Ukraine. In recent months, it has become clear that peace in these theatres of conflict will require a multi-pronged effort. The Red Sea is a significant conduit for Indo-European trade and the frailties of a US-led defence against the Houthi attacks are already evident. With Trump’s return to the White House becoming imminent, fears that the US will be a less engaged player on the global stage may not be unfounded. Indo-French collaboration could be among the keys to ensuring stability in a complex geopolitical environment.

THE THREAD THAT COUNTS: CHANDERI TO KASAVU, 1,900 VARIETIES OF SAREES TO BE ON DISPLAY AT REPUBLIC DAY PARADE

Amidst the tableaux of various states and ministries that would participate in the Republic Day parade this year will be an exhibition of sarees, textiles and embroideries from around India. Titled ‘Anant Sutra – The Endless Thread’, the exhibition along the Kartavya Path on Friday will feature nearly 1,900 drapes mounted on wooden frames.

Costume designer and exhibition curator Sandhya Raman says, “This exhibition is about the thread that binds us, bridges us across distances, and that women carry on from generation to generation. The saree has two borders, representing you and me, and a pallu, which represents how we come together to become one. That is the beauty of this garment and country. It is timeless.”

She adds, “This exhibition is about the thousands of weavers I work with across India. I have a panel on styles and techniques from every state and Union Territory, from Uttar Pradesh’s Banarasi, to Manipur’s Moirang Phee, to Odisha’s Bomkai, to Kerala’s Kasavu, to Madhya Pradesh’s Chanderi, to Rajasthan’s Leheriya, to Kashmir’s Kashida.”



One of the artisans whose work will be on display at the exhibition is Zahin Qureshi, a weaver from Chanderi, Madhya Pradesh, who has been involved in the handloom business since he was a child. From the fourth generation of a family of weavers, Qureshi works with nearly 50 people in his village, all of whom weave these sarees from their homes and market to many states and Union Territories (UTs) including Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra. "I feel proud that my handicraft will be displayed at the exhibition," he says.

Hitesh Vankar, a weaver from Kachchh, Gujarat, works with 15 families – including 15 men and 22 women – to make stoles, sarees, dupattas and shawls. The saree, Bhujodi, is sold all over India. "It feels good to know that my work will be displayed at the Republic Day parade," he says.

Nirmala Mudenur, a weaver from Ballari, Karnataka, started her handicraft business with just one woman in 2017, and has since grown her business to hire 150 people. She makes many items, including the Lambani saree, in a workshop. The products were first marketed through Facebook, but soon, a website (soojidaara.in) and Instagram handle were made to facilitate online sales.

"I'm just surprised to know that these sarees will be displayed at the parade, maybe they found out about my work from a nearby exhibition in Kaladham," she says.

FROM RAM TO AKBAR TO GANDHI: ARTWORK ON THE CONSTITUTION, WHO PAINTED THEM

The Indian Constitution is not just the lengthiest written Constitution in the world but also the most richly illustrated, with all 22 parts carrying hand-painted images and its pages adorned with elaborate borders.

While the Constitution was handwritten by calligrapher Prem Behari Narain Raizada, the paintings were conceived and implemented in Santiniketan by artist-pedagogue Nandalal Bose and his team.

When placed in sequence, the narrative scheme of the paintings represents different periods in Indian history, from the Indus Valley civilisation to the freedom struggle, also including scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

The illustrations also showcase the diverse geography of India, from camels marching in the desert to the mighty Himalayas. "It is a sequence of images which is his (Nandalal's) vision of India's history. He is not illustrating the content of the Constitution, but he is placing the history of India as he saw it. Present-day scholars and historians might have some disagreements about the sequence but that was the broad chronology talked about back then," said art historian R Siva Kumar.

The appointment of artists

Siva Kumar said Bose was approached with the task of illustrating in October 1949, just before the final session of the Constituent Assembly and the signing of the draft Constitution on November 26, 1949. "It is difficult to say how long the illustrations took and if they were completed before the signing.... in some instances, the signatures breach the space allotted for them and the borders skirt them, suggesting they were added later," he said.

Two copies of the Constitution, one in English and one in Hindi, are handwritten and bear the paintings.



Bose was probably entrusted with the task due to his long association with the nationalist movement. A close aide of Mahatma Gandhi, he had designed posters for the Congress session at Hariपुरa, near Bardoli in Gujarat, in 1938.

On the Constitution, Bose worked with a team of collaborators which included close family members, his students and fellow-artists, including Kripal Singh Shekhawat, A Perumal, and Direndrakrishna Deb Burman.

The Preamble page has intricate patterns sketched by Beohar Rammanohar Sinha and bears his signature, while Dinanath Bhargava sketched the National Emblem, the Lion Capital of Ashoka.

Siva Kumar said a note found among Nandalal's papers suggests that the artists who painted the historical scenes were paid Rs 25 for each page.

It is believed that it was Jawaharlal Nehru who wanted the Constitution handwritten, and therefore Raizada, a graduate from Delhi's St Stephen's College, was approached. The calligrapher, who had learnt the art from his grandfather, immediately agreed. Not charging a penny for the task, his only request was to have his name on each page and alongside his grandfather on the last. Allotted a room in the Constitution Hall, he reportedly took six months to complete the task, writing on parchment sheets both in Hindi and English.

The ideation of the artwork

According to Siva Kumar, the text and images in the Constitution have no direct correlation, as Nandalal was not illustrating the text or studying its details while planning the visual narrative. "A preliminary plan was drawn up, which saw deletions and additions," Siva Kumar said. For instance, 'portraits of Akbar and Shahjahan with Mughal architecture' was replaced with an image of Akbar.

Ashish Anand, CEO and Managing Director of DAG, said: "Nandalal Bose's career varied across his watercolour washes to his expressionist subaltern works in Santiniketan, and, indeed, the selection and style as well as imaging spans this spectrum in terms of subjects and influences. Illustrating the Constitution was a task that would survive for centuries, an onerous responsibility — and Nandalal Bose's stamp exemplifies as well as expands the vision of the document it represents."

Borrowing from history and religion

The Bull Seal, excavated from the Indus Valley region, is the first pictorial representation in the Constitution, appearing in 'Part I: The Union and its Territory'. 'Part II: Citizenship' features a hermitage scene with male ascetic figures offering prayers in a meditative environment. In another scene of hermitage that appears in Part V, Buddha is the central figure, surrounded by disciples, animals, and birds in a serene setting.

Out of the select representations in colour is an image in Part VI of Mahavir, the 24th Jain Tirthankara, seated crossed-legged in meditation.

In Part XIII, we see sculptures from Mahabalipuram and the descent of Ganga to Earth.

Part IV on Directive Principles of State Policy begins with a scene from the Mahabharata, with the discussion between Arjun and Krishna before the onset of the war. For Part III on Fundamental



Rights, the artists turned to the Ramayana, drawing a sketch of Ram, Lakshman and Sita returning home after the battle in Lanka.

India's monarchs

While Emperor Ashoka is seen seated on an elephant, propagating Buddhism, in Part VII of the Constitution, Part IX has a scene from King Vikramaditya's court with musicians and dancers, representing him as a patron of art.

The only female figure illustrated prominently in the Constitution, Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, is sketched in her armour as she shares the page with Tipu Sultan, the king of Mysore, in Part XVI of the Constitution. Chhatrapati Shivaji and Guru Gobind Singh are featured in Part XV.

"Portraits of Rana Pratap and Ranjit Singh were also meant to be there but were not included probably due to space constraints," Siva Kumar said.

The country's freedom struggle

Gandhi appears twice, leading the Dandi March and visiting riot-hit Noakhali in Bangladesh. He is being welcomed by women with an aarti thali and Muslim peasants wearing kufi caps.

In Part XIX, Subhas Chandra Bose is seen against a mountainous backdrop, saluting the flag, with members of Azad Hind Fauj marching ahead.

Nehru was also supposed to be included, but was eventually omitted.

Siva Kumar said three landscapes in the Constitution are a homage to Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore and the National Anthem he composed, which also celebrates the diverse geographical landscapes of India.

FROM FEAR TO HOPE

The opening of the Ram temple in Ayodhya is a sharp turn in the course of the nation. The central role of the state in the rituals associated with the inauguration of the temple is being celebrated by the proponents of the temple, while its opponents fear it is the beginning of a dangerous slide. Two divergent visions of Indian nationhood inspire the two sides. The inauguration of the temple marks a definitive milestone, if not a comprehensive victory, for the vision of the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Mr. Modi said it was the beginning of a new era in the history of the country, an era that will last for centuries. He called for humility alongside the celebration of victory, and invoked the universality of the spirit of Ram that encompasses all of humanity. Portraying the temple as a link between India's rich cultural inheritance and ambitions for the future, across the various regions and communities of the country, Mr. Modi exhorted fellow citizens to think big and work purposefully for progress. Ram Rajya has had multiple imaginings. The temple in Ayodhya must inspire and promote the conception of a polity determined not by an obsession with the past, but by an appreciation of the difficulties of the present, and the challenges and opportunities of the future.

The Prime Minister also noted the fact that the temple was facilitated by a judicial decision. The Supreme Court verdict that handed over the disputed land in Ayodhya to the Hindu petitioners had also unambiguously noted that the demolition of Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992 by kar sevaks was a "serious violation of law". Devotees of the temple, in their moment of celebration, should not be unmindful of the past. Triumphalism and grievance must give way to reconciliation

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



and harmony; and fear must yield to hope. The temptation to use the same template of settling contests over places of worship must be abandoned immediately. Seeking to settle historical grievances can trigger unpredictable social forces and risk national unity. Mr. Modi himself noted this fact, while appreciating the relative ease with which the temple was built after the Supreme Court verdict in 2019. In the making of present-day politics, the past is often used as malleable material. It can surely be deployed for the purpose of forging unity and creating harmony, instead of for accentuating differences. The wisdom of statecraft is in making the right choice.

HOW RAMAYANA BECAME POPULAR OUTSIDE INDIA, FROM EAST ASIA TO THE CARIBBEAN

The Ramayana has been popular in India for millennia, as text in Sanskrit and many other languages, as folk theatre, as puppet shows, and as countless kathas or oral retellings organised in villages and small towns. However, the epic enjoys popularity much beyond Indian shores, and the spread of the Ramayana is also testimony to how Indians travelled across the world — as prosperous traders, as preachers, and as bonded labourers.

In this article, we look at two broad periods of the spread of Ram's story: the early CEs, when it reached countries like Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, China, Tibet etc., and the 19th century, when it gained popularity in parts of Africa, the Caribbean, and Oceania.

How the Ramayana spread in Asia

As Santosh N Desai, then Assistant Professor of Asian History and Religion at St John's University, New York, wrote in 1969, the Ramayana travelled from India to the rest of Asia in "the early centuries of the Christian era" along three routes, "by land, the northern route took the story from the Punjab and Kashmir into China, Tibet, and East Turkestan; by sea, the southern route carried the story from Gujarat and South India into Java, Sumatra, and Malaya; and again by land, the eastern route delivered the story from Bengal into Burma, Thailand, and Laos. Vietnam and Cambodia obtained their stories partly from Java and partly from India via the eastern route."

Why were Indians travelling to this region "in the early centuries of the Christian era"? Mainly for trade, in spices, gold, and aromatic wood. Many stayed back there, either because they married local women or got jobs.

Historian Karmveer Singh, in a research paper titled, 'Cultural dimensions of India-Thailand relations: A historical perspective' (2022), writes that the traders brought with them "Indian religion, culture, traditions and philosophy". "They were also accompanied by Brahmin priests, Buddhist monks, scholars and adventurers and all of them played an important role in the transmission of Indian culture to the natives of Southeast Asia."

Over time, the Ramayana became an integral part of the culture of many of these countries. In Thailand, the Ayutthaya kingdom (1351 to 1767) is believed to have been based on the Ayodhya of the Ramayana. A UNESCO article on the the city of Ayutthaya says, "When the capital of the restored kingdom was moved downstream and a new city built at Bangkok, there was a conscious attempt to recreate the urban template and architectural form of Ayutthaya...to emulate the perfection of the mythical city of Ayodhya."

In Cambodia, the Angkor Wat temple complex, built in the 12th century, features murals from the Ramayana, and was originally a temple dedicated to Vishnu.



How it survives in the region today

Even today, the Ramayana remains an important part of the culture of many of these Southeast Asian countries, though the dominant religions range here from Buddhism (for eg. Cambodia, Laos) to Islam (Malaysia, Indonesia).

The Ramakien, a version of the Ramayana, is Thailand's national epic. The current king belongs to the Chakri dynasty, whose rulers are all named after Ram. Vajiralongkorn, the current constitutional monarch, is styled Rama X. In Laos too, the story of Phra Ram is the national epic.

Of course, in all these countries, the story of Ram has undergone various changes. Also, the inspiration for their versions of Ram's tale are not necessarily the Valmiki Ramayana. For example, in the countries where the story was popularised by traders from south India, it bears more similarity to the Tamil epic Kamban Ramayana. The late scholar AK Ramanujan wrote, "It has been convincingly shown that the eighteenth-century Thai Ramakien owes much to the Tamil epic. For instance, the names of many characters in the Thai work are not Sanskrit names, but clearly Tamil names."

Some differences that these tales of Ram have from the Indian epic are: in Cambodia's Reamker, a mermaid princess Suvannamaccha falls in love with Lord Hanuman; in Java, the Javanese deity Dhayana and his sons become part of the story; the Malaysian Hikayat Seri Rama is more sympathetic to Ravana (Maharaja Wana); while in Laos, "Phra Ram is considered a previous incarnation of Gautama Buddha...Hapmanasouane, the Lao Ravana, is considered the previous incarnation of Mara, the demon that tried to impede the Buddha's ascent to enlightenment," according to an article published by the University of Washington's Center for Southeast Asia and its Diasporas.

In all these countries, the story has been kept alive through plays, dance dramas, puppet shows, etc.

Desai writes, "Generally the stories derived from the northern strand of legends emphasise the nobility and greatness of Rama. The versions based on the southern legends, on the other hand, depict Ravana as a hero and praise his scholarship."

Ramayana outside Asia

A major current that took the Ramayana to Africa, the Caribbean, etc. was the girmitiya migration outside India in the 19th century. After slavery was abolished, there was an urgent demand for labourers who could work on plantations earlier serviced through slave labour. Waves upon waves of men and women were sent out from British India as indentured labourers to countries like Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, etc. The word 'girmitiya' comes from 'agreement', which these people signed (or were made to sign) to work in the plantations.

Majority of these girmitiya labourers were from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. While they could not carry much as they boarded ships towards an entirely new life, they did carry their culture and religion along, and a large part of this culture was Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas, written in Awadhi and arguably the most popular religious text in North India.

How it survived

The girmitiyas were not rich traders likely to influence kings, but there is a more personal element in how they remembered and preserved the tale of Ram. In an alien land, far away from their



homes which they had left to flee either poverty or caste oppression or some form of social boycott, the Ramcharitmanas became a source of succour, of nostalgia, the symbol of a homeland more real than the actual home.

Author VS Naipaul, born in Trinidad to a family descended from indentured labourers, wrote, “The other where Gandhi and Nehru and the others operated was historical and real. The India from which we had come was impossibly remote, almost as imaginary as the land of the Ramayana, our Hindu epic.”

British historian Clem Seecharan, born in Guyana in a girmitiya family, wrote that for his forefathers, “The Ramayana...was constructed as an authentic representation of the motherland. The real eastern UP and western Bihar disappeared from the radar.”

He also explains that the “India of the Ramayana endured”, “because it is a narrative that answered many of the monumental, urgent needs of the girmitiyas”.

“The theme of Lord Rama in exile in the Dandak forest is resonant among Indians in the diaspora. His triumphal return to Ayodhya has a freshness... It is an evocation of hope and renewal, even of their own triumphal return, however illusory.”

He also writes about what Sita meant to girmitiya women. “...the Sita persona spoke to women who were in virtual exile, had severed all links with their families in India, had to endure aspersions cast on their sexual life on the plantations (occasionally ending in murder by jealous partners), while toiling to reshape a life and recreate a family in a distant land.”

Today, in many of these countries, the folk theatre of Ramleela is still popular. In 2017, on Ram Navmi, India gave Mauritian Rupee 8,376,000 to expand and renovate the Ramayana Centre complex in Mauritius. In Fiji, the Ramayana has been translated into the indigenous iTaukei language.

THE TEMPLE THAT AURANGZEB RAZED: EVIDENCE FROM HISTORY ON GYANVAPI AND KASHI VISHWANATH

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has concluded that “there existed a large Hindu temple prior to the construction of the existing structure” at the Gyanvapi mosque site in Varanasi. The ASI has said it has relied on “scientific studies and observations”; there is also ample textual evidence that supports its conclusion.

The 1669 farmaan

A temple that stood adjacent to the existing Kashi Vishwanath temple is thought to have been razed on the orders of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, and the Gyanvapi mosque erected on its ruins.

The most popular primary source cited for this is Saqi Mustaid Khan’s Maasir-i-Alamgiri, a Persian-language chronicle written shortly after Aurangzeb’s death in 1707. The ASI report refers to historian Jadunath Sarkar’s 1947 translation of the text.

“His Majesty [Aurangzeb], eager to establish Islam, issued orders to the governors of all the provinces to demolish the schools and temples of the infidels, and with the utmost urgency put down the teaching and the public practice of the religion of these misbelievers,” says the Maasir-i-Alamgiri.

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



The royal farmaan (decree) issued in Aurangzeb's twelfth regnal year on April 9, 1669 led to the destruction of both the Vishwanath temple in Kashi and the Keshavdev temple in Mathura. Sarkar interpreted this as part of Aurangzeb's larger "attack on Hinduism". (A Short History of Aurangzib 1618-1707 (1930))

Historian S A A Rizvi wrote that "Aurangzib's reign was marked by a gradual departure from Akbar's policy of coexistence". In 1665, he fixed the customs duty on imports by Hindu traders at double the rate payable by Muslims and, two years later, altogether abolished customs duty for Muslims.

"In January 1669 the wedding of Prince Azam (the third son of Aurangzeb)...offered the Emperor a chance to show his orthodoxy by issuing innumerable puritanical ordinances," Rizvi wrote in The Wonder That Was India Vol II (1200-1700) (1987).

"A general order to demolish temples and Hindu centres of learning was issued. The celebrated Visvanatha Temple of Banaras and the Keshava Rai Temple of Mathura, which had been presented with a stone railing by Dara Shukoh, were reduced to ruins. This policy was implemented even in remote East Bengal, Palamau, Rajasthan, and later in the Deccan," Rizvi wrote.

Political motives

Historian Richard Eaton argued that the 1669 farmaan was not a "general order for the immediate destruction of all temples", rather it was "targeted at those institutions where a certain kind of teaching had been taking place". ("Temple Desecration And Indo-Muslim States': Journal of Islamic Studies, 2000).

Eaton pointed to a line from the Maasir-i-Alamgiri saying Aurangzeb had learnt that in certain places, "and especially at Benares, the Brahman misbelievers used to teach their false books in their established schools, and that admirers and students both Hindu and Muslim, used to come from great distances to these misguided men..."

Historian Satish Chandra wrote that "Aurangzeb began to look upon temples as centres of spreading subversive ideas, that is, ideas which were not acceptable to the orthodox elements". (History of Medieval India 800-1700, (2007))

There is also a theory that Chhatrapati Shivaji's escape from Mughal custody in Agra, provoked the humiliated Aurangzeb to order the destruction of the Kashi temple, as retribution.

"In 1669, there arose a rebellion in Benares among landholders, some of whom were suspected of having helped Shivaji, who was Aurangzeb's arch enemy, escape from imperial detention," Eaton wrote.

Historian Audrey Truschke wrote: "Aurangzeb brought the bulk of Benares's Vishvanatha Temple down in 1669. The temple had been built during Akbar's reign by Raja Man Singh, whose great-grandson, Jai Singh, many believed helped Shivaji flee from the Mughal court in 1666." (Aurangzeb: Life and Legacy of India's Most Controversial King (2017)).

Chandra agreed that "In case of conflict with local elements, he (Aurangzeb) now considered it legitimate to destroy even long-standing Hindu temples as a measure of punishment and as a warning."



Gyanvapi mosque erected

The mosque at the site of the destroyed temple likely came up in the 1670s or '80s.

“A part of the ruined temple’s wall [was] incorporated into the building,” Truschke wrote. “This reuse may have been a religiously clothed statement about the dire consequences of opposing Mughal authority.”

Unlike the Shahi Eidgah built over the destroyed Mathura temple, the Gyanvapi mosque’s patron remains unknown. It does not find mention in Mughal court documents.

The present-day Kashi Vishwanath temple was built next to the mosque by Queen Ahilyabai Holkar in the 18th century.

IN GYANVAPI CASE, THE TEST AHEAD: LAW ON PLACES OF WORSHIP AND THE CHALLENGE IT FACES

The legal test before the civil court in Varanasi and the Supreme Court is whether a title suit can exist on the Kashi Vishwanath-Gyanvapi mosque disputed site since the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, puts a constitutional bar on it.

Section 3 and Section 4 of the 1991 Act essentially declare that the religious character of a place of worship, barring the one at Ayodhya, shall continue to be the same as it was on August 15, 1947, and that no person shall convert any place of worship of any religious denomination into one of a different denomination or section. This is the constitutional bar under the Places of Worship Act, 1991 which forms the basis of deciding the title of the disputed site.

While hearing a plea challenging the maintainability of the Gyanvapi suit, the Supreme Court had in May 2022 observed that “finding the nature of the religious place” is not barred under the 1991 law. “...the ascertainment of a religious character of a place, as a processual instrument, may not necessarily fall foul of the provisions of Sections 3 and 4 (of the Act)...,” it had said. Essentially, this ascertainment is limited to 1947 and not prior to the construction of the mosque itself.

The Supreme Court is, however, yet to hear final arguments to decide whether the 1991 Act bars even the filing of such a plea. So far, only oral observations have formed the basis of this argument but the Court is yet to conclusively rule on the issue.

Separately, a constitutional challenge to the 1991 Act is also pending in the Supreme Court. It had in 2019 indicated the case could be referred to a larger constitution bench. However, the Centre is yet to file a response in the case.

Though the voluminous Archaeological Survey of India report submitted to the Varanasi court, and to both the parties to the dispute now, suggests “there existed a Hindu temple prior” to the Gyanvapi mosque, it would be considered expert evidence that could be contested in Court.

Essentially, Courts will have to determine first whether the ASI report can be relied upon conclusively and then what does the existence of a Hindu temple mean to the religious character of the mosque on August 15, 1947.

A similar ASI report in 2003 was cited in the Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhoomi suit. While pronouncing its order in November 2019, the Supreme Court had rejected the ASI report as inconclusive.



“The report concludes on the basis of the architectural fragments found at the site and the nature of the structure that it was of a Hindu religious origin. The report rejects the possibility (urged by the Sunni Central Waqf Board) of the underlying structure being of Islamic origin. But the ASI report has left unanswered a critical part of the remit which was made to it, namely, a determination of whether a Hindu temple had been demolished to pave way for the construction of the mosque. ASI’s inability to render a specific finding on this facet is certainly a significant evidentiary circumstance which must be borne in mind when the cumulative impact of the entire evidence is considered in the final analysis,” the Supreme Court had said in its Ayodhya judgement.

‘JAN 22 NOT A STATE FUNCTION’: UNSCHEDULED HOLIDAY DECLARATION IRKS BANKING UNIONS AND MARKET PLAYERS

The declaration of an unscheduled holiday on January 22, 2024, for the Ram Lalla Pran Pratishtha celebrations has sparked protests in the banking and financial markets. Bank unions and market players criticize it as a misuse of government institutions. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) announced a halt in transactions and settlements in various financial instruments, and stock markets will remain closed on the said day. The move has led to concerns about the impact on economic activities and objections on the grounds that the celebration is religious, not a state function. The Bank Employees Federation of India (BEFI) has called for the withdrawal of the order, emphasizing the secular nature of India. The Ministry of Finance’s response to queries remains unanswered.

KHEDA FLOGGING IS A CASE OF ‘POLICE ATROCITY’: TOP COURT

The Supreme Court on Tuesday orally observed that the 2022 incident of four Gujarat Police officers publicly flogging Muslim men after tying them to a pole for allegedly disrupting a garba event in Kheda district amounted to an “atrocious”. “Did they have an authority in law to tie people to a pole and beat them,” Justice B.R. Gavai asked. “And take videos,”

Justice Sandeep Mehta joined in. The police officers had appealed to the Supreme Court against a Gujarat High Court order in October sentencing them to 14 days’ imprisonment for contempt of court.

D.K. Basu judgment

The conduct of the four officers were found to be in contempt of the directions of the Supreme Court in the D.K. Basu judgment of 1996 against police abuse and custodial violence. The D.K. Basu verdict had highlighted the deep concern in a free society for the protection of an individual from torture and abuse by the police and other law-enforcing officers. “Police is, no doubt, under a legal duty and has legitimate right to arrest a criminal and to interrogate him during the investigation of an offence but it must be remembered that the law does not permit use of third degree methods or torture of accused in custody during interrogation and investigation with that view to solve the crime,” the judgment had observed. Justices Gavai and Mehta were not impressed by the argument raised by senior advocate Siddharth Dave, appearing for the police officers, that there was no “willful disobedience” of the verdict by his clients.

The Bench asked whether ignorance of law had become a defence in law now. “It is the duty of every police officer to know what is the law laid down in D.K. Basu [judgment],” Justice Gavai observed.



The senior lawyer challenged the jurisdiction of the High Court to try the men for contempt. The Bench admitted the statutory appeal of the police officers, A.V. Parmar, D.B. Kumavat, Laxmansinh Kanaksinh Dabhi and Rajubhai Dabhi, and stayed the contempt action against them in the High Court.

FIVE-JUDGE SC BENCH TO SIT TODAY TO HEAR CONFLICT BETWEEN CALCUTTA HIGH COURT JUDGES

A Bench of five senior-most judges of the Supreme Court headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud on Friday scheduled a special sitting on Saturday to suo motu hear a controversy over sitting Calcutta High Court judge, Justice Abhijit Gangopadhyay, pronouncing a judicial order accusing his colleague of “acting” in favour of a political party in West Bengal.

Justice Gangopadhyay, sitting as a Single Judge Bench, has charged Justice Soumen Sen, who was heading a Division Bench of the High Court, with “acting clearly for some political party in this State” in a medical admissions case. Justice Gangopadhyay said his colleague’s orders need a “relook” by the Supreme Court “if it thinks so”. Justice Gangopadhyay had directed the Registrar-General of the High Court to forward a copy of the order to the CJI and the Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court.

The train of events started on Wednesday when Justice Gangopadhyay directed a CBI inquiry on the basis of a petition alleging issuance of fake caste certificates to gain medical admissions in the State. The judge had slammed the West Bengal Police and the State government. The next day saw Advocate-General Kishore Datta mention the case before the Division Bench of Justices Sen and Uday Kumar, saying the petitioner had not even sought a transfer of the case to the CBI. Mr. Datta said the State was not given an opportunity to explain the steps taken by the police in the medical admission case. The Division Bench had stayed the order of the Single Judge Bench to hand over the investigation to the CBI.

In a consequent order, Justice Gangopadhyay passed scathing remarks against Justice Sen while countermanding the stay order by the Division Bench. “...the Division Bench has given a very wrong signal that without the order and memorandum of appeal, an appeal can be heard and order can be passed...” Justice Gangopadhyay had observed in his order.

The special Saturday hearing in the Supreme Court would be by a Bench comprising Justices Sanjiv Khanna, B.R. Gavai, Surya Kant and Aniruddha Bose, besides the CJI. This is not the first time Justice Gangopadhyay has courted controversy. In April last year, events triggered by Justice Gangopadhyay in the sensational and politically sensitive West Bengal school job-for-bribe scam case had led to a similar out-of-turn Special Bench hearing. The Supreme Court had ordered the case to be transferred from him after Trinamool Congress leader Abhishek Banerjee moved the apex court against a TV interview given by Justice Gangopadhyay.

Justice Gangopadhyay subsequently passed an order directing the Secretary-General of the Supreme Court to place before him by midnight the records which were placed before the Supreme Court leading to the reassignment of the case from him.

A Special Bench of the Supreme Court had quickly convened the same night to stay Justice Gangopadhyay’s order.



WHAT IS THE LEGAL DISPUTE OVER AMU'S MINORITY STATUS?

The story so far:

A seven-judge Bench of the Supreme Court (SC) led by the Chief Justice of India (CJI) D.Y. Chandrachud is currently hearing the 57-year-long dispute over the minority character of the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU).

What constitutes 'minority character'?

Article 30(1) in Part III of the Constitution empowers all religious and linguistic minorities with a fundamental right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. Clause 2 ensures that the State maintains 'equality of treatment' in granting aid to all educational institutions, irrespective of their minority status. This includes educational institutions at all levels, from primary schools to professional education. Notably, these institutions enjoy exemptions from the implementation of SC, ST, and OBC reservations in both admissions and employment. Additionally, they can reserve up to 50% of seats for students from their community and exercise greater control over employees compared to other institutions. In the T.M.A Pai Foundation (2002) case, the SC clarified that a 'minority' is to be determined by the concerned State's demography, not the national population.

What is the background of the case?

In 1877, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, a Muslim reformer, founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (MAO College) at Aligarh to address Muslim educational backwardness while protecting Islamic values. The Aligarh Muslim University Act, 1920 (AMU Act) was passed to incorporate the MAO college and the Muslim University Association into AMU. In 1951, the AMU Act was amended, removing compulsory religious education for Muslims and the exclusive Muslim representation mandate in the University Court. The Act was further amended in 1965, and the powers of the Court were redistributed among other bodies including the executive, with the President of India nominating members to the governing body.

The legal dispute began in 1967 when the SC in *S. Azeez Basha versus Union of India (UOI)*, reviewed the 1951 and 1965 amendments. The petitioners argued that since Muslims established AMU, they had the right to manage it. However, a five-judge SC bench upheld the amendments, reasoning that AMU was neither established nor administered by the Muslim minority, highlighting the Act's enactment through Central legislation. This ruling triggered nationwide protests, leading to the amendment of the AMU Act in 1981, affirming the university's minority status. In 2005, AMU reserved 50% of postgraduate medical seats for Muslim candidates. The Allahabad High Court struck down the reservation policy in *Dr Naresh Agarwal vs UOI (2005)* holding the 1981 amendment ultra vires. Consequently, in 2006, the UOI and the University appealed to the SC. However, in 2016, the UOI withdrew from the appeal, refusing to acknowledge the University's minority status. The University is now pursuing the case alone.

How is the case faring in the SC?

The apex court is addressing two issues — the criteria for determining the minority status of an educational institution and whether an institution established under a statute can enjoy such status. While the petitioners argue that AMU is entitled to the minority status, the UOI is now endorsing the *S. Azeez Basha* verdict.



Sr. Adv. Rajeev Dhavan relied on the T.M.A Pai Foundation verdict to argue that statutory regulations or State aid, as given to AMU, do not deprive an educational institution of its minority character. It was argued that the Act of the legislature merely ‘incorporated’ the university as distinguished from its ‘establishment’ by the minority community under Article 30. Solicitor General Tushar Mehta contended that AMU was a ‘loyalist’ institution that had surrendered its rights to the British government and assumed a secular character with the 1920 Act. The CJI interjected that AMU’s political inclination does not affect its minority status. The judgment in this case will set a precedent impacting the rights and legal recognition of all minority institutions.

ON EQUAL ACCESS TO BENEFITS FOR ALL SCs

The story so far:

The Union government has formed a high-level committee of secretaries, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, to evaluate and work out a method for the equitable distribution of benefits, schemes and initiatives to the most backward communities among the over 1,200 Scheduled Castes (SCs) across the country, that have been crowded out by relatively forward and dominant ones.

Why this committee and why now?

This committee’s formation is the result of a meeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi chaired in December, 2023, weeks after promising to look into the demand for sub-categorisation of Scheduled Castes as raised by the Madiga community in Telangana in the run-up to the Assembly elections there last year. The Madiga community constitutes at least 50% of the SC population in Telangana, where SCs comprise around 15% of the total population (2011 Census). For decades, the Madiga community has said that despite their numbers, they are crowded out of government benefits meant for SCs, including reservation, by the Mala community — another SC — which is dominant and relatively forward.

Like the Madiga community, SC communities in several States have said that they have been routinely crowded out of benefits meant for SCs by dominant and relatively forward communities in their category. Commissions formed by State and Union governments have also supported the argument that several SC communities often miss out on benefits. As a result, multiple States like Punjab, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu have tried to bring in reservation laws at the State level in a bid to sub-categorise SCs and decide on a separate quantum of reservation for these subcategories within the umbrella of SCs— all of which are held up in courts.

Consequently, this high-level panel of Secretaries has been formed with a strict mandate to look into “other ways of taking care of their grievances”. While the committee’s formation comes on the heels of the PM’s promise to the Madiga community, sources have told The Hindu that its “scope is larger than just one community in one State as it will be looking at ways to address similar issues faced by similarly-placed SC communities across the country”.

Meanwhile, a seven-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court is expected to soon start hearing the matter of whether sub-categorisation of SCs and STs is at all permissible.

What will the panel do?

The Committee will consist of Secretaries from the Home Ministry, the Law Ministry, the Tribal Affairs Ministry, the Social Justice Ministry and the Department of Personnel and Training in addition to the Cabinet Secretary. With the question of breaking up the SC quota off the table, the



panel will look into ways in which benefits of other government schemes and initiatives can be focused towards these SC communities. This includes ways to design special initiatives for communities that need it and focusing existing programmes and schemes towards them to ensure a more even distribution of benefits. While it has not been given a specific deadline, the committee has been asked to present its findings at the earliest.

The panel will have to figure out on what basis SC communities are going to be shortlisted for special attention, find out the extent to which special initiatives need to be designed for each of them, and then find a way to deliver them. While sources have indicated that the panel has been instructed not to veer off into the question of breaking up the SC quota, nothing prevents it from forming an opinion on this matter for the government's consideration, if necessary.

Have there been attempts in the past?

The demand of the Madigas was raised as early as 1994, which led to the Union government seeking legal options to do the same in 2005. At the time, the erstwhile Attorney General of India had opined that the sub-categorisation of Scheduled Castes was possible and that the Constitution could be amended to bring this about. But he had also stressed that this could happen only if there was “unimpeachable evidence to indicate a necessity” for it — suggesting that there needs to be a mechanism to gather empirical evidence to prove the necessity of sub-categorisation.

At the time, both the National Commissions for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) and Scheduled Tribes (NCST) had opposed the move to amend the Constitution, arguing that just setting aside a quota within the quota would not be enough and that making sure existing schemes and benefits reach them on priority basis was more urgent. However, even the NCST and NCSC had in 2005 maintained that nothing in the Constitution's Articles 341 and 342 explicitly prevented Parliament from sub-categorising SCs and STs.

These Articles vest the powers of notifying SC and ST lists with the President of India and of creating the lists with Parliament, with no specific instruction as to whether there can be sub-categorisation within these lists respectively. In fact, the Commissions had gone one step ahead and argued that Article 16(4) of the Constitution of India already provided for States to create special provisions for any backward classes it felt was under-represented.

EXPRESS VIEW ON ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION PANEL: FIRST, LISTEN

The official consultation process set in motion for gauging the viability of simultaneous elections is unfolding like a chronicle foretold. According to the Union Law Ministry, 81 per cent of the 20,000-plus responses received by the High Level Committee on One Nation, One Election have favoured the idea. The Committee headed by a former president, Ram Nath Kovind, issued a public notice asking for suggestions between January 5-15. Unfortunately, given its constitution, manner of functioning and the larger context of one-party dominance, the Kovind Committee gives the impression of being partisan at best and a rubber stamp at worst. The blame for the lack of robust debate on the proposal also lies with the Opposition, particularly Congress. On an issue with far-reaching consequences, it has refused to engage.

The eight members of the Committee have either openly expressed support for simultaneous polls — as president, Kovind did, in Parliament, in 2019 — or are seen to be close to the government and therefore broadly in agreement with its pet projects. Congress Leader in the Lok Sabha, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, refused to be a part of the Committee arguing that it is imbalanced. The



Committee's very terms of reference assume that One Nation, One Election is in "national interest". But despite this, an Opposition leader could have played an important role — by voicing concerns the government may not want heard and by pushing for greater transparency in the process. As things stand, the concerns of the Opposition and the states look scattered and are being voiced piecemeal: Congress has called it "undemocratic", AAP has said it will give an "unfair advantage" to the ruling party, the DMK has labelled it "dangerous", and the TMC described it as "against the federal structure".

Admittedly, a near-constant election cycle, and the short-termism this engenders, places a great burden on the exchequer. But while these issues are important, they cannot be used as an excuse to artificially keep governments that lose the support of the legislature and by extension, the people, in power. Certainly, such a fundamental change in the democratic structure and process must not be brought about without adequate engagement with the Opposition's concerns. The legitimacy of the electoral system does not flow only from the Treasury Benches or the corridors of power at Kartavya Path. It also emanates from those without executive office continuing to have a voice. The elected Opposition, all but silenced in the last session of Parliament with the expulsion of 146 MPs, must have a say, and not just a token one, in the consequential matter of the design of elections.

EXPRESS VIEW ON GOVERNOR ARIF MOHAMMED KHAN: STOOPING LOW

Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan's remarks, in response to criticism by (retired) Supreme Court judge Justice Rohinton Nariman for holding up bills in the state, are low blows. They ill behove the high constitutional office that Governor Khan holds. Speaking at a public event on Wednesday, the governor pointed to Justice Nariman's father, the eminent advocate and jurist, Fali Nariman, being employed by the Pinarayi Vijayan government for legal advice and alleged a conflict of interest. Justice Nariman's comments over the governor's "wholesale reference of bills to the President after sitting on 23 bills without a decision", he suggested, had to do with the fee paid to his father for legal opinions given to the government.

It is not as if Justice Rohinton's criticism was his alone. For some time now, Governor Khan has been engaged in a very visible and very unseemly tussle with the Pinarayi government. And while both sides have failed to abide by norms of civility in their frequent run-ins, the growing belligerence between the government and Raj Bhawan has hurt the governor's office particularly. It has also drawn a sharp rebuke from the Supreme Court. After the Kerala government moved the top court, a bench headed by CJI DY Chandrachud asked: "What was the governor doing for two years sitting on the bills?"

But this is not just a story of a governor with a thin skin. His drawing of Fali Nariman into the disagreement with his son is outrageous, also, for the disrespect it shows to one of the country's most distinguished constitutional experts, seen by many, because of his formidable body of work, as the conscience-keeper of the court. And because Governor Khan, especially, should know a thing or two about heeding the call of conscience. He is, after all, the politician who famously went against the current, took a stand and resigned from his position as minister of state, protesting against the Rajiv Gandhi government's dismal somersault on the Shah Bano case in 1986.

For Governor Khan to stoop to make a point, therefore, is a terrible let-down. He needs to urgently mend relations with the government so that he can better fulfil his role as the custodian of constitutionalism in the state. Lashing out at critics and criticism, and making bad faith arguments while doing so, is an unnecessary and unflattering diversion from the onerous task at hand.



WHY WAS FCRA REGISTRATION FOR SEVERAL NGOS CANCELLED?

The story so far:

The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, 2010 (FCRA) registration of two prominent non-governmental organisations (NGOs) — Centre for Policy Research (CPR) and World Vision India (WVI) have been cancelled this month.

Who monitors the process?

The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) monitors the implementation of the FCRA. The registration of thousands of NGOs was due for renewal in 2020-2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the amendments to the FCRA Act in 2020, many NGOs could not complete the process. The MHA had given a relief up to September 30, 2021 to NGOs whose registration was expiring between September 29, 2020 and September 30, 2021 to apply for a renewal. The MHA has extended the deadline multiple times; the latest date being March 31, 2024.

Through the FCRA, the ministry regulates foreign donations to ensure that such funds do not adversely affect the country's internal security. It is compulsory to register under the Act, first enacted in 1976, if an association, group or NGO intends to receive foreign donations. The 1976 Act was repealed and replaced with a new legislation in 2010. It was further amended in 2020. The registration is valid for five years, after which the NGO has to apply for a renewal. It is mandatory for all such NGOs to register under the FCRA, initially valid for five years that can be renewed if it complies with all norms. Registered groups can receive foreign contribution for social, educational, religious, economic and cultural programmes.

How many have lost registration?

Since 2015, the FCRA registration of more than 16,000 NGOs have been cancelled on account of "violation." As on January 22, there were 16,989 FCRA-registered NGOs active in the country. The FCRA registration of nearly 6,000 NGOs had ceased to operate from January 1, 2022 as the MHA either refused to renew their application or the NGOs did not apply.

A 2012 report by the MHA said that there are over 20 lakh registered NGOs in the country and the number of such NGOs registered under FCRA will be less than 2%. "While it is not proper to make sweeping generalisations, it is necessary to note that the NGO sector in India is vulnerable to the risks of money laundering and terrorist financing. Therefore, necessary steps for rigorous enforcement as well as coordination with foreign countries for law enforcement will continue," the report said. In 2023, a record number of 1,111 associations were granted fresh registration. Analysis of the data showed that nearly half of fresh FCRA registrations under the religious category are for Christian NGOs. The MHA informed the Lok Sabha on December 19, 2023 that out of the total 1,615 applications received for registration under FCRA in 2021 and 2022, as many as 722 applications were granted clearance while 225 applications were rejected.

The ministry said that a total of 13,520 associations received ₹55,741.51 crore foreign contribution in the financial years 2019-2020, 2020-21 and 2021-22.

Why were CPR and WVI's registrations cancelled?

The MHA alleged that CPR diverted foreign donations to fund "protests and legal battles against developmental projects" and misused funds to "affect India's economic interests." It alleged that



the think tank engaged in production of current affairs programmes which violated FCRA norms. CPR had furnished a report on air pollution — “Overview on the Commission for Air Quality Management Act 2021, policy challenges for the new government etc.” The MHA said publishing of current affairs programme using foreign funds is prohibited under Section 3 of the FCRA.

CPR said that the ministry’s decision is incomprehensible and disproportionate, and some of the reasons given challenge the very basis of the functioning of a research institution. “This includes the publication on our website of policy reports emanating from our research being equated with current affairs programming,” CPR said. The registration of WVI was cancelled for alleged FCRA violations from 2012-13 to 2020-21. WVI is the recipient of the highest amount of foreign donations among all NGOs registered under the Act in 1986.

A BACKSLIDING

Less than a year after suspending the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) licence of the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), the Government of India has cancelled its FCRA licence. The justification for this move — CPR’s publications have been equated with current affairs programming, prohibited for an entity using FCRA funds — is nothing if not farcical. As a premier think tank, the CPR has been around for more than half a century, during which it has been an exemplar of public-spirited scholarship feeding into an ecosystem of governance and policy-making where multiple stakeholders and their often divergent interests need consensus-building through informed debates — the hallmark of a democracy. A decision to effectively shut down such an institution by crippling its finances is bound to send the message that India is no longer open to the free flow of knowledge and ideas. The move also fits into a broader, and sadly, by now all-too-familiar, pattern of the state wielding the FCRA as a weapon to silence entities whose work is not to its liking — typically those working on environmental issues, civil liberties and human rights. The use of the FCRA to target civil society for political or ideological reasons is perhaps written into its DNA. The legislation is the child of the Emergency, enacted by a regime paranoid about foreign governments interfering in India’s internal affairs by channelling funds through NGOs. Since then, it has been amended by successive governments, with the provisions becoming more stringent.

When the latest round of amendments was passed in 2020, the International Commission of Jurists denounced it as “incompatible with international law” and warned that it would “impose ... extraordinary obstacles on the capacity of ... civil society actors to carry out their important work”. It appears as though the government has been working hard to prove the ICJ right. Even before dust could settle on the FCRA cancellation of CPR, World Vision India, which works with children, has had its FCRA cancelled. On the one hand, India seeks recognition as a ‘Vishwaguru’. Its calling card as the G-20 host was ‘Mother of Democracy’. The government is hypersensitive to rankings on international indices, yet unwilling to acknowledge the link between perception and reality. When the U.S.-based non-profit, Freedom House, in its Democracy Index, downgraded India to an “electoral autocracy”, a reason it cited was erosion of civil liberties. Shutting off the finances of civil society organisations on flimsy grounds is a textbook example of civil liberties erosion, guaranteed to amplify the narrative of democratic backsliding. It would then be pointless to complain about bias or invoke “conspiracies” to tarnish India’s image when these actions get reflected in India’s downgrading in global indices of freedom and democracy.



DANGEROUS STATUS QUO

Eight months after ethnic violence broke out between the largely valley-dwelling Meitei and the hill-dwelling Kuki-Zo communities in Manipur, hostilities continue. The ethnic polarisation has persisted and displaced people on both sides are still unable to return to their homes; schooling and health care remain disrupted and the writ of the State government does not run in the Kuki-Zo hill areas. The government's inability to win peace and the failure of institutions such as the State Assembly to deliberate on the problem have compounded the conflict even as the Chief Minister, N. Biren Singh, continues to be seen more as an ethnic leader, preventing the possibility of any thaw in the pervasive hostility. Even media and civil society organisations seem to be divided on ethnic lines and, more dangerously, the role of the army and central paramilitary forces is being seen through this lens, evident in the utterances of the Chief Minister and representatives of ethnic chauvinist groups. The Union government's response has been to rely on a smoke and mirrors approach — a de facto assumption of powers related to law and order enforcement without publicly announcing the imposition of Article 355 that enables it to do so. There has been little follow-up on confidence-building measures between the representatives of the ethnic groups after visits by the Union Home Minister Amit Shah and others from his Ministry. The latest visit by a Home Ministry team is a reaction to a resolution by some MLAs to take collective action following fresh killings and violence in Moreh town.

The predominance of militant outfits is alarming. Militias such as the Meitei radical Arambai Tenggol have been allowed to act as "defence squads", brandishing weapons and being allowed to vitiate the already perilous discourse in the valley even as Kuki insurgents do the same in the hill areas. The arms looted from police stations and camps have still to be recovered, which suggests that there is a dangerous militarisation of non-state groups. The Union government must focus on addressing this key issue on either side of the divide. Meanwhile, Mr. Singh has tried to erroneously link the prevailing conflict and the ethnic polarisation to the refugee situation in Manipur with many, predominantly from the Chin communities, fleeing the civil war in Myanmar following attacks by the junta. This has led to the demand for ending the Free Movement Regime (FMR) enabling trade and people-to-people contact near the border. While the porous border has also enabled drug trafficking and the movement of insurgents, a cessation of the FMR would be a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

RECONSIDERING THE FREE MOVEMENT REGIME

The story so far:

At a passing out parade of the Assam police commandos in Guwahati on January 20, Home Minister Amit Shah said the 1,643 km India-Myanmar border would soon be fenced. He also said the Free Movement Regime (FMR) agreement with Myanmar would be reconsidered to stop border residents from moving into each other's country without any paperwork.

What is the FMR?

Much of India's present-day northeast was temporarily under Burmese occupation until the British pushed them out in the 1800s. The victors and the vanquished signed the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, leading to the current alignment of the boundary between India and Burma, later renamed Myanmar. The border divided people of the same ethnicity and culture — specifically the Nagas of Nagaland and Manipur and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo communities of Manipur and Mizoram — without their consent. In some stretches, the border split a village or a house



between the two countries. Wary of increasing Chinese influence in Myanmar, New Delhi began working on improving diplomatic ties with the Myanmar government a decade ago. After almost a year's delay, the FMR came about in 2018 as part of the Narendra Modi government's Act East policy. The Rohingya refugee crisis that began in August 2017 caused the delay. The FMR allows people living on either side of the border to travel up to 16 km inside each other's country without a visa. A border resident needs to have a border pass, valid for a year, to stay in the other country for about two weeks per visit. The FMR also envisaged the promotion of localised border trade through customs stations and designated markets apart from helping the people of Myanmar access better education and healthcare facilities on the Indian side of the border.

Why is the FMR being reconsidered?

Apart from a 10 km stretch in Manipur, the India-Myanmar border through hills and jungles is unfenced. The security forces have for decades grappled with members of extremist groups carrying out hit-and-run operations from their clandestine bases in the Chin and Sagaing regions of Myanmar. The ease of cross-border movement, even before the FMR was in place, was often flagged for inward trafficking of drugs and outward trafficking of wildlife body parts. The trigger for the rethink on the FMR was the conflict that broke out between the majority Meitei and the tribal Kuki-Zo communities in Manipur on May 3, 2023. Over the past decade, the Manipur government has been expressing concern over the "influx" of Myanmar nationals, a euphemism for Kuki-Chins, calling for an Assam-like National Register of Citizens to weed out the "illegal immigrants". The theory gained currency after the conflict, which coincided with a few hundred Myanmar nationals taking refuge in Manipur to escape a civil war back home. In September 2023, Manipur Chief Minister Nongthombam Biren Singh blamed the ethnic violence on the free movement of Myanmar nationals into India and urged the Ministry of Home Affairs to end the FMR, which had been suspended on April 1, 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown. The suspension was extended after the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021. Kuki-Zo organisations, on the other hand, have accused the Chief Minister of branding the community as "illegal immigrants" and "narco-terrorists" to justify their "ethnic cleansing".

What is the scale of migration?

The civil war in Myanmar saw a drastic jump in the number of people seeking refuge in India. In September 2022, authorities in Manipur pushed back 4,300 of some 5,500 Myanmar nationals from the Moreh area along the border after recording their biometrics. A committee set up by the State government put the number of such migrants in 2023 at 2,187. The civil war in the neighbouring country also forced some 40,000 people into Mizoram, who, unlike Manipur, made them feel at home primarily due to their ethnic affiliation. The Mizoram government has been seeking funds from the Centre to look after the displaced people who it wants to be sent back only after the situation in their country normalises.

Why are Mizoram and Nagaland opposed to ending the FMR?

Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma said his government does not have the authority to stop the Centre from fencing the India-Myanmar border for perceived security threat and scrapping the FMR, but said he was opposed to the move. According to him, the border was imposed by the British to divide the people belonging to the Zo ethnic stock. "We Mizos share ethnic ties with the Chin people across the border. We have the right to live together," he said. The Nagaland government, in which the BJP is a stakeholder, has not reacted but the influential Naga Students' Federation condemned the Centre's move. It said the decision to fence the border and end the



FMR was “regressive”, which would exacerbate conflicts in the region. “It is crucial for India to acknowledge the historical truth that these territories (between the Chindwin River in Myanmar and the Saramati mountain in Nagaland) belong to the Nagas,” the federation said in a statement.

AS ARMY LAUNCHES OP SARVASHAKTI, RECALLING SARPVINASH OF 2003, THAT CRUSHED TERROR BASE IN PIR PANJAL

The Indian Army has initiated Operation Sarvashakti in the Rajouri-Poonch sector of Jammu and Kashmir to target terrorists responsible for recent attacks on troops in the area. This operation is reminiscent of Operation Sarpvinash conducted in 2003, which aimed to eliminate terrorists infiltrated from across the border in the thick forests south of the Pir Panjal range. Operation Sarpvinash involved around 10,000 troops and lasted approximately three months, resulting in the elimination of about 100 terrorists and the recovery of a significant amount of weapons and supplies. The current operation seeks to address renewed terrorist activities in the region, particularly targeting foreigners believed to be operating there. The strategic importance of the area lies in its potential as a route for infiltrators from across the Line of Control into the Kashmir valley. Operation Sarpvinash successfully restored peace to the region until 2017-18, but recent years have seen a resurgence in high-intensity attacks on security forces.

UNION GOVT. MAKES IT CLEAR THAT AADHAAR CARD NO PROOF OF CITIZENSHIP, BIRTH DATE

Aadhaar card has never been proof of citizenship as foreign nationals are also eligible to obtain one if they have been living in India for 180 days. However, different government departments accept it for purposes reserved for citizens or adults.

For instance, the Election Commission of India explicitly accepts Aadhaar as a proof of date of birth for enrolling people to vote. These new clarifications, prominently printed on the document, may challenge such allowances.

The IDs also include a warning that authenticating them offline needs to be done by scanning the QR code on the reverse side of the document, or by using an XML file issued to residents by the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), which administers Aadhaar.

At least one organisation has stopped accepting Aadhaar as a proof of date of birth: the Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO), which administers the mandatory retirement fund for salaried employees in India. The EPFO issued a circular on January 16, deleting Aadhaar from the list of documents acceptable as a proof of date of birth.

2018 memorandum

This invalidity of Aadhaar for use in determining the date of birth and citizenship has been the case for years — the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology clarified in a 2018 memorandum that Aadhaar is “per se... not a proof of date of birth”, as the date of birth is based on a different document given by applicants.

A Bombay High Court judgment last year that emphasised this was cited in a December 2023 circular that UIDAI issued, which reminded organisations of the fact. But now the warning is imprinted on the face of all Aadhaar cards and digital copies issued to all Indian residents.



This new warning initially only mentioned last year that it was not a proof of citizenship, but now clarifies that Aadhaar is not a proof of date of birth too.

The 12-digit ID is a proof of uniqueness and residence, but different government agencies accept it — often on a stand-alone basis — for any citizen establishing their identity.

HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLMENT ROSE BY 19 LAKH IN 2021-22: GOVT. SURVEY

According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) for the academic session 2021-22, the total enrollment in higher education in India increased to nearly 4.33 crore, up from 4.14 crore in the previous academic year. Female enrolments in the science stream surpassed male enrolments, with a total of 2.07 crore female students compared to 1.74 crore male students. The report highlighted a significant growth in enrollment, with an increase of around 91 lakh students since 2014-15. Key points from the AISHE report:

Overall Enrollment Increase: Total enrollment in higher education increased to nearly 4.33 crore in 2021-22 from 4.14 crore in 2020-21.

Female Enrollment: Female enrolment increased to 2.07 crore in 2021-22 from 2.01 crore in 2020-21, with a total increase of around 50 lakh since 2014-15.

Ph.D. Enrollment: Female Ph.D. enrolment doubled to 0.99 lakh in 2021-22 from 0.48 lakh in 2014-15.

Science Stream: In 2021-22, out of the total enrolment in undergraduate, postgraduate, Ph.D., and M.Phil levels, 57.2 lakh students were enrolled in the science stream, with female students outnumbering male students.

Category-wise Enrollment: Enrollment of Scheduled Tribe (ST) students rose to 27.1 lakh in 2021-22 from 16.41 lakh in 2014-15, marking a 65.2% increase. Other Backward Classes (OBC) student enrolment increased by 45% in 2021-22 (1.63 crore) compared to 2014-15 (1.13 crore).

Regional Enrollment: The total student enrolment in northeast States increased to 12.02 lakh in 2021-22 from 9.36 lakh in 2014-15. Female enrolment in northeast States (6.07 lakh) surpassed male enrolment (5.95 lakh).

Discipline-wise Enrollment: Among disciplines at the undergraduate level, enrolment was highest in arts (34.2%), followed by science (14.8%), commerce (13.3%), and engineering & technology (11.8%).

Postgraduate Level: Among streams at the postgraduate level, maximum students were enrolled in social science (21.1%), followed by science (14.7%).

Ph.D. Enrollment Growth: Ph.D. enrolment increased by 81.2% to 2.12 lakh in 2021-22 compared to 1.17 lakh in 2014-15.

The AISHE survey has been conducted by the Ministry of Education since 2011, covering all higher educational institutions in India.



ON THE 'ANNAPOORANI' DEBATE: THE TYRANNY OF TASTE

Art can render visible and known what was hitherto unspoken. One of the temples that Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited in the run-up to the consecration ceremony of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya was the famous Ranganathaswamy Temple in Srirangam. Interestingly, the sprawling abode of Ranganatha, a form of Lord Vishnu, is also featured in the Tamil film Annapoorani. The inspiring story of a Brahmin priest's daughter who wants to become a top chef made the news when it was unceremoniously taken off by Netflix after some Hindu groups complained that the film about food was in bad taste.

Finding the 'unique' in art

The film argues that food is an emotion. Early in the Nayanthara-starrer, the priest who prepares the offering for the lord whets the curiosity of a set of tourists by explaining the legend of Tulukka Nachiyar or Bibi Nachiyar, "the Muslim lady" that is documented in the temple records. Painted on the wall of the corridor that is adjacent to the sanctum of one of the oldest temples in India, he says, the real name of Tulukka Nachiyar was Surathani and that she was the divine consort of Lord Ranganatha.

Said to be the daughter of Malik Kafur, the general of Delhi Sultan Allauddin Khilji, she developed a bond with the idol that her father and his army had looted from the temple in the 14th century. The Vaishnavites plotted to get the idol back and succeeded, not realising the deep affection that Surathani had developed for the Lord. She rushed to Srirangam followed by the Sultanate's army but could not find the idol. Devastated, she perished at the door of the temple waiting for her lord. Since then she is entrenched in the collective memory of the devotees. The day's first offering comprises north Indian chappatis, butter, and dal and it is offered to the lord's consort as well. On special occasions, the idol is wrapped in a red, checkered veshti. It is perhaps the only temple in the country where a Muslim is venerated as a goddess by the Hindus. This is the tolerance and accommodation that our civilisation is known for.

The role of art is not to find what is common but what is unique and it is the uniqueness of our diverse culture that Annapoorani serves on the table in no uncertain terms. In its structure, the Nileshe Krishnaa film is a regular story of an underdog laced with a predictable background score but it provides the lay audience plenty to chew on how caste still limits career options and how a young, enterprising woman is not allowed to own up to even her mistakes.

Merely skimming the surface

The spoiler is warranted because right-wing groups lodged complaints in police stations in Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled States that said the film had hurt the feelings of Hindus as it promoted Love Jihad. They were offended because the priest's daughter in the film has a Muslim friend, Farhan, who helps her get over her inhibition to cook and taste non-vegetarian food by citing verses from the Valmiki Ramayan that indicate that Lord Ram and Lakshman consumed meat during exile.

Those who can read the film can see the bond between Annapoorani and Farhan in the context of the introductory mythical tale but those with fragile sensitivities in the current socio-political milieu find the depiction fitting into their definition of a conspiracy theory about Hindu women being seduced to convert to Islam.



Notably, the film was cleared by the Central Board Of Film Certification (CBFC) and had a smooth theatrical run in December. The controversy arose only after the Hindi dub of the film was released on the OTT platform at a time when the countdown to the grand Ayodhya event had begun. Since then, the producer and the lead actor, have apologised for inadvertently hurting sentiments, and artistic freedom in the country has taken yet another hit.

It seems those who pick on mainstream films deliberately watch them selectively in bits and pieces and don't appreciate the overall intent of the makers. It is not new malaise, though. Those who grew up during the Congress rule would remember the hoopla over Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom* for showing monkey meat being served in India.

Last year, a senior minister from the BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh took umbrage over the saffron bikini of Deepika Padukone in *Pathaan* but when the film released and it was discovered that the actress is playing a Pakistani Muslim, the opposition petered out. Then the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting sought an explanation from the CBFC for not chopping off a scene in *Oppenheimer* where the protagonist is reading *Bhagwat Gita* during a deeply intimate scene. The fact that the father of the atom bomb is known to have structured his life around the philosophy of the revered Hindu text didn't cut ice with those who wanted to skim only the surface in the face of an outcry on social media.

It is not that the charges went completely uncontested. Former CBFC member and seasoned filmmaker Dr. Chandraprakash Dwivedi who faced FIRs and an official ban for *Mohalla Assi*, told this journalist that in his opinion it was not the victory of Hindu ethos but the victory of the Victorian mindset towards sex wherein sex is considered a sin. Known for meticulous research, the director of *Chanakya* said, "In many Hindu scriptures union of man and woman is described as sacrifice — a yagya."

After the *Annapoorani* controversy, noted artist Shuddhabrata Sengupta wrote a social media post where he cited references to hunting and meat-eating from Valmiki *Ramayan*. Describing himself as an atheist who read Valmiki *Ramayan* as an epic poetry in Sanskrit, Sengupta went on to say there was nothing wrong in a Muslim citing from a Hindu text, for one of the most accessible translations of Valmiki *Ramayan* into English is by Sanskrit scholar Arshia Sattar who happens to be a Muslim.

The need to protect creative freedom

Another scene of *Annapoorani* that offended sensitive taste buds was when the protagonist was shown offering namaaz before cooking *Ambur biryani* during the climax. *Annapoorani* performs the ritual because Farhan's vegetarian mother, from whom *Annapoorani* learnt the art, told her that it adds to the taste. It irked the self-appointed custodians of faith but when a Muslim scholar, during the television coverage of the Ram Temple event, said that the Persian word *namaz* has its roots in the Sanskrit word *Namah* (reverence), it was lapped up. Why is it that the former is often opposed and the second is usually welcomed? It is the same when *Bade Ghulam Ali Khan* sings *raga Yaman* in praise of goddess *Saraswati* or *Ustad Vilayat Khan* renders *raga Bhairav* or for that matter *Mohd Rafi* sings '*Man Tarpat Hari Darshan Ko Aaj*'— it becomes a symbol of syncretic culture. However, when *Salim-Javed* makes *Vijay don badge no 786* in *Deewar*, ulterior motives are seen in it in retrospect.

Often such debates end abruptly when someone says, "Oh! you don't dare to question the orthodoxy in other religions." There is no point in becoming the mirror image of something that looks atavistic and feels intolerant. Having said that there are examples like *Secret Superstar*



(2017) where the desire of a young Muslim girl to become a singer is almost put to an end by her father in the name of culture and religion. Then Mee Raqsam (2020) tells the story of a Muslim father who supports his daughter's desire to become a classical dancer while standing up to the orthodox clergy.

The controversy, once again, brings out the doublespeak of the reigning guardians of free speech. If we truly believe in Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family), if we pontificate from pulpits that the DNA of all Indians is the same, can we say that the kitchen of goddess Annapurna, on whom the protagonist is named, will prepare only one kind of cuisine or will feed only people of one faith, one taste?

Moreover, the film engages in an interesting debate on taste. When Annapoorani loses her sense of taste, one of her core strengths, because of an accident, her mentor instills confidence in her by reminding her that no one tastes the prasada before it is served to the god but it still tastes great. By the end of the film, Annapoorani rises above the handicap of taste to push the boundaries of her art, and her emotion. As Marcel Duchamp, the father of conceptual art famously said, taste is the enemy of art.

TAMIL NADU HONOURS ALT NEWS' MOHAMMED ZUBAIR FOR PEACE EFFORTS

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin handed over the Kottai Ameer Communal Harmony Award, 2024, to Alt News co-founder Mohammed Zubair during the Republic Day celebrations in Chennai on Friday. Governor R.N. Ravi was among the dignitaries present at the celebrations.

Mr. Zubair, a native of Denkanikottai in Krishnagiri district, has been analysing, through his portal, the veracity of the news on social media and "his work helps to prevent the occurrence of violence in society likely to be caused by fake news," the citation read. It recalled that in March 2023, a video was rapidly spreading on social media claiming that migrant workers were being attacked in Tamil Nadu.

'Preventing violence'

"After verifying the authenticity of the video footage, he reported on his Alt News website that the footage was not actually taken in Tamil Nadu and thus stopped the spread of rumours against Tamil Nadu and acted to prevent violence caused by caste, religion, race, and language in Tamil Nadu," it said.

WHY IS THERE NO SNOWFALL IN KASHMIR?

The story so far:

January is usually the month where Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh are blanketed with snow. This winter has, however, seen these regions extremely dry. Places like Gulmarg and Pahalgam, known to be popular destinations for skiing, have been unable to offer avenues for the winter sport. Himachal Pradesh, a State famous for several mountain resorts, has witnessed dry slopes and valleys of brown grass. The Himalayan ranges of Uttarakhand have also reported minimal snowfall, with the first bout of snow in January at Auli, a popular hill resort, only reported on January 19. Records from the India Meteorological Department (IMD) suggest that Himachal Pradesh has registered its driest January since 1901, with a 99.7% shortfall in January rain compared to what is normal. Until this year, the record for the driest January was 1996, which reported a 99.6% shortfall.

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



What is the reason for the lack of snowfall?

Snowfall requires adequate moisture as well as atmospheric temperatures to be zero degrees or less. Temperatures were fairly low since December. An analysis by the IMD in mid-January reported that maximum temperatures are running 5-8°C 'below normal' over the plains of north India since December 29. Minimum temperatures were also below 4 degrees Celsius at many stations of northwest India for most of January. This also resulted in a very dense fog persisting over the plains of northwest India. Several cities in the region reported zero visibility over the entire north-Indian plains from Amritsar to Dibrugarh across Haryana, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. While moisture and high aerosol loads contribute to fog, there were three major reasons behind the lack of snowfall — and consequently - intensifying cold waves over north India. These were — a drastic fall in Western Disturbances (WDs) over northwest India; prevailing El-Nino conditions; and the absence of a strong jet stream.

How do these three factors influence snowfall?

Western Disturbances are storms that originate in the mid-latitude regions and travel thousands of kilometres to bring rains to northern India. Such WDs in the winter dissipate fog and increase the sunshine incident on the ground raising temperatures. They also, when the temperatures are low, result in snowfall and water being available as snow melts. The melting glaciers contribute to the water available in the Ganga, Indus and Yamuna. On the other hand, they can also bring in hail, which is destructive to standing wheat crop. Usually, 5-7 WDs impact northwest India during December to January. But this winter there have been none. There were two WDs in this period, but their impact was mainly confined to Gujarat, north Maharashtra, east Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. As a result of the lack of these rains, the Western Himalayan Region got 80% less rain than normal.

Prevailing El-Nino conditions over the equatorial Pacific Ocean, or warmer ocean temperatures, may also have had a role to play. However, irrespective of El Nino, or the converse, La Nina, the number of WDs in December and January have been on a decline. In the winter of 2022-23 (December and January), India reported its hottest ever December. The northwest region, which usually reports nearly a third of its rainfall during this season, saw an 83% rainfall deficit.

In recent years, there has been a rise in these WDs in February and March that have caused flash floods, particularly in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. Last year for instance, saw record-breaking rain in February. In general, the traditional pattern of WDs have been disrupted since 2019, the last year we saw a conventional WD pattern. These instances of extended dry periods and intense wet spells are characteristic of global warming, as several meteorologists and climate scientists have been pointing out in recent years.

What role do the jet streams play?

Jet streams are powerful winds, ranging from 250-320 kmph, travelling at about 12 km above mean sea level. They are carriers of the western disturbances but the lack of moisture means that so far, they have been contributing to the subsidence of cold air thereby enhancing the cold over north India. The jet streams set in after the withdrawal of the monsoon are also able to draw in moisture from the Arabian Sea. In recent years, the jet stream has been shifting northwards. This, emerging research suggests, is a consequence of a warming in the Arctic seas that affects the natural gradient of temperature necessary to ensure the strength and direction of the jet streams.



AN EXCHANGE

While the Centre has announced the first set of recipients of a fellowship programme called Vaibhav (VAIshwik BHArtiya Vaigyanik), the premise of the initiative remains intriguing. Scientists of Indian origin, or of Indian ancestry, can apply to spend up to three months in a year, for three years, at a host research laboratory in India. In that period, these researchers are expected to begin a project or technology start-up, build long-term connections with the institute, collaborate with the host faculty and bring in new ideas to the field, in Indian university and research settings. As the programme gains momentum, officials say, new kinds of relationships could emerge: the Indian origin faculty could be encouraged to take on students, more associates and even supervise degrees that could lead to a genuine transfer of knowledge, innovation and work culture and perhaps optimistically, the non-resident Indian scientist even considering staying on in India.

Vaibhav is not an original idea. During this government's tenure itself, the Department of Science and Technology (DST) conceived the VAJRA (Visiting Advanced Joint Research) Faculty Scheme with similar objectives. The differences in the two schemes are minor. Vaibhav is exclusively for the Indian diaspora, while VAJRA can include other nationalities too. VAJRA, though generous in the amount offered as fellowships, was restricted to one-year engagements, unlike Vaibhav which pays less but extends to three years. The DST, which is in charge of both schemes, says that nearly 70 international faculty have spent time in India as part of VAJRA, though there have been concerns over the effectiveness of the scheme. Currently, officials say, both schemes will continue. While facilitating exchange between Indian and foreign universities is welcome, there ought to be clarity on what India hopes to gain by specifically focusing on the Indian diaspora. Through the decades, much ink has been spilt on the problem of 'brain drain', where talented researchers went abroad for want of commensurate opportunities in India. While economics and individual proclivities heavily influence such decisions, short-term fellowships are useful in priming foreign faculty and researchers to the potential for science in India. They can also lay bare the challenges — the lack of funding for basic research, the lack of participation by private companies in core research and development and limits on academic freedom — and trigger changes in policy. The tremendous competition for tenured jobs in American and European universities means that there is a vast pool of skilled scientific manpower, trained abroad, who can be brought back or retained in India. Realistic expectations must be the touchstone of such engagements. It remains to be seen if the presumption that scientists of Indian origin will be likelier to stay back, indicated by the ethno-nationalist restriction, will bear fruit.

WITH JUST TWO SPEAKERS, A LANGUAGE IN KERALA WITH NO SCRIPT IS ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION

Madhika, a language in Kerala with no script, is on the brink of extinction as only two fluent speakers, K.P. Narayanan, 87, and his niece Rajputhri, remain. Despite its blend of Telugu, Tulu, Kannada, and Malayalam, Madhika faces decline due to the younger generation's lack of interest in learning the language. The language is associated with the Chakaliya community, which has faced social stigma and discrimination, contributing to the neglect of Madhika. The decline in speakers and the absence of documentation pose a significant threat to the survival of the language.



INDIA AMONG NATIONS OVERUSING “WATCH” GROUP ANTIBIOTICS

In the Data Point published last week (“Over 38% patients on more than one antibiotic”, January 17), results from a government survey showed that an overwhelming number of inpatients are prescribed antibiotics by hospitals across India. Findings also showed that many patients were on more than one antibiotic. Further, the data showed that over 55% of such antibiotic prescriptions belonged to the “Watch” group as classified by the World Health Organization (WHO), i.e., medicines reserved for only severe infections.

Data show that resistance among Indian patients to certain types of antibiotics is among the highest in the world. In India, for many antibiotic-bacterium combinations, over 75% of infections were from resistant bacteria. For instance, in the ceftriaxone antibiotic-Klebsiella pneumoniae bacteria combination, over 87.4% of infections were from resistant bacteria. The ceftriaxone antibiotic belongs to the group called third-generation cephalosporins.

It is telling that the resistance proportion among Indian patients was among the highest for drugs in the third generation cephalosporins group. As noted in the Data Point last week, over 33% of antibiotic prescriptions in India — the highest among all types — that featured in the government survey in 2021-22, were also from the third generation cephalosporins group, which include antibiotics such as ceftriaxone, ceftazidime and cefotaxime. So, the most used antibiotic is also the most resisted.

There is also a clear divide between countries with high resistance and low resistance. Responsible antibiotic usage has resulted in low antibiotic resistance among developed countries such as Norway, Finland, Netherlands and the U.K.. In contrast, along with India, patients in Russia, Egypt and Pakistan have developed high antibiotic resistance.

AWaRe was developed by WHO based on the impact of different antibiotics on antimicrobial resistance so that they can be used appropriately. It broadly categorises antibiotics into “Access”, “Watch”, and “Reserve”. The “Access” group is the most advised as it minimises the potential for resistance. “Watch” group antibiotics are only for specific and limited use, and result in increased antibiotic resistance. The “reserve” group should only be used in life-threatening conditions. According to WHO, 60% of total antibiotic consumption in a country should be from the “Access” group. It is a worry that in India, the opposite is true. About 59% of total antibiotic consumption in the country in 2022 was from the “Watch” group. This share went up to 64% during the pandemic years. In 2015-17, a year for which comparison data with other countries was available, India stood out that year, with 56% of all antibiotics that were prescribed from the “Watch” group. Russia was a distant second. On the other hand, Norway, Finland, Netherlands and the U.K. — which featured among nations with low antimicrobial resistance — also had low “Watch” group proportion in consumption. “Watch” group antibiotics formed less than 20% of the total consumption in these countries.

JAMMU CSIR LAB FINDS CANNABIS COMPOUND THAT HAS ANTIBIOTIC EFFECTS

Scientists at CSIR-Indian Institute of Integrative Medicine (IIIM), Jammu, have found that phytocannabinoids, a class of compounds found in the cannabis plant, possess some hitherto unexplored antibiotic properties.

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a major health concern worldwide. It refers to when bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites no longer respond to medicines used to treat them.



According to Sanghapal D. Sawant, a senior principal scientist at the CSIR-National Chemical Laboratory (NCL), Pune, bacteria have developed certain sophisticated 'shields' over many decades to resist the effects of antibiotic medications.

These include the formation of biofilms – thin sheets of bacterial colonies that are more resistant to antibiotics than when separated – and cellular mechanisms called efflux pumps that flush drugs out from cells. The resulting AMR increases the risk of disease spread, severe illness, and death.

What is India's AMR burden?

According to one estimate, India reported 2.97 lakh deaths in 2019 that could be attributed to AMR and 10.42 lakh others that could be associated with AMR. Reports have also flagged the overuse of antibiotics in India, their misuse in animal husbandry, and poor waste disposal for engendering AMR and potentially rendering India the "AMR capital of the world". For these reasons, medical researchers are keen to tamp down AMR and find new drugs that fight AMR pathogens.

In the new study, published in the journal ACS Infectious Diseases, IIM researchers tested the antibacterial properties of tetrahydrocannabinol (THCBD), a semisynthetic phytocannabinoid, against *Staphylococcus aureus*, the bacteria responsible for the second most number of deaths due to AMR worldwide.

Need for 'alternative solutions'

Antibiotics are chemical compounds isolated from one microorganism and used to kill another. They have saved millions of lives since their discovery but are falling short against AMR bacteria. "S. aureus includes a strain known as MRSA, for methicillin-resistant S. aureus, resistant to the last line of antibiotics called methicillin," Parvinder Pal Singh, principal scientist at IIM researcher and the study's corresponding author, said. "While numerous antibiotics exist for S. aureus, the emergence of the MRSA strain necessitates alternative solutions."

The study revealed THCBD obtained from cannabis could fight MRSA. "We tested this molecule on eight to ten different resistant strains of S. aureus, indicating its potential through a distinct mechanism, and offering a promising avenue for further investigation."

How is THCBD made?

Cannabinoids are a class of compounds found in the cannabis plant. The prefix 'phyto' in phytocannabinoid means it comes from a plant. Cannabinoids bind to receptors in the bodies of animals to produce a variety of neurological effects. The researchers extracted cannabidiol from a cannabis plant and made it react with hydrogen, using palladium as a catalyst. This process yielded a mixture of molecules with the same composition and order of atoms but different structures. One of them was THCBD.

What were THCBD's effects?

Then the researchers tested THCBD against bacterial cultures in the lab. The minimum quantity found to be efficacious against a strain of Gram-positive S. aureus used commonly in AMR research was found to be 0.25 g/ml, which the researchers called "potent".

They found THCBD "demonstrated strong effectiveness" against efflux pump overexpression and MRSA strains.



They also wrote THCBD “significantly reduced” the number of viable microbial cells of *S. aureus* skin infections in mice.

Finally, they found that the compound either complemented or was indifferent to the effects of other common antibiotics like mupirocin, penicillin G, and ciprofloxacin, meaning they could be used together.

“While we have identified a promising candidate, the journey to transforming it into a viable drug involves overcoming additional hurdles,” Dr Singh said. “The establishment of a comprehensive safety profile is a crucial step that remains to be seen. Moving forward, our focus will include addressing these issues to develop an improved and safer molecule for potential drug applications.”

MOSQUITOFISH, USED TO FIGHT MOSQUITOES, HAS BECOME INVASIVE IN INDIA

In the last few months, various government and non-governmental organisations in Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, and Punjab have released mosquitofish into local water bodies to address a mosquito menace that locals have complained about. In fact, officials in Visakhapatnam are set to release an additional six lakh mosquitofish after having released some 20 lakh a few months ago.

The world’s climate and habitats have changed noticeably in the last century, accelerating the spread of mosquito-borne diseases. Today, these diseases prevail in more than 150 countries worldwide, affecting more than 500 million people. In India alone, around 40 million individuals contract mosquito-borne diseases every year, and mosquito-borne illnesses have remained a persistent public health concern for many decades.

What is mosquitofish?

In this milieu, the biological control of mosquitoes assumes importance. In the 1960s, such approaches – including introducing mosquitofish in freshwater ecosystems to feed on mosquito larvae – became prominent as alternatives to chemical solutions like pesticides, which were found to have dire adverse effects on both human health and the ecosystem. The uptake of these alternatives increased in the 1980s and 1990s.

Many of them were considered to be environmentally friendly and sustainable. Among mosquito predators were two species of mosquitofish, *Gambusia affinis* and *Gambusia holbrooki*. In countries with governments that had approved this strategy, the authorities released them into freshwater ecosystems. What they didn’t plan for, however, was that the fish began to proliferate here, with their populations eventually spreading far beyond their original habitats. These species of mosquitofish originated in the U.S. but today have become global inhabitants. They are notorious for their detrimental ecological impact, including displacing and preying on native fauna, leading to the extinction of native fish, amphibians, and various freshwater communities. As such, *Gambusia* stands out as some of the most widely dispersed freshwater fish, aided by their robust adaptability and high tolerance for fluctuating environmental conditions.

The introduction of *Gambusia*, or mosquitofish, in India dates back to 1928 when it was first introduced during British rule as a means to control mosquito populations and combat malaria. Various government organizations, including the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and the National Institute of Malaria Research (NIMR), as well as municipal corporations and private entities, were involved in the widespread introduction of mosquitofish across India. However, the unintended consequences of this strategy have led to severe ecological and environmental



problems. Mosquitofish, considered one of the hundred most detrimental invasive alien species, has negatively impacted native aquatic biodiversity in India.

What effects has mosquitofish had?

Wildlife biologists and conservationists consider mosquitofish to be among the hundred most detrimental invasive alien species. Aside from their resilience, these fish also have voracious feeding habits and have demonstrated aggressive behaviour in habitats to which they are introduced. India's *Gambusia* story thus underscores the importance of careful consideration, research, and monitoring when using biological control methods to manage pest species. Studies conducted in other countries have consistently revealed the harmful consequences of the presence of *Gambusia* in water bodies.

For example, in Australia, introduced mosquitofish have led to the local extinction of the red-finned blue-eye (*Scaturiginichthys vermeilipinnis*), an endemic fish species. They have also been observed preying on the eggs and larvae of native fish and frogs. A study from New Zealand highlighted the threat posed by *Gambusia* to their native aquatic biodiversity. In India, some reports have indicated a decline in *Microhyla* tadpoles following the introduction of *Gambusia*.

For these reasons, the World Health Organisation stopped recommending *Gambusia* as a mosquito control agent in 1982. In 2018, the National Biodiversity Authority of the Government of India also designated *G. affinis* and *G. holbrooki* as invasive alien species.

But both government and non-governmental organisations in India have continued to introduce these species for mosquito-control.

At this time, more stringent enforcement measures are crucial to prevent the species from continuing to be introduced to freshwater ecosystems and to manage the consequences of past introductions. Both also include the task of safeguarding our indigenous aquatic biodiversity and the well-being of native species.

How can mosquitofish be controlled?

Put differently, the problem today is both wolf at the door and termites at the base, and the optimal solution needs practitioners to tackle the problem from multiple angles. The first has to do with the National Centre for Vector Borne Diseases Control (NCVBDC) – of the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare – displaying a recommendation on its website for the use of *Gambusia* and *Poecilia* (guppy) fishes to manage mosquitoes. This recommendation must be removed.

Second, for effective mosquito control, alternatives to *Gambusia* should come from local solutions. Experts have suggested a collaboration between mosquito biologists/entomologists, invasion ecologists, and fish taxonomists, with a focus on river basins. Together, they can compile lists of native fish species in each basin that are capable of controlling mosquito larvae. Then, based on these lists, authorities can release the relevant species into the natural environment, sidestepping the risk of ecological repercussions posed by invasive alien species.

EXPRESS VIEW ON INDIA'S ENERGY FUTURE: GOING SOLAR

In one of his first decisions after becoming Prime Minister, Narendra Modi had set a target of installing 100 GW of solar power in the country by 2022 — 40 per cent of this energy was to be generated from rooftop installations. Though the country's renewable energy (RE) sector has



made appreciable strides in the past 10 years, it missed the 100 GW target by a long margin — the 2022 deadline has been pushed back to 2026. The patchy performance of rooftop installations is a major reason for this failure — the capacity of such systems is currently less than 12 GW. The Pradhan Mantri Suryodaya Yojana (PMSY), a new scheme announced by PM Modi on Monday, can place the decentralised solar power segment on a better footing. It aims to take solar power to one crore households.

Installing solar power is expensive for an individual household. That's why less than a fifth of the rooftop installations are in the residential sector. At the same time, subsidies on energy generated from conventional power sources make RE an unattractive proposition. Central and state government subsidies for solar installations, in contrast, are offset by deterrents such as cumbersome procedures and quality issues. The government's failure to frame convincing solutions, especially its flip-flops, seem to have made the problem more intractable. Its 2019 policy required households availing the subsidy to buy solar panels and inverters from companies empanelled by the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE). The provision was meant to enable the government to monitor the quality of the rooftop systems. But the centralised system restricted consumer choice and three years later, the ministry relaxed this requirement. "The government will publish the lists of solar panel manufacturers and inverter manufacturers whose products meet the expected quality standards," the MNRE noted. By all accounts, the change has not made a perceptible difference.

Companies, too, face difficulties in achieving economies of scale when they target individual households. Vendors, therefore, prefer servicing commercial consumers. Gujarat — the state with the most rooftop installations — has tried to address these issues with aggressive awareness campaigns and timely disbursement of subsidies. But with the grid getting a substantial amount of electricity from households, the state's discoms are confronted with the most difficult problem with RE — intermittent supply. The details of PM Modi's new scheme are not yet in the public domain. The government would do well to learn the right lessons from the country's past experiences with solar power.

EXPRESS VIEW ON BUTTER CHICKEN BATTLE: TENDER AT THE BONE

Butter chicken can be many things to many people. It can be a taste of home or a sinful indulgence; a weightwatcher's bane or a foreigner's foray into a new, vaunted cuisine. As it turns out, it can also be a bitter bone of contention, capable of simmering for years and dragging colleagues-turned-foes to court. The fight between Delhi restaurants Moti Mahal and Daryaganj over the ownership of butter chicken has now moved into legal territory. With Moti Mahal filing a trademark violation suit against Daryaganj, Delhi High Court is set to be the arbiter of who got to the coveted recipe first.

The dish's disputed legacy harks back to the moment of Partition. Moti Mahal claims that in the 1930s, leftover pieces of tandoori chicken at their original restaurant in Peshawar had been given a new lease of life by owner Kundan Lal Gujral, who cooked it in a decadent gravy of butter, tomatoes, cream and spices. It had amassed such a following of its own that when the Gujrals moved to India in 1947, butter chicken remained on the menu of their new outlet in Delhi's Daryaganj, where they were joined by Kundan Lal Jaggi in the kitchen. Jaggi's relatives, proprietors of Daryaganj restaurant, claim that this gives them trademark rights over the dish.

The fight over ownership is likely to linger on — the next hearing has been scheduled for May. But shorn of its commercial consequences, the dispute is an indication of the charged sentiments that



food, especially as storied as butter chicken, with a fan following among prime ministers and visiting heads of states, actors and commoners, evokes. Family recipes and star dishes in restaurants rely equally on acts of collaboration and moments of inspiration in the kitchen. They signal a continuity of tradition, but also a hint of distinction that sets them apart, makes memories out of them. The butter chicken has long passed that test. It remains a legend. Does it really matter who got to it first?

RARE GOLDEN TIGER SNAPPED IN KAZIRANGA

While the photograph of a golden tiger, shared by Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on X (formerly Twitter) on National Tourism Day (January 25), has left nature enthusiasts spellbound, the man behind the image feels that the rare encounter in the wild might never happen again. Wildlife photographer Gaurav Ramnarayanan from Coimbatore snapped the tiger with the golden coat on a safari in Assam's Kaziranga National Park on January 24.

Exact count unknown

According to him, more than one tiger with the golden coat are believed to be in Kaziranga, but the exact count is not known. The photograph of a golden tiger, said to be taken in 2019, is of a different tiger.

Professor Uma Ramakrishnan of the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bengaluru, whose team studied the black or pseudomelanistic tigers in the Similipal Tiger Reserve in Odisha, is conducting a study on the golden phenotype of Kaziranga using scat samples.

WETLAND 'NATURE TOURISM' GETS A FILLIP

The Union government has embarked on a mission to promote tourism at ecologically sensitive wetlands, better known as Ramsar sites, such as the Chilika lake in Odisha and Sultanpur bird sanctuary in Haryana. The focus of the initiative would be to shift these fragile wetlands from high-value tourism to nature tourism by directly supporting conservation action and letting local communities and economies take the lead.

As of now, 16 Ramsar sites have been identified under the initiative and five of them have been taken up as a pilot project for skill development of the facilitators, tourism service providers, and stakeholders in and around these sites. These five wetlands are Sultanpur National Park (Haryana), Bhitarkanika Mangroves (Odisha), Chilika lake (Odisha), Sirpur (Madhya Pradesh) and Yashwant Sagar (Madhya Pradesh).

The initiative to develop these sites has been taken by the Union Tourism Ministry and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change under the Amrit Dharohar Capacity Building Scheme, 2023.

The Amrit Dharohar initiative, part of the 2023-24 Budget announcement, was launched in June 2023 to promote unique conservation values of Ramsar sites in the country while generating employment opportunities and supporting local livelihoods.

The scheme is being implemented in convergence with various Union government Ministries and agencies, State wetland authorities, and a network of formal and informal institutions and individuals.



The aim is to enhance livelihood opportunities for local communities through harnessing the nature-tourism potential of such sites.

‘High-value’ versus ‘nature’

The tourism industry identifies high-value travellers as those who are likely to spend more, stay longer, and disperse beyond tourist hotspots. Nature tourism on the other hand is tourism based on the natural attractions of an area like birdwatching, photography, stargazing, camping, hiking, hunting, fishing, and visiting parks. These are experiential tourists who are interested in a diversity of natural and cultural resources. “Wetlands are important for the conservation of global biological diversity and for sustaining human life through the maintenance of their ecosystem components, processes and services. Hence it is important that we focus on nature tourism at these Ramsar sites,” a senior Tourism Ministry official told The Hindu.

RAHUL GANDHI PREVENTED FROM VISITING BATADRAVA THAN: SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS ASSAM SHRINE

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was Monday prevented from visiting Assam’s Batadrava Than, where he was going as part of his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. The yatra was stopped for over two hours at Haibargaon in Nagaon, and around 9:30 am, only Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi and Batadrava MLA Sibamoni Bora were allowed past the barricades to visit the Than.

The Than management committee had written to Bora, saying Rahul would not be allowed inside the premises before 3 pm on Monday since thousands of people would gather there in the morning to mark the pran pratishtha at the Ram temple in Ayodhya. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma too had said Rahul should visit the Than after the Ayodhya ceremony had concluded.

What is the Batadrava Than?

Located in Nagaon district, the Batadrava Than, or Bordowa Than, is one of the most sacred sites for Assamese Vaishnavites. The Than is situated at the birthplace of revered Vaishnavite reformer-saint Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568). According to the Nagaon district’s website, “Sankardeva founded the first-ever Kirtan Ghar at Bordowa in 1494 AD to practise and preach the neo Vaishnavite faith during the fifteenth century in Assam, and propagated the Ek Saran Naam Dharma.”

What was Srimanta Sankardeva’s philosophy?

The Ek Saran Naam Dharma focussed on worship in the form of bhakti (devotion) to Lord Krishna, through singing and congregational listening of His name and deeds. Sankardeva espoused a society based on equality and fraternity, free from caste differences, orthodox Brahmanical rituals and sacrifices. His teaching focused on prayer and chanting (naam) instead of idol worship. His dharma was based on the four components of deva (god), naam (prayers), bhakats (devotees), and guru (teacher).

The Neo-Vaishnavite reformist movement that Sankardeva started is behind the monastic institutions called Thans/Sattras that dot Assam. As the saint travelled across Assam, spreading his teachings, these Sattras/Thans were established as centres of religious, social and cultural reforms in the 16th century. Today, the Sattras promulgate Sankardeva’s unique “worship through art” approach with music (borgeet), dance (xattriya) and theatre (bhauna). Each Sattra has a naamghar (worship hall) as its nucleus and is headed by an influential “Sattradhikar”.



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

WTO DISPUTE SETTLEMENT BODY REVIVAL FACES DELAYS OVER COUNTRY DIFFERENCES: GTRI

Reinstating a fully functional WTO dispute settlement body to resolve trade disputes between countries could take longer than expected as there continues to be wide differences between developed and developing countries over the issue, a GTRI report said on Sunday.

This comes as the 164-member World Trade Organization (WTO) is set to gather next month in Abu Dhabi for the 13th ministerial conference (MC) to resolve different issues such as reforms in dispute settlement mechanisms, agriculture-related matters among other key issues.

Protectionism has been on the rise due to the lack of a functional dispute settlement body as the US, since 2017, has been blocking the appointment of new judges to the WTO's seven-member appellate court as it believes that that the body is hurting its interest.

GTRI said that balancing India's demands for an appellate body, S&DT (special and differential treatment) provisions, and fairness while addressing other members' concerns, including transparency and legal certainty, will require significant compromise and negotiation.

INDIA TO SEND INDUSTRY DELEGATION FOR COPPER MINING OPPORTUNITIES IN ZAMBIA

The Mines Ministry has proposed sending an Indian industry delegation to copper-rich Zambia to discuss potential copper exploration and mining projects in the southern African country. Mining companies including Vedanta and its subsidiary Hindustan Zinc, along with electric vehicle (EV) maker Ola Electric and lithium-ion battery recycler LOHUM, have expressed interest in joining the delegation to Zambia to attend a joint working group (JWG) meeting to discuss cooperation in the field of mineral resources.

Zambia has about 6 per cent of the world's copper reserves and was the eighth-largest producer of copper in 2022. Copper is widely used in sectors like construction, consumer durables, transportation, and industrial manufacturing. It is also used in clean energy technologies including solar panels, EVs, and energy efficient motors. China Nonferrous Mining Corporation (CNMC) is among the largest producers of copper in Zambia.

EXPRESS VIEW ON FOOD PRICES: DAL, ROTI, CHEENI

International food prices have eased considerably from their 2022 peaks. The benchmark FAO Food Price Index in December was 10.1 per cent below its level one year ago and 28 per cent down from its all-time high scaled in March 2022, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But this story of global deflation is contrary to the Indian situation, where the official consumer food price index inflation ruled at 9.5 per cent in December. The domestic inflationary pressures are coming from basic foods: Pulses, cereals and sugar. In other words, dal-roti-cheeni. It's not for nothing that the Centre is worried, especially with national elections due in hardly three months' time. Retail food inflation averaged just 0.2 per cent during the year leading to the last Lok Sabha polls in April-May 2019. The Narendra Modi government knows that food prices matter for voter sentiment.

The government's strategy to rein in food inflation has been a heterodox mix of export and trading curbs along with import liberalisation. Thus, exports of wheat, non-basmati white rice, sugar and



onion have been banned, denying Indian farmers and agri- businesses the opportunity to benefit from high international prices, whether in 2022 (for the first) or now (for the other three). Stocking limits have been imposed in wheat and pulses for traders, processors as well as big-chain retailers. Curbs have been placed on sugar mills with regard to diversion of cane juice and intermediate-stage molasses for manufacture of fuel ethanol, industrial-grade rectified spirit and potable alcohol. Simultaneously, imports of major pulses and crude edible oils have been allowed at zero or very low duties till March 31, 2025. Notwithstanding all these supply-side measures, rice is retailing at an all-India average (modal) price of Rs 40/kg (Rs 35 a year ago), milled arhar (pigeon pea) at Rs 150/kg (Rs 110), chana (chickpea) at Rs 80/kg (Rs 68), sugar at Rs 45/kg (Rs 40) and onion at Rs 30/kg (Rs 25).

The government approach reflects an excessive pro-consumer policy bias. Such bias, apart from being anti-producer, isn't in long-term consumer interest either. Both producers and consumers benefit from policy that is predictable and stable, not knee-jerk and reactive. Indian agriculture has been a victim of short-termism, which has deterred much-needed investments in processing, cold storage, marketing and research. Such investments will unleash the productive potential of the farm sector, providing a more sustainable solution to food inflation. Post election, that should also be the focus of the next government.

GOVERNMENT GUARANTEES ON A RISING TREND IN 12 STATES

As a State grows, the need to fund infrastructure projects increases. The Public Sector Enterprises which are executing these projects need funds. While many of them get funds within the State budget, some of the projects require huge investments, for which PSEs turn to banks and financial institutions. The State government stands as guarantor for such loans, otherwise the banks may not be willing to extend loans to such entities.

Given the guarantee, the banks are happy to give loans, often without even doing due diligence about the commercial viability of such projects. Because of the very low risk attached to such loans, they also most often do not monitor the projects they finance. As long as the PSEs are financially sound and servicing the debt, this is a win-win situation. However, if the PSEs turn loss-making, and if the banks invoke the guarantees, it is the State government which will be in trouble. This was the concern that the RBI's Working Group on State Government Guarantees had expressed in its report released last week.

For instance, for Andhra Pradesh, the outstanding guarantees as a share of its GDP grew from around 4% to over 10% in the said period. In fact, the guarantees are on an increasing trend in 11 other States — Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Meghalaya, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Uttar Pradesh.

In Sikkim and Telangana, along with Andhra Pradesh, the share of outstanding government guarantees as a share of their GDPs was above the 10% mark at the end of 2022. Whereas it was around 8-9% in the case of Meghalaya and Uttar Pradesh. The Working Group has asked governments to have a fixed ceiling on the guarantees issued and make it uniform across all States. The Group has also recommended the States assess risks attached to each guarantee and assign weights based on the sector and the borrower's past record.

While the share of banks and financial institutions in the financing of States' gross fiscal deficit has remained low, in terms of absolute numbers they are still considerable as the quantum of loans given by the banks to the States has zoomed over the years.



As the loans are guaranteed by the State, if they are not honoured, the banks may not give fresh loans to the enterprises and guarantees given by the government will fall in value. To avoid that, the Working Group has come up with some recommendations. Having a uniform ceiling for incremental guarantees issued during a year at 5% of the revenue receipts or 0.5% if the GSDP of the State, whichever is less, is the major criterion. The riskiness of the borrowers and projects involved should be considered. A State Finance Department unit should be set up to capture all guarantees and monitor them continually. All States should report in a similar format so that it is easier to oversee.

DIRECT TAX-GDP RATIO ROSE TO 15-YEAR HIGH IN FY23, TAX BUOYANCY DIPPED

Direct tax-to-GDP ratio, which reflects the share of taxes in the overall output generated in the country, rose to a 15-year high of 6.11 per cent in the financial year 2022-23, time-series data released by the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) under the Ministry of Finance showed Tuesday. This was accompanied by an increase in the income tax return filers in India to 7.4 crore in FY23, up 6.3 per cent from FY22, even as the tax buoyancy — the growth rate of taxes in relation to the economy's nominal growth rate — declined to 1.18 in 2022-23 from 2.52 in 2021-22 and 1.29 in the pre-Covid year of 2018-19.

The cost of tax collection — indicating the expenditure on tax collection as a proportion of the total tax collections — inched lower to 0.51 per cent in FY23, the lowest level since 2000-01, but it increased in absolute terms to Rs 8,452 crore, the highest level since 2000-01, the year for which data is last available, the CBDT data showed.

Tax buoyancy had stood at (-)1.21 in 2019-20 and it was not computed for the financial year 2020-21 as both the nominal GDP and tax collections contracted from the previous year. Tax buoyancy had improved to 2.52 in 2021-22 due to a low base effect. Now, tax buoyancy inched lower to 1.18 in 2022-23 even as the growth rate for taxes was recorded at 17.79 per cent in 2022-23, higher than 15.11 per cent nominal GDP growth.

A tax buoyancy greater than 1 reflects a faster growth in taxes as against the country's national income.

Net direct tax collections, which reflect collections after refunds, "increased by 160.52 per cent to Rs 16.63 lakh crore in FY 2022-23 from Rs 6.39 lakh crore in FY 2013-14", CBDT said in a statement. Gross direct tax collections stood at Rs 19.7 lakh crore in FY 2022-23, a rise of 173.3 per cent from Rs 7.21 lakh crore in FY 2013-14, it said. On a year-on-year basis, net direct tax collections increased by 17.8 per cent, while gross direct tax collections rose by 20.5 per cent.

While the number of persons filing income tax returns increased to 7.4 crore in financial year 2022-23, out of which 6.97 crore were individuals, the corresponding data for taxpayers was not available. In the previous financial year 2021-22, while tax return filers stood at 6.96 crore (with 6.55 crore individuals), overall taxpayers stood at 9.37 crore — a gap of 2.41 crore — showing that a significant number of taxpayers are getting taxed through measures such as TDS but are not filing income tax returns.

As per CBDT, a taxpayer is a person who either has filed a return of income for the relevant assessment year (AY) or in whose case tax has been deducted at source in the relevant financial year but the taxpayer has not filed the return of income.



In the overall tax collections by the government, direct tax collections accounted for 54.62 per cent share in financial year 2022-23, a four-year high. Direct taxes as a share of the overall taxes had stood at 52.27 per cent in FY22, 46.84 per cent in FY21, 52.42 per cent in FY20 and 54.83 per cent in FY19. A higher direct taxes-to-indirect taxes ratio is considered progressive as indirect taxation hurts the poor more than direct taxes.

Among states and union territories, Maharashtra accounted for 36.4 per cent (Rs 6.05 lakh crore) of the overall direct tax collections in the country in the financial year 2022-23, followed by Delhi at 13.3 per cent (Rs 2.22 lakh crore), Karnataka at 12.5 per cent (Rs 2.08 lakh crore) and Tamil Nadu at 6.4 per cent (Rs 1.07 lakh crore). Cumulatively, these four states accounted for 68.6 per cent of the overall direct tax collections in FY23.

WHY THE HIKE IN IMPORT DUTY FOR GOLD, SILVER FINDINGS AND COINS? POLICY MAKERS SAY MOVE AIMED AT TACKLING ARBITRAGE

In a bid to remove the loophole of a tax arbitrage between different types of gold and silver items, the Finance Ministry on Tuesday raised import duty on gold and silver findings and coins of precious metals to 15 per cent. Higher imports of gold and silver findings — which are small components such as hooks, clasps, clamps, pins, screws used to hold the whole or a part of a piece of jewellery in place — led the government to hike the import duty for them at par with gold and silver bars.

Gold and silver bars faced a 15 per cent import duty, while gold and silver findings attracted 11 per cent import duty. Owing to this duty arbitrage, it was found that there was a significant surge in imports of gold findings in the last two months, a senior government official told The Indian Express.

What has been the change in import duty for gold and silver?

The hike in import duty on gold and silver findings has come in the form of levy of Agricultural Infrastructure Development Cess (AIDC) of 5 per cent and removing Social Welfare Surcharge (SWS) of 1 per cent. The new duty rates became effective from Tuesday.

Earlier, gold and silver findings faced a 10 per cent levy of basic customs duty (BCD) and 1 per cent SWS, making the effective duty rate to be 11 per cent. Now, the government has levied AIDC of 5 per cent and removed 1 per cent SWS, while keeping BCD unchanged at 10 per cent and resulting in a total effective duty rate of 15 per cent. This brings it at par with import duty on gold and silver of 15 per cent. Similarly, coins of precious metals will also now attract a 15 per cent duty as against 11 per cent earlier.

The import duty on spent catalyst and ash containing precious metals has also been hiked to 14.35 per cent (including 10 per cent BCD and 4.35 per cent AIDC) from 10.09 per cent earlier (9.17 per cent BCD and 0.92 per cent SWS). This brings the import duty at par with gold and silver dore.

Why the hike in import duty on certain items of gold, silver?

The hike in import duty has been done to bring in uniformity for import duty rates for all categories of gold and silver and precious metals as people were misusing the tax arbitrage to import gold/silver in different forms which faced lower duty than gold/silver bars. The government took note of a surge in imports of gold findings in the last two months to hike the import duty.



“To prevent circumvention of the higher duty of gold and silver bars, the rate on gold and silver findings have been equalised with gold and silver bars. Similarly, duty has been equalised for coins of precious metals. The import duty on Spent Catalyst of precious metals which was at 10.09 per cent have also been aligned with import duty on gold and silver dore to prevent possible misuse,” the official said.

Gold imports had jumped by 95 per cent year-on-year to \$7.23 billion in October. During April-October, gold imports rose by 23.01 per cent year-on-year to \$29.48 billion. In November, gold imports moderated from the previous month to \$3.45 billion, even as they remained up 6.24 per cent year-on-year. In December, gold imports jumped by a sharp 156.47 per cent to \$3.03 billion compared to \$1.18 billion in the year ago period. Cumulatively during April-December, gold imports have risen by 26.64 per cent year-on-year to \$35.95 billion.

Rise in gold prices and duties are also seen as the key reasons for higher gold smuggling in the country. In 2023, according to official statistics, gold smuggling cases in India surged over 20 per cent year-on-year till October, with 4,798 documented cases involving seizure of 3,917.52 kg of gold. This is the highest number of gold smuggling cases in at least three years, though the year-on-year surge in cases is lower than the 62.9 per cent year-on-year growth seen in the post-pandemic year of 2022, when 3,982 cases of gold smuggling were recorded involving seizure of 3,502.16 kg gold.

HEALTH INSURANCE COMPANIES TO OFFER 100% ‘CASHLESS’ TREATMENT IN HOSPITALS: ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

Taking the health insurance segment to a new level, general and health insurance companies have decided to offer 100 per cent cashless treatment across the country from January 25. The step, initiated by the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI), is expected to boost insurance penetration in the country and ease the claim process of policyholders and hospitals, thus avoiding delays and disputes normally seen in the reimbursement mode.

How will 100% cashless treatment work in hospitals?

Under the ‘Cashless Everywhere’ system, the policyholder can get treated in any hospital they choose without paying any amount, and a cashless facility will be available even if this hospital is not in the insurance company’s network. This means the policyholder can get admitted to any hospital without paying any advance money, and insurance companies will pay the bill on the discharge day.

According to the General Insurance Council, the apex body of general insurers that is a coordinating member under the ‘Cashless Everywhere’ system, the customer should inform the insurance company at least 48 hours before admission. “For emergency treatment, the customer should intimate the insurance company within 48 hours of admission. The claim should be admissible as per the terms of the policy and the cashless facility should be admissible as per the operating guidelines of the insurance company,” it said.

Segar Sampathkumar, Director of health insurance, GI Council, said the 100 per cent cashless system will be backed up by a technological platform with the aid of the National Health Authority. The new system of cashless payment, apart from needing a technological platform, also needs a lot of standardisation of rates and services.



What's the situation now?

During the fiscal 2022-23, 56 per cent of the health claims were settled through the cashless route, according to the IRDAI Annual Report.

The cashless facility is currently available only at hospitals where the respective insurance company has an agreement or tie-ups. If the policyholder chooses a hospital without such an agreement, the cashless facility is not offered now, and the customer has to go for a reimbursement claim, further delaying the claim process and leading to disputes. Policyholders in rural and semi-rural areas often find it difficult to access network hospitals for the cashless facility.

Tapan Singhel, MD and CEO of Bajaj Allianz General Insurance, and Chairman of the General Insurance Council, said, "Today if you see only about 63% of customers opt for cashless claims, while the others have to apply for reimbursement claims as they might be admitted to hospitals that are outside their Insurer or TPA (third party agents) network."

Will the move boost insurance penetration?

Insurance officials say the ease of claims settlement without burdening the policyholders financially will be a win-win situation for all three parties involved – hospitals, the general public and insurers. The biggest beneficiary will be the policyholders, who won't have to shell out money during the treatment period depending on the policy terms.

"The new initiative will encourage more customers to opt for health insurance. We also see this as a step towards reducing and in the long run, eliminating fraud, which has been plaguing the industry in a big way and reducing trust in the system. Overall, it's a win-win for all the stakeholders," Singhel said.

"The Councils – industry bodies Life Insurance Council and General Insurance Council – are playing a very prominent and active role for enabling common empanelment and interoperability with hospitals. This will make claim processing of health insurance seamless and frictionless for the policyholders," IRDAI Chairman Debasish Panda said recently.

If all insurers develop solutions that allow members to go cashless at all hospitals, it would be a game changer for the health insurance industry and will improve the insured experience, which, in turn, will aid in increasing penetration. "If this is successful, it will be an excellent move. There will undoubtedly be some glitches initially, but once resolved, it will be a fantastic thing for the insured," said Sudip Indani, National Head- Health & Benefits, Howden Insurance Brokers (India).

What are the issues in reimbursement mode?

Patients struggle to identify hospitals in the insurer's network and, if not discovered, end up paying from their pockets and claiming reimbursements later. This leads to several difficulties, frustrations and delays that can last for weeks.

Often, despite having insurance, customers do not have enough money to pay for hospital expenses and end up borrowing at exorbitant interest rates as urgent cash for hospitalisation. If the hospital bill is high, patients find it tough to arrange funds if they are in the reimbursement mode, as witnessed during the peak of the Covid pandemic. Patients are also asked to pay a hefty amount as an advance in the reimbursement system.



The general complaint among customers was that insurers normally slash the claim amount drastically and even reject claims on various pretexts in the reimbursement mode.

What's to be kept in mind?

In the cashless system, insurers will pay only up to the amount taken as a sum assured in the policy. If the sum assured is Rs 5 lakh, insurers will pay the hospital up to Rs 5 lakh during the year. Moreover, in the case of some illnesses, there's a waiting period of two or three years before the insurance coverage is applicable.

Customers must read the policy documents carefully to see the waiting periods and pick the plan with the least waiting period and those which cover the maximum number of illnesses.

How many claims were settled?

During 2022-23, general and health insurers settled 2.36 crore health insurance claims and paid Rs 70,930 crore towards settlement of health claims as against Rs 69,498 crore in the previous year. The average amount paid per claim was Rs 30,087 in 2022-23 as against Rs 31,804 a year ago, according to the IRDAI Annual Report.

In terms of the number of claims settled, 75 per cent of the claims were settled through the TPA and the balance 25 per cent of the claims were settled through an in-house mechanism. In terms of the mode of settlement of claims, 56 per cent of the total number of claims were settled through cashless mode and another 42 per cent through reimbursement mode. Insurers have settled two per cent of their claims amount through "both cashless and reimbursement mode", IRDAI said.

The health insurance segment is expected to cross the Rs one lakh crore mark in premium mobilisation during fiscal 2023-24 with insurers mobilising Rs 79,559 crore during the nine-month period that ended in December 2023.

DreamIAS

**LIFE & SCIENCE****ASIA ASCENDANT**

On January 19, the Smart Lander for Investigating Moon (SLIM) spacecraft of the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA), launched in September, was expected to soft-land on the moon. Shortly after the stipulated time, reports from JAXA indicated the lander had touched down but its solar panels were not producing power, forcing the craft to bank on its batteries. However, SLIM, it said, appeared to be transmitting data, and checks of its other components did not indicate any damage — meaning Japan had become the fifth country to soft-land a robotic spacecraft on the moon. SLIM, like Chandrayaan-3, was tasked with a lunar soft-landing and deploying a rover mission (with two small rovers) but its primary mission was pioneering. Thus far, interplanetary spacecraft to the moon and Mars have been assigned suitable landing areas several hundred metres wide. SLIM however was designed to land within a 100 sq. m area near (Shioli crater), and thus its nickname “moon sniper”. In a press conference in which they confirmed the controlled descent, JAXA officials also said it could be a month before they could ascertain if SLIM had successfully executed its pinpoint landing.

SLIM’s partial success (for now) comes a day after a moon-landing mission built by Astrobotic, a private U.S. company, and funded by NASA, reentered the earth’s atmosphere following a propellant leak. SLIM also happened roughly a month ahead of a landing attempt by another American company and four ahead of China’s ambitious sample-return mission from the moon’s far-side. JAXA’s lessons from SLIM are expected to inform the planned Lunar Polar Exploration Mission, an India-Japan collaboration with India expected to provide the lander. Precision landing is valuable because it allows lunar missions to begin closer to a place of interest, where there may be a smaller patch suitable for landing, instead of landing further away and roving to the area. And the moon’s surface around its south pole is mostly rough terrain. There are now five countries with the demonstrated ability to land robotic spacecraft on the moon. These plus the European Space Agency are the world’s major spacefaring entities. No other such entity has a robotic lunar mission planned in the near future. Both the U.S. and Russia also last demonstrated their abilities in a bygone era, although the NASA Commercial Lunar Payload Services programme will be making frequent attempts, as with the Astrobotic mission. As such, the new Space Race is currently being led by Asian countries.

WHY EUROPEAN UNION IS SHIFTING FROM BEING THE GLOBAL TECH REGULATOR TO AI INNOVATION ADVOCATE

To dissuade concerns that Europe is overregulating artificial intelligence (AI), which could stifle innovation in the bloc, the European Commission has released a set of rules to enable start-ups and other businesses to access hardware – such as supercomputers and computing capacity – for them to build large- scale AI models. This follows the political agreement reached in December 2023 on the EU AI Act – the world’s first comprehensive law on AI – that aims to support the development, deployment and take-up of trustworthy AI in the European Union (EU).

India has been considering a similar plan to build compute capacity for the country’s start-ups to ride the AI wave. The Indian Express had earlier reported that New Delhi is looking at a public-private partnership model to set up high capacity data centres in the country for start-ups to access. Computing capacity, or compute, is among the most important elements of building a large



AI systems, apart from algorithmic innovation and datasets. It is also one of the most difficult elements to procure for smaller businesses looking to train and build such AI systems.

How is the EU's plan similar to India's?

The Indian government is currently drawing out an AI Mission which may soon head for Cabinet approval and could have an outlay of more than Rs 10,000 crore. As part of the programme, the government wants to develop its own 'sovereign AI', build computational capacity in the country, and offer compute-as-a-service to India's startups.

The Indian Express had earlier reported the capacity building will be done both within the government and through a public-private partnership model, highlighting New Delhi's intention to reap dividends of the impending AI boom which it envisions will be a crucial economic driver.

In total, the country is looking to build a compute capacity of anywhere between 10,000 GPUs (graphic processing units) and 30,000 GPUs under the PPP model, and an additional 1,000-2,000 GPUs through the PSU Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC), Minister of State for Electronics and IT Rajeev Chandrasekhar had earlier told this paper.

The government is exploring various incentive structures for private companies to set up computing centres in the country – ranging from a capital expenditure subsidy model which has been employed under the semiconductor scheme, a model where companies can be incentivised depending on their operational expenses, to offering them a “usage” fee, Chandrasekhar had said.

The government's idea is to create a digital public infrastructure (DPI) out of the GPU assembly it sets up so that startups can utilise its computational capacity for a fraction of the cost, without needing to invest in GPUs which are often the biggest cost centre of such operations.

Why is the EU especially enabling AI innovation?

The most visible innovation in AI so far has been led by American companies, especially OpenAI and Google, and newer ventures such as Perplexity and Anthropic. Europe, which has so far regulated technologies from a human-rights-first approach, was being accused by the industry of yet again regulating AI even before it has spread across the continent in a meaningful way.

The US has so far not needed to offer hardware service to businesses in the country because that is an area where a number of American companies have made formidable strides.

For instance, according to a 2020 blog by Microsoft, the company had developed a supercomputer for OpenAI – the firm behind ChatGPT – which consisted of 10,000 GPUs among other things.

This also comes after the European Commission reached a deal to introduce an AI Act last year, but the legislation has drawn criticism. The legislation includes safeguards on the use of AI within the EU, including clear guardrails on its adoption by law enforcement agencies, and consumers have been empowered to launch complaints against any perceived violations. The deal includes strong restrictions on facial recognition technology, and on using AI to manipulate human behaviour, alongside provisions for tough penalties for companies breaking the rules.

Governments can only use real-time biometric surveillance in public areas only when there are serious threats involved, such as terrorist attacks.



US SIGNALS COOPERATION WITH CHINA ON AI SAFETY: WHAT COULD HAPPEN, AND WHAT COULD IT MEAN?

Less than six months after President Joe Biden signed an executive order prohibiting American investments in sensitive technologies in China, including artificial intelligence (AI) systems, the United States has signalled a rapprochement — by agreeing to work with Beijing on safely deploying AI systems.

Two important events took place between the executive order, issued in August 2023, prohibiting tech transfers to China, and the statement by the White House’s top science adviser.

At the beginning of November, China joined 27 other countries (including India) and the European Union to sign the Bletchley Declaration on evolving standards for AI at the world’s first AI Safety Summit in the United Kingdom.

Later that same month, President Biden met with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the APEC summit outside San Francisco for wide-ranging discussions including on US export controls for sensitive equipment.

Why is the statement by the White House important?

The change in approach from Washington comes at a time when rapid progress in AI has triggered global concern that this frontier technology could widen vulnerabilities to cyber-attacks and spread misinformation, especially as a record 40-odd countries vote in elections this year.

It also coincides with a recent report in Forbes that quoted analysts including Kaifu Lee — a tracker of AI development in China — to claim that the two countries “have reached parity in the development of artificial intelligence but China’s implementation of the technology in products and services is likely to edge ahead of the US this year”.

Chinese AI major Baidu, working in partnership with Internet giants Alibaba and Tencent, has recently unveiled ERNIE, a 23-billion-parameter AI model trained on almost 150 million Chinese image-text pairs. Another Chinese AI model is Taiyi, a bilingual (Chinese-English) large language model trained on some 20 million filtered Chinese image-text pairs and one billion parameters.

China has declared its intent to become the global leader in AI by 2030, and TikTok is seen as a global leader in behavioural algorithms.

Facial recognition is yet another area where China is seen as getting far ahead of the US and Europe, given the heavy deployment of a billion surveillance cameras in Chinese urban centres that are being hooked up with backend AI tools.

How will a collaborative approach towards China work for the US?

While the contours of the new collaboration are unclear, Prabhakar told the FT that while the US may disagree with China on certain values and approaches to regulation, “there will also be places where we can agree”, including on global technical and safety standards for AI software.

Prabhakar underlined, however, that the US “did not intend to slow down AI development, but to maintain oversight of the technology”.



This comes in the backdrop of criticism that the Biden administration had potentially dented the competitive advantage of American tech companies in AI by moving too early to regulate it.

While the US has imposed export curbs on cutting-edge chips such as Nvidia's latest GPUs to curb China's ability to train foundational models needed for AI, there is also a realisation in Washington that political divergences notwithstanding, the US and Chinese AI research ecosystems are deeply intertwined. Some of the best AI scientists coming out of China come to the US, and Washington can benefit from some of these ties to China, including the talent flows from that country.

What could be the impact of this seeming reconciliation in other geographies?

A US-China alignment on AI technology, especially its regulation, could have an impact across other geographies, including India.

India has been trying to pitch itself as a country that has effectively used technology to develop and deliver governance solutions on a mass scale — the biometric identity programme Aadhaar and the payments solution Unified Payments Interface (UPI) being examples.

These solutions form the bedrock of what New Delhi calls Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) — in which the underlying technology is sanctioned by the government, and then offered to private entities to develop various use cases. India wants to take the same DPI approach with AI.

With sovereign AI and an AI compute infrastructure (the software and hardware needed to build AI-powered systems), New Delhi is not looking to merely compete with the generative AI type of model. It also wants to focus on real-life use cases in healthcare, agriculture, governance, language translation, etc., to maximise economic development.

As of now, the European approach to technology rules is seen as being based inherently on regulation for the rights of citizens, while the US approach is more innovator-focussed. According to policymakers, India's approach so far has been a hybrid of the European and American approaches. The new US-China consensus on tech development and regulation could offer another useful template.

FROM VOICE TO ACTION: CAN THE RABBIT R1 DISRUPT THE SMARTPHONE MARKET?

This year's Consumer Electronics Show (CES) at Las Vegas was littered with updates from both start-ups and large tech firms that are building products harnessing, or in some cases, advancing the power of natural language processing (NLP), a burgeoning sub-field under artificial intelligence (AI). With so many exhibits, it is difficult to point out any one piece of tech as exceptional this year. Still, an orange-coloured device unveiled at the ballroom at Wynn, and not at the official CES stage, grabbed the spotlight.

The palm-sized handheld, called Rabbit r1, received a fair amount of chatter at CES 2024 as it could do — per the company's claim— several things that a smartphone can't. Even Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella called it a 'most impressive' device, and compared it to the first iPhone unveiled by Steve Jobs.

So, what exactly does this device do? If you want to book an Uber ride, the r1 can do it for you. If you want to plan a vacation, including booking air tickets and making room reservations, the r1 can do that for you. If you want some cooking ideas, the r1's camera can scan the motley



ingredients in your refrigerator and suggest a recipe based on your calorie requirement. All you have to do is just 'tell it' what to do.

Exploiting chatbots' limitation

Granted, any of the latest generation smartphones with its state-of-the-art voice assistant can do several tasks like searching the web, playing your favourite song, or making a call from a user's phonebook. But, executing tasks, like booking a cab, reserving hotel room, and putting together a recipe using computer vision, just by talking into a walkie-talkie style device, is a stretch even for smartphone-based voice assistants.

Even the current crop of chatbots, like ChatGPT, Bard and Claude, can only text out responses through apps as they are incapable of executing actionable tasks. For instance, the ChatGPT app can text you a vacation plan. It can even tweak the itinerary if you ask it to make it easy or packed. But, it cannot open a ticket booking app or a room reservation portal to make a reservation for you. Rabbit Inc., the maker of r1, says that the current batch of chatbots have limited functionality because they are built on text-based AI models — more commonly known as large language models (LLMs). LLMs' accuracy depends a lot on annotated data to train neural networks for every new task.

Extending LLM's capability

The Santa Monica-based start-up has built its r1 device using a different AI model that is biased for action. The Rabbit OS, in a way, extends the capabilities of the current generation of voice assistants. The AI model, which the company calls a large action model (LAM), takes advantage of advances in neuro-symbolic programming, a method that combines the data driven capabilities of the neural networks with symbolic reasoning techniques. This allows the device to directly learn from the user's interaction with the applications and execute tasks, essentially bypassing the need to translate text-based user requests into APIs.

Apart from bypassing the API route, LAM-based OS caters to a more nuanced human to machine interaction. While ChatGPT can be creative in responding to prompts, a LAM-based OS learns routine and minimalistic tasks with a sole purpose of repeating it.

So, Rabbit Inc., in essence, has created a platform, underpinned by an AI model, that can mimic what humans do with their smartphones and then repeat it when asked to execute. The r1 is the company's first generation device, which according to its founder Jesse Lyu, is a stand-alone gadget that is primarily driven by natural language "to get things done." The company has also cleverly priced the device at \$199, significantly lesser than the price of most flagship smartphones. This makes it difficult to decipher whether customers will buy this device for the value it offers or just because it is cheap.

But is the price differentiation alone enough to trade in your existing smartphone for the new Rabbit r1?

A smartphone replacement?

Booking a ride, planning a vacation, or playing music are only a subset of things we do with a smartphone. Over the last one and a half decade, the smartphone has become a pocket computer.

The app ecosystem built for this hardware has made the device so sticky that an average user picks up their smartphone at least 58 times a day, and spends, on average, at least three hours



with it. And during that time, they use this mini-computer for whole host of things, not to mention streaming videos, playing games, reading books, and interacting with friends and family via group chat applications. Secondly, not everyone wants to speak into a device all the time to get something done. Most people are just fine typing in text prompts and getting responses in the same format. It gives them a layer of privacy that the r1 does not provide — that's because the latter can only execute voice commands.

So, the smartphone, and its app ecosystem, is here to stay to cater to an entire gamut of user needs and wants for the foreseeable future.

Into the Rabbit hole

Mr. Lyu believes the r1 will disrupt the smartphone market, but technically, his company's palm-sized device is a strong contender in the voice assistant and smart speaker market, which is another space that is growing quite steadily.

According to a 2022 joint report by NPR and Edison Research, in the U.S. alone, 62% of users over the age of 18 use the voice assistant on any smart device. And the number of tasks they do with it is also increasing. In 2022, smart speaker users requested an average of 12.4 tasks on their device each week, up from 7.5 in 2017. And smartphone voice assistant users requested an average of 10.7 tasks weekly, up from 8.8 in 2020.

This shows that the r1 can play an important transition role in the audio space by driving hardware designers and software developers in the direction of building more voice-based interoperable applications. Alternatively, Rabbit inc can also build a super app — something like WeChat to enable chatter between apps in a smartphone to 'get things done.'

That's a call Rabbit Inc. should take based on the feedback it receives from its customers. As on January 19, five batches of 10,000 (batch size) rabbit r1 devices have been sold out. And the first batch will start shipping in April. Customer experience with this new gadget will play a big role in how deep r1 will take consumers down the rabbit hole.

AUTONOMOUS DRIVING: HOW INDIA, AN UNLIKELY MARKET, NOW PACKS A SURPRISE FOR ADAS GEAR MAKERS

Mobileye Global Inc., an Intel-owned Israeli company specializing in chips and systems for advanced driver assistance technology, has experienced a surge in demand from India over the past 12 months. Orders from Indian automakers, such as Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd., for advanced driver assistance technology and plans for jointly developing a fully autonomous driving system for India have exceeded Mobileye's original forecasts. The unexpected demand has prompted Mobileye to upgrade India to the status of a priority market in Asia, alongside China. The company's latest suite of Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS) features and the SuperVision package, offering hands-free autonomous capabilities, have attracted interest from Indian companies looking to incorporate advanced driver assistance technology in their vehicles.

ADAS demand

India has traditionally not been seen as a priority market for ADAS systems given its infamously dangerous roads and haphazard traffic patterns. The country has the world's deadliest roads, with crashes killing and maiming over 800,000 people annually, according to the World Bank.



This demand for such systems comes at a time when there is a progressive democratisation of autonomous driving tools here, with car manufacturers starting to now offer advanced driver assistance systems as standard bells and whistles on their mid-segment vehicles.

According to Mahindra & Mahindra, a relatively high percentage of its XUV700 owners have opted for the system, which includes lane keep assist, front collision warning, smart pilot assist, automatic emergency braking, adaptive cruise control and traffic sign recognition.

The new Verna, Hyundai's upgrade of its flagship sedan, comes equipped with front and rear radars, sensors and a front camera to allow for what is called 'Level 2 ADAS' functionality, meaning that it will not just detect obstacles on the road or issue a warning in the event of an unusual departure of the car from a designated lane, but also initiate corrective actions. The new Kia Sonnet, an entry level premium SUV, also now offers ADAS as part of its feature list in higher variants.

The ADAS suite offered by most carmakers now include features such as automatic emergency braking, forward collision warning, blind spot collision warning, blind spot collision-avoidance assist, lane-keeping assist, driver attention warning and adaptive cruise control, which can enhance the safety and convenience of driving.

Honda Cars India too now offers these ADAS features on the higher-spec variants of its mid-segment sedan, the City, while Tata Motors offers these in the top variants of the Harrier and the Safari. These tools have traditionally been offered with cars having a substantially higher price sticker, including Hyundai's premium SUV Tucson and sedans and utility vehicles sold by German luxury car makers such as Mercedes-Benz and the Volkswagen Group's Audi.

While this progressive trend of moving down the price bracket is being driven by several factors, including the increasing demand for safer vehicles among Indian consumers and the government's push for increased road safety, the availability of more affordable ADAS technology is also accelerating this trend. With the adoption of ADAS technology, car manufacturers say they are helping to improve the overall safety of Indian roads and reduce the number of accidents and fatalities. But ADAS level 2 is where the self-driving goal of most carmakers seems to have maxed out, at least for now, despite lofty promises over the years.

Levels of autonomous driving

There are essentially five levels in the evolution of autonomous driving: each level describing the extent to which a car takes over the responsibilities from the driver, and how the two interface. So, the levels range from 0 to 5, progressively defining their relative extent of automation. Level 0, "No Automation", is where the driver controls the car without any support from a driver assistance system – the case for most cars on the road currently.

The driver assistance systems of level 1, like adaptive lane assist or parking assist, are already being offered in a number of top-end cars, while level 2 is a further upgrade that was available only across some models of premium car makers such as steering and lane-keeping assist and remote-controlled parking – examples include Tesla's 'Autopilot' or BMW's 'Personal CoPilot'. This is what Hyundai is now offering with its new Verna and Honda with the new City and Mahindra with the XUV700.

Level 3 is where it starts to get tough for carmakers – who have to offer an even greater array of "automated driving" tools where the driver can partly take his eyes off the road, while level 4



stands for “Fully Automated Driving”, where the driver can take his hands off the steering wheel for most of the drive. Level 5 is “Full Automation”, where the car can drive without any human input whatsoever. The problems in moving up from Level 2 to Level 5 range from cars jumping red lights, not recognising pedestrians to situational problems like identifying a cyclist who briefly disappears behind a parked vehicle.

HOW PHYSICISTS ARE MAKING SENSE OF THE MYSTERY OF PULSAR GLITCHES

The year was 1967. The Nathu La and Cho La clashes between the Indian and the Chinese armies had just concluded. A war was raging in Vietnam. The space race was at its peak. At this time, a group of astronomers at the University of Cambridge had put together an array of antennae for use as a telescope to study the radio waves emitted by distant stars.

When they started operating the array, two members of the group – Jocelyn Bell Burnell and Antony Hewish – noticed one set of signals that were flashing in a periodic manner. They didn’t know its origins.

We know today that the pair had discovered the first pulsar, named PSR B1919+21.

The pulsar and the neutron

The pulsar turned out to be intimately tied to a discovery from 1932, when James Chadwick had discovered the neutron. When neutrons are in a group, they are not allowed to have the same energies. Each neutron will have to settle for the lowest available energy level. If gravity tries to compress this collection of neutrons inward, their inability to ‘merge’ into a common energy level will resist with an outward pressure.

When heavy stars die, their cores implode. If they’re heavy enough, they become black holes; but if not, they collapse just enough to form a ball of neutrons, with gravity not being strong enough to overwhelm their outward pressure. This compact, super-dense object is called a neutron star.

When the Cambridge group reported that they had found a pulsar, other scientists proposed several possibilities for the origin of the unusual pulsating signal. Many of them were also rejected (including extraterrestrial civilisations). Ultimately, the fact that the signals came from a very small patch of the sky and that they repeated frequently led scientists to identifying pulsars as rotating neutron stars.

Radio signals emitted from near the poles of such a star would form a narrow cone that sweeps past the earth with every rotation – like the light from a lighthouse shining over a ship on the sea.

MPEMBA EFFECT: HEAT UP TO COOL DOWN

WHAT IS IT?

The Mpemba effect, named after Tanzanian student Erasto Mpemba, who brought attention to this counterintuitive phenomenon in 1969, makes for curious observation. The effect is that hot water can freeze faster than cold water in similar conditions.

While Aristotle, Francis Bacon, and René Descartes had noticed the effect centuries earlier, the Mpemba effect caught scientists’ attention only more recently. Researchers have conducted



numerous experiments to determine the causes of this confusing phenomenon, but a consensus conclusion remains wanting.

One cause, they have posited, is microbubbles left suspended in water that has been heated by boiling. These cavities promote convection and transfer heat faster as the water cools. Another is evaporation: as warmer water evaporates more, it also takes away some heat (evaporation is inherently endothermic, which is how sweat cools your skin). Both convection and accelerated heat transfer are enhanced in warmer water because such water is less dense.

Yet another factor could be the presence of frost in cold water. Frost is an insulator and could slow the loss of heat. Scientists have also considered whether compounds in water like calcium carbonate could be precipitated by boiling, and then dissolve, thus increasing the water's freezing point.

This way, the Mpemba effect continues to captivate scientists with its complex interplay of physical mechanisms.

AVIAN NAVIGATION

How do birds find their way home after long journeys?

A1: There are many theories explaining this capability of birds. According to one of them, the sun's rays and the direction of winds help them navigate. Birds' extrasensory capabilities assist them in this task and direct them with the help of the earth's magnetic field.

Another theory suggests these winged wonders 'read' and understand star-maps well enough to find their way.

But no one answer has been put down for this as of now.

A2: Birds have the ability to detect changes in atmospheric pressure, weather, and the earth's magnetic field. Based on these, they locate specific regions and find their home.

But the most important navigational aid is said to be an internal magnetic compass they are said to possess in their brains. The compass works in relation to the earth's magnetic field. The magnetic currents generated here are turned into flight paths.

As a result, disturbances in the field can seriously affect birds' judgement. In July 1988, 3,000 homing pigeons set off for their return journey from northern France to southern England but couldn't reach their destination because an explosion on the surface of the sun a few earlier had produced radiation that disrupted the Earth's magnetic field. As a result, their internal magnetic compass picked up confusing signals and the birds lost their way.

THERAPEUTIC ANTIBODY MAY ENHANCE SNAKE VENOM TOXICITY

Every year, 2.7 million people are bitten by snakes globally and venomous snake bites kill and permanently disable hundreds of thousands of people. There is an urgent need globally for safer and effective therapies to treat snake bites.

Current antivenom therapies using animal-derived blood serum are limited in their effectiveness, are expensive to produce, and can result in adverse immune reactions. This has led to researchers pursuing the development of recombinant antivenoms based on human antibodies. Previous

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



studies have identified and characterised potential antibody-based therapeutics that have shown promising results in preclinical animal models of snakebite envenoming. Bothrops asper viper venom contains myotoxin II, a substance that leads to muscle tissue destruction and can result in long-term disability or even death. Andreas Laustsen from the Technical University of Denmark and others identified potential antibody candidates to neutralise myotoxin II toxin in laboratory experiments.

However, when they assessed their efficacy using a mouse model of snake envenoming, they found that the YTE-mutated IgG antibody actually enhanced the effect of the toxin, rather than neutralising it. These findings are the first demonstration of antibody-enhanced disease seen in this context and highlight the importance of thorough preclinical testing of antivenom candidates in more relevant contexts. The authors highlight the need for careful consideration of antibody design and testing protocols to avoid unintended harmful effects. Further research is required to optimize these therapeutic antibodies. "While clinical ADET [antibody-dependent enhancement of toxicity] related to snake venom has not yet been reported in humans, this report of ADET of a toxin from the animal kingdom highlights the necessity of assessing even well-known antibody formats in representative preclinical models to evaluate their therapeutic utility against toxins or venoms," they write.

Whether this effect is unique to this particular antibody and toxin, or something that occurs more widely, and whether this is also seen in humans is yet to be determined.

THE IMPACT OF COLD WAVES ON COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

With temperatures hitting record lows, communities grapple with a spectrum of physical health challenges. Prolonged exposure to extreme cold can lead to hypothermia, a condition where the body loses heat faster than it can generate it, resulting in shivering, confusion, and potentially life-threatening consequences. Respiratory issues come to a head as cold air irritates the airways, worsening conditions like asthma and bronchitis. Kiran Madala, Head of Critical Care at Government Medical College Nizamabad, highlights the pronounced struggle for breath, especially for those with pre-existing respiratory conditions, making winter an especially challenging time.

Cardiovascular health is not exempt, as the heart works overtime to maintain a stable internal temperature. Elevated blood pressure and heart rate become commonplace, posing additional risks for those with underlying cardiovascular issues. The convergence of cold waves and flu seasons heightens risks, added Dr. Kiran.

The impact isn't solely physical; the psychological toll is substantial. Reduced social interaction during cold spells affects psychological well-being. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) can set in when low visibility and weather-related mobility restrictions lead to a lack of sunlight and limited movement. Bona Colaco, a clinical psychologist based in Hyderabad, notes the importance of human connection for mental health, stating that the uncertainty of weather exacerbates mood fluctuations during periods of reduced sunlight.

She further added that as much as survival needs to encompass food, water, and shelter, fostering connections with others is equally essential for well-being during cold wave conditions. Sleep disruptions further compound the mental toll, as the discomfort of cold temperatures interferes with achieving restful sleep. The cumulative effects of physical discomfort and mental strain create a challenging environment for individuals during the winter season.



To cope with these challenges, psychologists recommend proactive measures. Engaging in activities that bring comfort and seeking social interaction can be beneficial. Adjusting daily routines, such as scheduling physical exercises during the warmer evenings, can help mitigate the impact of colder mornings.

THE URGENT NEED FOR DATA TO MAKE PERSONALISED MEDICINE EQUITABLE

Warfarin is a powerful blood thinner and a leading drug for cardiovascular disease worldwide. But in South Africa, it is among the top four drug varieties leading to hospitalisation from adverse drug reactions. It's reasonable to suppose that the drug has similar problematic effects farther across sub-Saharan Africa, though the national data needed to show it are lacking.

The fact that warfarin is riskier in some populations than others isn't a surprise. Different geographic regions tend to host people with slightly different genetic makeups, and sometimes those genetic differences lead to radically different reactions to drugs. For certain people, a higher dosage of warfarin is fine; for others, it's dangerous. Researchers have known this for decades.

Focus on one subset

The problem is that the majority of medical research, including genetic research, is still done mainly on one subset of the world's population: men of Northern European origin. This means that negative drug-gene interactions in other, less well-studied populations can fly beneath the radar. In the case of warfarin, one study concluded that using someone's genetic information to help guide their drug dosing would benefit 18% to 24% of people categorised as white, but have no benefit for people identified as Black, Chinese or Japanese.

While that study is a decade old, the general point still holds true: A bias in our current understanding of the genetics of different populations means that some people would be helped far more than others by genetically informed personalised medicine.

As a bioinformatician, I am now focusing my attention on gathering the statistics to show just how biased medical research data are. There are problems across the board, ranging from which research questions get asked in the first place, to who participates in clinical trials, to who gets their genomes sequenced. The world is moving toward "precision medicine," where any individual can have their DNA analysed and that information can be used to help prescribe the right drugs in the right dosages. But this won't work if a person's genetic variants have never been identified or studied in the first place.

Understudied populations

It's astonishing how powerful our genetics can be in mediating medicines. Take the gene CYP2D6, which is known to play a vital role in how fast humans metabolise 25% of all the pharmaceuticals on the market. If you have a genetic variant of CYP2D6 that makes you metabolise drugs more quickly, or less quickly, it can have a huge impact on how well those drugs work and the dangers you face from taking them. Codeine was banned from all of Ethiopia in 2015, for example, because a high proportion of people in the country (perhaps 30%) have a genetic variant of CYP2D6 that makes them quickly metabolise that drug into morphine, making it more likely to cause respiratory distress and even death.



Researchers have identified over a hundred different CYP2D6 variants and there are likely many, many more out there that we don't yet know the impacts of – especially in understudied populations.

Back in 2016, researchers published an important article looking at more than 2,500 genome-wide association studies done up to that time. These are studies that scan the genomes of thousands of people to find variants associated with disease traits. What the researchers found was disturbing: While there had been some improvement in diversity since 2009, still 81% of the nearly 35 million samples in those studies came from people of European descent.

People of African descent have the greatest genetic diversity on the planet (because humanity originated in Africa), and so arguably they deserve the greatest amount of study. But this is hardly the situation. This population makes up just 4% of the PharmGKB dataset, for example.

Geographic ancestry isn't the only factor that's biased. Women make up only 38% of participants in studies of drug effectiveness and pharmacokinetics, for example. Because of gender bias all along the line, women experience adverse drug reactions nearly twice as often as men. And this doesn't even scratch the surface of people with genetic conditions – like my son who has Down syndrome – or other disabilities.

There are some good efforts working to correct these problems. On October 18, 2023, researchers announced plans to create one of the largest-yet databases of genomes exclusively from people with African ancestry. The project aims to recruit at least 500,000 volunteers (for comparison, tens of millions of people globally have had their genomes sequenced to date). This is a great effort; more should follow suit.



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